

# **Educational Decision-Making**

## **The Significance of Class and Context**

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**OSLOMET**

PhD thesis  
Centre for the Study of Professions  
OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University

Spring 2019

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OsloMet Avhandling 2019 nr 1

ISSN 2535-5414 (online)

ISSN 2535-471X (trykket)

ISBN 978-82-8364-248-3 (online)

ISBN 978-82-8364-141-7 (trykket)

OsloMet – storbyuniversitetet

Universitetsbiblioteket

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0130 Oslo,

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Trykket hos Byråservice

Trykket på Scandia 2000 white, 80 gram på materiesider/200 gram på coveret

## Acknowledgements

This thesis has not been written in isolation and I am grateful to all those who have helped me along the way. First, I would like to thank my supervisors, Håvard Helland and Marianne Nordli Hansen, both of whom have contributed by reading, commenting, and co-writing my articles. With his eye for details, always-open door and remarkable sense of humour, Håvard has been helpful both academically and in times of frustration. Marianne was the one who introduced me to this field of research and her expertise has helped me to distinguish the important from the unimportant. Moreover, she has kindly included me in her network around the ‘Classes and Elite Research seminar’ at University of Oslo, where I have benefitted from a group of inspiring and knowledgeable colleagues.

I have had the pleasure of working at Centre for the Study of Professions, a truly great place to work both academically and socially. I am especially grateful to the ‘career group’, where I have gotten crucial feedback on numerous drafts of my articles and thesis.

I have also been a part of the project ‘International Study of City Youth’, and I would like to thank all my colleagues around Europe for hosting meetings and interesting workshops. I am grateful to the ISCY group at NIFU, in particular Eifred Markussen and Berit Lødding, for their kind help and support along the bumpy road of international collaboration and data collection. I have also appreciated the chance to continuing to participate in the ISCY-project at NIFU after the thesis was submitted.

Parts of this thesis have been written in New York and Paris. I am grateful to Shamus Khan for kindly facilitating my research stay at Columbia University in the fall of 2015, and to Johs. Hjellbrekke for his kind invitation to Centre Universitaire de Norvège á Paris in the fall of 2016 and the fall of 2017.

I feel very lucky that many of my colleagues in the field are also close friends. In particular, it is hard to imagine the last four years (or this thesis) without Maren Toft, who has travelled this path with me. I am forever grateful for the help, support, inspiring discussions and fun in Paris, at courses and conferences, in the mountains, at Torshov and Carl Berner, and I am very much looking forward to what lies ahead. I would also like to thank Hedda Haakestad for reading, discussing and being there for me, both at the office and at the balcony after long days. And thank you Sara Seehuus, Runa Brandal Myklebust and Hedda Haakestad for our focused writing-sessions, for helpful comments on drafts and for welcome distraction along the way.

I would also like to thank Andreea Alecu for important help in R; Karl Ingar Kittelsen Røberg and Aleksander Madsen for useful advice in Stata; Vegard Jarness for valuable comments on the whole thesis; Jørn Ljunggren, Øyvind Wiborg and Marte Mangset for valuable comments on drafts of the introduction; Patrick Lie Andersen for inspiring discussions along the way; Håvard Brede Aven, Aleksander Madsen, Hedda Haakestad, and Karl Ingar Kittelsen Røberg for the sporty distractions outside of office; and Marianne Takvam Kindt for a focused writing trip that helped me finishing the thesis.

Finally, thanks to my family and friends outside of work for your support and distractions along the way. In particular, thanks to my parents and all my siblings, and to Kathleen Lillo-Stenberg and Aishath Afeef.

## Summary

*This thesis investigates whether and how classed educational decisions occur in different contexts.* Using international comparative survey and Norwegian register data, I examine the decision-making processes at different levels of the education system; I do so through a theoretical focus on the composition of capital and contextualized closure. Through four articles, I investigate the association between class and educational decisions within the contexts of the family, school, specific educational fields and nationally. An operationalization of class that distinguishes between levels of cultural and economic forms of capital but that also includes the more usual vertical distinction contributes additional knowledge.

In the first article, co-authored with Håvard Helland, we investigate the association between cultural and economic resources in the family and two different forms of parental involvement in education. Using survey data from Ghent in Belgium, Barcelona in Spain, Reykjavik in Iceland and Bergen in Norway, we find that parental involvement in current schooling is associated with parents' levels of economic resources, whereas future educational expectations are largely associated with the level of cultural resources in the family. The national differences did not suggest that school system characteristics played an important role in the correlations between resources and involvement; however, both Iceland and Spain stood out in that economic resources played a more important role in parental involvement. The aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 may be an explanation for this.

In the second article, I investigate the association between the classed compositions of lower secondary schools and whether academic or vocational tracks are chosen at upper secondary schools in Norway. By using Norwegian register data that encompass 11 cohorts of the population and by using multilevel and school fixed effects methods, I show that the proportion of upper-class pupils at lower secondary schools is associated with a greater likelihood of choosing academic tracks at upper secondary level; this is particularly true of students who themselves are not from upper-class backgrounds. Classed segregation patterns and classed socialisation at school seem to have an impact on individual decisions. This suggests that the 'classed' nature of educational decision-making is also embedded in contexts beyond familial ones.

The third article is co-authored with Marianne Nordli Hansen; we investigate the extent to which the professions of medicine and law disproportionately recruit students with socio-economically advantageous backgrounds over a timespan of 26 years in Norway. Using

Norwegian register data on the Norwegian population, we show that parents' income and self-recruitment are relatively stable and important factors for recruitment to both fields, although these associations are somewhat higher for law than for medicine. Drawing on Turner's (1960) ideal-typical concepts of contest and sponsor mobility, we pinpoint institutional differences between the two forms of education. We argue that while law to a greater degree resembles the ideal-type of contest mobility, medicine resembles that of sponsor mobility.

In the fourth article, I investigate the association between class and educational decisions, aspirations and the mismatch between these in Barcelona, Spain and Bergen, Norway. By using survey data measured at two points in time, I find that a higher class background is associated with aspiring to occupations requiring higher education, enrolling in an academic track and a smaller likelihood of experiencing a mismatch between these, but that the mismatch is not as large as expected from previous research. Applying a categorization of class that distinguishes between cultural, balanced and economic fractions as well as vertical levels of class reveals that while cultural fractions are more oriented towards higher education in Norway, economic fractions are equally or to a larger extent oriented towards higher education in Spain. National specific aspects related to the school systems, the labour market and the economic situations in the two countries are suggested as explanations for these differences.

In terms of theory, the thesis suggests viewing educational decisions as a relational process whereby young people's embodied experiences constantly encounter more pragmatic considerations linked to future and present possibilities. Following the ideas of the theories of social closure (e.g. Murphy 1988), formal and informal practices can contribute to boundary drawing between groups, influenced for example by economic prospects and cultural capital in the family (Bourdieu 1996).

## Sammendrag

Denne avhandlingen undersøker om og hvordan klassede utdanningsvalg foregår i ulike kontekster. Jeg bruker internasjonale surveydata og norske registerdata til å undersøke valgsituasjonen i ulike nivåer av utdanningssystemet ved hjelp av et teoretisk fokus på kontekstualisert lukning og kapitalsammensetning. I fire forskjellige artikler undersøker jeg sammenhengen mellom sosial klasse og utdanningsvalg i familiekonteksten, i skolekonteksten, i spesifikke utdanningsfelt og i ulike nasjonale kontekster. Jeg benytter meg til dels av en operasjonalisering av klasse som skiller mellom kulturell og økonomisk kapital i tillegg til de mer vanlige vertikale nivåene.

I den første artikkelen, skrevet i samarbeid med Håvard Helland, undersøker vi sammenhengen mellom kulturelle og økonomiske ressurser i familien og to ulike former for involvering i skolen. Vi bruker surveydata fra Ghent i Belgia, Barcelona i Spania, Reykjavik på Island og Bergen i Norge, og viser at foreldres involvering i barnas nåværende skolegang i større grad er korrelert med foreldrenes nivå av økonomiske ressurser, mens fremtidige forventninger knyttet til utdanning i større grad er korrelert med foreldrenes kulturelle ressurser. De nasjonale forskjellene tyder ikke på at de ulike skolesystemene påvirker disse sammenhengene. Både Island og Spania skiller seg imidlertid ut ved at økonomiske ressurser ser ut til å i større grad være korrelert med foreldres involvering. Etterdønningene etter finanskrisen i 2008 kan være en mulig forklaring på dette.

I den andre artikkelen undersøker jeg sammenhengen mellom den klassede elevsammensetningen av ungdomsskoler og elevenes valg av yrkesfag eller studiespesialisering på videregående. Ved hjelp av norske registerdata som inneholder informasjon om 11 fødselskohorter av befolkningen og ved hjelp av flernivåanalyse og faste effekter på skoler viser jeg at andelen overklasseelever på en skole har en sammenheng med sannsynligheten for å velge studiespesialisering på videregående. Dette er i tillegg særlig uttalt for de som ikke selv har overklassebakgrunn. Klassede segregeringsmønstre og klasset sosialisering på skolene virker å ha en viss betydning for individuelle valg. Dette antyder at den 'klassede' delen av utdanningsvalg også er situert i kontekster utenfor familien.

Den tredje artikkelen er skrevet sammen med Marianne Nordli Hansen. Vi undersøker i hvilken grad medisin og juss disproporsjonalt rekrutterer studenter med privilegert bakgrunn over en tidsperiode på 26 år i Norge. Ved hjelp av norske registerdata som dekker hele befolkningen viser vi at foreldres inntekt og såkalt selvrekruttering er relativt stabile og tydelige faktorer for rekruttering til begge felt, selv om denne sammenhengen er noe sterkere

for juss. Vi trekker på Turners (1960) idealtypiske begreper om sponsormobilitet og konkurransemobilitet, og bruker dette til å påpeke institusjonelle forskjeller mellom de to formene for utdanning. Vi foreslår at jussutdanningen, som i deler av perioden har vært åpen, i større grad har trekk fra det idealtypiske begrepet konkurransemobilitet, mens medisintutdanningen, med strenge opptakskrav men lite karakterer i utdanningsløpet, i større grad kan beskrives som sponsormobilitet.

I den fjerde artikkelen undersøker jeg sammenhengen mellom klasse og utdanningsvalg, aspirasjoner, og graden av uoverensstemmelse mellom valg og aspirasjoner i Barcelona i Spania og Bergen i Norge. Ved hjelp av surveydata målt på to tidspunkter finner jeg at en høyere klassebakgrunn er positivt korrelert både med aspirasjoner til yrker som krever høyere utdanning, med å starte på en studiespesialiserende linje og negativt korrelert med å ha et misforhold mellom disse to. Misforholdet er imidlertid ikke så stort som forventet fra tidligere forskning. Ved å benytte meg av en kategorisering av klasse som skiller mellom kulturelle, balanserte og økonomiske fraksjoner i tillegg til vertikale nivåer viser jeg at mens kulturelle fraksjoner i større grad er orientert mot høyere utdanning i Norge, er økonomiske fraksjoner i større grad orientert mot høyere utdanning i Spania. Nasjonale aspekter knyttet til skolesystemer, arbeidsmarkedet og den økonomiske situasjonen i de ulike landene er foreslått som forklaring på disse forskjellene.

Teoretisk foreslår denne avhandlingen å forstå utdanningsvalg som en relasjonell prosess der unge menneskers kroppsliggjorte erfaringer hele tiden møter mer pragmatiske vurderinger knyttet til fremtidige og tidligere muligheter. Ifølge teorier om sosial lukning (for eksempel Murphy 1988), kan formelle og uformelle praksiser bidra til grensedragning mellom grupper, påvirket av for eksempel økonomiske prospekter og kulturell kapital i familien (Bourdeu 1996). Funnene i denne avhandlingen bygger opp under en slik forståelse, og viser i tillegg at disse prosessene bedre kan forstås ved å undersøke de spesifikke kontekstene utdanningsvalg og rekruttering foregår i.



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## The four articles

**Article one:** Strømme, T.B. and Helland, H. (2020), Parents' educational involvement: Types of resources and forms of involvement in four countries. Br Educ Res J.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1002/berj.3609>

**Article two:** Thea Bertnes Strømme (2020) Vocational and academic decisions in 'classed' school environments, Journal of Education and Work, 33:3, 197-211,

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2020.1754365>

**Article three:** Thea Bertnes Strømme & Marianne Nordli Hansen (2017) Closure in the elite professions: the field of law and medicine in an egalitarian context, Journal of Education and

Work, 30:2, 168-185, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2017.1278906>

**Article four:** Thea Bertnes Strømme (2020) Educational aspirations and decisions in Barcelona, Spain and Bergen, Norway: the significance of class and class fractions, Journal of

Youth Studies, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1741526>

## Introduction

It has often been pointed out that the education system has not facilitated enhanced social mobility but rather seems to entail social reproduction (Bottero 2005; Saavage 2000). Contrary to expectations of a turn towards a society in which inherited traits would gradually lose their significance (e.g., Treiman 1970; Blau and Duncan 1967), it was noted several decades ago that the main trend in the relationship between socioeconomic background and educational attainment is stability (Shavit and Blossfeldt 1993), even though recent disagreements have arisen regarding whether mobility patterns in the education system are moving towards more or less fluidity (cf. Breen 2010; Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2016). Hence, although the education system has expanded all over the Western world, the *relative* relationship between social class characteristics and levels of education attained has not changed much.

*This thesis investigates how classed educational decisions occur.* Considering the massive amount of evidence already collected regarding the relationship between social background characteristics and educational decisions in general, the purpose of this thesis is not to ask *whether* educational decisions are following patterns of inequality in society overall but rather to ask *whether and how when contextualized in various ways*.

I intend to contribute to filling a gap in the literature in the field, which, broadly speaking, has been divided between two dominant approaches. On the one hand, a great deal of quantitative research has followed the Nuffield school in investigating general mobility patterns involving educational attainment, mostly viewing education as mediating between origin and destination. This branch has mainly used theory most profoundly developed by Boudon (1974) and then Goldthorpe (1996; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997) based on a rational action approach and an occupation-based class map. As formulated by Breen and Jonsson when reviewing previous (quantitative) research on inequality and educational attainment (2005: 227), ‘one of the most significant trends in the study of inequalities in the educational attainment in the past decade has been the resurgence of rational choice models focusing on educational decision-making’. On the other hand, a growing field of mostly qualitative research has often drawn on a cultural tradition to analyse classed experiences, aspirations and identities in the education system, for the most part distinguishing between the working class

and the middle class and often building on the theory developed by Pierre Bourdieu<sup>1</sup>. According to Brown et al. (2013: 638), this division in the field points to both a weakness in mainstream mobility studies and a ‘failure in the sociology of education to engage in broader debates around intergenerational mobility, notwithstanding its engagement with wider debates on social inequalities and social justice’.

With both international comparative survey data and Norwegian register data, I will examine the decision-making process at different levels of the education system through a theoretical focus on capital composition and contextualized closure. The reason for this theoretical focus is twofold.

First, the dominance of rational choice explanations in quantitative research on educational attainment and social mobility arguably disregards possible investigations into horizontal segmentations within class groupings as well as important theoretical and empirical insights into the significance of culture in educational decisions. On the one hand, as emphasized by Ball et al. (2002), choice of education is for many connected to what is perceived as a ‘normal biography’ of choice, lifestyle and taste. These aspects of choice seem not to be included in an understanding that emphasizes the rational considerations. On the other hand, it has been argued that what has been labelled the ‘cultural turn’ in social research has partly written class out of the agenda and ‘replaced it with discussions of culture, consumption and identity alone’ (Cromton and Scott 2005). Moreover, even when class *is* an important aspect of the research, also in Bourdieu-inspired research, the potential important distinction between different forms of capital is surprisingly often overlooked (Vandebroeck 2018). This oversight is remarkable given the space granted to this division in Bourdieu’s theories on education and the reproduction of advantages.

Second, it has been noted that too little emphasis has been placed on the role of social contexts in determining educational decisions (Lauen 2007:179) and that ‘Individual decision-making (...) cannot be separated from the wider institutional context in which it is made’ (Devine 1998: 38). To understand the totality of wider mechanisms of inequality in educational outcomes in society, it seems necessary to investigate different contexts, as processes of educational decision-making may be dependent on time and place.

This thesis meets these challenges by examining more closely, quantitatively, how social stratification works in the education system through a focus on contextual closure and

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<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, a simplification, and there are many notable exceptions. As will be evident throughout this introduction, the concept of cultural capital has, for example, on many occasions been investigated quantitatively.

horizontal class divisions. Following the ideas of the theories of social closure (e.g., Murphy 1988), formal and informal practices can contribute to drawing boundaries between groups, influenced by factors such as economic prospects and cultural capital in the family (Bourdieu 1996). Hence, classed educational decisions can be understood as processes of social closure in that certain groups of people to some extent are excluded (Murphy 1988). First, understanding educational decisions as a long and relational process influenced by the cultural social milieu of the students as well as their early upbringing in the family *and* as a result of pragmatic considerations based on economic resources and possibilities, I investigate how cultural as well as economic capital is important in explaining educational decisions. Second, such practices can, for example, be specific to groups within a field of study or within a particular school. Arguably, investigating educational decisions in various settings will bring important knowledge to the table. Four different contexts covering different parts of the educational trajectory and different levels of specificity are examined.

*The family context:* In most theories on stratification and class, the family is considered the most central site of reproduction in the education system, whether through early socialization (e.g., Bourdieu 1996), strategic considerations (e.g., Golthorpe 1996) or a combination of both. However, few studies have investigated different forms of parental educational involvement in relation to class. In article one, by analysing parents' involvement in schooling and educational expectations and how it is related to both the economic and cultural resources of the family, my co-author Håvard Helland and I scrutinize the early foundations of educational adjustment and decision-making. The results reveal that while cultural resources are more important for academic socialization and future academic expectations, economic resources are more important for involvement in current schooling, albeit to various extents in different countries. We thus advocate an understanding of class background that emphasizes that class fractions as well as vertical levels intervene differently in children's upbringing and thus contribute to reproducing unevenly distributed resources.

*The school context:* In addition to the family, socialization in school and can be important for educational decisions. The social composition of a school can be important, although it is arguably often overlooked in conventional theories on class and educational decisions. In article two, I show that the proportion of upper-class students in a school is associated with the likelihood of enrolling in a vocational or an academic track in upper secondary school. Applying multilevel models as well as school fixed effects models conditioned on cohorts in schools makes it possible to examine both how classed segregation patterns influence choice and how the classed composition in the cohort in the school has an

impact on individual decisions. Moreover, I find that the proportion of upper-class students in a school is particularly important for the decisions of those students who are not of upper-class origin themselves.

*The educational fields:* Educational mobility studies often analyse attainment in the education system in general, disregarding the different educational fields of study. Differences in intake systems in specific educational systems, distinctions in field-specific capital and context-specific closure mechanisms are arguably prevalent in elite educations such as medicine and law. Moreover, a focus on mobility trends in specific elite educations is an important contribution after decades of educational expansion and increase of women and immigrants in these fields. In article three, my co-author Marianne Nordli Hansen and I find relatively stable trends over a 26-year time-span in the association between parents' income, parents in similar fields and the recruitment to medicine and law. The two fields displays a high degree of similarity, but recruitment to law is somewhat more strongly associated with having parents with high income or in the same profession than is the case for medicine, also among the oldest cohorts that entered law when access was completely open. We suggest that the more vague body of knowledge in law could be easier to transmit within families, and use Turner's ideal-typical concepts of contest and sponsor mobility to explain the differences in how the professions have managed to maintain their exclusivity in a period of educational expansion.

*The national context:* Comparing different countries with an emphasis on school systems and economic situations has a long tradition in educational sociology. However, by separating cultural and economic fractions regarding parental involvement in education, educational aspirations and decisions, it is possible to investigate differences between countries regarding the influence of originating in different class fractions as well as differences between vertical class levels. Additionally, access to data from countries that differ in both school system aspects (e.g., standardization and stratification) and economic aspects (exposure to financial crisis, different levels of youth unemployment) makes it possible to investigate how country-specific aspects mediate such differences. In article one, we compare Spain, Belgium, Iceland and Norway, and in article four, I compare Spain and Norway. Importantly, including a fractional understanding of class adds important information when attempting to understand contextual differences regarding educational decisions. While the influence of economic fractions seems to be conditioned on national economic conditions, cultural fractions seem to have made rather similar advances across countries and school systems in relation parental involvement in school. When investigating

aspirations and enrolment in upper secondary tracks, however, class fractions endowed with a preponderance of cultural capital seem to be more oriented towards higher education in Norway, whereas fractions endowed with a preponderance of economic capital have equal or higher prospects of aspiring to occupations requiring higher education or taking academic tracks in Spain.

In addition to this introduction, the thesis consists of four articles.

**Article one:** Strømme, T.B. and Helland, H. (2020), Parents' educational involvement: Types of resources and forms of involvement in four countries. *Br Educ Res J*.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1002/berj.3609>

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### **Educational decisions in an expanding system**

A great number of people belonging to groups that were previously not represented in upper secondary schools and higher education are completing an increasing number of years in the

education system. For instance, the OECD average of people with a tertiary degree aged 25-34 has increased from 23.30% in 1995 to 41.80% in 2015 (OECD 2018a), and working-class

students, women and ethnic minorities are increasingly a part of the student population. The shift from an education system for the few and wealthy to a system of mass education means that growing sections of the population are spending a significant part of their life in the education system. Educational institutions thus play a crucial and expanding role in society

and most likely also in the transmission of advantage between generations (Laureu and Weniger 2003). As argued by Blackburn and Jarman (1993: 205), 'When degrees were held by less than 2% of the labour force, they may have been extremely important for the careers

of the qualified men and women but they were too rare to have a major impact on the labour market as a whole'. This situation is different today. Holding a degree, and what type of degree, has become increasingly important, if not mandatory, for a growing number of high-level occupations; education thus plays a significantly greater role in the occupational-based class structure (Murphy 1988; Blackburn and Jarman 1993).

However, how should classed educational decisions be understood? Even if education, according to Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002:37), is 'a major – probably *the* major – mediating factor in class mobility', an educational decision is also a highly individual branching point, where young people develop identity and position themselves socially while they decide whether they want to move on to another educational level or leave and, if they do want to move on, what sort of education to choose (Baker 2017). Educational decisions are thus both 'individually non-trivial, and socially complex events' (Gambetta 1987: 1); they are made by virtually everyone in the Western world at some point, are considered important for the life chances of the individual, and are important in measures of the level of social mobility in a society. Trying to grasp how socioeconomic background factors and educational decisions are related is thus both a sociological theoretical question of individual and society and an empirical political question that is important for individuals and public debate. As the education system has gradually expanded, the topic's relevance has increased.

Theoretically, much of this introduction will draw on concepts developed from the theories of Max Weber. For Weber (1978), the general principles in bureaucratic institutions such as schools and universities were perceived as fair and neutral while at the same time being institutionalized based on historical inequalities or resources. In Weber's account, skills and educational credentials were one of two basic elements of class formation, and formally rational exclusion rules that are similar for everyone therefore contribute to maintaining inequality (Weber 1978: 302). Thus, formal equality does not lead to substantive equality; rather, it changes the form of domination and exclusion and gives an advantage to those who enter the contest with more resources (Murphy 1988: 222). Though writing long before the massive expansion of the education system that we have observed over the past century, he wrote that 'there is no doubt that educational difference is nowadays the most important difference giving rise to true social 'estates', in contrast to the stratifying effect of possessions and economic function' (quoted in Scott 1996: 34). Hence, the increasing regulation and bureaucratization of education was for Weber 'not a suddenly awakened "thirst for education"', but rather the desire to limit the supply of candidates for these positions and to monopolize them for the holders of educational patents' (Weber 1978:1000). Furthermore, his



separation of class and status (stände) and his notion of social closure is important for understanding some of the mechanisms in which distinctions in the education system and thus in the society have been relatively stable in a relative sense, despite the remarkable growth in the education system. Status groups are by Weber, in contrast to the economic classes, portrayed as actual groupings or communities, more subjective than objective, leaning more towards consumption than production, or 'styles of life', taste, formal education or occupational prestige. Class and status (and party) tend to overlap, but not necessarily. Generating wealth does not, for example, necessarily lead to status (Weber 1978: 306, 344; Giddens 1973: 43).

Weber has been remarkably influential in the development of theory concerning inequality and educational attainment, in credentialism (Brown 2001; Parkin 1979; Collins 1979; Murphy 1988), in social position theory (Boudon 1974; Golthorpe 1996) and in cultural capital theory (Bernstein 2003; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), all theories that are important for understanding and explaining inequality in educational decisions and the growing weight of education in the Western world.

As will be evident throughout this introduction, I will advocate a theoretical approach influenced by a reading of Bourdieu (1996) that focuses on vertical as well as horizontal class differences in combination with theories of social closure (Murphy 1988). I will argue that a relational and cultural approach to decision-making emphasizes the long-lasting relational process that is involved when people discuss their future educational trajectories with their parents, enrol in an upper secondary programme or finish an elite education. This process begins in childhood and makes some options not only rational but also 'too obvious to articulate' (Reay 2010) for some groups but not for others. Furthermore, it allows a view of class that recognizes that the composition as well as the volume of capital matters. That is, cultural and economic capital have different values in society and in the education system.

### **The structure of the introduction**

The rest of the introductory part the thesis is structured as follows: First, I review and discuss relevant theory and previous research. I briefly summarize theoretical developments in the field, beginning with the modernization theory and the response to it. I then outline two main chapters that thematize the most important contributions to this thesis: one that discusses the presence of and importance of culture and economy in educational decisions by reviewing two frequently used theories in the field and one that discusses the understanding of closure

and context in relation to social inequality and educational decisions. I then discuss the challenges and strengths of the data and methods applied in this thesis. After a summary of the articles, I discuss them in relation to the introduction as a whole.

Several aspects of educational decisions other than class and social background could be emphasized. Genetically inherited traits can, for example, be important for abilities, which again have consequences for educational decisions. Ethical concerns (Sayer 2005, 2010) and other social factors can be important for the decision-making process. Additionally, I place little emphasis on gender and immigration status in this thesis, even though both factors are included in the models and to some extent discussed, as they are important in understanding classed educational decisions. As it is sensible to investigate one topic at a time, the rest of this introduction focuses on empirical and theoretical work that explicitly addresses class and socioeconomic background and their relation to educational decisions<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In the last chapter, I will return to the topic of gender to discuss how it should be involved in further research related to classed educational decisions and the findings in this thesis.

## **Trends in theory and previous research**

To understand the theoretical positions addressed in this thesis, I will first provide a short review of previous research and theory that have been important for developments in the sociology of stratification and education. Hence, I will begin this chapter by briefly explaining the modernization theoretical approach to the topic and the empirical response that emerged mainly from a comparative trend in the 1990s. I also briefly touch upon the individualist approach to discarding the focus on class and the response to it.

### **The functionalist approach and meritocratic optimism**

After the Second World War, sociologists were optimistic about the significance of educational credentials for social mobility. A functionalist-inspired approach directed their focus on occupational status scales based on individual characteristics and their conclusion that in the mid-century United States, educational achievement was becoming more important than ascribed characteristics in determining occupational status. Industrialization was thus believed to pave the way to a meritocratization of society that would eventually lead to equality, even though no clear time trends had been identified (Blau and Duncan 1967; Treiman 1970: 218; Ganzeboom et al. 1991). In this view, economic development was thought to lead to higher rates of mobility, and increased competition would make employers recruit based on merit, making educational attainment more important. Education was thus perceived as equal to individual merit and was defined as IQ + effort. Advancing one's position through the education system was a result of hard work and intelligence and justified inequalities in wages and positions. Furthermore, because upward mobility would predominate over downward, more people would 'win' than 'lose' in this system; therefore, a majority would favour the system (Blau and Duncan 1967: 440). Hence, equal opportunity was viewed as one of many common shared norms that formed part of a shared culture (Scott 1996). Central to this tradition was the origin, education, destination (O-E-D) triangle, demonstrating the development towards equality. Briefly, the direct link between origin and destination should have been weakened because the education system opened up for more people and thus decreased the meaning of origin in relation to destination (Blau and Duncan 1967). Such meritocratic ideals have been persistent in public and political debate and are also relevant for understanding the theoretical and empirical work of the past decades.

Responses to and critiques of the modernization theory's contributions to the field have been widespread. The theory did not match the large amount of empirical evidence

collected during the 1980s and 1990s, when large comparative analyses in combination with a common system of broad class categories were conducted (e.g., Shavit and Blossfeldt 1993; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Breen et al. 2003; Goldthorpe 1996). Theoretically, the assumed neutrality of the school system was attacked by theorists who argued that rational considerations based on economic standings (Goldthorpe 1996), linguistic codes (Bernstein [1990] 2003), reproduction of social relations of production (Bowles and Gintis 1976) and reproduction of cultural inequalities (Bourdieu 1984) were important factors contributing to social inequalities in the education system and thus in society as a whole. Moreover, measuring 'class' or social background as a linear hierarchy of either prestige or socioeconomic scales was attacked for assigning too much importance to individual characteristics and ignoring structural barriers to achievement, internal labour markets and job ladders (Crompton 1996; Scott 1996).

### **Education back into a classed system of mobility**

The main empirical response to the modernization theory came from a wave of comparative work performed during the 1990s showing that the development did not point in the direction of meritocracy in the way anticipated by the modernization theory – even if absolute mobility was increasing, *relative* mobility patterns were not moving towards increasing openness, and merit had not replaced ascription (See Hout and Deprete 2006, Bottero 2005; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Goldthorpe 1996). They criticized hierarchical status schemes for merely mapping the distribution of individual rewards without investigating the societal structures that were important for explaining the hierarchy. Economic resources were thus brought back into the scope, with a focus on occupations. Considering educational expansion meant conceiving of educational careers as a series of transitions between levels rather than linear regressions of years of education on social origin (Mare 1980). Logit models of transition propensities thus became the preferred method to reveal the association between social origin characteristics and educational attainment (Breen and Jonsson 2005).

The trends were surprisingly similar across countries, and in absolute terms, mobility patterns were generally somewhat more open in the Scandinavian countries than in 'industrialist' countries such as the US and Great Britain, in contrast to the expectations of the modernization theorists. This pattern was also visible when investigating educational attainment as an end in itself; in a major comparative project led by Shavit and Blossfeldt (1993), researchers found that the expansion of education systems had not been accompanied

by greater equality of educational opportunity – except in Sweden and the Netherlands, they did not find a substantial decline in the association between origins and educational attainment. In fact, most empirical investigations found that relative class differentials in educational attainment had been rather stable over the years and in multiple countries, despite the expansion of education systems. Temporal stability was the case, rather than an opening up for the meritocratic society (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Goldthorpe 1996). Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992), when portraying general absolute and relative mobility rates, in a comparative project involving 12 European countries and the USA, Australia and Japan also concluded with stability. Moreover, the researchers found small differences between countries in patterns and degrees of fluidity and disputed the modernization theory by arguing that industrialization, modernization and educational expansion were not decisive in explaining mobility trends.

Some later projects measuring mobility patterns in the education system have modified the picture of stability in mobility patterns in terms of educational attainment and have instead found equalization trends in many Western countries, especially at lower transition points (Vallet 2004; Breen 2004; Shavit et al. 2007; Breen et al. 2009; Breen 2010; Devine and Li 2013). The trends are, moreover, contrary to what was found by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992), varying between countries, and constancy has typically been found only in Ireland and the USA. Germany and Ireland are more ‘rigid’ in terms of opportunities for mobility in the education system, whereas Hungary, Poland and Sweden are on the other side of the spectrum (see Breen and Jonsson 2005 for an overview). Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2016) recently challenged these findings, arguing that education must be viewed as a *positional good*, that is, measured as relative to other people’s level of education (see also van de Werfhorst 2017). When educational credentials are more common, they are also worth less. Measured in this way, the association between education and destination is relatively stable in Britain (but see Triventi et al. 2016). Both Pfeffer (2008) and Shavit et al. (2007), moreover, found stability in the relationship between inequality and transition to higher education in a majority of the countries studied.

Notwithstanding the disagreements regarding trends in educational mobility, education still remains a major cause of inequality (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016; Breen 2010), and various theories have attempted to explain why. According to the maximally maintained inequality (MMI) hypothesis proposed by Raftery and Hout (1993), educational levels that are not yet universal will always be dominated by families with a higher social background who will use their advantages in the education system. The findings of Shavit et al. (2007) support

this theory in that educational expansion tends to attenuate inequality first when it reaches the point where a particular level of educational attainment is nearly universal (they set the threshold at 80%). Lucas (2001) suggested that when levels *are* universal, those with more resources will compete for the type rather than the level of education, which he called effectively maintained inequality (EMI). Hence, consequential socioeconomic inequality will maintain because important qualitative inequality may be exacerbated when education systems expand. Moreover, Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1996) has received support from research showing that the cultural capital of the parents is decisive for children's grades (e.g., Andersen and Hansen 2011) as well as their educational decisions and attainment (e.g., DeGraaf et al. 2000).

### **Individualism and culture**

In a mostly theoretical turn towards individualization in the 1990s (e.g., Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Pakulski and Waters 1996), education was again identified as a liberating factor, and class was considered to be losing its importance. The general argument was that emerging individualized cultures had rejected the ideas of ascribed class cultures and that late-modern identities were increasingly *experienced* as flexible. In relation to educational decisions, these theories have occasionally been used as an explanation for rising aspirations among the young: because of individualization and a multitude of possibilities, young people generally have high aspirations as part of a 'normatively evaluative narrative about who they are and the kind of person they hope to become' (Baker 2017: 1203). Background factors such as class are not as important as they used to be, and the decision-making process is highly individualized and reflexive.

The theories' claims about the decreasing relevance of class have, however, not been supported by empirical research and have been viewed mostly as theoretical suggestions (Savage 2000: 105). The focus on reflexivity has also been criticized for being class-biased, meaning that the culture of individual choice mostly resembles the process that middle-class children experience in their educational decision-making (Sweetman 2003).

The claims of emerging individuality fit, however, with the scarce evidence of class consciousness; even if class continue to be important for educational attainment, it is less visible to people (Savage 2000; Bottero 2005; Scott 1996). In research on educational aspirations, theories of individualization have also been used to explain why pressure for individual choice, participation and engagement at a time of growing inequality and

precarious employment prospects can be problematic for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, who often have unattainable aspirations (Yates et al. 2011). Even if class remains important for educational attainment, in line with processes of individualization and the obscurity of traditional structures, people's 'perception of these processes has certainly been obscured by changes which have taken place' (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 25-26).

This change is part of a more widespread 'cultural turn' in the field and taps into a more general debate about how culture relates to action (see, for example, Lizardo and Strand 2010; Swidler 1986; Lamont 1992). Theories placing emphasis on culture in their explanation of action after the 'cultural turn' have, however, been criticized for placing culture, identity and consumption before class and stratification (Cromton and Scott 2005), one-sidedly focusing on the subjective aspects of social stratification and thus neglecting societal structures that might be important in shaping people's life chances without necessarily being named or recognized by the actors (Jarness 2017). The cultural turn has even been criticized for bringing with it 'decorative sociology' – neglecting the empirical agenda of historical and comparative research on 'the changing balance of power in Western capitalism' (Rojek and Turner 2000: 630). This neglect has been viewed as partly a reaction to stratification research that has largely been oriented towards a rational choice approach that emphasizes economic stratification and that has been criticized for ignoring the very topic of cultural aspects of decision-making (Devine and Savage 2005: 11).

Such critical responses have been said to revitalize sociological interest in the cultural aspects of classed educational decisions (see Savage 2000; Devine and Savage 2005; Scott 2001). In what has been called a 'Bourdieuian turn' (Devine and Savage 2005), a renewed focus on individual classed educational pathways and experience has emerged (e.g., Ball et 2002). Individualization, according to Savage (2000) entails not the dying of classes but rather a shift in how class operates. In educational research, this shift can be viewed via a focus on embedded perceptions and expectations that follow patterns of class in making some choices 'obvious' and others unthinkable. Middle-class students' efforts to maintain and achieve their positions and lifestyles through education and working-class students' aversion to higher education are often topics of discussion (e.g., Ball 2003; Reay et al. 2005; Reay and Vincent 2014).

## **Understanding classed educational decisions – rationality and embodied culture**

To explain educational decisions in relation to class and inequality, it is crucial to discuss different theoretical views of how educational decisions can be shaped by and shape class structures and inequality. As the topic of this thesis is classed educational decisions, I will focus on theories that explicitly address class and socioeconomic background and education. More precisely, I will discuss how culture and economy matter to individual educational decisions in light of two theoretical directions that have dominated the field in recent decades, namely, social position theory and theories of cultural advantage. Goldthorpe and Bourdieu are especially relevant in this discussion, but they are far from exclusive contributors to these theoretical directions. Goldthorpe has in his formulations of a theory of inequality in educational decision-making cultivated his rational action approach, and has been criticized for neglecting cultural aspects of decision-making. Bourdieu has been criticized for determinism or for placing too much emphasis on the unconscious aspect of action in his emphasize on the importance of cultural capital in the education system (Sayer 2005; 2010; see Reay 2004, 2010 for overviews). In the following section, I will explain and discuss Goldthorpe's and Bourdieu's approaches and their relationship to the findings of this thesis.

### **Economic calculations in educational choices: social position theory and rational choices**

*..persisting differentials are simply one expression of the way in which the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and constraints that characterize a class society contribute to their own perpetuation through the quite rational adaptive strategies that they induce on the part of those who must act under their own influence (Goldthorpe 1996: 497).*

Theoretically, Goldthorpe followed the structural theory of aspirations by Boudon (1974, see also Keller and Zavalloni 1964), and claimed that one should view levels of educational and social opportunity as relative to economic stratification. Reducing the level of economic inequality, according to Boudon, would affect inequality in educational attainment more than any other factor because people, while trying to maximize the utility of their decisions, at the same time 'behave within decisional fields whose parameters are a function of their position in the stratification system' (Boudon 1974: 36). Hence, both the economic and social costs of progressing to the next level of education are greater and the rewards are higher when the social status of the family is lower.



Golthorpe maintained that one should view levels of aspiration in relative rather than absolute terms (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2002:42) and called the model relative risk aversion (RRA) (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997). Partly as a response to research showing that people did not have articulated class consciousness, as anticipated by the Marxist tradition<sup>3</sup> (see Savage 2000: 24-27), and partly as a response to the modernization theory, Goldthorpe moved towards rational action theory (RAT). He based his class scheme (albeit not explicitly) mostly on Weberian insights, focusing on how economic and employment affiliation affected social mobility patterns (Breen 2005). In short, Goldthorpe's theory of social position, as in Boudon's version, claimed that to avoid downward mobility, people make rational calculations in the education system based mainly on their parents' economic situation and their probability of success in different educational alternatives (Golthorpe 1996; Breen and Golthorpe 1997). The costs and rewards will be different depending on one's class situation, and the years of education needed to avoid downward mobility will depend on the class position of the parents.

The education system in this view is not particularly interesting in its own right; it is rather people's placement in the class structure in combination with their rational calculations and decisions that matter in terms of where they end up. This perspective is made explicit in the famous division between primary and secondary effects, again taken from Boudon (1974). So-called primary effects, the effects that contain cultural, psychological and biological traits that are important in shaping abilities, are not of particular interest in educational decisions. Secondary effects, which remain after primary effects have been controlled for, are where actual rational decisions can be observed (e.g., Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Golthorpe 1996; Werfhorst and Hofstede 2007)<sup>4</sup>. The importance of this division in Boudon's and Goldthorpe's work is related to debates with the theorists who advocated a meritocratic view of the increasing value of hard work in the education system. Both Boudon (1974) and Goldthorpe made an important point in emphasizing, theoretically as well as empirically, that *beyond* the differences in abilities, the class structures in modern societies have stable and strong implications for educational attainment (e.g., Breen and Goldthorpe 2001).

In fact, Goldthorpe and colleagues showed that once education and other 'merit' variables are controlled for, a substantial part of destination is still explained by class

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<sup>3</sup> Visible in statements such as 'I shall avoid reference to distinctive class values, norms, 'forms of consciousness' or other supposed aspects of class cultures or subcultures' (Golthorpe 1996: 487).

<sup>4</sup> Erikson and Johnson (1996) estimated that 50% of class differences in educational outcomes derive from primary effects and 50% from secondary effects, whereas Boudon (1974:84) suggested that secondary effects are 'much more important than primary effects'. Others (cf. Nash 2003), however, claimed that primary effects are more important than secondary effects.

background (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2002). Comparing two different cohorts, they showed that merit, effort and educational attainment did not exert a greater influence on mediating mobility or determining relative chances of mobility; rather, the trends were in some instances declining (Breen and Goldthorpe 2001). Children with a disadvantaged class background thus must ‘display far more merit (as indicated by educational attainment or by IQ and effort) than do children of more advantaged origins in order to attain similar class positions’ (Breen and Goldthorpe 1999:21). They acknowledged that ability, effort and educational attainment play a significant role in the determination of the mobility process and as a mediator in this process, but ‘there is no mechanism apparent to us that would ensure that this role should steadily grow until merit understood in terms of these criteria becomes totally dominant’ (Breen and Goldthorpe 2001:84).

Goldthorpe separated somewhat from Boudon in his rejection of any social or cultural influences in educational decisions, most clearly apparent in the articles that focus solely on theorizing inequality in educational attainment (e.g., Goldthorpe 1996; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997), in which he denied that people are ‘subject to systematic influences of a (sub)cultural kind’ (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997: 278). Whereas Boudon (1974) emphasized the social costs of educational decisions, and Erikson and Jonsson (1996: 22) wrote that parents with higher education could influence their children to some extent in valuing higher education more highly, Goldthorpe and Breen (1997) at one point stated regarding educational choices, “we need not take up the vexed and complex question of the extent to which they are genetic, psychological or cultural in character” (Breen & Golthorpe 1997:3). Thus, even if they did not subscribe to a particularly strong version of rationality and mainly focused on the meaning that people attach to their actions, analysis of cultural norms, values and how to understand the underlying aspects of action and decisions seem to have been considered a black box<sup>5</sup>. He referred to Coleman (1986) and Hollis (1977) when stating that rational action explains itself and that the understanding of action in the theory does not need explanation (Golthorpe 1996: 485).

Together, these ideas tend towards a theory of action that says little about whether and how actions and decisions are formed through socialization in the school, in the family or through peers but rather shows how economic differences have logical consequences at different levels of the educational trajectory when people make rational decisions according to

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<sup>5</sup> This stand is similar to that of Elster (2007), who, even though he to a greater extent acknowledged social norms as important for understanding decisions, wrote that the *reasons* for social norms are complex to embellish (Elster 2007:353).

their position and future economic prospects (see also Gambetta 1987: 20). The development of the education system is thus interesting largely in terms of economic challenges connected to attaining degrees, and a school itself can do little to change the unequal possibilities present in society. Arguably, the theory can be important in understanding how economic inequality in society is telling in relation to inequality in educational attainment and aspirations and in understanding the part of the decision-making process that involves rational considerations of options based on economic prospects, or ‘courses of action that, given particular class situations, are rational, at least in a subjective sense, and therefore intelligible’ (Goldthorpe 2002: 212). The popularity of the theory within the field is apparent in quotations such as ‘Today, many would agree that any theory accounting for social fluidity patterns should be built up from a model of rational actors operating within an institutional framework’ (Breen and Jonsson 2005: 236). However, despite its value and popularity, in the following section, I will elaborate on why I think it needs complementary elements from other theories to come closer to explaining the totality of classed educational decisions, how they are developed, and how they transpire.

### **Too much rationality? Limitations and critical remarks**

As Bottero (2005) argued, the unfortunate consequence when attempting to avoid questions of culture, and moving towards a rational action perspective in which everything is about economy, is that one falls short when trying to explain how society and humans influence each other.

This shortcoming becomes visible in a discussion of the theory’s separation of primary and secondary effects, which, even if it has become a valuable tool for separating different parts of the decision-making process, arguably can also be misleading if it relies too heavily on rational choice theory. It can occasionally be difficult to separate the two ‘effects’ from one another. Jackson et al. (2007), for example, discussed whether students decided before or after receiving their grades whether they should move on to A-levels and that not knowing this decision could result in an underestimation of the secondary effects because ‘anticipatory decisions can be expected, especially through their positive or negative effects on motivation, to influence students’ performance in the examinations they subsequently take’ (Jackson et al. 2007: 222). It seems reasonable that rational motivations can affect grades. However, a reasonable second question would be whether the secondary effects (the students’ choices) could also be affected by primary effects (which include socioculturally influenced factors such as grades) – in other words, whether secondary effects could themselves be understood as partly socioculturally conditioned. This question is, however, quickly dismissed with the

argument that it leads to ‘black box’ explanations ‘that leave open the question of just *why* particular class values and related social norms *should be* accepted and followed’ (Jackson et al. 2007: 224, italics in original). According to Abbot (2007), a problematic assumption in such lines of reasoning is that the meaning of action is given in itself. It is rational. He advocated an alternative view in which the meaning of action is in its relation to other actions, temporally and structurally.

A similar point was made by Hatcher (1998:14), who argued that the rational choice theory corresponds somewhat with middle-class trajectories, but he pointed to a range of working-class orientations towards educational decisions among young people of which the RAT approach is but one. He claimed that ‘Identity is, of course, a social construction, embedded in the culture. The error RAT makes is to *counterpose* rational choice to culture, rather than seeing it as one element in a culturally-shaped repertoire’ (Hatcher 1998:16, italics in original).

It has been noted that the educational decision-making process in families is far more complex than the theory of Goldthorpe allows for, influenced by, among other things, responsibilities and feelings and not just materialistic concerns (Devine 1998). Hence, Goldthorpe’s approach can, again according to Bottero (2005:136), be viewed as ‘de-cultured class analysis’ – to avoid the question of class consciousness, he avoids the question of culture altogether. The consequence is a reduction of educational inequality to a question of rational calculations connected to economics, which is important but hardly the full picture of what occurs when children and families with various origins and experiences in school decide on what paths, if any, to choose in the education system.

Moreover, Savage (2000: 87) noted that to pursue such strategic action dependent on class, parents and children must have *some* sense of what class they belong to. Thus, ‘The RAT argument depends not only on the objective existence of a class-based cost and opportunity structure, but also on an awareness of symbols and identifiers to allow people to devise an ‘appropriate’ strategy’ (Savage 2000: 87). Furthermore, one may ask how informed students actually are about their educational opportunities and potential pathways; information is seemingly a precondition in Goldthorpe’s stand, even if his formulations on the preconditions of rationality is somewhat moderate (see Goldthorpe 1996). Various studies have shown that young people’s knowledge of future possibilities and income opportunities related to different educational paths is surprisingly low (Almås et al. 2012) and often follows patterns of class (Archer and Hutchings 2000).

In relation to the findings of this thesis, the theory of relative risk aversion adds important explanations regarding the relationship between economic inequality and stratified educational decisions but falls short in response to the findings concerning the division between economic and cultural capital and in relation to the classed environments in schools. Additional theories are needed to understand the fuller picture of how classed educational decisions occur. How do classed educational decisions develop? How can we understand the complex relationship between parents' class background, the classed environment of the school and individual educational decisions? How can we understand different parental practices and individual decisions based on the parents' level of economic and cultural capital?

### **Cultural processes in educational decisions – embodied advantage**

*'It is simply not possible to ignore the cultural frameworks which people use to make sense of their social location and which will thus condition the kinds of rational responses that they will make' (Savage 2000:87).*

In this section, I will go through Bourdieu's theory of the education system and how educational decisions and attainment can be understood in this tradition. I will argue that the theory can contribute important aspects relevant to this thesis but that there are some limitations and shortcomings mostly related to how the theory has been used in contemporary research on the topic. In particular, in the use of the theory, the contextual aspects and change have largely been overlooked, as well as the differentiation between cultural and economic capital.

A different reaction to the functionalist approach than that of the Nuffield School was a more culturalist-oriented direction, emphasizing how the school and teachers systematically discriminate against working-class pupils by expecting a language and culture consistent with those of the middle class. Pierre Bourdieu has become the most frequently used theorist in this tradition. In contrast to Goldthorpe, Bourdieu places culture at the heart of questions of class and education. In his theories of class reproduction, the education system plays a crucial part in the reproduction of what he called *cultural capital*<sup>6</sup>, even if he viewed economic capital as the most important resource in contemporary capitalism (Bourdieu 1997).

Bourdieu was attempting to 'rethink' the division between class and status used by Weber in the development of the idea of a three-dimensional *social space*. In addition to the

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<sup>6</sup> Bernstein ([1990] 2003) used concepts similar to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital but more focused on language and linguistic codes.

vertical level of volume of capital that can be found in most conventional theories of class and socioeconomic status (SES), he advocated *capital composition*, the horizontal division between class fractions with various amounts of cultural and economic capital. The third dimension of social space is time, or people's trajectory, as in time used to increase capital or to change the composition and/or volume of capital. According to Bourdieu (1990), classes and class fractions tend to take the form of status groups, as understood by Weber, in that they often share lifestyles and tastes.

Briefly, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the education system suggests that schools are part of a larger system of symbolic processes and mechanisms that contribute to reproducing power and domination through producing and distributing a dominating culture. Cultural capital refers both to embodied competences and institutionalized educational degrees and is objectified in terms of, for instance, books, instruments and objects of art (Bourdieu 1997). People with higher cultural background have advantages in the school system, as they possess embodied cultural capital that comes with an 'ease' that is rewarded by teachers (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This ease is not explicitly expressed and is often misrecognized as a gift or talent by teachers and students and hence legitimized. The most important transition of cultural capital occurs in the family and is more disguised than economic capital (Bourdieu 1997). As formulated by Bourdieu,

What we call ease is the privilege of those who, having imperceptibly acquired their culture through a gradual familiarization in the bosom of the family, have academic culture as their native culture and can maintain a familiar rapport with it that implies the unconsciousness of its acquisition (Bourdieu 1996: 21).

He thus rejects the meritocratic idea of a neutral system advocating equality of opportunity and instead uses the concept of *habitus* in addition to cultural capital to explain how the school contributes to the reproduction process. Habitus can be thought of as a set of master patterns, or embodied dispositions, including certain social and linguistic traits, manners, style and 'know-how' that is often perceived as a natural way of being. It is 'the system of structured structuring dispositions' (Bourdieu 1990:53), 'a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices (Bourdieu 1990: 54), or 'embodied history' (Bourdieu 1990: 56). Habitus is thus closely related to cultural capital in its embodied form, which is also viewed as the fundamental state of cultural capital by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1997). In this understanding, ability or talent is not natural but is 'itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997:48), and

although habitus is largely the product of early childhood experience, it is repeatedly re-structured by individuals' encounters with the world, especially with schools (Reay 2004).

In this understanding, classed educational decisions will not be a merely economic and rational consideration, as Goldthorpe argues. Rather,

To speak of strategies of reproduction is not to say that strategies through which dominants manifest their tendency to maintain the status quo are the result of rational calculation or even strategic intent. It is merely to register that many practices that are phenomenally very different are objectively organized in such a way that they contribute to the reproduction of the capital at hand, without having been explicitly designed instituted with this end in mind (Bourdieu 1996: 272).

Educational choices are, according to Bourdieu, governed by what is reasonable to expect and often involve considerations of what is suitable for 'people like us', together with an operation of a 'practical sense' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1990). As emphasized by Ball et al. (2002), an educational decision is for many connected to a 'normal biography' of choice, lifestyle and taste, and the degree and nature of choice or reflexivity differ between classes and class fractions. Furthermore, the value of cultural capital in its institutional form is dependent on its scarcity and thus whether it is possible to gain advantages from the investment – which is not always easy to predict, for example, in the changing conversion rate between economic and academic capital after the expansion of the education system (Bourdieu 1997: 246). According to Nash (1990:435), schooling has 'its own power to shape consciousness, over and above the power of the family, and it is clear that the role of the school is acknowledged as active, and not merely passive in its legitimation of family acquired habitus'. The practices in the school are thus given significantly more attention than in the position advocated by Boudon and Goldthorpe.

### **Can cultural capital be operationalized?**

Because cultural capital is a frequently used concept in this thesis, I find it relevant to discuss how the notion has been understood and used in previous research – what cultural capital is and what it is not. This understanding is especially important given that the concept of cultural capital in research on education has been understood and measured in a myriad ways by researchers. It has, especially in relation to grades or abilities, been suggested to be roughly divided into a 'broad' and a 'narrow' understanding (see Lareau and Weiniger 2003; Andersen and Hansen 2011; Barone 2006). Whereas the broad understanding typically involves the transmission of academic skills through help with homework and academic

features that are rewarded in the school system (Lareau and Weiniger 2003), the narrow understanding emphasizes the transmission of cultural capital through exposure to highbrow cultural activities such as museums, theatre and classical music (e.g., Di Maggio 1982; Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede 2007). The latter understanding has been common in quantitative research, often to distinguish between cultural capital and academic skills, or human capital.

Qualitative studies have accentuated a broader understanding, perhaps because of a lack of need to draw an exact line between what is and what is not cultural capital in studies often restricted to distinguishing between working-class and middle-class students in their encounters with the education system (e.g., Reay et al. 2001; Ball 2003). Some quantitative studies have suggested dividing cultural capital in more detailed ways – into a relational and a static state (Tramonte and Willms 2010), where the static state refers to highbrow activities and the relational to cultural interaction and communication between parents and children, or in a way that distinguishes between activities, cultural knowledge and language, showing how these aspects of cultural capital account for significant proportions of variance in abilities (Sullivan 2001). Communicative skills have also been emphasized (Barone 2006) as well as the simpler version that operationalizes parents' level of education as a proxy for cultural capital (e.g., Jonsson 1987). Additionally, many seem to consider cultural capital as something that crystallizes when a large number of social background factors and ability measures are controlled for (e.g., Sullivan 2001), leaving cultural capital to be separated from class background, parents' educational level and sometimes also broad measures of socioeconomic background (e.g., Barone 2006).

The relationship between abilities and cultural capital is disputed in the field. On the one hand, Kingston (2001) argued that what is included in the broad spectrum of cultural capital is often merely abilities and competencies that are rightly awarded by the school. Furthermore, he concluded that elite cultural capital, the narrower understanding, is relatively unimportant as a mediating factor between social privilege and academic success (Kingston 2001: 97). It should, according to Kingston, be possible to show that cultural capital is important *even when abilities are controlled for*. If not, relevant competencies that are learned at home are wrongly recognized as capital.

On the other hand, Lareau and Weiniger (2003) argued that cultural capital should be considered broadly and involve skills and competences. They rejected the narrow understanding of cultural capital that both restricts it to highbrow culture and separates it from



skills and abilities and suggested a broad version in which a technical and a status dimension of degrees cannot be separated. They wrote that

the critical aspect of cultural capital is that it allows culture to be used as a resource that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next (Lareau and Weiniger 2003: 587).

They further argued that this understanding ‘implies that the competencies that function as cultural capital are not fixed once and for all’ (ibid: 588) but are dependent on how markets for cultural capital are constructed. Using their own research, they exemplified cultural capital as parents’ skills and ‘a sense of entitlement’ connected to being able to intervene in institutions such as the school as well as transferring these skills to their children.

According to Sullivan (2001), this debate boils down to a disagreement of – in addition to what cultural capital actually *is* – *how* the transmission of this cultural capital happens: are teachers prejudiced in favour of pupils who have been exposed to the dominant culture, and do they reward those pupils with higher grades, or does participation in dominant cultural activities lead to the development of abilities or skills that are rewarded at the school? If the former is the case, she suggested that a narrow understanding seems more appropriate, and if the latter, a broad understanding. As argued by Andersen and Hansen (2011), however, Bourdieu was largely concerned with the *symbolic* features of cultural capital in the school system – how the transmission of cultural capital is more disguised than economic capital and hence ‘predisposed to function as symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1997:244), or what he called ‘symbolic violence’. The dominated and the dominating have in this understanding a similar perception of what is valued – the ease that is rewarded by the teachers is conceived as legitimate by the students as well (Bourdieu 1996). They thus agreed with Kingston that cultural capital cannot be exactly the same as abilities and hard work but did not view cultural capital as restricted to highbrow culture – the symbolic aspects *misrecognized* as abilities are what is considered cultural capital. Their argument is supported by evidence that those originating in the cultural fractions received higher grades in oral exams, where stylistic and symbolic aspects can be perceived as more important, than in anonymous written exams (Andersen and Hansen 2011: 620; see also Barone 2006).

In Bourdieu’s own writings, he did not make a clear distinction between cultural capital and abilities; rather, cultural capital is related to the investment of time to acquire abilities. That relationship means not that abilities are the same as cultural capital but that people with large amounts of cultural capital also have interests in (and are predisposed to)

spending time to perform well in school. People with high levels of cultural capital thus tend to have high grades in school or perform well on tests. Bourdieu's focus, however, is on the misrecognition of reproduction processes, on how teachers and students alike make assumptions and classifications of themselves and others regarding abilities that often are strictly related to classifications of ideas of style and ease and are also related to class differences in how they expect people to perform given their social background. This misrecognition obscures the relationships between social background and abilities, while at the same time being regarded as neutral. Hence, this will be especially prevalent in fields in which stylistic and symbolic aspects are highly rewarded and in examination forms in which bodily and linguistic forms of behaviour are visible (Bourdieu 1996):

We thus see how the educational institution, with no explicit instructions and, most of the time, even contrary to the intentions both of the agents who assign it its objectives and of most of those who are supposed to realize them, is able to function like an immense cognitive machine, operating classifications that, although apparently completely neutral, reproduce pre-existing social classifications (Bourdieu 1996: 52).

To translate this situation to educational decisions and educational attainment, it is also plausible that cultural capital is not equal to highbrow culture or skills and hard work per se, even if it cannot be strictly separated from them. Rather, cultural capital will be connected to cultural and symbolic aspects that are in short supply and that are recognized as such (Flemmen 2013) by teachers, parents and students. While embodied cultural capital will be related to stylistic and entitled ways of being that are generally rewarded in school, educational credentials are institutional cultural capital as long as they are recognized in the relevant labour markets, providing access to jobs and economic or status rewards (Bourdieu 1984). As argued by Barone (2006), previous quantitative research has mostly overlooked cultural capital in its embodied state and focused on the objectified state. Moreover, if relational aspects have been emphasized, it is often with a focus on the communication of highbrow culture. The discussion also makes it clear that cultural capital cannot easily be operationalized in quantitative research without the danger of limiting the concept.

In sum, the way to measure cultural capital can be broadly divided into three categories. One uses a broad understanding, often in combination with qualitative measures and a division between the working class and middle class. The second, used in quantitative research, is often a quite narrow understanding based on highbrow cultural objects or practices, and a third also used in quantitative research is applying more creative

measurements used together with general measures of status scales, education level and/or class. The measurements of cultural capital are, however, as emphasized by Sullivan (2001), often limited by what data are available.

In this thesis, cultural capital is measured in two different ways. In article one, it is measured using an index based on questions in the survey regarding parents' education, books in the house, and music instruments. In article four, it is measured by utilizing the Oslo Register Data Class Scheme (Hansen et al. 2009) based on questions in the survey regarding parents' occupations. Importantly, cultural capital in this thesis is always understood in relation to economic capital. It is thus viewed not as separate from socioeconomic background but as a way to measure social background that simultaneously includes horizontal and vertical measures of class.

### **Culture and economy**

Clarifying the understanding of cultural capital in the education system also entails an understanding of its relation to trends and to economic capital. Important for this thesis, a central but often overlooked point in Bourdieu's theory is that of social space. Class divisions for Bourdieu are not, as in most theories of class and status, only hierarchical; they are differentiated by the composition of capital. Agents are thus defined by their relative position within social space, which is dependent on their economic, cultural and symbolic resources. This aspect is, as shown above, usually absent in research on class and education, even though cultural capital is a frequently used concept in the field. Moreover, these power relations in society are not constant and are also part of

... a field of power struggles among the holders of different forms of power, a gaming space in which those agents and institutions possessing enough specific capital (economic or cultural capital in particular) to be able to occupy the dominant positions within their respective fields confront each other using strategies aimed at preserving or transforming these relations of power (Bourdieu 1996: 264-65).

This theory involves a *relational* understanding of human action. Social space is a space of relations in which 'social position depends not on the intrinsic properties of groups or locations ('substantialism'), but on the configuration of relations which link and give them their significance' (Bottero 2009:401). For example, as gaining educational credentials has increasingly become a common strategy or practice for those possessing merely economic capital to legitimize their position (Bourdieu 1984, 1996: 216), it is also assumed in Bourdieu's theories and in this thesis that reproduction in the education system must be

understood within the macro-level concept of ‘social space where both economic and cultural capital are important. Research on education that applies Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts has largely focused on cultural capital and its transmission, or sometimes on a rather implicit combination (Vandebroeck 2018).

Moreover, even if structures are partly ‘bodily incorporated and transformed into habitual tastes and pre-reflective aspirations’ (Bottero 2009: 402), actors also pursue strategies and respond creatively to new situations based on their practical knowledge of the world (Bottero 2009: 400). This approach includes the possibility of reconverting capital into forms that are more profitable or more legitimate, sometimes contributing to maintaining one’s position (Bourdieu 1996: 277). This possibility depends on the value of one’s capital and on its relative weight in the structure of one’s heritage (ibid: 276). On the one hand, if an individual comes from a family with a family business, depending on the education system, will, for example, perhaps be more interesting if the business is under threat or when legitimizing the business keeps it in the family. Families that largely depend on cultural capital, on the other hand, may make use of the school to a greater extent and in smarter ways in their reproduction strategies (ibid: 292).

Central to this understanding is also the aspect of change. Savage (2000: 110, 117) argued that Bourdieu’s approach to cultural capital should be modified, as people generally desire to be ‘ordinary’ rather than to be above other people, and that Bourdieu underestimated the resources available to working-class people that are used to develop claims of distinction. In developing a more nuanced theory, it would, according to him, be easier to contradict critiques by, for example, Goldthorpe (1996, 2007), who claimed that Bourdieu failed to explain the inclusion of lower-class students in the education system that accompanied the massive expansion (Goldthorpe 1996: 489). According to Goldthorpe, this is not a story of the reproduction of cultural capital but a story of its substantial growth. A reproduction, according to Goldthorpe, would involve the exclusion of the working class from higher education, which is not the case.

Bourdieu did not dispute this idea. In fact, he wrote that ‘Generally increased schooling has the effect of increasing the mass of cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1984: 128). This increase, moreover, leads to the inflation of educational credentials, an argument that is not far from Goldthorpe’s view of education as a positional good. Thus, education does not entail the same value as cultural capital regardless of the structural arrangements, but the value will be relative to whatever is in short supply. Moreover, the inflation of academic qualifications

leads to a 'structural de-skilling of a whole generation, who are bound to get less out of their qualifications than the previous generation would have obtained' (Bourdieu 1984: 140).

Hence, even if those with more cultural capital are expected to perform better in the education system, especially in educational fields in which stylistic and symbolic aspects are highly rewarded, and to be more inclined to rely on education rather than economic resources to accumulate the relevant capital, it is necessary to investigate to what extent this situation is changing and differs according to the context. The most common strategies in research relying on Bourdieu's theories, either to distinguish between the working class and middle class or to measure cultural capital in terms of highbrow activities and objects or in opposition to general measures of socioeconomic background (as outlined above), thus do not seem to acknowledge the full potential of his theories. It has been claimed both that economic fractions to a great degree are dependent on the education system and that following the expansion of the education system, cultural factors are increasingly important for determining one's class position (Furlong and Cartmel 1997:13), but these claims have not been fully investigated. Different reproduction strategies and practices between fractions with a predominance of different forms of capital are generally omitted from research on educational attainment and class and from research relying on Bourdieu's theories. An arguably important aspect of Bourdieu's theory, that of capital composition, is thus omitted from the empirical picture – somewhat mysteriously, given the large space it has in Bourdieu's own writings. Examining both culture and economy, as two of the articles in this thesis do, can arguably bring important knowledge to the table. As argued by Crompton and Scott (2005):

Culture and economy are inter-twined, but as long as they are seen, for the purposes of analysis, as dual systems then this inter-twining may be explored using both variable-oriented as well as case-study research methods. Similarly, the question of whether cultural factors (or status) have become more important in the determination of class position (social and economic positioning) may be systematically investigated through the study of a variety of locales, occupations, institutions, and social groups (Crompton and Scott 2005:202).

In this sense, the distinction between economy and culture can be used in investigations of stability and change and contextual differences, such as national labour markets and education systems, and can perhaps add important knowledge to the correlation between class structures and educational outcomes.

Moreover, drawing on Bourdieu's habitus approach, in this thesis, an educational decision is understood not as occurring only at an exact moment but as part of a longer and relational process that occurs within a self-defined social space consisting of acceptable

alternatives. This view has been further developed in what Ball et al. (2002:55) called a 'resocialisation of the rational within choice', where Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997:36) emphasized how people make pragmatic and rationally based decisions within their horizons; these horizons depend both on their habitus and on the context of the market for labour and education. Similar to how Giddens (1979) explained action, the individuals thus are neither 'completely autonomous (as pre-existing rules and resources are heavily implicated in most people's lives), nor do they create situations anew (as teachers, for example, always act in an existing school system)' (Shilling 1992:80).

# **Social closure and educational differentiation**

## **contextualized**

*'Rather than assume a singular significance of diplomas, credentialing theory accords independent significance to the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of degrees that vary across national and historical contexts'* (Brown 2001:25).

An important framework for this thesis is the focus on classed educational decisions contextualized in different parts of the decision-making process and in different parts of the education system – in the family, in the school, in two different elite educations and in the national context. To account for how contextualizing inequality in educational decisions in this way matters, I will focus on theories of social closure and social boundaries. Certain educational pathways and fields are more accessible among specific groups, and both strategies and informal practices contribute to restricting the access of other groups. Educational decisional processes, I will argue, are partly context-specific, which could both hide and reinforce closure processes in the education system. After reviewing different ways of viewing theories of social closure, I will outline one section for each context in which educational decisions are investigated throughout this thesis: the family, the school, the educational field and the national context. This chapter will thus be closer to the themes of the articles in the thesis than the one already outlined.

### **Social closure**

The reproduction of classed patterns in educational attainment is often observed in relation to processes of social closure. Originally developed by Weber, the concept of social closure denotes a tendency for social groups to try to increase the advantage of their resources by excluding others and drawing boundaries in relation to them. Educational degrees are thus often manipulated by occupational groups to maintain their own interests (Brown 2001:21). Social closure can occur in the economic, political and status order but in this understanding is perhaps most relevant for education in terms of occupational groups closing off by requiring the correct training, education or licence, which is controlled by the group. In Weber's account, if a status group or a class has the power to influence them, formally open systems can be systems of closure in a system of rationalized modes of exclusion (Murphy 1988:223). I will elaborate on the claim that closure can also be the result of informal individual practices following patterns of class. The concept of social closure has been further

developed by a range of theorists, such as Larson (1977) and Bourdieu (1996), and more extensively by Raymond Murphy (1988) and Frank Parkin (1979) (see Manza 1992 for an overview).

### **Collective, individual, formal and informal closure**

Forms of closure can be viewed as based on both collective and individual action (Murphy 1988; Parkin 1979). On the one hand, Parkin describes the collectivist criteria of exclusion as directly transmitting advantage to other groups, for example, family members. On the other hand, individualist criteria, such as properties or credentials, are designed to protect advantage and are thus somewhat less efficient in transmitting it. Even if privileged classes tend to adapt to exclusion rules established to protect privileges, the rules are not always successful. Furthermore, exclusion and monopolization within states are moving towards increasing levels of individualist forms of closure. Race, gender and ethnicity, for example, are less important, and individual performance in the market, cultural performance in the education system and political performance in the bureaucracy have become increasingly important (Murphy 1988).

According to this understanding, how to understand closure mechanisms in the education system is not straightforward. On the one hand, credentials are explained as individualist criteria, while professional groups, such as doctors and lawyers, are examples of groups that limit and control access to the professions to secure or increase market value (Larson 1977). Hence, when these groups receive high rewards in terms of income or status, it is not just because of their individual merits but rather because of the successful strategies pursued by the group (Larson 1977; Collins 1979). As explained by Murphy:

(...) the monopolization by corporatist credentialed groups today is accomplished initially through the use of the formal educational credentials of the school system and then, in the case of the most strongly organized corporatist groups – the professions, though the credentials issued by the corporation itself. These certificates are conspicuously displayed as guarantors of competence (Murphy 1988: 186).

Similarly, Larson (1977) described the professions as the occupations that managed to create a monopoly control over the supply of specific types of skilled services, and she called projects of professionalization ‘collective mobility projects’ (1977:67) that attempt to close off other actors and professionalization ‘a collective project which aims at market control’, ‘centred in and allied with the modern university’ (1977: 50, see also Abbot 1988). Medicine



and law, the topics of article three, are of special relevance here, as these ‘elite educations’ are often used as prime examples of how collective closure strategies are used successfully to limit outsiders’ access and maintain privileges within the groups.

According to Murphy (1988:180), however, it is important not to obscure the important component of collectivist exclusion inherent in individual criteria. Even if individual or structural closure mechanisms are viewed as based on individual action, not necessarily intentionally aimed at gaining interests or blocking other groups, collectivist monopolization more than ever before operates indirectly through individual forms in ways commonly viewed as based on individual merit and hence more legitimate (Murphy 1988).

Hansen (1995) made a distinction between *collective closure mechanisms*, which include laws, curricular requirements, and rules of admission to higher education institutions, and what she called the ‘*aggregation effects of individual action*’ (Hansen 1995: 26). The latter may consist of different forms of advantage based on both economic resources (Boudon 1974; Goldthorpe 1996) and different forms of class cultures that can influence people’s preferences, possibilities and actions, for example, as emphasized by Bourdieu (1996). The aggregation of individual action may, even if not necessarily intentionally, contribute to class closure.

Thus, closure mechanisms need not be deliberate. According to Manza (1992: 286), closure theory focuses too much on formal practices of closure and not enough on informal practices. He wrote that ‘many of the most intractable forms of closure are hidden, unorganized, perhaps even unconscious, and extremely difficult to capture with formal models of closure emphasizing the intentionality of social action’. The education system can in this view be formally open, but those who enter with more resources (cultural capital, contacts, money, spare time, etc.) will have advantages over other groups. This situation also opens an opportunity for closure based on merit and is thus increasingly perceived as connected to individual characteristics. As formulated by Murphy,

In the collectivist exclusionary codes of the past it was the ‘whole’ person himself or herself who was excluded or selected. In a formally rational system of exclusion it is no longer the person who is selected or excluded, but rather the person’s apparent skills, talents, knowledge, and resources. (...) in a rationalized society which presents success in a bureaucratic career or in the market as the ultimate goal, not being selected implies individual failure and inferiority and strikes the core of individual identity (Murphy 1988: 221).

Moreover, social closure is related to Weber’s distinction between class and status groups – it is the distinct social groupings that ‘reinforce their internal solidarity by drawing distinct

boundaries (in intimate interaction and lifestyle) between those who fall inside and outside the group' (Bottero 2005: 41). Weber described how social closure can occur through apparently innocent social actions, such as marriage, consumption patterns and friendships, as well as in education, occupation and property (Bottero 2005:43; Scott 1996: 32-3; Bourdieu 1989). Thus, certain educational possibilities, while formally open to all, can be informally closed to some people based on economic barriers, cultural and symbolic competencies, social networks or abilities.

Bottero (2005) made similar points when describing 'differential association'. She underlined that the principle of similarity must not be overstated; we do not live and choose in completely similar social groups, and we are situated within a range of different social locations that intersect to varying degrees. Moreover, people tend to adjust as their social positions change. Nevertheless, social boundaries and social ties are used to 'establish the extent of social closure between groups' (Bottero 2005:171). Hence, even if the schools or universities are in principle open to all (however often dependent on grades and economic resources), social and cultural dissimilarity, self-selection and self-exclusion contribute to a reproduction of social distance. In relation to class and educational decisions, this situation has been described by Reay et al. (2001) in terms of how working-class and ethnic minority students select themselves out of the 'best' universities owing to fear of not being with 'people like me' in a 'process of psychological self-exclusion in which traditional universities are often discounted' (Reay et al. 2001: 863).

Many of the ideas of closure theory resonate with the works of Bourdieu, even though he did not use the word closure (Manza 1992; Murphy 1988). The concept of cultural and academic capital, for example, presupposes social closure, as the idea is that those lacking capital are excluded, and the 'success of claims to legitimacy depends on the relative power of the groups involved' (Murphy 1988: 20). In general, the concept of social closure is relevant for the understanding of contextualized classed educational decisions in that it explains, to various degrees, how social groups close off towards other groups and draw boundaries, thus contributing to the maintenance of stratification in the education system. This exclusion can occur formally and explicitly or through apparently unrelated activities, such as lifestyle choices. It can occur by organized professions or by individuals with the correct language and grades.

Educational decisions can also be perceived as important in a process of designating similar people for suitable occupations. Collins (1977), for example, in his rather radical approach to educational credentials, suggested that education is a good example of

socialization into status cultures that often have little to do with occupational qualifications. According to him, education works well for employers to select new members for occupations who share the appropriate cultural attributes and vocabulary. The increase in educational requirements for occupations is thus not an actual need for more skills but rather a consequence of an increase in educated people. This increase, in turn, has led to employers raising requirements to be able to maintain exclusiveness in the occupations and to more people obtaining education. Hence, rather than meritocratic competition based on skills that are useful in jobs, Collins claimed that occupational monopolies are primarily concerned with gaining cultural capital and social exclusion (Brown 2001: 24)<sup>7</sup>.

Does this claim mean that education is without function? Although Collin's theories can be viewed as an important reminder of the non-technical and cultural aspect of educational credentials, not far from Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, such a claim seems somewhat unreasonable. As argued by Murphy (1988:171), there are reasons to include Parkin's emphasis on exclusion and monopolization based on *skills*. According to him, skills and expertise are crucial factors in class inequality and occupational rewards. Hence, both cultural barriers and technical skills are important in the closure mechanisms related to education and credentials (ibid: 182). This importance can be observed in that, on the one hand, professions with a certain skill base (such as medicine and law) succeed in retaining and increasing their market scarcity. On the other hand, there are many examples of skills and credentials that have been the basis of monopolization and exclusion without being technically functional; they are perhaps especially visible when losing their status (for example, Latin, or priests).

In this thesis, there is tension between formal and informal, collective and individual forms of closure. Perhaps most recognizable from the theories of closure, the classical professions of medicine and law are examples of groups managing to maintain their exclusivity, measured in terms of self-recruitment and the income levels of the candidates' parents, partly based on strategies created on a group level. This system can be viewed as a form of social closure, as other groups are by necessity to some extent excluded. Moreover, the two professions rely on different forms of individual closure mechanisms. High intake requirements are more prevalent in medicine and are not as effective at the end of the period,

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<sup>7</sup> This point is not far from one made by Breen and Goldthorpe in opposing the meritocratization theory. They noted that 'employers are able to define merit how they wish' and that the relative importance of merit measured in different ways will vary from one period to another (Breen and Goldthorpe 2001:97).

while law to a higher degree relies on competition throughout the educational career; thus, cultural and field-specific knowledge are perhaps more important.

The other articles in the thesis concern topics related to social closure, if not as explicitly. What Hansen (1995) called the *aggregation effects of individual action* can include advantages for groups with higher economic and cultural capital in the education system. The topic of how parental involvement in article one can be class-specific and also related to the composition of different forms of capital sheds light on early foundations of skill formations that can later be observed in relation to both formal and informal exclusion or inclusion in the education system. The focus on cultural capital can generally be understood in relation to social closure, as it is understood that those with less of this capital are to some extent excluded from the education system, legitimized and viewed in relation to individual merit. The focus of article two is differential association, as explained by Bottero (2005), in the sense that people with similar class backgrounds attending similar schools can influence each other to choose similar paths.

### **Educational ‘strategies’ and reproduction in the family**

In this section, I will review relevant theoretical and empirical work on educational reproduction in the family and discuss how investigating this context is relevant to understanding reproduction in the education system.

Most researchers and theorists agree that the reproduction of advantage in the education system mostly occurs within the family. This agreement holds for both Bourdieu and scholars applying his concepts of habitus and cultural capital and those advocating the view of the rational actor. In both cases, the family is the main site of reproduction, either as the setting where the most important and long-lasting socialization occurs or as the setting where parents and children together strategically calculate the most sensible educational decision, given a wish to avoid downward social mobility. This theoretical emphasis on the family is perhaps not surprising, given that the reproduction in focus is that between parents and their children, bound together in the constitution of the family. The question, however, in relation to the topic of this thesis, is how different ways of parenting, or different practices in the context of the family, have consequences for the relationship between the class situation of the parents and the educational possibilities of the child. In what ways does the family situation contribute to the continuation or alteration of already unevenly distributed traits?

Studies of educational transitions have emphasized early transition points to explain the link between students' social backgrounds and their educational choices (e.g., Mare 1980; Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Lucas 2001; Müller and Karle 1993), and education systems with early tracking have shown a higher degree of unequal educational decisions associated with people's social background (e.g., Pfeffer 2008). This finding suggests that educational decisions made when children are younger and have stronger connections to their parents are classed to a higher degree.

Furthermore, several qualitative studies have shown how educational aspirations and decisions are associated with class differences and the possession of cultural capital and that children and parents together have different ways of behaving and being met in the education system. The decision-making process in this research is often explained and investigated as something occurring in the home, with both parents and children in a central role. For example, it has been shown that knowledge of status hierarchies between institutions and fields and the use of them are systematically different for families seen in light of their class origin. Indeed, 'the capacity for choice is unevenly distributed across the social classes' (Ball et al. 2002:66; see also McDonough 1997; Reay et al. 2001; Ball 2003). 'Non-choice' and aversion are often described as especially important for those from families without previous experience in higher education, whereas those with a higher-level class background who have families that are familiar with the education system often explain the process of choosing higher education as a choice between attending the most privileged university or not, and it is taken for granted or always assumed that they will attend university (Ball et al. 2002). Reay (2010: 77), for example, describes how for many middle-class families, choosing to attend university is considered part of their biography and is 'often too obvious to articulate'. Young people with working-class backgrounds, in contrast, tend to place themselves outside higher education, painting it as a choice for middle-class people and 'not for the likes of us'. Higher education is often perceived as risky and costly and as a potential threat to working-class identities (Archer and Hutchings 2000).

As emphasized in article one, parents' involvement can be important for how their children perform in school (e.g., Seginer 2006; McNeil 1999; Hill and Tyson 2009) and has been identified as a way to close socioeconomic gaps in achievement (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins and Weiss 2006). In recent years, strengthening parents' involvement in schools has become a political priority in many countries (Hill et al. 2004), increasing the relevance of investigating its relation to class background. Both the forms and the effects of parents' involvement vary according to class background (McNeal 1999; Benner et al. 2016; Hill et al.

2004; Lee and Bowen 2006); children from low- and high-SES families benefit differently from different forms of involvement (Benner et al. 2016), and people with a more advantageous class background seem to benefit more from discussions and expectations. In what ways and to what extent parents are involved in their children's schooling also vary by the parents' SES (Desimone 1999; Lareau 1987, 2011; Lee and Bowen 2006; Calarco 2014).

However, few scholars have conducted research on actual educational reproduction processes occurring in the family and connected to class, with some important exceptions. Lareau (2011) conducted large projects to investigate the classed nature of upbringing in America and developed the typology of 'concerted cultivation', which, according to her, is common among middle-class parents, and the 'accomplishment of natural growth', which she attributed to working-class parents. Similar to Lee and Bowen (2006), she found that middle-class parents are more involved than working-class parents and also that the *styles* of involvement are different. Whereas the middle-class parents whom they encountered tended to perform active involvement, including after-school activities, conversations about school and active communication with teachers, the working-class parents were more oriented towards ensuring that their children received love, clothing and safety. Additionally, the working-class parents allowed their children much more autonomy in their spare time and allowed the school to be responsible for education. This situation is assumed to provide advantages in school to middle-class students, an assumption that is supported by research showing that class differences link to different uses of language and to advantages in school (Ready and Wright 2011).

In more recent educational research, Calarco (2018), in her study of children and teachers in school, argued that the middle-class advantage in school is a *negotiated* advantage. Children are not passive recipients of inequalities that parents and teachers create for them but are active participants in stratifying their own lives and experiences. She found that middle-class students were remarkably active and assertive in their negotiations with teachers, even when this behaviour directly conflicted with the rules and expectations of the class, which gave them advantages. Hence, rather than resistance to school by working-class students, as has been argued elsewhere (cf. Willis 1977), middle-class students resisted the rules by interrupting, claiming attention and challenging teachers' expectations.

In article one, we examine parental involvement in schooling either by having future educational expectations or by directly helping with homework and attending meetings at school. The findings resemble previous research in that parents with higher-class backgrounds are generally more involved. However, we additionally distinguish between those with

primarily cultural and economic resources and compare four different countries. The analyses show that informal practices such as involvement in the home can be part of the social closure mechanisms that are important for classing the outcomes of different children – the different class fractions differ in their involvement practices, and those with more cultural capital are somewhat more inclined to use what have previously been shown to be the most effective forms of involvement.

How should such findings be understood? Should one assume that parents make strategic calculations to avoid downward mobility, and perhaps also to ascend in the social hierarchy, or are such calculations also a matter of cultural and habitual traits, style and taste? According to Ball (2003: 114), it is neither one nor the other. Families are not cynical individualists who knowingly contribute to the creation of social inequalities, nor are they only doing what is best for their children without recognizing that their actions have consequences for the distribution of resources.

While the family is central in most theories on the topic, surprisingly few studies have been conducted on the reproduction strategies and practices that actually occur in the family in relation to the reproduction of educational advantages. More often, classed decisions are assumed to occur in the family, while what is actually researched is the level of education attained or ad hoc interviews about the decision-making process. In addition, the distinction between cultural and economic resources is, for the most part, absent in previous research on this topic, as is relevant comparative work.

### **The school context**

In this section, I elaborate on the significance of the school context in understanding classed educational decisions. The topic of how schools contribute to the process of educational stratification is empirically and theoretically disputed, as shown by merely examining how the different theories used in this thesis emphasize the school. Following Boudon (1974) and Goldthorpe (1996), for example, the school is not important in the process of educational reproduction (except in the less interesting primary effects), as the economic inequality of the students will be the main deciding factor in their educational decisions. According to Bourdieu, however, the school plays a crucial role in the process of transferring, justifying and reinforcing differences in the amount and type of capital that people hold. Moreover, following theories of social closure or differential association, the formally open school system will be a place for boundary drawing and closure mechanisms, where those with more

resources or the right resources will have an advantage. Previous research has on many occasions shown that teachers tend to underestimate the capabilities of less privileged students (e.g., Ready and Wright 2011; Callarco 2018), which can often be explained by mismatches between teachers' and students' background characteristics (see Downey and Pribesh 2004). Students with lower-social-class backgrounds, especially those with less cultural capital, also systematically receive lower grades (Andersen and Hansen 2013).

Social capital has been highlighted as an important theoretical approach to parents' involvement in school, referring to, in various ways, the material and immaterial resources that families are able to access through social connections (Coleman 1966; Horvat et al. 2003). Parents in possession of social capital draw on these resources to help their children succeed in the school system and sometimes also contribute to closing off others who do not have the resources to pursue such strategies. This closing off is not necessarily done deliberately but is 'enacted as much through belonging, through a recognition of mutuality, fit and identification, as it is through distinctions' (Ball 2003:176). Additionally, the significance of cultural capital and cultural taste in constructing different forms of social ties and capital has been highlighted (Lizardo 2006), if not specifically in relation to educational credentials. From this perspective, classed educational decisions can be increased by groups of students with similar class backgrounds in the same school. This finding taps into research showing that members of a social group tend to form networks with members of the same group, so-called 'homophily' (Lin 2000). Additionally, middle-class parents have more frequent contact with other parents than working-class parents, often through after-school activities and friends and connections that are valuable for their children's outcomes. These connections are in turn used as resources in school (Horvat et al. 2003).

An extensive literature is devoted to school-compositional effects; however, it mostly focused on how the school or the peer group affects the ability outcomes of students (for reviews, see Thrupp et al. 2002; Van Ewijk and Slegers 2010; Selström and Bremberg; Zimmer and Toma 2000). The social composition of the school has mostly been found to influence students' grades and test scores. Some studies also investigated the influence of school composition on further educational decisions regarding higher education (e.g., Robinson and Roksa 2016; Hill 2008) and found that this influence is also important.

Previous research focusing on ability outcomes in school also suggested that peers play a greater role for low-ability students than for high-ability students, a finding that is robust across school types and countries (Zimmer and Toma 2000:89). Moreover, Coleman noted that the attributes of other students in school were more important for achievement than



school facilities and teachers (Coleman et al. 1996: 302, in Wong and Nicotera 2004:130), which makes it relevant to investigate the classed composition of schools and how it is related to further educational decisions.

Because studies focusing on school-compositional effects are often rather technical, sociological theoretical implications are not widely discussed. As formulated by Ewijk and Slegers (2010: 135), ‘most studies treat the effect as a “black box”’. Some studies suggested causal paths, however; for example, the average SES could affect the disciplinary climate, the teacher may adjust his/her style, or high-SES students may receive better support at home<sup>8</sup>. Studies influenced by Bourdieu have, on some occasions, used notions such as ‘organizational habitus’ or ‘institutional habitus’ (Palardy 2015; Reay et al. 2005; McDonough 1997), suggesting that the composition of a school can be viewed as a sort of collective habitus that will mutually be influenced by and influence students. A school’s history, practices and contacts can, for example, be important to the opportunities of the students regarding further educational decisions<sup>9</sup>.

Bottero (2009) criticized Bourdieu for not placing enough emphasis on social interaction (even though his reading is ‘relational’ rather than ‘substantialist’). This lack of emphasis causes problems, she claimed, because many of Bourdieu’s core concepts build on assumed but underdeveloped interactional properties. She emphasized a view in which ‘differences in social interaction emerge out of situations where individuals feel more socially comfortable with, and more akin to, some kinds of people than others’ (Bottero 2005: 164). According to Bottero, a competitive struggle is not necessarily involved, but these preferences follow patterns of class without a shared value structure. Other relational approaches have emphasized how educational decisions are part of an ongoing process over time in connection with the students’ social milieu (Abbott 2007; Emirbayer 1997; Bottero 2005). As emphasized by Abbot, the selection process in which young people are involved when deciding what track to choose in upper secondary school is closely related to their identity, which again is shaped by meaningful connections between them and various other groups (Abbott 2007:17). Although they have heavily criticized ‘variable-based analysis’ (e.g., Emirbayer 1997: 288), it is possible via this tradition to understand how the classed composition of a school can be important to individuals’ educational decisions beyond their own class background and their

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<sup>8</sup> See also Davis (1966), and more recently Espenshade, Hale and Chung (2005) on the frog-pond effect

<sup>9</sup> This concept is however hard to adjust to any of the theories applied in this thesis, as it seems to suggest institutions to have a personality and a will.

tastes and traits developed within the family – the school milieu will depend on the people in it, and a choice of track will be influenced by how the general peer group views it.

Investigating the influence of the classed nature of lower secondary schools in Norway, as article two does, is interesting in this respect because people are assigned to the school closest to where they live. The schools are thus segregated in the same manner as neighbourhoods, but people cannot choose to attend other schools any more than they can choose to move. Utilizing school fixed effects further narrows the analysis to reveal the influence of varying class composition in the cohort without the influence of neighbourhood segregation. The findings suggest that the schools are both a relevant place for segregation – people of similar backgrounds tend to flock to the same schools and neighbourhoods – *and* that so-called ‘school compositional effects’ can be operative in the schools in the sense that the class background of the students in the same class and school seem to influence students’ choices. The finding that those who are not upper class are the ones who are most influenced by the share of upper-class students in the cohort suggests that those with the most valuable capital in the school system (economic and cultural) primarily influence those with less capital. This finding is consistent with a relational view of decision-making in that groups influence each other but is somewhat surprising given the theories of closure and capital. According to these theories, it could also be expected that dominant groups primarily influence groups similar to themselves. Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus, for example, emphasizes that even if early experiences have a particular weight in shaping the dispositions of the individual, surrounding oneself with people with similar experiences tends to reinforce those very same dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990: 61).

In total, while the school’s and teachers’ part in the reproduction process is a central but disputed theoretical topic, the relational understanding of how social interaction in schools mediates the link between background and outcome is not thoroughly addressed in sociological theories in the field. While the topic has been investigated empirically, perhaps more frequently within economics, the connection with theoretical explanations remains underdeveloped. The so-called ‘relational’ branch is perhaps a good place to start. The finding of school-compositional effects in a unified school system such as the Norwegian one at the lower secondary level should make it relevant to conduct similar research in countries with more extensive tracking and differentiation, even if the size of such effects has often been found to be rather modest (Breen and Jonsson 2005).

## **Horizontal divisions and the education system**

An important argument in this thesis is that the class structure and the education system are not only vertically divided. In this section, I will review the theoretical and empirical relevant literature regarding class and fields of study.

Horizontal measures are important in the education system in three ways. First, horizontal measures of background characteristics can be important for educational decisions (Helland and Wiborg 2018; Munk and Thomsen 2017). Second, social class measured in various ways can be important for choice of field and not only level in the education system (Helland and Wiborg 2018; Munk and Thomsen 2017; Triventi 2011; Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2010; Lucas 2001). Third, the educational field of study can be important for the occupational success of the individual (Reimer, Noelke and Kucel 2008). Understanding educational decisions should thus not be understood one-dimensionally, and focusing on the field of study in general or specific educations in particular, as in article three, can contribute important knowledge regarding the reproduction of privilege within and through the education system.

Lucas (2001) is known for his claim that when an educational level becomes universal, the middle class will compete for type of education rather than level. This claim is supported in Norwegian and Danish research: Helland and Wiborg (2018), for example, recently showed that people tend to choose educations similar to those of their parents, and if not, something close in both horizontal and vertical measures. This tendency is most pronounced among students whose parents earned high-level degrees in professional fields. Moreover, Thomson (2015) found that while inequality in access has been generally reduced in Denmark, students with lower-educated parents have been channelled into less prestigious educational tracks. This distinction can also be observed in relation to grades: Hansen and Mastekassa (2006) showed that children with an advantaged background, on average, performed better in their studies than others, especially in cultural and professional fields of study.

Findings regarding the importance of fields of study for success in the labour market are somewhat conflicting, however. Hällsten (2013) found that class-origin differences in educational attainment are stronger when education is measured with a higher level of precision, including information regarding type of degree, and that direct class-origin effects were stronger in ‘softer’ than in ‘harder’ fields (see also Hansen 2001). He found, however, that field of study did not contribute much to the class-origin gap in earnings. Similarly, Jackson et al. (2008) did ‘not find support for the idea that children from certain class origins

choose particular fields to promote their class attainment strategically'. Neither did they find support for the idea that particular fields would promote advantages to end up in certain class destinations. The findings were country specific, however, and the field of study was more important in the Netherlands and France than in the UK. As the authors themselves argued (2008: 384), the results might have been different if the measure of class had also been horizontal to a larger extent.

Micro-class theories have been preoccupied with the question of the inheritance of occupations and educations, claiming that instead of 'big classes', it rather comes down to inherited actual occupations and closure practices related to specific occupations (Weeden and Grusky 2005), albeit somewhat more in the occupation-based labour force of American society than in the social-democratic societies of Scandinavia (Weeden and Grusky 2012). It has been claimed that the traditional professions are especially likely to be reproduced in the sense that children of lawyers and physicians are particularly likely to choose the same educations as their parents. In article three, we show that there is indeed a high and stable correlation between parents with law and medicine education and children choosing and completing the same education; consistent with the micro-class theory, people tend not to choose medicine if their parents studied law, or vice versa. In this thesis, however, even though it partly makes use of the micro-class reasoning in article three, it is assumed that the notion of class is not reducible to occupations<sup>10</sup> but rather that a notion of class that involves horizontal distinctions will be important for understanding why field-specific knowledge matters.

Murphy (1988: 184) suggested that it is important to differentiate between different types of skills – a certain type of skills will dominate in credentialed groups, but all of them will be prevalent. The differences in the degree and type of skills in different groups will

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<sup>10</sup> Goldthorpe (2002: 214), advocating the view of occupations grouped together in classes based on their market situations and work situations, argued convincingly against micro-class theory as a replacement for theories of 'big' classes. He wrote that class mobility is about more than understanding why doctors' children become doctors; rather, it is about why the majority, who do not, are far more likely to enter some type of professional or managerial occupation than to become something else. Thus, even if they are useful in explaining the closure mechanisms at work in the elite educations of law and medicine, singular occupations do not seem to be enough to capture the patterns outside these. As emphasized by Weininger (2005: 909, italics in original), 'it is difficult to see how, within their framework, one could speak of an occupational *structure*. This is because they are unwilling to specify a principle (or principles) of variation or of differentiation which could establish theoretical meaningful relations between the total set of locations within the occupational system'.

influence their power resources in different contexts. The skills obtained in the field of law will, for example, not be as useful in medicine, and vice versa, and skills that are valuable in the economic field will not be as useful in the field of education. This finding resonates with previous research by Hansen (2001) showing that those with parents who are lawyers tend to receive better grades in law school, especially later in their education, as there are more oral examinations in which field-specific skills connected to style and language are of extra value.

More research is needed in this area, as the results from different countries are not consistent. The findings in article three are, however, arguably a highly relevant contribution to the field in that investigating specific educations over time makes it possible to simultaneously examine a specific context with particular mechanisms contributing to opening or closing access and to observe the educations under scrutiny in relation to the larger structures of class and power.

### **National school systems and their impact on educational stratification**

In this section, I will review the relevant previous research on international differences in inequality and educational attainment and discuss how it can be understood theoretically and in relation to the topics of this thesis. I will also review the specifics of the education systems investigated in this thesis.

International comparisons have been conducted on many occasions in relation to mobility and educational attainment (e.g., Shavit and Blossfeldt 1993; Erikson and Jonsson 1996; Breen et al. 2004, 2009; Shavit et al. 2007). Moreover, many general mobility studies have included education as a variable in their analyses (e.g., Erikson and Golthorpe 1992, Breen 2004). There are, however, important contributions that have examined more closely how international characteristics connected to the education system and other country-specific attributes can impact or mediate social mobility patterns in the education system, many of which are relevant to this thesis. Differences in the way national education systems are organized may impact the ways in which socioeconomic background influences educational decisions. National differences can be important for understanding the mechanisms at play that mediate the different mobility patterns in the education system, and in the worst-case scenario, international studies that ignore these differences could lead to falsely estimated results.

In the literature of socioeconomic background and educational outcomes, tracking/stratification/differentiation and vocational orientation have been key subjects in

explaining the differences between education systems (Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2010). Tracking usually refers to the existence of different educational programmes at the same point in time in an educational trajectory that is hierarchically ranked; vocational orientation refers to the extent to which students are taught vocational skills and how specific these skills are (Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2013).

There is general agreement that early tracking and strong vocational orientation reinforce the link between inequality and educational opportunities (Werfhorst & Mijs 2010; Pfeffer 2008). As formulated by Hout and DiPrete (2006:10), researchers 'seem to have reached a consensus that the more differentiation that gets built into a school system, the more differentiation comes out'. However, a trade-off with labour market opportunities has been emphasized: secondary vocational education has been shown to reduce the risk of unemployment and of entering the labour force as an unskilled worker (Shavit and Muller 1998, 2010; Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2013).

As elaborated in article one, selectivity and standardization have also been important parameters for measuring school systems. Selectivity refers to the degree to which track placement is a function of previous school performance rather than the free choice of students and their parents (Jackson and Jonsson 2013), whereas standardization refers to the degree to which the curriculum, teacher qualifications, examinations, school financing, etc. are established at the central state level or more locally (Park 2008; Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2010; Horn 2009). Standardization has been found to increase equality of opportunity. Clear national standards apparently make it easier for parents (particularly low-SES parents) to assess whether their child learns what he/she is supposed to learn (Park 2008). In relation to types of education systems, Park (2008) found that in standardized education systems, communication between parents and children had a higher impact on PISA test results for low-SES students, whereas the opposite was true in non-standardized systems. He argued that in more standardized systems, low-SES parents have greater access to necessary knowledge of schooling and that it is easier for them to navigate a system that has established educational standards. Because communication between parent and child seems to be less effective for low-SES parents when they discuss books or other issues that require cultural capital, they gain extra benefits from a transparent system that can compensate for this drawback (Park 2008).

The degree of differentiation at the tertiary level has also proven to be significant. In diversified systems, that is, systems in which higher education is divided into more and less prestigious universities and colleges, tertiary attendance rates are higher, and these systems

are more inclusive than either binary (divided between universities and vocational educations) or unified systems (Shavit et al. 2007).

Not only school system characteristics but also more general traits in society can be important for the socioeconomic differences in educational decisions and outcomes across countries, as described by Walther (2006). On the basis of the classification of welfare regimes by Esping-Andersen (1996) and Gallie and Paugam (2000), he developed a typology that distinguishes four regimes for youths' transition between school and work. His point was that rather than describing specific national systems, countries can be clustered based on a set of characteristics that fits specific welfare state regimes. In the *liberal or minimal* transition regime, typical of the UK, individual rights and responsibilities are more valued than collective provisions, and the system is flexible and risky for the young. The *employment-centred* transition regime is typical of continental countries (e.g., Germany, France, Belgium), has a more selective system to allocate the young to their occupational careers and social position, and produces a highly regulated employment regime. Standardized vocational training and education are common. The *sub-protective* transition regime is characteristic of southern European countries, such as Spain. Esping-Andersen (1996) called these countries conservative welfare states, and according to Walter, their transition regime is characterized by un-protective living conditions in which the family plays a crucial role. Vocational training is weakly developed, young people receive fewer benefits, unemployment is high, and higher education can provide young people with status in such a phase. Finally, in the universalist transition regime, of which Norway is a part, a comprehensive school system as well as a generous welfare state benefit young people who are encouraged to experiment with their individualized education and welfare options. According to Walther (2006: 135), this way of emphasizing international differences allows for an explanation that not only emphasizes institutional structures but also 'includes ideological concepts and cultural values that inform both transition policies and young people's orientations and cultural values that inform both transition policies and young people's orientation and coping strategies'. These typologies are used to some extent in articles one and four.

Turner's (1960) concept of different forms of mobility, while used in article three in relation to two distinct educational fields, was originally developed to describe the ideal differences between types of national education systems and how they contributed to recruiting to the elite, with England and the USA as examples. Turner noted that the English system was best described as a system of 'sponsor mobility', whereas the system in the USA was characterized as 'contest mobility'. The difference, according to Turner, was that the

American school system to a greater extent has a competitive system during the educational trajectory of the students in the sense that students must compete along the way to remain in the system, whereas the English system rather imitates a club where a candidate needs a sponsor to get in, but ‘when you’re in, you’re in’.

Two of the articles in this thesis make use of international comparative data and thus are related, in various ways, to the abovementioned research and theory. In article one, we identified differences between levels of involvement that could be related to differences between school systems, but we found weak evidence that differences between school systems impact the correlation between resources and involvement. We did find, however, that economic resources are more important for future educational aspirations among parents in Iceland and Spain, possibly indicating that economic resources are more important for parents’ educational aspirations for their children at times of economic insecurity, as these countries were strongly affected by the economic crisis of 2008.

Article four suggests that patterns of the financial situations as well as the particularities of the school systems are significant for the differences between the two countries. While cultural capital is more important especially for educational decisions but also for aspirations in Norway, economic capital is more important or not significantly different in Spain. This difference can be explained by the differences in the transition systems, as explained by Walther (2006): starting a vocational track does not have as many advantages in Spain as in Norway, and both economic and cultural fractions might prefer the academic track to avoid downward mobility. Additionally, the economic situation of Spain following the crisis of 2008 paved the way for increasing youth unemployment that could make education in general more popular among groups that rely primarily on economic capital and decreasing the differences between the fractions.

Hence, a general finding concerning international comparison in this thesis is that the influence of economic and cultural background characteristics varies among countries, and this variation has not been investigated to any great extent. While economic conditions and crises, and partly transition regimes, seem to have an impact on the association between economic capital and educational involvement, decisions and aspirations, the impact on the association between cultural capital and educational outcomes is not as clear. In previous research, the effects of cultural capital have largely been shown to be similar across countries (Barone 2006; Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007; Xu and Hampden-Thompson 2012), although Xu and Hampden-Thompson (2012) found across welfare state regimes that the interaction



effects between cultural capital and social status were stronger in liberal welfare state regimes.

Given the lack of research concerning differences of capital composition in educational reproduction, the findings of this thesis must be followed up by further research. The findings could possibly be explained by the suggestion that cultural capital is more important for educational attainment relative to economic capital in the Scandinavian countries, as the economic barriers to educational attainment are not as excessive as those in other countries (Hansen and Mastekaasa 2006; Jæger 2009). Economic capital is more thoroughly addressed in the general mobility literature, and following the theoretical approach of Goldthorpe, it could be assumed that economic inequalities in educational attainment merely follow general economic inequalities in society. This assumption is to some extent supported by previous research: Hansen (2008) found that trends in the relationship between parents' economic capital and students' educational attainment were highly correlated with trends in general inequality and unemployment during the same period in Norway.

However, while there is an increasing amount of international comparative research in the field, there are still knowledge gaps. As emphasized by Breen and Jonsson (2005: 236), even though we have observed many empirical descriptions in the field, 'convincing explanations of cross-national variation in the origin-education or origin-destination association are lacking'. This lack is perhaps especially notable regarding the composition of capital, that is, the relationship between cultural and economic capital.

### **The school systems in this thesis**

Table 1 summarizes a set of different characteristics of the school systems of the countries addressed in this thesis. Some of the characteristics are not straightforward to assign, as they have not all been the subject of international comparisons or are characterized differently in various studies. Norway is one of the school systems characterized by a strong vocational orientation (Bol 2013; Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2013), with approximately half of the students choosing a relatively specialized vocational path during upper secondary school on a national basis but with relatively late and little tracking (age 16) (Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2013). Belgium, in contrast, is an example of a country with extensive tracking, where students must choose between different programmes at an early age (12), and retention is common (Van Houtte, Demanet and Stevens 2012). Iceland is relatively similar to Norway, while Spain officially has tracking at the same age as Norway and Iceland but has a less developed vocational system. Norway and Iceland are examples of relatively highly

standardized education systems in which the curriculum is determined nationally, and all students follow the same trajectory.

Table 1. System and country characteristics of Spain, Norway, Belgium and Iceland.

	Barcelona (Spain)	Bergen (Norway)	Ghent (Belgium)	Reykjavik (Iceland)
School system is ...				
...Stratified/differentiated	Low	Low	High	Low
...Selective	Medium	Low	High	Low
...Standardized	Medium	High	Medium	High
...Vocationally oriented	Medium	High	High	Medium
Welfare regime	Mediterranean	Social democratic	Corporatist	Social democratic
Transition regime	Sub-protective	Universalistic	Employment- centred	Universalist
Severity of financial crisis	Severe	Mild	Medium	Severe

The Norwegian education system is addressed separately in two of the articles. As emphasized in the articles, the Norwegian system is largely described as ‘egalitarian’ in that it is mainly public; there are minimal fees, and those that do exist are limited by law. All students have the statutory right to upper secondary schooling; the entrance into higher education is mainly based on grades, and higher education is highly funded by the state. Loans are offered to everyone regardless of personal economic resources. In contrast to other countries that are often analysed in research on the topic (e.g., the USA and UK), few prestigious institutions that offer degrees are regarded as higher status than other institutions. The system can, however, be described as ‘dual’ in that it is divided between universities and more vocationally oriented programmes (Shavit 2007), although this situation is to some extent changing. The Norwegian system is an interesting case in relation to classed educational decisions because students’ economic situation is not as important in relation to their opportunities to enter higher education as in some other systems.

## **Methods and data**

Two main sources of data are used in this thesis. In two of the articles, Norwegian population-wide register data from public registers are used, and in the remaining two, survey data derived from the international comparative project ‘International Study of City Youth’ are used. While register data contains information about the entire Norwegian population collected from multiple public data registers made available for research, survey data contains information collected from a sample of individuals answering questions in a survey constructed by the researchers.

### **Data sources**

The data in article three are drawn from Norwegian public registers made available for the project ‘Educational careers’ at the Department of Sociology and Human Geography of the University of Oslo for the complete cohorts in Norway born from 1955 to 1980. The data in article two are register data made available for the project ‘Professional students and professional practitioners: Studies of recruitment, study achievement and labour market careers’ at the Centre for the Study of Professions, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, using the cohorts starting upper secondary school from 2003 to 2012. Statistics Norway (SSB) delivered the files in both cases.

Separate files containing different types of information are used to construct one dataset connected by encoded identification numbers that are unique for each individual, and connected to information about their parents. In article two, I use information about parents’ occupations, parents’ education, parents’ income, parents’ welfare transfers, grades in lower secondary school, what lower secondary school attended, parents’ country of origin, country of origin, county of residence, programme started in upper secondary school and cohort in school. In article three, we use information about completed education, linked to information about students’ parents’ completed education, parents’ income, and country of birth and gender. Register data have the advantage of providing information about the whole population over a relatively long time span and are thus popular in statistical research. Problems common in survey data related to the number of participants are therefore not an issue. This dataset also makes it possible to study relatively small groups of the population, such as those educated as lawyers and doctors. Additionally, having access to data covering a long time span makes it possible to examine developments over time, and repeated measurements of the same individuals over multiple years provides the advantage of applying fixed effects methods, taking advantage of variations over time. The limitations include not having access

to more subjective variables concerning attitudes and experiences, which are easier to contain through the collection of survey data.

The data in articles one and four are survey data collected in the project 'International Study of City Youth' (ISCY) in 2014 and 2015. The project spans multiple years and countries, and the first two years are used in this thesis. The Norwegian data are additionally connected with register data provided by the County Council of Hordaland to enable us to follow the students' trajectories through upper secondary school. In article one, my co-author and I use Norwegian, Spanish, Belgian and Icelandic data, and in article four, I use Norwegian and Spanish data. In Norway, all the lower secondary schools in Bergen were asked to participate, and all the public schools accepted. The three private schools did not choose to participate. The limited prevalence of private schools in Norway, however, together with laws that forbid profits on private schools, has the result that there is little social segregation between private and public schools (Berge & Hyggen 2011), and leaving the private schools out of the study is not expected to affect the analyses noteworthy. The response rate in Norway was 80,2%. In Reykjavik, as in Bergen, all the public schools participated, and the response rate was 80%. In Ghent, 77% of the schools that were asked to participate accepted the invitation, and the response rate was 90,25%. In Barcelona, a representative sample was drawn, and of the students who were invited, 91,6% participated. The data collection was performed separately for each country and collated by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) at Victoria University, Australia.

As I did not participate in collecting the data, I had to adjust my research to the available variables. An important variable, parents' occupations operationalized with ISCO 08, was available only for Spain and Norway; therefore, different measures of cultural and economic capital are used in article one and article four. Additionally, the question of comparability can potentially be difficult with these kinds of data. This difficulty is evident in article three, in which the question regarding one of the dependent variables is asked somewhat differently in the two countries included in the analysis as a result of some aspects of the question being 'lost in translation'. The question is still used in the analysis, as it is assumed that the differences are not great enough to alter the general meaning of the question and its relation to the other variables. There is also a potential shortcoming regarding the use of the ORDC class map in Spain –whether the class approach can easily be compared across countries in the way done in this article needs to be followed up by further research, as the relative standing of the occupations can differ across countries.

Nevertheless, I argue that the survey data are valuable in three important ways. First, they were collected with the intention of performing comparative analyses. Rather than ad hoc combinations of different datasets, it is possible to compare questions that were asked in all countries. Second, the response rate was high, and they were collected at the same time. Third, the data used in article four include measurements at two time points, making it possible to apply a more nuanced analysis comparing attitudes and plans to actual decisions.

### **Measuring social background and class**

The most important independent variables in this thesis are those measuring social class. Prior research measure social class background in multiple ways – in this thesis, it is operationalized in three different ways. The operationalization of social background or class depends partly on the data available, partly on theoretical reasons, and first and foremost on the research question of the article.

In the first article, we measure parents' resources based on survey questions regarding articles in pupils' homes, a subjective question about economic standing and a question about parents' level of education. This is a well-known and effective way to measure resources. It is effective in the sense that most pupils know the answers to the questions asked – for example, how many bathrooms and televisions they have, whether their parents are unemployed or whether they have a piano. Creating an index based on these answers can thus be informative when investigating the cultural and economic resources in the home. The indexes could, however, as discussed earlier in the introduction, give disproportionate weight to cultural capital in its objectified state, even if the parents' level of education will to some extent attenuate this problem.

In the second and fourth articles, I use the Oslo Register Data Class Scheme developed by Hansen et al. (2009). The scheme operationalizes the class structure two-dimensionally, considering both the total amount of capital and the composition of capital, including the relative weight of cultural and economic capital as well as a balanced category between those two. The class map consists of four main hierarchical levels of the class structure: upper class, upper middle class, lower middle class and working class. The upper class and the middle classes are additionally differentiated into fractions, distinguishing between a cultural fraction, a balanced fraction and an economic fraction. In article two, I combine the categories into upper class, upper middle class, lower middle class and working class, as the main topic is the share of upper-class students in schools. In article four, I retain the cultural, balanced and economic fractions but combine the upper class and upper middle class because some

groups contain only a few people. In the second article, I use a simplified version with register data, and in the fourth I use a modified form made available for survey data. The register data approach uses information about parents' occupational codes, which are linked to information about income, education and welfare transfers. The survey version is based solely on occupational codes, as I do not have information about income and welfare transfers. This mostly affects the upper class fractional groups, however (income is, for example, important for distinguishing the upper economic fraction from the upper middle), and is not considered as big a problem when the upper class and the upper middle class fractions are combined.

In the third article, we measure the impact of parental income and self-recruitment in medicine and law; thus, parents' income and type of education are used as independent variables. This information is available over a time span of 26 years and provided us with the opportunity to measure long trends. Detailed educational codes available in the register data that show the completed educations of parents as well as children are used as well as parents' income when the child is 10-16 years old, divided into deciles.

### **Methodological choices**

In all the articles, the analyses and data processing are performed in the program Stata, and the graphs are made in R. I will not review all the methods applied (these are more thoroughly explained in the articles) but will highlight certain choices and some limitations of the methods used.

### **Modelling the school context**

Most methods for cross-sectional data assume that all observations are independent. This assumption is violated if the observations are clustered in units, for example, individuals clustered in schools. When the residuals are correlated across observations in this way, the standard errors in OLS can be biased, as is the case in the survey data used in this thesis. To adjust for this problem, cluster-robust standard errors are utilized in article one and four, as suggested in the literature (Petersen 2008).

In article two, the schools are the subject of research, which requires other approaches. Moreover, the repeated measures in the data make it possible to apply both multilevel regression and school fixed effects. These two methods have different advantages and disadvantages and are therefore both applied in the same paper.

Multilevel models have the advantage of managing to use a hierarchical structure of data to provide simultaneous information about both the between- and within-school variation. Thus, it is possible to investigate the relative explanatory contributions of different

levels of clusters by giving the second-level model parameters of its own. Where complete pooling (OLS) ignores differences between groups, and no pooling (fixed effects) ignores the between-school information, multilevel modelling, or partial pooling, manages an analysis in between (Gelman and Hill 2007) and can thus study effects that vary by groups as well as within groups – or, as formulated by Bell and Jones (2015), can ‘model context’. The common problem of omitted variable bias is also a problem here, however.

Because the register data used in article two contain repeated measures over a number of years, it is possible to use school fixed effect models. This model is able to partly avoid the problem of heterogeneity bias because all higher-level variance is controlled using the higher-level entities themselves as dummy variables (Bell and Jones 2015). Thus, all between effects found in the multilevel model are also controlled, and the method instead takes advantage of the fact that there will be some variation over cohorts within schools. This variation is assumed to avoid problems connected to self-selection, as parents do not sort their children into cohorts in schools but could potentially sort themselves into neighbourhoods and schools in general (Hoxby 2000; Schneeweis and Winter-Ebmer 2007). While normal random effects models assume that there is no correlation between unobserved and observed variables, fixed effects models ‘allow for any correlation between time-invariant predictors and the time-varying predictors’ (Allison 2009: 23). However, the fixed effect model controls for all time-invariant variables but not for unmeasured variables that vary over time. Hence, as I don’t know if the cohort-to-cohort variation of the proportion of upper-class students is random between schools, or if there is selective transitions of families out of schools with a high percentage of low class students, I am careful with casual claims also in this model.

The reason to apply both models is therefore that while the fixed effects model can come closer to an estimate of school compositional effects without the problem of omitted variable bias, it also controls away important context and heterogeneity and thus may offer overly simplistic results. Some important information is thus collected from both models.

### **Trends and multinomial logit**

As the dependent variable is categorical with more than two outcomes, a multinomial logit model is used in article three to measure the relative correlation between the background indicators and completed education at the age of 31 for 26 birth cohorts. The advantage of logistic regression in this respect is the possibility of measuring relative trends, a frequently used method in mobility studies. The results are thus insensitive to absolute changes in number of candidates (these are also shown).

There are some possible limitations to this form of analysis. First, it is not possible to compare across models, and each coefficient must therefore be compared to the baseline category. We have therefore tried to be careful with the interpretations of the results. This point additionally sometimes makes the model unstable if the baseline variable is not intuitive – the choice of baseline will in this case be highly important for the interpretation of the results (Menard 2010). The choice of baseline category is, however, quite intuitive in our case, as we wanted to compare the log-odds of being in the category of law or of medicine compared to any other education or to not having a higher education. The baseline category is therefore also by far the largest, and a normal logit with a dichotomous dependent variable (law versus the rest or medicine versus the rest) does not differ much from the model used.

Second, as shown by Mood (2009), estimates from logistic regression can be affected by omitted variables and also when these variables are not related to the independent variables in the model. It is also problematic to compare across time points, since unobserved heterogeneity can differ across cohorts. Performing the models with a linear probability model, however, shows similar results, and as we have information for the whole population over a long period of time, it is arguably of interest to view correlations between variables as long as causal claims are avoided.



## Summary of the articles

**Article one, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1002/berj.3609>**

The topic of the article is different forms of parental involvement and its relationship to cultural and economic resources. While parental involvement in school has been highlighted in the political debate in several countries as important for children's learning, it has simultaneously been shown that socioeconomic factors are related to both the level of parents' involvement, the type of involvement and how children benefit from it. Most theories on the topic of class and parental involvement in school ignore the division between cultural and economic capital, even when using the theories of Bourdieu. As some research has suggested that the capital composition of the parents is reflected in their style of parenting, we wanted to investigate whether this reflection also occurs in educational involvement. Access to international comparative data comprising information from four different countries varying in important school system measures as well as welfare and transition regimes made this investigation especially relevant.

The data used in the article are available through the project 'International study of city youth'. We used the first round of the survey from Barcelona, Spain; Reykjavik, Iceland; Ghent, Belgium; and Bergen, Norway, conducted when the participants were 16 years of age. Based on information from previous research, we made indexes to measure two types of involvement: future educational expectations and involvement in present schooling. We also made indexes based on subjective experienced resources at home as well as objects thought to measure economic and cultural capital. The indexes are z-scored and standardized separately for each city. Linear regressions with robust clustered standard errors on schools for each separate country were conducted with controls for gender, immigration and grades.

The findings suggest that cultural resources are more important for future educational expectations, whereas economic resources are more important for current involvement in schooling. As previous research have found that parents' future educational expectations are more effective in impacting the educational outcomes of the child, this suggests that cultural resources to some extent is an advantage over economic resources in terms reproduction of educational traits. The national differences did not suggest that school system characteristics were important for the correlations between resources and involvement, but both Iceland and Spain stood out with economic resources being more important for involvement. As these countries were hard-hit by the financial crisis of 2008 but are not particularly similar in other measures, the financial crisis could be an explanation.

**Article two, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2020.1754365>**

The article uses multilevel analysis and school fixed effects to investigate whether the classed composition of a lower secondary school has any implications for the choice between academic or vocational track in upper secondary schools in Norway. The theoretical literature in the field mostly emphasizes the family as a site of the reproduction of classed educational decisions. Insights from the literature regarding grades and abilities, however, suggest that the classed composition of the school can have consequences for the ability development of the students and thus perhaps also for the decision between vocational and academic tracks in upper secondary school.

Using register data covering eleven entire cohorts of the Norwegian population provided me with the opportunity to utilize two methods that in different ways contribute important information about the subject. Standard multilevel analysis can estimate the group level model at the same time as the individual data to identify how the compositions of the schools contribute to the outcome. School fixed effects make it possible to examine the variation between cohorts more closely and can thus provide information about the contribution of the environment in schools without involving information regarding, for example, neighbourhood segregation. Utilizing a simplified version of the Oslo Register Data Class Scheme, the aggregated variable of upper class at the school level is the main variable of interest. Controls include individual class background, grades at both levels, immigrant status at both levels and gender.

The results show that the share of upper-class students in lower secondary school is associated with an increased likelihood of enrolling in the academic track in upper secondary school in both models. As expected, the coefficients are reduced in the school fixed model but are still significant. Introducing an interaction between the share of upper-class students and the individual class background reveals that this is especially important for those who are not of upper-class origin. Furthermore, controlling for grades at both levels does not alter the results.

**Article three, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2017.1278906>**

The article explores the trends in intergenerational closure in the elite professions of medicine and law over a time span of 26 years in Norway. Given the inclusion of new groups in the education system at large, it could be possible that the educations of medicine and law have been characterized by a decrease in self-recruitment and a lower association between parents'

income and enrolment. Examining two particular educations leading to occupations with high status and income made it possible to consider specific information about intake criteria and other features of the education.

Using Norwegian register data over the full population over 26 years, we investigated the relative significance of parents' income and having parents with similar education for students completing one of these educations at the age of 31. Logit analyses were performed separately for men and women, were controlled for having a first- or second-generation non-Western background for each year and were assembled in graphs to visualize the trends.

The results revealed relatively stable results for both parental income and self-recruitment. This means that the influx of women and to some extent people with minority origins into medicine and law has done little to alter the elite character of these professions – parents' income and education type is still important factors in the recruitment patterns in law and medicine. Utilizing the theory of Turner (1960), we suggested that the two fields are characterized by two different closure mechanisms. While law traditionally has been characterized by low intake requirements but tough competition throughout the education and career, medicine has been characterized by high intake requirements but less competition during the education. We suggest that these two practices resemble what Turner (1960) called contest and sponsor mobility. At the end of the period, the educations become more similar to each other in terms of intake-requirements, and medicine becomes somewhat more open in terms of both self-recruitment and parental income.

**Article four, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1741526>**

The article examines how class influences aspirations and decisions and a mismatch between them in Norway and Spain. Utilizing a class scheme that distinguishes between horizontal as well as vertical dimensions of class, I investigate how these dimensions differ between two countries with relatively similar education systems but different employment prospects for the young. Both systems are tracked at age 16, and the students can choose between a vocational and an academic track. The vocational system, however, is not as well developed in Spain as in Norway, and employment prospects are generally lower in Spain.

The data used in the article are available through the project 'International Study of City Youth'. The two first rounds of the survey are used for Spain, whereas the first round of the survey followed by register data is used in Norway. Applying logistic regression with robust clustered standard errors shown as average marginal effects, I perform analyses

separately for the countries with four different dependent variables: aspirations (what occupation the students want at age 30 categorized after education level needed), decisions (enrolment in vocational or academic programme in upper secondary school), mismatch between aspirations and decisions (aspiring to an occupation that requires higher education while starting a vocational track) and mismatch the other way around (aspiring to an occupation that requires vocational or no education while starting an academic track).

The findings reveal that vertical class differences are important for aspirations and enrolment as well as for a misalignment between them in both countries. Class is more important for enrolment than aspirations, however, and especially so in Norway. The misalignment between aspirations and decisions is not as high as expected from previous research, even if a higher-class background decreases the likelihood of experiencing aspirations to occupations that require higher education while starting a vocational track. Importantly, there seems to be a difference between the countries in relation to the horizontal measure of class. Class fractions endowed with a preponderance of cultural capital seem to be more oriented towards higher education in Norway, whereas fractions endowed with a preponderance of economic capital have equal or higher prospects of aspiring to occupations requiring higher education or taking academic tracks in Spain. This difference, I suggest, is linked to growth in unemployment rates since the economic crisis in 2008 in Spain as well as to differences between the education systems in the transition from school to work. While the vocational tracks in Norway are potentially more profitable and leading to a secure future, these tracks are not as developed in Spain.

## **Concluding discussions**

The thesis proposes to investigate how educational decisions follow patterns of inequality when contextualized in different ways. As a result of the rapid expansion of the education system over recent decades, educational institutions are playing a crucial and growing role in society and most likely also in the transmission of advantage between generations. Against this background, it is important to investigate how classed educational decisions occur when contextualized in various ways. In four articles, I have examined several aspects of the process of educational decisions, from the family, via the school, to the higher education system to the national context. I have maintained a focus on the cultural in addition to the economic aspects of classed choices, a combination which is often overlooked in research on the topic. In this chapter, I will discuss the articles in relation to the introduction – both theoretically and empirically – and elaborate on the main contributions of this thesis. I will first outline the contributions to the field in relation to the main topics of this introduction and then discuss the placement of the thesis in relation to the field of class and education. Finally, I will discuss political trends and avenues for further research.

### **General implications and contributions**

In general, closure theory and capital composition theory together underpin a crucial argument in this thesis, namely, that the context in which an educational decision is made is important in understanding how reproduction and social mobility work. Reproduction processes in the education system can be identified and understood to a greater extent if we investigate the specific parts of the process of decision-making. This understanding has several implications related to the specific contexts under scrutiny. First, families with different forms of capital as well as different levels of capital seem to differ in their ways and levels of involvement. These differences can in turn contribute to a reproduction of advantages. Second, not only the family, as often assumed in theories about the reproduction of academic advantages, but also the environment and the peer group in lower secondary school can be important for the process of choosing a track in upper secondary school. Third, specific types education can have high and stable levels of self-recruitment over time that can be better understood when taking into account their particular patterns of closure following the particularities of the field and intake requirements. Fourth, examining the national context can contribute knowledge of how education systems as well as economic and employment prospects may interfere with the relationship between class, class fractions and the horizons

for choice. Hence, educational decisional processes are partly context-specific, which could both hide and reinforce closure processes in the education system.

This thesis also addresses the composition of capital in some of these contexts, one of which is the national context. Although the differences found between countries in this respect are not great, some interesting findings regarding capital composition should be followed up with further research. While both economic and cultural capital seem to be positively related to future educational expectations by parents and individual educational decisions, the correlation between economic capital and these dimensions seems to be dependent on the national economic situation, or ‘regimes of youth transitions’ in the terminology of Walther (2006). I suggest relating the findings to Weber’s understanding of the changing importance of status groups and classes (1978: 938); he stated that status groups become more important in stable times, whereas economic class situations are more visible in turbulent times. Even if Bourdieu was attempting to ‘rethink’ the division between class and status used by Weber, this finding seems to indicate, as emphasized by Bourdieu (1984), that the education system becomes more important for groups with an abundance of economic capital, especially when their occupational situation is uncertain<sup>11</sup>.

In general, the inclusion of both cultural and economic capital in the analysis is argued to be important to understand stratification in the education system, how it is changing over time, and how it differs among groups, countries and families. Simply distinguishing between the middle class and the working class arguably does not exploit the full idea of the different dimensions of social space, and neither does operationalizing cultural capital as separate from other broad measures of social background or as highbrow culture.

### **A divided field?**

This thesis is also an attempt to build a bridge in a divided research field in which theory and methods are often interrelated. In a somewhat simplified description, we have on the one hand observed much quantitative research following the Nuffield school in investigating general mobility patterns involving educational patterns, mostly viewing education as a mediator between origin and destination, based on a rational action approach. On the other hand, we

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<sup>11</sup> Relatedly, Swidler (1986) suggested that how culture interacts with social structure varies across time and historical situation – in established modes or times, ‘settled cultures’, culture provides a repertoire of capacities from which varying strategies of action may be constructed. In unsettled periods, however, cultural meanings are more articulated or explicit because they model patterns of action that do not occur naturally (Swidler 1986: 284).

have observed a growing field of mostly qualitative research drawing on Bourdieu's tradition, investigating classed experiences, aspirations and identities in the education system, for the most part distinguishing between the working class and the middle class. In this thesis, I primarily rely on theories of capital composition while applying quantitative research. This approach makes it possible to use class-cultural ideas to theoretically explain findings related to social interactions in school and field-specific closure mechanisms related to educational fields. Moreover, applying various quantitative methods in combination with rich data provides an advantage when investigating patterns of behaviour within and between contexts and over time.

Research that relies heavily on rational choice theories has been criticized for simplifying the relational and cultural process involved when young people make educational decisions (Divine 1998), and that assuming that such decisions are rational corresponds more to middle-class trajectories than working-class trajectories (Hatcher 1998). While it is limited how much such quantitative methods as applied in this thesis can embellish in terms of relational and cultural processes in educational decision-making, I believe it is possible to apply such methods and still agree with Emirbayer (1997: 287) that 'Individual persons, whether strategic or norm following, are inseparable from the transactional contexts within which they are embedded'. Hence, people are neither completely rational nor unconscious when making an educational decision. Their decisions are better understood as based on each individual's 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), and as long, relational processes. They are at the same time based on early socialization in the family, on the relationships encountered in various contexts such as the school and on pragmatic considerations related to their economic prospects and available information about the future. Furthermore, the theories of social closure described in this introduction arguably manage to show how individual advantages related to both culture and economy can contribute, although not necessarily intentionally, to the closing off of possibilities for some groups.

### **Education as an economic and technological goal**

Education is often viewed as a major factor promoting economic and technological development in society (OECD 2018b). Politically, equalization in the education system has long been on the agenda for various reasons. For example, to maintain economic competitiveness, the European Union has set a goal that 40% of those aged 30-34 will hold a tertiary degree by 2020 (EU 2018); it includes broadening access to education as a strategy to

reach the goal. Moreover, access to education for all groups of society seems to be a broad political goal across countries, often related to the idea of meritocracy, with hard work, skills and abilities perceived as leading to success through the education system regardless of background (Brown 2009).

This idea of increasing education for all is also related to some of the topics of this thesis. For example, a general increase in educational aspirations has in some countries been deemed important for social mobility – if the students are more ambitious, especially those with a low social background, they will apparently contribute to social mobility in the education system. Various scholars have questioned this view, claiming that higher aspirations in themselves do not change much if the actual chances of success in the education system continue to follow patterns of social class (e.g., Baker et al. 2014; Yates et al. 2011). The findings of article four are partly consistent with this critique, as class is especially important for the actual choices, also controlled for their aspirations to higher education, and the mismatch that is found also follows patterns of class. Similarly, great political efforts have been made to strengthen parents' involvement in schools in many countries (Hill et al. 2004), as such involvement has been shown to improve students' results in school (Seginer 2006; McNeil 1999; Hill and Tyson 2009). However, the level of involvement and its effects vary according to demographic factors such as social class (McNeal 1999) and the level of cultural and economic capital, as shown in article one. Types of involvement have different effects and follow levels as well as composition of capital. Furthermore, a general increase of students in the system of higher education does not necessarily improve equal access, as the groups with higher amounts of resources manage to maintain their relative dominance in the most prestigious fields, as shown in article three.

The idea of meritocracy, hard work and achievement has relatively recently been claimed to naturalize socially constituted distinctions (Khan 2011) and to contribute to a 'democratization' of inequality. While we have indeed observed an opening for groups of the population that were previously not present, this idea is contributing to a blurring of the unequal opportunities that still exist in the education system. As articulated by Halsey (and often highlighted by Goldthorpe) (1977:184), 'ascriptive forces find ways of expressing themselves as "achievement"'. Not succeeding in the education system is now largely perceived as a question of individual merit and is hence perceived as more legitimate (Ball 2003; Khan 2011; Murphy 1988: 190). Some have also argued that in ways similar to the meritocratization thesis, the idea of the flexible individualistic self contributes to a process dubbed 'the commodification of the education system' that reproduces social inequalities



while maintaining a veneer of open access (Furlong and Cartmel 1997:19). The findings of this thesis show that class is indeed important for educational practices in different ways, and I have mainly tried to explain the reasons with theories emphasizing how individual perceptions of possibilities and choice to some extent follow patterns of class.

### **Avenues for further research**

A crucial part of the expansion of education systems in the Western world over recent decades has been the expansion related to women entering the education system and surpassing men in many industrialized countries in educational attainment (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Hout and Deprete 2006). Meanwhile, stratification research has often been criticized for not considering questions of gender when analysing inequalities in the education system and for basing analyses solely on men or on fathers (see Bottero 2005). This neglect has become less common, but the education system, as well as the occupational structure, is highly divided by gender, which has a large influence on the classed patterns of educational decisions and makes the topic of class and gender together highly relevant (e.g., England 2010). Moreover, gender segregation in higher education has been shown to be stabilized in several countries (Barone 2011). National education systems differ greatly in their patterns of gender inequality (Charles and Bradley 2002), and gender segregation in the education system is an important explanation of the gender pay gap in society. Gender is also often, together with class, explained as a crucial aspect of theories explaining the process of educational decision-making (Gottfredson 1981:558).

In this thesis, gender receives little attention, even though all the analyses control for gender or have been performed separately for men and women. In further research, I intend to examine gendered patterns in choices of study in countries with various levels of tracking. Gender segregation begins earlier in tracked systems and could be decisive for further segregation in the transition to work. Additionally, investigating school-compositional effects could lead to further investigations into this topic in the gender-segregated vocational tracks of upper secondary school in Norway and how it might affect further employment possibilities and class position.

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Article one:

Strømme, T.B. and Helland, H. (2020), Parents' educational involvement:  
Types of resources and forms of involvement in four countries. Br Educ Res J.  
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1002/berj.3609>



# Parents' educational involvement: Types of resources and forms of involvement in four countries

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Parents' involvement in schooling and education is highly important for children's results. Still, both levels of involvement and their effects vary according to social class. Previous research on educational reproduction within the family has, however, largely studied differences between the middle and the working class, and generally ignored differences in the composition of cultural and economic capital. In this article, we aim to fill this gap in the literature by separating cultural and economic resources and investigate their correlation with two kinds of parental involvement in four different European countries. Results show that parents with more cultural resources are more likely to be involved by having future educational expectations, and parents with more economic resources are more likely to be involved in their children's current schooling (e.g. help with homework) than those with more cultural resources. The association between economic resources and involvement in educational expectations is however stronger in Spain and Iceland than in Belgium and Norway, suggesting an influence from system-level features as well as general economic trends.

**Keywords:** cultural capital; economic capital; parental involvement; international comparison

## Introduction

A strong correlation between parents' social position and their children's education outcomes has been convincingly established by previous research; for example, one's social origin has been found to correlate with school grades and one's field and level of education (e.g. Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993; Erikson & Jonsson, 1996; Strømme & Hansen 2017). Previous research has also shown that students with more cultural capital outperform their peers from the economic fractions (Hansen & Mastekaasa, 2006; Andersen & Hansen, 2011). Several mechanisms may contribute to these correlations, but prominent in the literature are (1) parents' educational aspirations for their children (e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Breen *et al.*, 1997) and (2) their direct involvement in their children's schooling (Lareau, 1987; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Lareau & Weininger, 2008). In this article, we examine how economic and cultural family resources correlate with these two dimensions of parental involvement in education and schooling in four countries.

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Parents' involvement in schooling and education has been shown to be highly important for children's results (cf. McNeal, 1999; Seginer, 2006; Hill & Tyson, 2009) and has been identified as a way to close socioeconomic gaps in achievement (Dearing *et al.*, 2006). Great political effort has thus been put into strengthening parents' involvement in schools (Hill *et al.*, 2004). However, most quantitative studies of socioeconomic differences in parental involvement focus on the effects of involvement on performance measures such as grades or test scores. Little research has focused on parents' involvement in itself as the dependent variable, and we aim to bridge this gap.

Levels of involvement and their effects vary according to demographic factors such as social class (McNeal, 1999). Some previous research has shown that middle-class parents are more involved than working-class ones (Lareau, 1987, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006), and different amounts of cultural capital are often cited as part of the reason for this (Lareau, 1987, 2011; Calarco, 2014). This research has largely studied vertical differences between the middle and the working class (or between *high* and *low* income groups or between *high* and *low* socioeconomic status (SES)), and generally ignored horizontal differences within classes (e.g. between cultural and economic fractions) (see Lareau, 1987, 2011; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Calarco, 2014). Our study focuses on such differences.

We know that children with large amounts of cultural capital tend to do well in the education system, and family practices and attitudes towards education vary between families with various levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 1987, 2011; Aarseth, 2017). We also know that lower income is associated with less parental involvement in school (see La Placa & Corlyon, 2016 for an overview). Less is known about the relative weight of cultural and economic capital in association with parental involvement in school. This gap in previous research is striking, considering how central the composition of cultural and economic capital is in the writings of the originator of the theory of cultural capital, Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984). According to him (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 34), the practices of different actors will depend on their total amount of capital as well as on the composition of their cultural and economic capital. Consequently, people with more cultural than economic capital will act differently in their involvement in their children's schooling than people whose capital composition is the opposite. The associations between such resources and parents' involvement are important to our understanding of social reproduction through education. Here, we examine how parents' cultural and economic resources influence both their involvement in their children's everyday schooling and their future educational expectations for their children.

These associations may also vary between national contexts. Cross-national differences between educational systems, such as levels of differentiation and standardisation, may affect the levels and types of parental involvement. General economic conditions and the business cycle may likewise affect the associations under study here. The expansion of the education system has been accompanied by an increased need for educational credentials, also for the economic fraction of the middle class (Bourdieu, 1984, 1996; Kahn, 2011), and this need may be strengthened for example in times of crisis and high unemployment. We examine this by comparing unique survey data from four different cities in four countries: Barcelona (Spain), Bergen



(Norway), Ghent (Belgium) and Reykjavik (Iceland). These countries vary both in their educational systems and in their economic conditions (e.g. Spain and Iceland were much more severely stricken by the economic crisis in 2008).

### Forms of involvement and social background

The literature defines and operationalises parental involvement in various ways (Hill & Tyson, 2009, p. 759), and Fan and Chen (2001, p. 3) conclude that it is 'multi-faceted in nature'. In a meta-analysis of the effects of parental involvement in middle school, Hill and Tyson (2009) distinguish between *home-based* involvement (e.g. helping with homework, communicating with children about school, creating a learning environment at home), *school-based* involvement (e.g. visiting and volunteering at school, communicating with teachers) and *academic socialisation* (including 'communicating parental expectations for education and its value or utility' and 'making preparations and plans for the future'; Hill & Tyson, 2009, p. 742). Academic socialisation means parents talking to their children about the importance of education and of doing well in a way that fosters a positive attitude to education and where pursuing higher education is taken for granted (Bæck, 2017, p. 126). Hill and Tyson (2009) document that academic socialisation is more important for achievement than the other two forms of involvement. Academic socialisation supports the development of adolescents' autonomy and the internalised valuation of education and schooling, whereas excessive pressure may have the opposite effect (Hill & Tyson, 2009, pp. 758–759). In our analyses, we combine home-based and school-based involvement (helping with homework and parents' meetings at school), that is *involvement in their children's current schooling*, and compare this with *academic socialisation* (whether they expect them to go to university or find a job after completing upper-secondary school).

In general, parents' involvement is positively related to children's success in school (cf. Seginer, 2006; Hill & Tyson, 2009), but the effects vary along several dimensions. Different forms of involvement have different effects, and these vary according to the age of the child (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Certain kinds of school involvement can even be negatively associated with academic performance (Desimone, 1999; Hill *et al.*, 2004). Helping with homework is, for example, negatively correlated with academic results (Hill & Tyson, 2009), partly because such involvement may be a response to students not performing well, but excessive help with homework may also be understood as interfering with the child's autonomy (Hill & Tyson, 2009, p. 759).

The effects of different forms of involvement also vary with the student's background (McNeal, 1999; Hill *et al.*, 2004; Benner *et al.*, 2016). It is, however, disputed whether the involvement of parents with high socioeconomic status is more effective (Desimone, 1999; McNeal, 1999; Lee & Bowen, 2006) or less effective (Domina, 2005). Benner *et al.* (2016) found that *school-based* involvement was particularly beneficial for children from lower SES families and those with poorer prior achievement, whereas parents' *educational expectations* had a stronger academic influence on children from higher SES families and those with stronger prior achievement. Discussions between parents and students at home have proven to be a significantly better predictor of students' results among mid-income students than among low-income

students (Desimone, 1999). It thus seems as though middle-class students benefit more from involvement comprising discussions and voicing expectations, whereas low-income students benefit more from parental involvement at school. These differences are particularly pronounced in the USA compared to countries with more standardised education systems (Park, 2008). Less is known about whether such effects vary according to capital composition.

Annette Lareau (Lareau, 1987, 2011; Lareau & Weininger, 2008) distinguishes between two child-rearing practices: ‘concerted cultivation’, which is common among middle-class parents, and the ‘accomplishment of natural growth’, which is attributed to working-class parents. Working-class parents assume that they should give their children love, safety, food and clothes so they can grow and thrive. They define education as the responsibility of the school, do not meddle in school matters and grant their children considerable autonomy over their spare time. The concerted cultivation of the middle class, in contrast, entails the view that parents’ duty is to actively stimulate development of their children’s potential talents. Middle-class parents constantly monitor their children’s education and intervene in school matters, broaching their concerns with teachers whenever deemed necessary. In their leisure time, middle-class children are often enrolled in a variety of activities that are believed to transmit important skills. The middle-class strategy thus involves considerably more parental involvement and is far more effective in promoting the schooling and education of offspring (Lareau & Weininger, 2008; see also Calarco, 2017).

Research on the association between SES and parents’ involvement is, however, inconclusive. Hartas (2011) finds that parents are equally involved, and that poverty and lack of economic resources are the main explanations for the inequality in scholarly success. The impact of family income on completed schooling (Duncan *et al.*, 1998) and test scores (Dahl & Lochner, 2005) is largest for children in low-income families. Hence, material poverty, rather than lack of involvement, is argued to be the explanation for lower working-class achievement (La Placa & Corlyon, 2016).

Notwithstanding different findings, previous research has mainly studied the differences between the middle and the working class (or between high and low income groups or between high and low SES), and generally ignored the differences in composition of cultural and economic capital (e.g. Lareau, 1987, 2011; McNeal, 1999; Hill *et al.*, 2004; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Calarco, 2014, 2017; Hegna & Smette, 2017). One exception is Lee and Bowen (2006), who distinguish between economic resources (measured as whether children receive free school lunches) and cultural capital (measured as whether parents’ educational attainment is above or below the sample mean). While their main interest lies in determining the effects of parents’ involvement on students’ achievement, they also examine bivariate correlations between the two kinds of resources and parental involvement. Parents whose level of education is above the sample mean are more involved at school, in parent–child discussions about education, and have higher educational expectations than other parents. Parents whose children do not receive free or reduced-price lunches are also more involved in these three forms of involvement; in addition, they are less involved in the management of their child’s time. In terms of helping with homework, Lee and Bowen do not find any differences.

Research on middle-class child-rearing practices has emphasised how different fractions have different strategies and orientations. Whereas groups with more

cultural capital are often more liberal, caring and 'social mix'-oriented in their educational strategies, those with more economic capital are more competitive and position-oriented (Power & Whitty, 2002; Vincent *et al.*, 2004; Aarseth, 2017; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2017). The literature often explains middle-class parenting practices as a response to middle-class anxiety about their children's social reproduction, or a 'fear of falling' (e.g. Ehenreich, 1989; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Aarseth (2017), however, found this only in the economic fractions. In the cultural or professional fractions, she found a 'fear of fading', involving a fear of being dull and ordinary and not fulfilling one's potential. Both fractions were engaged in concerted cultivation, but Aarseth still found interesting differences. The economic fraction was more instrumental and goal-oriented, with pressure and strict rules about homework and grades. This stricter regime indicates a lack of ease and confidence and a greater need to plan and work for the results desired (Aarseth, 2017). The professional fraction, in contrast, was emotionally oriented, concerned with their children's pursuit of their own personal interests, aiming at self-fulfilment and autonomy. They were seemingly more relaxed about their children's academic achievement, expressing a confidence that their 'clever, but lazy' children would eventually do well even if, at the time of the interview, they were not doing well (see also Irwin & Elley, 2011). This harmonises well with results on students' own attitudes to education. Those with more cultural capital have been shown to be more inclined to see education as a means of self-realisation and self-accomplishment, whereas students with more economic capital tend to see it as more instrumental and as an investment in future material living conditions (Spruyt *et al.*, 2016). Below, we discuss whether such differences in attitudes to education and in child-rearing practices between people with different capital compositions may affect parents' involvement in their children's current schooling, and their educational aspirations for their children (*academic socialisation*).

### **A horizontal understanding of parental resources**

The definitions and operationalisation of cultural capital vary, even in Bourdieu's own work. Dividing into 'narrow' and 'broad' understandings has been suggested as useful, even if these overlap (see Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Barone, 2006; Andersen & Hansen, 2011). Narrow understandings emphasise exposure to highbrow cultural activities such as museums, theatre and classical music (cf. Di Maggio, 1982; Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Van de Werhorst & Hofstede, 2007), whereas broader understandings typically involve the transmission of academic skills by helping with homework and through academic features rewarded in the school system (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Some also focus on interaction and communication (Sullivan, 2001; Barone, 2006; Tramonte & Willms, 2010). Common to these ideas is an understanding that the most important transition of cultural capital occurs in the family, actualising a focus on parents' involvement.

Cultural reproduction theory claims that the culture of the dominant classes has status as the valuable and legitimate culture, and the education system transmits this culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The education system expects and rewards cultural capital, thus reproducing social inequalities in educational achievement

(Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Students exposed to this culture at home are better equipped for school. Bourdieusian theory assumes that parents with high cultural capital contribute to their children's learning in subtle ways, by transmitting cultural capital from an early age, which is then embodied and naturalised in the child's habitus (Reay *et al.*, 2005). Part of the middle-class habitus is a sense of entitlement (Kahn, 2011) and the 'ease' with which middle-class students encounter the education system (Reay *et al.*, 2009). Bourdieu compares such ease with being 'like a fish in water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).

According to Bourdieu then, theories focusing only on monetary investments and returns to education (like human capital theory) fail to take into account the volume and composition of people's assets. Ability and 'gifts' are also products of 'investment' in time and cultural capital, and the relative weight of cultural to economic capital will matter for how parents 'invest' in scholastic work (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 276). Those relying heavily on economic capital are increasingly involved in the education system, but those with large amounts of cultural capital still have better chances of success.

In keeping with Aarseth (2017) and Irwin and Elley (2011), we expect that both economic and cultural family resources will correlate positively with the two forms of parental involvement. The strength of these positive correlations may vary, however. When it comes to parental involvement in current schooling (ensuring children do their homework and pressuring them to do well at school), Aarseth's (2017) description of the parenting styles in the economic and cultural middle-class fractions gives reason to expect stronger impacts from economic resources than from cultural. The approach of the economic middle class to their children's schooling is influenced by their 'fear of falling', and characterised by strict rules and pressure. They are seemingly not as confident about their children's ability as the cultural fractions, and are not as concerned with their children's autonomy and self-fulfilment. On the contrary, parents with more cultural than economic resources may be more involved in 'academic socialisation', and the correlation between cultural family resources and future expectations is expected to be stronger than the correlation between these expectations and economic resources.

### **International comparison**

Our expectations that cultural resources correlate more strongly with academic socialisation, and that economic resources correlate more strongly with involvement in current schooling, will be examined in Belgium, Iceland, Norway and Spain. The school systems in these countries vary along several dimensions, which may affect the correlation between parental resources and involvement. System stratification (or differentiation or tracking) usually refers to whether there are different educational programmes or schools at the same point in an educational trajectory that are hierarchically ranked (Horn, 2009; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010; Jackson & Jonsson, 2013). Most studies find that stratification reinforces social inequality (Horn, 2009) and increases advantages connected to cultural capital (Barg, 2015). In contrast, standardisation (the degree to which the curriculum, teachers' qualification, exams, school financing and so forth are set at the central state level) (Park, 2008; Horn, 2009; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010) has been found to increase equality of

opportunity. Clear national standards make it easier for parents (particularly low SES parents) to assess whether their children are learning what they are supposed to (Park, 2008).

The countries in this study vary on several dimensions pertaining to the school systems. The association between parental involvement and economic and cultural resources might be stronger in systems where aspects of one's social background are more important for educational results, like in the more stratified system of Ghent. In more standardised systems like in Iceland and Norway, the correlations may be weaker, as all parents there can more easily follow the educational plans (Park, 2008). On the standardisation axis, Barcelona seems to be located between Belgium and the Nordic countries.

Previous research does not give clear expectations of variations across systems in what kind of resources will have the stronger effect on the two kinds of involvement. However, comparative studies of the importance of cultural capital for other educational outcomes have shown that the effects of cultural capital are remarkably similar across countries (Barone, 2006; Xu & Hampden-Thompson, 2012; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2017), which may give reason to expect rather small cross-country differences in the effects of cultural family resources. The differences in effects of economic resources may be more substantial, and may be bigger in the clearly stratified system of Belgium, than in the standardised schools of Iceland and Norway. The general levels of involvement may, however, be higher in standardised systems, as higher levels of standardisation might allow for easier involvement for all groups of parents. If that is the case, we expect higher levels of involvement in Norway and Iceland, and perhaps a weaker relationship between involvement and resources.

An organisational feature that may affect the average level of parents' involvement in their children's current schooling is how many hours the students are expected to spend at school. Students in Ghent and Barcelona spend 8 hours more at school each week than students in Bergen and Reykjavik do, which gives Norwegian and Icelandic parents more time to get involved in their children's homework.

Such possible effects of the schooling systems may, however, be both amplified and counteracted by other country characteristics, such as structural conditions at the national level. Based on the classification of welfare regimes by Esping-Andersen (1990) and Gallie and Paugam (2000), Walther (2006) distinguishes between four regimes for the transition from school to work. In the universalist transition regime of the Nordic social-democratic welfare systems (Iceland and Norway), the state provides comparatively generous social insurance schemes. Such social safety nets mitigate labour market risk and youth unemployment is normally low. This, coupled with a cultural conception of youth focused on personal autonomy and development, makes transition choices free and unconstrained. This regime may give parents less reason to worry, and consequently less reason to be heavily involved in their children's schooling. In the sub-protective transition regime of Mediterranean countries such as Spain, in contrast, the state offers less safety or support, youth unemployment is high and young people depend more on their families. Here we expect that parental involvement will be more important.

The correlations will probably also be affected by general economic conditions. The security offered by the Nordic transition system may, for example, have been less

apparent in Iceland at the time this survey was conducted, because of the recent collapse of the entire Icelandic financial sector, and the subsequent near-bankruptcy of the Icelandic state and relatively high levels of unemployment (Matthiasson, 2008). Also Spain was especially strongly hit by the financial crisis (Scarpetta *et al.*, 2010), which may have increased parents' 'fear of falling', thus making them value higher education to a greater extent. Such circumstances may make education more important also for the economically well off, who under other conditions may do well without pursuing a higher education. If so, we would expect both forms of parental involvement and economic resources to play a greater role in involvement in these countries. The crisis may lead to a greater level of involvement overall, and particularly for the economic fractions.

### **Data and methods**

Thanks to the project 'International Study of City Youth', we analyse survey data from four cities in different countries: Ghent (Belgium), Barcelona (Spain), Reykjavik (Iceland) and Bergen (Norway). Students filled in an online questionnaire in class when they were in 10th grade (aged 16) in 2014. In Reykjavik, Bergen and Ghent all the relevant schools were asked to participate, whereas in Barcelona a representative sample of the student population was drawn. In Reykjavik and Bergen all the public schools participated, whereas in Ghent only 77% of schools did. In the schools that were asked to participate, approximately 80% of students replied to the survey in both Reykjavik and Bergen, 90% in Ghent and 92% in Barcelona.

#### *Variables*

The first dependent variable is the extent of parents' involvement in their offspring's current schooling. We measure this by constructing a mean score from three questions: (1) 'My parents make sure that I do my homework'; (2) 'My parents attend parents' meetings at school'; (3) 'My parents put a lot of pressure on me to do well at school'. All are four-level Likert items ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The second dependent variable measures whether the parents want their children to go to university or find employment after completing upper-secondary school. The students were asked to assess two statements: (1) 'My parents want me to get a job rather than study after I leave school'; (2) 'My parents want me to go to university'. Since some informants agreed with both statements, we have constructed a variable representing the difference between the two statements. High positive values on this variable signify strong agreement with the statement 'My parents want me to go to university' and low values on the other, while negative values signify stronger agreement with the statement 'My parents want me to get a job rather than study after I leave school'.

#### *Independent variables*

We are interested in differences in the compositions of cultural and economic capital, and have therefore made two scales functioning as proxies for cultural and economic

capital. Both scales are mean scores of a number of indicators. In order to make the two resource scales more comparable, we have transformed them into standardised  $z$ -scores (with mean 0 and standard deviation 1). For each city, we first standardised each item. We then constructed mean scores of the standardised items and standardised them for each city. The economic resource variable is the mean score of the answers to the following questions: 'My parents often do not have enough money to make ends meet' (ranging from 1 'strongly agree' to 4 'strongly disagree'); 'How many cars do your parents have?' (ranging from 1 'none' to 4 '3 or more'); 'How many televisions do your parents have?' (ranging from 1 'none' to 4 '3 or more'); 'How many bathrooms do your parents have?' (ranging from 1 'none' to 4 '3 or more'); 'Does your mother work (part or full time)?' (2 = yes, 1 = no); 'Does your father work (part or full time)?' (2 = yes, 1 = no).

The measure of cultural resources is the mean score of the mother's and father's level of education (ranging from 1 'lower than ISCED level 3' to 3 'higher than ISCED level 3'); 'Do you have a piano at home?'; 'Do you have other musical instrument(s)?' (both ranging from 1 = no to 2 = yes); 'How many books are there in your home?' (ranging from 1 '0–10 books' to 6 'more than 500 books'). We thus measure cultural capital by asking about the possession of objects commonly associated with cultural activities, but also by asking about the parents' education level. In this way, we hope to capture cultural capital in a somewhat 'broad' sense—cultural capital is often associated with more education, more books and showing an increased tendency to play instruments, but this may of course overlap with economic capital; we separate the latter by asking questions about the possession of expensive objects, labour market status and a subjective understanding of economic standing. In Table 2 below, we find the correlation between the two types of resources as low as 0.27. Moreover, by including both measures in the same model, we measure the correlation between one and the dependent variables 'controlled' for the other.

The scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the two resource scales is approximately 0.6, which is not very high, but all the items contribute positively to the scale reliability and substantively we think that they all signify access to the two kinds of resources.

As a proxy for grades, we include the question 'What results do you expect to get in your studies this year?' (ranging from 1 'I expect to get very poor results' to 5 'I expect to get very good results'). We also include controls for gender and whether both parents were born in a country other than Spain, Belgium, Iceland or Norway, respectively. Descriptives of the variables are shown in Table 1 and their correlations in Table 2.

The data are based on questionnaires filled out by the students. As many of the questions include information about their parents, it is important to keep in mind that the results are mainly covering students' experiences of their parents' involvement, and not parents' own experiences of their own involvement.

## Analyses

Below we present results from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses. We analyse each country separately, as shown in Figure 1. All the coefficients are estimated with robust standard errors clustered on schools, as the OLS assumption that

Table 1. Descriptives

	<i>N</i>	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Cultural resources ( <i>z</i> -score)					
All	8,401	-3.04	2.43	0	1
Bergen	2,120	-3	2.25	0	1
Ghent	2,284	-2.61	2.12	0	1
Barcelona	2,035	-2.38	2.14	0	1
Reykjavik	1,962	-3.04	2.43	0	1
Economic resources ( <i>z</i> -score)					
All	8,373	-5.1	2.47	0	1
Bergen	2,112	-4.95	2.08	0	1
Ghent	2,285	-3.75	2.47	0	1
Barcelona	2,032	-3.33	2.39	0	1
Reykjavik	1,944	-5.1	2.34	0	1
Home and school involvement					
All	8,326	1	4	3.07	0.57
Bergen	2,096	1	4	3.05	0.53
Ghent	2,272	1	4	2.93	0.54
Barcelona	2,020	1	4	2.97	0.58
Reykjavik	1,938	1	4	3.34	0.53
Future expectations (university vs. work)					
All	8,099	-3	3	1.59	1.32
Bergen	1,999	-3	3	1.22	1.38
Ghent	2,226	-3	3	1.23	1.31
Barcelona	1,982	-3	3	2.07	1.2
Reykjavik	1,892	-3	3	1.88	1.12
Immigrant origin					
All	8,520	0	1	0.06	0.24
Bergen	2,147	0	1	0.05	0.22
Ghent	2,354	0	1	0.08	0.27
Barcelona	2,056	0	1	0.06	0.24
Reykjavik	1,963	0	1	0.05	0.22
Sex (male = 0, female = 1)					
All	8,458	0	1	1.52	0.5
Bergen	2,147	0	1	1.5	0.5
Ghent	2,310	0	1	1.58	0.49
Barcelona	2,046	0	1	1.47	0.5
Reykjavik	1,955	0	1	1.53	0.5
Expected grades					
All	8,414	0	4	2.73	0.8
Bergen	2,131	0	4	2.79	0.74
Ghent	2,293	0	4	2.69	0.67
Barcelona	2,039	0	4	2.54	0.94
Reykjavik	1,951	0	4	2.91	0.82

the errors have the same variance across observations is not confirmed in all the countries. In Ghent and Barcelona, there is between-school variance in the dependent variables and clustering the robust standard errors on schools allows for a model with heteroscedastic residuals.



Table 2. Correlations (Pearson's  $r$ ) between the important variables

	Home and school involvement	Future expectations (university vs. work)	Cultural resources ( $z$ -score)	Economic resources ( $z$ -score)
Home and school involvement	1	0.202*	0.073*	0.115*
Future expectations (university vs. work)	0.202*	1	0.221*	0.113*
Cultural resources ( $z$ -score)	0.073*	0.221*	1	0.273*
Economic resources ( $z$ -score)	0.115*	0.113*	0.273*	1

\*Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table 3 shows that both cultural and economic resources correlate significantly with parents' wishes for their children's future in Barcelona and Reykjavik, whereas only the correlation with cultural resources is significant in Ghent and Bergen. More resources increases parents' tendency to favour higher education and the coefficient for cultural resources is larger than the coefficient for economic ones in all four cities. A test reveals significant differences between the coefficients measuring cultural and economic resources in Ghent and Bergen, but not Reykjavik and Barcelona. The effect of cultural resources is also significantly smaller in Reykjavik compared to Barcelona, and larger in Barcelona compared to Bergen. The coefficients for economic resources are significantly larger in Barcelona than in Bergen and Ghent, but not Reykjavik. This could indicate that economic resources become more important for parents' educational aspirations for their children at times of economic insecurity. We find that the gender difference is significantly larger in Bergen than in Barcelona and Reykjavik. This implies that girls in Bergen more often than boys feel parents expecting them to pursue university studies, and that this gender difference is more prominent in Bergen. The coefficient for expected grade levels is significantly larger in

Table 3. Linear regressions (OLS) of parents' future educational expectations. Robust standard errors clustered on school

	Bergen		Ghent		Barcelona		Reykjavik	
	$b$	Robust SE	$b$	Robust SE	$b$	Robust SE	$b$	Robust SE
Economy	0.049	0.032	0.008	0.052	0.183***	0.058	0.087***	0.026
Culture	0.213***	0.030	0.241***	0.072	0.269***	0.043	0.129***	0.027
Girls	0.466***	0.058	0.194	0.158	0.180***	0.052	0.247***	0.050
Immigrant background	0.145	0.110	0.039	0.152	-0.10	0.106	0.068	0.092
Grades	0.490***	0.038	0.094	0.057	0.22***	0.033	0.236***	0.039
Constant	-0.395***	0.127	0.867***	0.250	1.427***	0.123	1.055***	0.130
Adj. $R^2$	0.145		0.039		0.162		0.08	
$N$	1,994		2,211		1,965		1,872	

\* $p < 0.10$ .

\*\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Table 4. Linear regressions (OLS) of parents' involvement in current schooling. Robust standard errors clustered on school

	Bergen		Ghent		Barcelona		Reykjavik	
	<i>b</i>	Robust SE	<i>b</i>	Robust SE	<i>b</i>	Robust SE	<i>b</i>	Robust SE
Economy	0.065***	0.016	0.045***	0.017	0.041***	0.015	0.079***	0.017
Culture	0.011	0.013	0.014	0.015	0.009	0.014	0.019	0.018
Girls	-0.034	0.028	-0.108***	0.036	-0.09***	0.036	-0.014	0.020
Immigrant background	-0.073	0.050	0.019	0.043	0.02	0.038	0.008	0.051
Grades	0.086***	0.014	0.040*	0.023	0.05***	0.016	0.099***	0.015
Constant	2.834***	0.038	2.885***	0.072	2.875***	0.047	3.060***	0.051
Adj. $R^2$	0.023		0.022		0.021		0.058	
<i>N</i>	2,095		2,255		2,002		1,918	

\* $p < 0.10$ .\*\* $p < 0.05$ .\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Bergen than in the other cities, and significantly smaller in Ghent than in the other cities.

In Table 4, we perform the same kind of analysis as above but here the dependent variable is parents' involvement in their children's current schooling. Several of the coefficients in Table 4 are significant, but generally the correlations are weaker than in Table 3; in all four cities the coefficients measuring the association between involvement and economic resources are significant, whereas the coefficients measuring the association between involvement and cultural resources are not. The  $R^2$  is also significantly smaller in these models, suggesting that the independent variables do not explain this form of involvement as well as that concerning future educational aspirations. The association between economic resources and this kind of involvement is somewhat larger in Reykjavik than in the other cities (significantly larger than in Ghent and Barcelona). The coefficients measuring cultural and economic resources differ significantly from each other only in Bergen and Reykjavik. In Ghent and Barcelona, boys experience somewhat more parental involvement than girls do. In Bergen and Reykjavik, there is no such difference.

Figures 1 and 2 visualise the predicted values of the two dependent variables following the  $z$ -score scales of the variables measuring resources, with the other independent variables set at mean for each country separately. The graphs for cultural resources are thus the predicted values following cultural resources from minimum to maximum when economic resources, immigrant background, gender and grades are set at mean, and vice versa.

In all four countries, the predicted values of both dependent variables increase with both types of resources. The graphs for economic resources are steeper in Figure 1, where the dependent variable is parents' involvement in school, whereas the graphs for cultural resources are steeper in Figure 2, where the dependent variable is parents' involvement in future plans or academic socialisation. The differences between the countries in the steepness of the lines are small, but in Figure 2 the line for economic

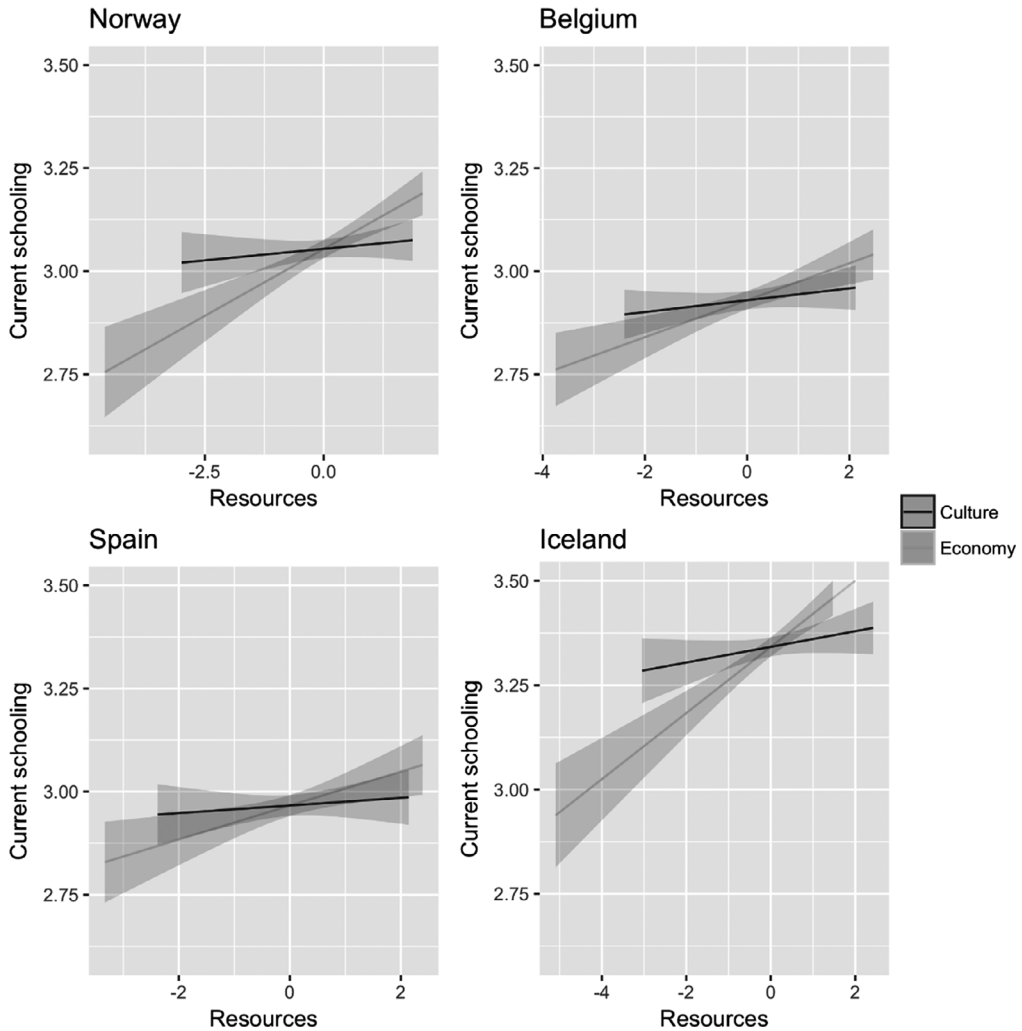


Figure 1. Predicted values from OLS for each country separately. The correlation between cultural and economic resources and involvement in current schooling with all other variables set at mean

resources is considerably steeper in Iceland and Spain than in Norway and Belgium, reflecting the coefficients for economic resources in Table 3. In Figure 1, we can also see that the level of parents' involvement in current schooling is somewhat higher in Norway and Iceland (as also seen in Table 1), as well as the difference between cultural and economic resources, possibly because the highly standardised systems allow for more accessible information for parents (Park, 2008). Another system characteristic that may affect the average level of parents' involvement in their children's current schooling is how many hours the students are expected to spend at school. Students in Ghent and Barcelona spend 8 hours more at school each week than students in Bergen and Reykjavik do, which gives Norwegian and Icelandic parents more time to get involved. The steepness of the lines for cultural resources in both figures is, however, strikingly similar across countries, in accordance with previous research.

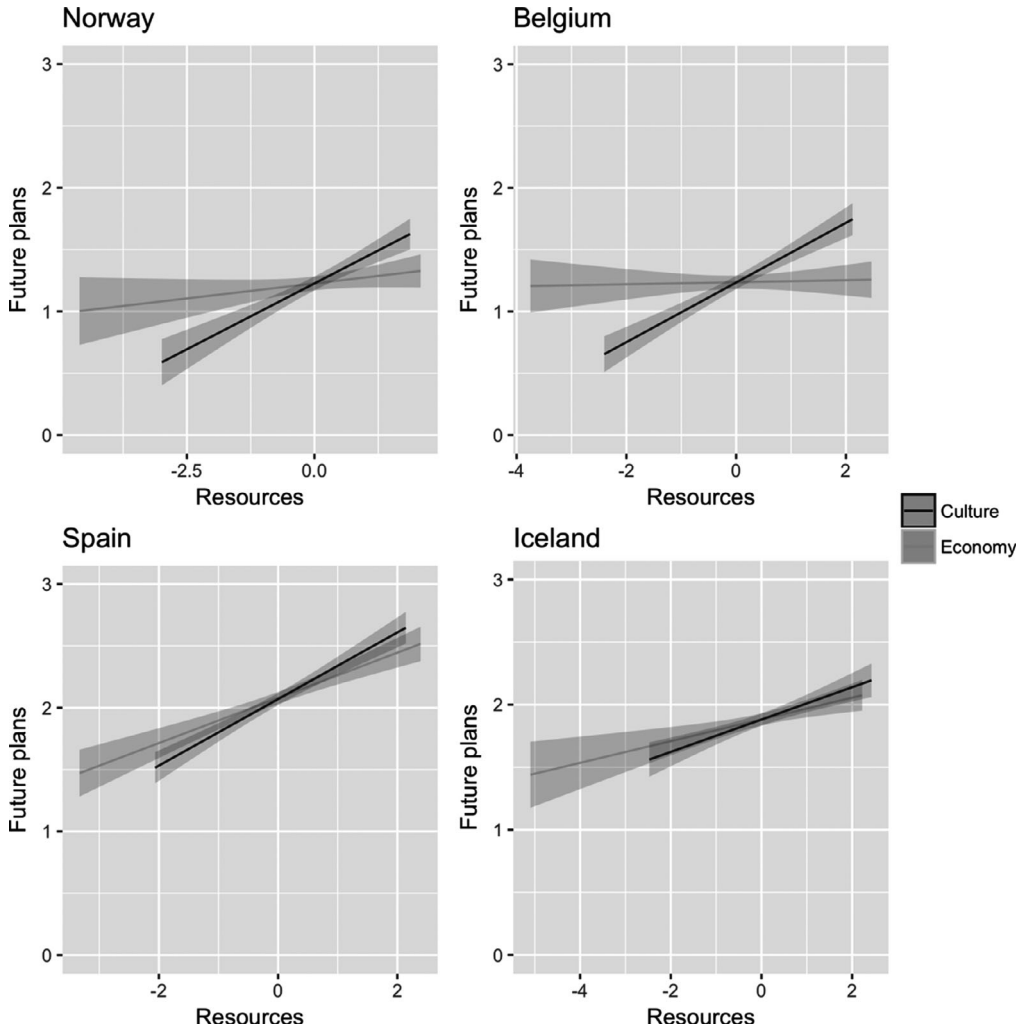


Figure 2. Predicted values from OLS for each country separately. The correlation between cultural and economic resources and involvement in future plans with all other variables set at mean

### Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have examined how parental involvement in children’s current schooling and academic socialisation is associated with their cultural and economic resources in four different countries. In line with previous research and theory, we found that both types of family resources correlated positively with parental involvement, and that family resources matter more for academic socialisation than for parental involvement in current schooling. Furthermore, we found that cultural resources are more strongly related with academic socialisation than with parental involvement in current schooling, and that economic resources are more strongly related with parental involvement in current schooling. Parents thus seem to practice different types of involvement, depending on their capital composition.

One of the reasons why expectations about future higher education might not be as prevalent in families with more economic than cultural capital in two of the countries may be that this might be less important for reproducing the family's social position. The results are consistent with the theory of Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984), and with the differences between fractions in family practices found by Irwin and Elley (2011) and Aarseth (2017). Distinctive ways of being involved resemble the distinction between the 'fear of falling' and the 'fear of fading'. The economic fraction in Aarseth's (2017) study was more instrumental and goal-oriented, with strict rules about and pronounced pressure on homework and grades, whereas the professional fraction was emotionally oriented, concerned with their children's pursuit of their own personal interests while aiming at self-fulfilment and autonomy. Parents with more economic capital than cultural seem to be more inclined to use strict rules and direct pressure on their children to achieve the aims of good grades and successful schooling, whereas parents with a capital composition dominated by cultural capital seem to achieve this by transmitting to their children a positive attitude to education. The pursuit of higher education is then taken for granted, and instils in their children an 'ease' with which they encounter the education system (Reay *et al.*, 2009). These patterns were quite similar across countries, resembling previous research that has shown negligible cross-country differences in the correlation between cultural capital and various learning outcomes (Barone, 2006; Xu & Hampden-Thompson, 2012; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2017). These similarities arguably strengthen the external validity of our findings.

In light of previous research showing that academic socialisation is more effective for learning outcomes than other forms of involvement (Hill & Tyson, 2009), our findings indicate that growing up with cultural resources in the family provides advantages in school. We thus question if policies aiming at more involvement *per se* can close socioeconomic gaps in educational aspirations and achievement, as has been criticised and discussed elsewhere (e.g. Hartas, 2011; La Placa & Corlyon, 2016). The association between parental resources and involvement is complex, and leaving parents with the task of closing socioeconomic gaps in educational attainment by simply being involved can be misleading. Moreover, as has not been touched upon here, *social capital* in the family can influence the ways in which social and economic returns to education play out (Horvat *et al.* 2003), and should be investigated in relation to cultural and economic capital.

We also found interesting differences between the countries. The association between the two kinds of resources and academic socialisation were quite similar in Spain and Iceland, while economic resources had negligible impact on this outcome in Belgium and Norway. This may be due to Iceland and Spain being more severely stricken by the economic crisis following the breakdown of the financial system in 2008. Youth unemployment rose rapidly, and economic insecurity increased. This may have created circumstances in which higher education seemed more important to everyone, also to families with relatively more economic than cultural resources. This pattern seems more difficult to explain by referring to differences in the educational systems.

When it comes to parental involvement in current schooling, in contrast, the coefficients are generally smaller, and the similarities between the two Nordic countries are more apparent. The general level of involvement is higher, and the association with

economic resources are somewhat higher in Iceland and Norway than in Belgium and Spain. The higher general level of involvement may be because Icelandic and Norwegian students spend less time in school, and because of the higher degree of standardisation of the systems. The difference in the strength of the impact of economic resources between Iceland and Belgium and Spain is harder to explain with system features. The financial crisis of 2008, in which the entire financial sector of Iceland (which at the time was unusually big) collapsed, may serve as part of the explanation of this finding. The fact that this Icelandic pattern is more similar to the pattern in Norway (which was almost entirely unaffected by the crisis) is more difficult to explain.

Because we do not have a causal design, we are not able to pinpoint exactly what aspects of the different education systems are impacting the differences we find, and exactly what other aspects outside of the education system might explain our findings. We call for further comparative research on differences between various forms of involvement, as well as research not only on differences in involvement practices between the middle and working classes, but also on differences in terms of capital composition. This difference is perhaps more visible since the expansion of the education system in the western world in recent decades, and the increased presence of the economic middle class in the education system increases the relevance of this topic.

### **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful for constructive comments from participants in ‘The Research Group on Professional Careers and Professional Labour Markets’. We are particularly grateful for input from Andreea Alecu on data visualisation.

### **Declaration of conflict of interest**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Ethical guidelines**

The research and handling of data was carried out in accordance with ethical guidelines and approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

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Article two:

Thea Bertnes Strømme (2020) Vocational and academic decisions in ‘classed’ school environments, *Journal of Education and Work*, 33:3, 197-211,

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2020.1754365>

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Thea Bertnes Strømme & Marianne Nordli Hansen (2017) Closure in the elite professions: the field of law and medicine in an egalitarian context, *Journal of Education and Work*, 30:2, 168-185,

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2017.1278906>

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Thea Bertnes Strømme (2020) Educational aspirations and decisions in  
Barcelona, Spain and Bergen, Norway: the significance of class and class  
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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1741526>

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