

Intergenerational Educational Mobility in Europe: Comparing Second-Generation Immigrants and Natives through Educational Regimes

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1. Theoretical Framework and Research Focus

Children of immigrants are the fastest-growing population in many European countries, reshaping integration dynamics and the demographic composition of school-age populations (OECD, 2018). Second-generation immigrants grow up within the same institutions as natives, yet their outcomes are jointly shaped by structural factors and parental cultural heritage (Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2022). In a life-course perspective, education represents both the result of observable and unobservable characteristics and a key predictor of outcomes across multiple life domains (Alba and Foner, 2015; OECD, 2006, 2017, 2018; Mezzanotte, 2022; Bucca and Drouhot, 2024). For immigrant descendants, educational attainment is particularly significant as it enhances individual success, intergenerational mobility, and social cohesion (Cerna et al., 2021; Schneider et al., 2022; OECD, 2017, 2018). Research has documented considerable progress across generations, with second-generation youth reaching educational levels increasingly similar to natives in many European countries (Oberdabernig and Schneebaum, 2017; Ferry & Ichou, 2024). Nonetheless, persistent structural disadvantages are common in systems with strong stratification, early tracking, and segregation. These mechanisms might lead children of immigrants to attend lower-quality schools with fewer resources and expectations, resulting in lower test scores, higher dropout rates, vocational rather than academic tracks, and reduced access to higher education. (Crul et al., 2012; Borgna and Contini, 2014; Alba and Foner, 2015; van de Werfhorst and Heath, 2019; Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2022; Porcu et al., 2023). Despite these barriers, literature highlights the prevalence of “immigrant optimism”, a pattern of high aspirations and strong educational commitment that often exceeds that of natives with similar backgrounds (Kao and Tienda, 1995; OECD, 2018; Cerna et al., 2021).

Furthermore, educational outcomes among second-generation migrants are shaped by contextual factors, such as education systems and country migration history, which have been examined as key determinants of differences in performance and attainment relative to native peers (Dronkers et al., 2010; Heath and Brinbaum, 2014; Borgna, 2017; van de Werfhorst and Heath, 2019). Social spending also plays a key role in reducing inequalities and improving social mobility, with higher public expenditure on education associated with higher mobility (OECD, 2018b, Britton and Sibiet, 2024). Early interventions, especially in childcare, education, and family support, are the most effective tools for breaking cycles of disadvantage and promoting equal opportunities. A comprehensive policy approach is therefore essential to reduce inequality, prevent dropout, and ensure fair opportunities across generations (OECD, 2009, 2018b). While prior research has examined educational attainment (Dronkers and Fleischmaan, 2010) and skill gaps (Fossati, 2011) across welfare regimes, less is known about how similar institutional configurations shape intergenerational educational mobility among second-generation migrants compared to native peers. In this perspective, educational regimes, as broader institutional configurations within welfare states that shape the organisation, funding, inclusiveness, and degree of public compensation in education systems (Allmendinger & Leibfried, 2003; Busemeyer & Nikolai, 2010; Pantić et al., 2025), will be the main contextual factor of the study.

By focusing on intergenerational educational mobility, this research moves beyond attainment level differences to examine status transmission, assessing how educational regimes mediate both upward opportunities and protection against downward mobility across different migration backgrounds.

The contribution will address the following research questions: (1) *Do second-generation immigrants differ from natives in terms of absolute and conditioned intergenerational educational mobility?* (2) *To what extent do these patterns vary across educational regimes?* (3) *Which educational regimes help individuals to experience high upward mobility from the lowest educational parental origin, given different migration backgrounds?* Accordingly, the hypotheses are: *Hp1*: Second-generation immigrants display higher upward mobility than natives, consistent with immigrant optimism, but are also at risk of downward mobility, reflecting structural constraints and stratification mechanisms. *Hp2*: mobility outcomes vary across educational regimes, reflecting differences in institutional inclusiveness, opportunity structures, and public spending for education. *Hp3*: In more defamilised regimes (e.g., Scandinavian), both upward mobility and the risk of downward mobility are expected to be less dependent on family background, reflecting stronger institutional compensation. In contrast, in more familiarised regimes (e.g., Mediterranean), weaker institutional support increases reliance on family resources, leading to stronger stratification in both upward opportunities and downward risks.

2. Data and methods

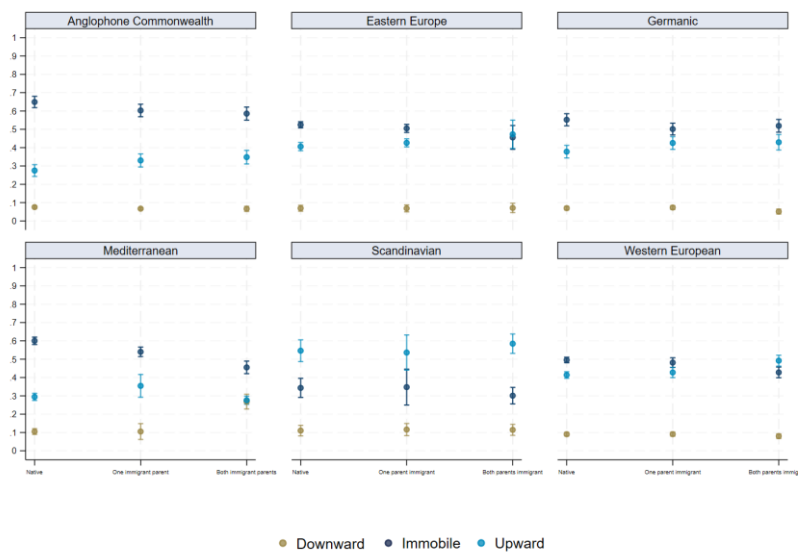
The analysis relies on the European Social Survey (ESS, Waves 7–11, 2014–2023) and examines intergenerational educational mobility as a function of the interaction of migration background and educational regimes. Intergenerational educational mobility is operationalised through three complementary outcomes: First, binary logistic regression models estimate the probability of upward mobility from less-educated origins, identifying the extent to which individuals can overcome disadvantage across educational regimes. Second, models are stratified by parental education, distinguishing how mobility and immobility patterns vary by migration background and educational regimes from specific education levels (Figure 1, lower part), also addressing compositional effects. Third, a full multinomial logit model is estimated on the entire sample to capture the overall structure of educational mobility (Figure 1, upper part). The dependent variable, *intergenerational educational mobility*, compares the respondent's education with the highest parental education, both recoded into three broader educational categories (Breen and Müller, 2020): low (ES-ISCED 1–2), medium (ES-ISCED 3–4), and high (ES-ISCED 5 and above). The key independent variable is *generation status*, distinguishing second-generation immigrants with one or both parents born abroad from native-born individuals, interacted with destination countries grouped into *educational regime* typologies (Busemeyer and Nikolai, 2010; Pantić et al., 2025). Additionally, an *education policy matrix* of national approaches to migrant inclusion in education systems (Pantić et al., 2025) is included as a contextual factor. Models incorporate a set of covariates capturing parental background (higher level of education and occupation/employment status when the respondent was 14), migration-related characteristics such as language spoken at home and macro-ancestry group to capture socio-cultural background [Western (Europe, North America, and Oceania), Eastern European (EU), Eastern European (non-EU), and Non-European], individual and contextual factors (age, gender, area of residence, citizenship, survey round). Finally, country-level indicators derived from the Global Social Mobility Index (GSMI) pillars (Technological access, Fair wage distribution, Social protection, and Inclusive institutions) are included to capture institutional dimensions of opportunity structures. All models are estimated using population weights and cluster-robust standard errors at the country level.

3. Findings

Figure 1 highlights how educational regimes differently mediate absolute and conditional mobility patterns across different migration backgrounds. A constant finding across all outcomes is that while some systems, Scandinavian and Western, combine stability with opportunities for upward movement, others appear more stability-oriented, such as the Germanic. Regimes characterised by higher social protection and universal public investments, particularly public spending in education, weaken the dependence of mobility outcomes on family resources, reducing the relative disadvantage

between native and immigrant families and absorbing the risk of downward mobility. By contrast, the Mediterranean regime stands out as the most constrained and unequal, particularly for second-generation immigrants with two parents born abroad, with higher risks of downward mobility from all parental education, and more constrained upward prospects to higher education. This points to weaker compensatory mechanisms and greater vulnerability among different groups (Schnell, 2014), with intergenerational educational mobility being strongly mediated by family resources. In this sense, results suggest that in the Mediterranean context, the presence of a native-born parent may constitute an additional integration resource, promoting more opportunities through higher cultural capital and access to information compared to families with both immigrant parents (Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2022; Barone and Herbaut, 2024), enabling what has been defined as the “multiplier effect” (Crul et al., 2017). Conversely, negative outcomes might be related to the inability to secure a highly rewarding job in the destination country, even when having high educational credentials, leading to a higher opportunity cost and the inability to invest in their descendant's higher education (Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2022). This highlights the importance of additional class resources besides the education level of the parents while measuring education attainments (H. Kruihof and Verhaeghe, 2024).

ABSOLUTE INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY



CONDITIONED MOBILITY FROM LOW (LEFT) AND HIGH (RIGHT) PARENTAL EDUCATION

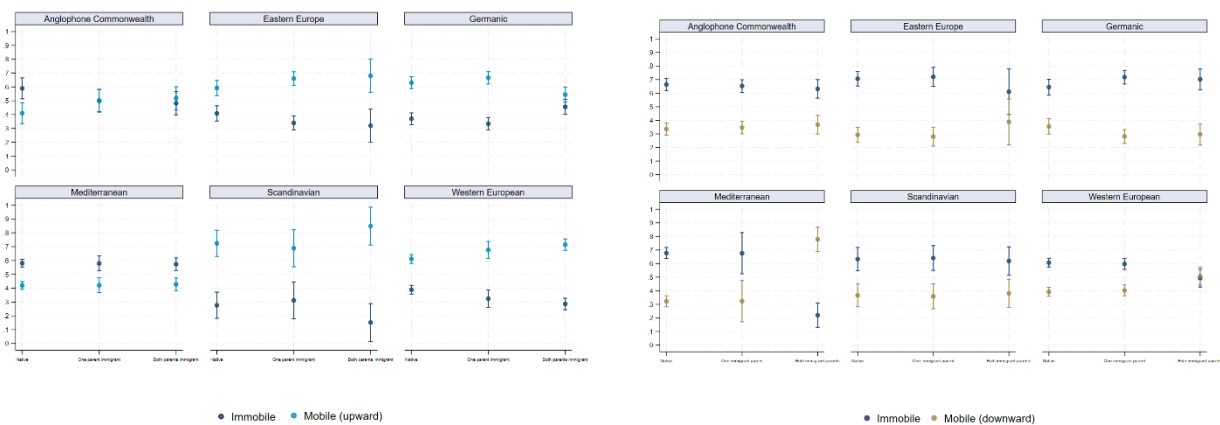


Figure 1. Predicted probabilities by migration background and educational regime interaction, SE 83.5

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