Check for updates

Received: 31 October 2022 | Revised: 21 December 2022 | Accepted: 18 January 2023

DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12998

RESEARCH MANUSCRIPT

WILEY

Social class and approaches to shaping educational expectations

Jens-Peter Thomsen

The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Copenhagen, Denmark

Correspondence

Jens-Peter Thomsen, The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Herluf Trolles Gade 11, Copenhagen 1052, Denmark.
Email: jpt@vive.dk

Funding information

The Lauritzen foundation, Grant/Award Number: 34224

Abstract

Scholars have recognized young people's educational expectations as a key factor in predicting educational outcomes, but few studies have attempted a comprehensive classification of how young people's educational expectations are shaped. In this article, I outline a typology of how young people from different social class origins shape their educational expectations. Drawing on 100 interviews with 15-year-olds, I find two underlying dimensions in young people's accounts of their educational expectations: how risk aware they are and how goal oriented they are. These dimensions translate into a heuristic model for understanding the structure of young people's educational expectations. I identify four major approaches to shaping educational expectations - the confident, the determined, the explorative, and the anxious - and show how these approaches connect to the young people's class origin. The typology of approaches offers a conceptual framework for understanding the mechanisms that lead young people to shape their expectations in qualitatively different ways.

KEYWORDS

educational expectations, social class, young people

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2023 The Authors. The British Journal of Sociology published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of London School of Economics and Political Science.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The educational expectations of young people are a key aspect of the research on the intergenerational transmission of social advantage and disadvantage.[1] Not only are expectations powerful signals of what young people hope to achieve in life, they have also proven to be strongly linked to educational achievement (Bozick et al., 2010; Jacob & Wilder, 2011; Johnson & Reynolds, 2013; Khattab, 2015; Morgan, 2005). In addition, research has shown that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds consistently have lower expectations than their privileged peers do, even when adjusting for their scholarly ability (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Hanson, 1994). Even though scholars have recognized young people's educational expectations as a key factor in predicting educational outcomes, few studies have attempted a more comprehensive classification of how young people's educational expectations are shaped. This paper makes such an attempt by outlining a typology of how young people shape their educational expectations. Examining how 100 15-year-olds from different social class backgrounds in Denmark reflect on their educational expectations just before their first major educational transition (to upper secondary education), I ask: How do young people from different social class origins shape their educational expectations, and how can these expectations be conceptualized? In answering this research question, I outline four major approaches to shaping educational expectations and show how these approaches link to social class: *the confident (focused and unconcerned), the determined (focused and risk aware), the explorative (undecided and unconcerned), and the anxious (the undecided and concerned)*.

The paper builds on Danish data, but the classifications outlined extend well beyond a Danish setting. Fewer economic obstacles—a highly developed social security system, free education and a generous universal government grant system—mean that young people's educational expectations may be less constrained in a Danish (and Scandinavian) setting than in countries where financial barriers much more directly limit young people in their expectations. Despite this, substantial class gaps in educational transitions persist even in Denmark (Thomsen, 2015). The paper proceeds as follows. First, I examine existing knowledge on educational expectations and present the paper's contribution. Next, I contextualize and present data and then move on to identify the common denominators in young people's educational expectations that combine to make up four approaches to young people's educational expectations.

2 | RESEARCH ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Studies have long documented a close tie between parents' socioeconomic status (SES) and young people's educational expectations (Bodovski, 2010; Haller, 1982; Morgan, 2005; OECD, 2017; Sewell et al., 1969; for a Danish study, see Thomsen, 2022), with parental involvement and a high-quality home learning environment being positively related to higher expectations (e.g., Astone & McLanahan, 1991). Net of parental SES, several studies have shown that young people's expectations continue to be strong predictors of educational attainment (Bozick et al., 2010; Jacob & Wilder, 2011; Johnson & Reynolds, 2013; Khattab, 2015). For example, Domina et al. (2011) find that expectations are strongly linked to achievement, as college expectations has positively affected high school students' effort. Other studies have highlighted how lower SES youth hold lower expectations than their more privileged peers, even when scholarly ability is adjusted for (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Hanson, 1994). In addition, researchers have found that young women hold more ambitious educational expectations than do young men (Reynolds & Burge, 2008; Wells et al., 2011; see also Di Prete & Buchmann, 2013) and that some immigrant groups and racial minorities have higher educational expectations than majority students (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Fishman, 2020; Goyette & Xie, 1999).

In addition to class, race, and gender, studies have found that friends and role models (teachers, educators, etc.) predict educational expectations (Gregory & Huang, 2013; Roth, 2017). Institutional sorting in highly differentiated educational systems (e.g., tracking in upper secondary education) has also been shown to impact young people's expectations, as the type of school the students attend to a large degree determine their educational expectations (Buchmann & Park, 2009). Moreover, studies have found that students who grow up in a rural setting have lower

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

expectations than students raised in urban settings (Byun et al., 2012) and that family economic shocks also negatively impact expectations (Renzulli & Barr, 2017).

In sociology, young people's expectations have largely been approached from three perspectives: a status-attainment perspective, a rational-choice perspective, and a cultural-reproduction perspective. In the remainder of this section, I will review relevant literature in relation to these three perspectives. One influential primarily U.S. based research tradition has focused on status attainment.

Status attainment theory seeks to understand how the social origin of a child affects that child's educational attainment and later occupational status. Using quantitative methodology, status attainment research have highlighted the importance of school and early family socialization, as well as how scholarly achievement and significant others shape educational expectations (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Bozick et al., 2010). In what is reffered to as the Wisconsin model of status attainment, Sewell et al. (1969) placed weight on factors such as aspirations and expectations as mechanisms mediating family background and children's educational and occupational outcome—showing how "significant others", such as parents, peers, and teachers, affect the educational expectations of students. Newer studies have underlined the dynamic aspect of expectation formation, showing how young people adapt their educational expectations in response to feedback on their academic abilities (Andrew & Hauser, 2012; Holm et al., 2019; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2012).

Another strand of research has argued that educational risk assessments of families vary by social class (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1996). As all classes wish to avoid downward mobility, working-class families tend to shy away from risky (lengthy and costly) higher education programs. This is reflected in the educational outlook of children and leads to substantial social-origin gaps in expectations, even when adjusting for scholarly abilities (e.g., high school Grade Point Average [GPA]). For example, Hanson (1994) finds that low-SES youths in the US are at risk of not using their academic talents as they have lower expectations of themselves than high-SES youths. The substantial gap in educational expectations and transitions for middle-class and working-class children, regardless of their scholarly ability, has led risk-aversion scholars to talk about the "secondary effects" of socialization (Boudon, 1974). Young people's educational pathways are not only attributable to the "primary effects" of socialization in the family (i.e., the relationship between social origin and scholastic abilities), but also to secondary effects (i.e., if and how, given their abilities, young people realize their educational potentials) (Boudon, 1974). The concept of secondary effects aims to explain why working-class students, who are socialized into working-class reproduction patterns, are systematically underrepresented in the transition to higher education, despite being just as qualified as their middle-class counterparts (Jackson, 2013).

The status-attainment and relative-risk aversion approaches outlined above view the educational expectations of individuals as a function of early socialization and emphasize the agency of the individual or the family unit. A contrasting perspective places more weight on the structural constraints that impede the educational opportunities of young people. These constraints are reflected in the educational diversion of underprivileged groups (Brint & Karabel, 1989), in the marginalization of subcultures in the educational system (Willis, 1981), in the way the educational system is used to the advantage of the middle class (Ball, 2003), or in the way in which culturally biased curricula and performances in the classroom give certain groups privilege (Bernstein, 1990; Bourdieu, 1996). According to Bourdieu, the key proponent of cultural-reproduction theory, families possess different amounts of cultural, social, and economic capital, and display different kinds of educational strategies that present themselves in the habitus and dispositions of their offspring (Bourdieu, 1986, 1996, 1997). Children from backgrounds with high levels of cultural capital enjoy a range of privileges and are given preferential treatment in the educational system because cultural capital presents itself as academic ability. Lareau (2011) has shown how middle-class families cultivate their children through specific child-rearing techniques and involve themselves heavily in their children's educational institutions, leading to privileges in the educational system and a "sense of entitlement" (see also Calarco, 2014). Working-class parents, on the other hand, interfere little with their children's everyday lives and accept educational professionals as authorities.

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Reay et al. (2005) have shown how privileged classes in the UK use resources and knowledge about the educational system to gain and maintain advantage in the struggle for sought-after positions in society (see also Lucas, 2001). In the US, Hamilton et al. (2018) have examined how middle-class parents act as "college-concierges", actively aiding and guiding their daughters with regard to their university experiences, whereas working-class families see themselves more as "outsiders" (see also Hamilton, 2016). Similarly, a UK study finds that middle-class children are more often met with uniformly high expectations from parents, peers, and teachers, leading their college expectations to be "a given" (Winterton & Irwin, 2012). In line with this, Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010) state that privileged US youths more often possess a "college-going" habitus, where the transition to college is the "natural" pathway (see also Andres et al., 2007). In contrast, for working-class youths, the choice of higher education is perceived as a riskier, more uncertain choice than for middle-class youths, a choice fraught with economic obstacles (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Reay, 2003). Mullen (2009, 2010) studies how upper-class families in the US use well-developed family strategies for choosing higher education, while the choices of working-class students are more coincidental and more dependent on role models, such as teachers and student counsellors. In addition, working-class students tend to have a utilitarian and vocational attitude to further studies, and more often opt for vocational programs or applied subjects in college than do middle-class students, who tend to favor liberal arts programs (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Lehmann, 2009; Thomsen et al., 2013).

The literature surveyed above uncovers key mechanisms that lead working-class children to have different expectations than their middle- and upper-class counterparts. The studies highlight the role of family and upbringing, influence of friends and significant others, and signals about academic abilities. They also place weight on the structural barriers faced by disadvantaged young people that lead to institutional exclusion and feelings of estrangement in the educational system. The *qualitative* literature often draws on cultural reproduction theory, explaining how dominant groups reproduce their privileges (Bourdieu, 1986, 1996). As a consequence, the qualitative literature tend to focus more on the structural exclusion of disadvantaged young people, than on how young people shape their educational expectations. The *quantitative* literature often draws on rational choice or relative risk aversion theory (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1996) treating expectations as economic utility maximization (for a fruitful discussion of the limitations of this position, see Frye, 2012). I propose a categorization of educational expectation that offers a more detailed understanding of how young people shape their educational expectations than the dominant hierarchical low/high-expectations approach (often operationalized as e.g., plans to pursue college or not). I argue that hierarchical orderings may mute important qualitative differences, for instance if young people focus more on whether an education leads to a vocational profession or not, than on the level of that education. My contribution to the literature is typological, as I aim to classify the different approaches to shaping educational expectations and how they are affected by the social class context in which the young people have grown up.[2]

In the following, I examine the young people's stories and I analyze how they translate into four major approaches to shaping educational expectations. I begin by contextualizing the data, after which I empirically identify the common denominators in young people's educational expectations, and finally, I show how these common denominators interact to make up a heuristic model of how young people's educational expectations are shaped.

3 | CONTEXT

Young people in Denmark shape their educational expectations in a context where educational pathways are subject to fewer economic constraints than in many other countries. Social security is well developed, labor market participation is high for both men and women, daycare is universal and affordable, compulsory schools do not use tracking, higher education is tuition-fee free, and everyone actively enrolled in a higher education program receives a government grant of Danish Kroner (DKK) 6250 monthly (approx. 800 Euros, 2020 figures).

The educational system in Denmark consists of 10 years of compulsory education, from grade 0 to grade 9 (6- to 15-year-olds), with an optional 10th grade. After finishing ninth grade, some young people choose a year

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

at a continuation school ("*efterskole*"), which is a unique Danish residential school program based on a liberal reform-pedagogical tradition with substantial academic freedom. In the eighth and ninth grade, all students receive an assessment of whether they are ready for further education, and students who are not found to be ready will often continue into the 10th grade to mature and improve their academic level.[3] In grade 8 and 9 students also receive collective information on choice of further education (through meetings and class introductions) while students that are not deemed ready for further education can receive individual guidance. After compulsory education, young people can—if they are deemed ready—choose between two formally and institutionally separate upper secondary educations. One is the higher-education-preparatory *gymnasium* (3 years), which offers a general academic track, two vocationally oriented academic tracks (technology or business oriented), and a track catered to mature students. Another option is vocational education and training (VET, typically 3 years) that prepares students for a career as a skilled worker, for example, as a carpenter or electrician or for a career within the construction or service industries.

Students who have completed *gymnasium* can continue into higher education, where they can choose between business academies, university colleges, and universities. Business academies offer two-to 3-year programs primarily targeted at various administrative jobs in the private sector. University colleges offer three-to 4-year degrees and primarily target professions within the welfare state (teachers, nurses, and childcare and social workers). Universities offer a wide range of traditional liberal arts and professional programs at bachelor's, master's, and PhD level. After completing a 3-year bachelor's degree at a university, students are legally entitled to continue into the corresponding 2-year master's program (e.g., from a Sociology BA to a Sociology MA), and more than four out of five bachelor students do so. Access to higher education programs is subject to uptake constraints when the demand for study places exceeds supply, which is the case for many university programs. In these cases, young people are sorted and admitted on the basis of their *gymnasium* GPA (with a small percentage of student applicants admitted on the basis of experience-based qualifications). Sought-after, prestigious university programs (such as medicine, political science, psychology, architecture) require a very high GPA to gain entry.

4 | DATA AND METHOD

The present paper builds on data collected in a large qualitative study on young people's educational expectations and educational trajectories from age 15–26. The study is conducted by a project team led by the author. The study complies with all Danish regulations concerning ethics, confidentiality, protection, and GDPR-regulations. The project, which runs from 2017 to 2026, consists of four waves of interviews with 100 young people aged 15, 18, 21, and 26, and examines how their educational careers and expectations develop as they move into adulthood. For the first wave of interviews, the project team sampled 100 students in the ninth grade (all 15 years old), just before they finished compulsory school and had to make their first educational choice. The team (hereafter "we") chose two municipalities with two different and complementary profiles: a suburban municipality within commuting distance of Copenhagen, the Danish capital city, and a rural municipality far from the capital. We recruited persons for interviews through the compulsory school system in each municipality (14 schools in total). After obtaining consent from the schools, we asked parents for permission to approach their children, and subsequently asked the children (ninth graders) to fill out a two-page questionnaire on household status, parents' education and occupational status, self-reported academic ability, initial educational expectations, and whether we could contact them for a later interview. In total, 431 ninth graders completed the questionnaire, and 426 consented to be contacted.

As we wanted to uncover different types of expectations, the aim of the sampling was not to achieve proportional representation, but to maximize variation along key background characteristics, that is, *sampling for range* (see Small, 2009 for a fruitful discussion on case selection). To this end, we sorted all ninth graders into four major socioeconomic groups and included in each group variation in gender, rural/urban background, ethnic minority status (majority/minority origin), and self-reported academic abilities (high/low). From this sample, we selected 100 young people for interviews and offered them a gift card of DKK 200 (approx. 25 Euros) each as a sign of appreciation for their willingness to participate. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

TABLE 1 Data description—background characteristics

Socio-economic group	Description	*N*	Examples of mother's occupation	Examples of father's occupation	Setting (N:urban; N:rural)	Gender (N: female; N: male)	N: Ethnic minority students
1	Parents with no upper-secondary education, in jobs not exceeding the qualification level of their education (8 parents unemployed).	23	Unemployed, sick leave, cleaning, shop assistant, assistant childcare worker.	Unemployed, warehouse worker, taxi driver, food service worker, shop assistant, factory worker.	6; 17	10; 13	8
2	Parents, whose highest education is a VET in jobs not exceeding the qualification level of their education (2 parents unemployed).	31	Bookkeeper, health assistant, cashier, hairdresser, disability support worker	IT worker, electrician, warehouse worker, mason, carpenter, self-employed.	20; 11	19; 12	2
3	Parents, whose highest education is a university college education, in jobs not exceeding the qualification level of their education (1 parent unemployed).	19	Medical secretary, special needs worker, team leader, nurse.	IT programmer, sales representative, teacher, childcare worker.	12; 7	10; 9	2
4	Parents, whose highest education is a university degree, in jobs at the qualification level of their education (1 parent unemployed).	27	Biologist, head nurse, schoolteacher, lawyer, high school teacher.	Engineer, accountant, vet, manager, economist, consultant, project manager.	11; 16	13; 14	2
		100			49; 51	52; 48	14

Note: The project team wanted to interview roughly the same number of students from each socioeconomic group, with a slight oversampling of groups 1 and 2, but as some of the students canceled their interview, the groups are slightly different in size. "Parents" refers to the primary caretakers in the young person's upbringing and may include non-biological parents.

In total, we interviewed 54 young people from working-class backgrounds (groups 1 and 2) and 46 young people from middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds (groups 3 and 4). Of the 100 interviewees, 52 were young women and 14 had an ethnic minority background. We interviewed the young people at their school, and interviews typically lasted 50–60 min. Prior to the interviews, the interviewees were informed about confidentiality, anonymity, and the setup of the interview. The interviews were semi-structured with emphasis on the broader socio-structural context that shapes the expectations of the interviewees (Bourdieu, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

To help the young people tune into their thoughts on future education and to contextualize expectations, we made use of a visual exercise at the beginning of each interview, see Figure 1.[4] We asked the ninth graders to indicate what kind of educational pathways they expected (circle in the middle), whom they saw as influential for their plans, and who and what had pushed them in that direction (satellite circles).

After the visual exercise, the interviewer moved on to cover background information, along with questions on home environment, school experiences, leisure activities, future plans and expectations. After each interview, the

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

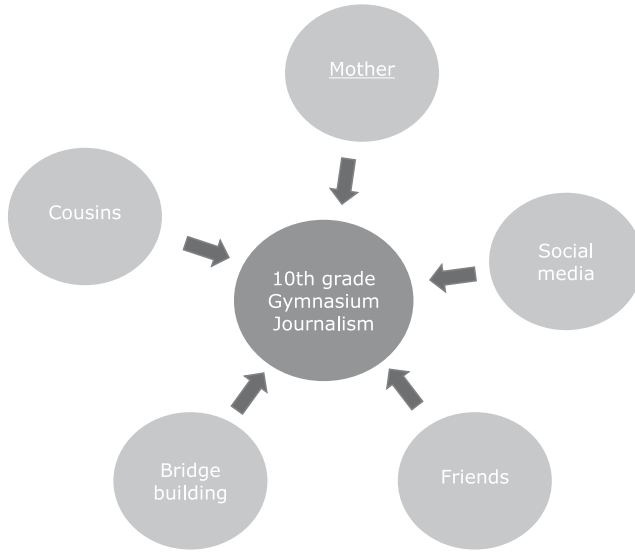


FIGURE 1 Influences on educational expectations. Example from visual exercise. The interviewees were asked to write their expectations in the circle in the middle and to write experiences, persons, or institutions that had influenced their expectations in the satellite circles. In the example, "bridge building" is an arrangement where students can spend a couple of days at an upper secondary school of their interest. "Mother" was underlined by the interviewee as the person who had been of prime importance.

interviewer made a condensed memo with background information and a short summary of the interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and were subsequently coded using Nvivo software. In our coding, we applied a dynamic coding tree in the following manner. We initially developed a set of nodes (collection of references such as school, guidance, experiences growing up, family life, relationship to parents and friends, expectations, other influences) based on research literature, our interview questions, and the condensed memos. Each set of nodes was attached to several child nodes (sub-references), for example, the node "school" had the child nodes of "relationship with teachers", "feelings about school", "educational assessments", "academic level", and "support". As we coded the interviews, new nodes were added if relevant. These were often of a more conceptual or theoretical nature than the initial descriptive nodes, and comprised factors such as "determination", "realism", "safety", "insecurity", and "natural/given choices". We used attributes in Nvivo to capture background information (parental SES, ethnic minority status, gender, etc.).

To help structure the analysis presented in the following, interviewees were listed in a main interview matrix as rows, and with condensed interview nodes and attributes as columns. This allowed the team to survey patterns in the data and to count the frequency of different influences on expectations. As the material was analyzed, the team uncovered two overarching common denominators in the data material pertaining to how much risk was associated with shaping expectations and how much a clear goal was associated. These two denominators echoed well with existing literature stressing the "risky" aspect of choosing education (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Reay, 2003) and the general orientation toward specific types of education—(often vocational or applied-oriented) among students from working class backgrounds (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Lehmann, 2009). The two common denominators, or dimensions—degree of risk awareness and degree of goal orientation—were added to the interview matrix (see the data and methods section) as columns, and the distribution of the dimensions across the rows of interviewees was examined. The examination showed that the two dimensions interacted to produce four major approaches that exhaustively captured how the young people shaped educational expectations. In the following section, I analyze the young people's stories and present the four approaches to shaping educational expectations. All names and places mentioned in the paper are pseudonyms.

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

5 | ANALYSIS

Parents are at the center of the narratives of the 15-year-olds, with 79 out of 100 listing them as influential for their educational expectations (see Table A1 in the appendix for an overview). Across socioeconomic groups, nearly all 15-year-olds say that their parents just want them to get the education that will make them happy. Yet, after these initial accounts of parental support, differences appear. Some students report that their parents are were actively involved in their educational plans, some mention parents that guide in a more subtle, downplayed way, while others say that their parents are not involved in their planning at all.

These different parental attitudes have a clear social gradient (more young people with university-educated parents list their parents as being influential, 24 out of 27, than young people with parents with no upper-secondary education, 14 out of 23). Agnes' story captures the active involvement of highly educated parents well. Her parents are both university graduates (IT and medicine), and she wants to study biotechnology at university. In shaping her educational expectations, Agnes has been coached and stimulated in many ways. Her parents have strengthened her trust in her scholarly abilities, applauded her attitude and belief in herself, and expressed joy when she presented her educational plans to them. Parental scaffolding (providing structure and support to maximize their children's opportunities) can also be more implicit. Elias, another 15-year-old from a highly educated home, recalls the impact of growing up in a family where the importance of education was a given: "[…] my parents have always believed I should continue into gymnasium, and so on, and then you're automatically pushed in that direction yourself." In these homes, the expectation of a college or university education can be characterized as a "given" and whether explicit or more implicit, parents provide a scaffolding for the "worry-free" choice of higher education.

Many of the young people from manually skilled homes (VET educated, group 2) also give accounts of supportive parents, but their parents' knowledge of the educational system is often limited, and they have not acted as guides or entered into dialogues with their children about the choice of education (see Lareau, 2011). Most of these young people display a risk awareness in their approach to further education, where job security is at the forefront of their reflections. Others, often those whose parents have no upper-secondary education, cannot recall having conversations with their parents about educational choices. As Emilie replies when asked whether she feels her parents had exerted any influence on her educational plans: "they have just been confident that I knew what to do. They didn't know much about what was possible, what you could do." (Emilie, group 1).[5]

Another major influence on the young people's expectations is the educational institution they have attended (with half of all the young people listing teachers or counsellors as influences, see appendix table A1). The support of teachers or counsellors is most often brought up by young people with parents without much experience with the education system. Rasmus, who comes from a troubled home, have been very worried about his educational prospects, and he have had several talks with the school counselor:

> I think she [the school counsellor] could sense that gymnasium was not for me, and that I didn't know what I wanted. […] she really did a good job, and she has probably been the biggest help. Without my educational counsellor, I would have been completely stuck, and I wouldn't have known what I wanted to do at all. (Rasmus, group 2)

At the time of the interviews, the students have begun to reflect on their school grades and the implications of their grade levels. While anxiety and readjustment is common among disadvantaged students, privileged students worries less about receiving low grades, and they do not readjust their educational plans to the same degree as the less privileged students do (see Beattie, 2002; Bernardi & Valdés, 2021 for interesting discussions of these differences). For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, where further education is in no way a given, grades mostly work as a way of cooling their expectations. For these students, educational choices is an inherently "risky business" (Reay, 2003). In contrast, advantaged students displays a stronger sense of entitlement (Lareau, 2011), and lower grades do not affect their self-worth and belief in themselves. Raised in privileged settings and culturally habituated to expect

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

certain educational pathways, their lack of readjustment makes just as much sense to them, as they know things tend to work out.

5.1 | Key dimensions in the young people's stories

The students' accounts of influences reveal two latent dimensions in how they approach educational expectations. The first dimension, *degree of risk awareness*, captures the risks and insecurity that accompany the transition to further studies. For students with less educated parents, choices are high risk. Their expectations are highly sensitive to signals of academic ability (worries about being assessed as "not ready for upper secondary education" or about the implications of receiving low grades). Students have a working-class habitus (Reay, 2003) and approaches choice of education in a risk-averse manner (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1996). Mirroring the socio-economic status of their parents, these students display a means-to-an-end attitude to education as a prerequisite for accessing jobs with low unemployment and a good salary. Other 15-year-olds, often those from homes with no upper-secondary education and precarious labor market attachments, tell stories of being insecure, undecided, and overwhelmed by the choices they faced. Their attitude is also one of avoiding risks, but with the embodied experience of coming from a disadvantaged background, they feel unable to tackle these risks and their risk awareness turn into anxiety, doubt and worries about the whole prospect of "moving on". Their parents support them emotionally, but cannot provide their children with the same kind of scaffolding and guidance as the more privileged parents are able to. Students from higher educated homes display less concern about future educational pathways. These 15-year-olds approach education with a carefree, laid-back attitude, displaying a self-confidence to what lies ahead, regardless of whether they focus on a specific profession or approach the choices in a more explorative and open manner. Their parents have intimate knowledge of the educational system, and the parents are highly involved in their educational decision-making.

The second dimension, *degree of goal orientation*, concerns how goal oriented the 15-year-olds are. Some students have a focused attitude toward achieving their educational goal, whether they are privileged students with a keen interest in, for example, politics and social issues, or working-class students aiming for a specific trade and fast entry into the labor market, like becoming a carpenter or health-care worker. Other students have a more open-ended and relaxed attitude toward their future. They are at ease with education being a lengthy undertaking, as they know it will eventually lead to an attractive and stimulating work life. Often coming from homes with highly educated parents, these students can "afford" such an explorative strategy, and often focus on transiting to *gymnasium* because this will provide a range of possibilities for accessing university programs and give them time to decide what line of study to pursue, as it postpones their choice of further studies for 3 years. Yet, for some students, predominantly from homes with no secondary education, the lack of determination covers feelings of doubt, stress, and anxiety regarding what the future holds for them. If these students have any plans at all, they are about the immediate future—10th grade—in the hope that the extra year at school will help them mature and improve their qualifications.

5.2 | Four approaches to shaping educational expectations

The two dimensions *degree of risk awareness* and *degree of goal orientation* interact to produce four major approaches to shaping educational expectations (see the methods section for details).[6] These four approaches provide us with a comprehensive understanding of how expectations are shaped and how they have a clear social gradient. In combination, the dimensions translate into a map that offers a parsimonious representation of the structure of young people's educational expectations. The map, shown in Figure 2, produces four quadrants that describe the main characteristics of each of the four approaches to shaping educational expectations. For ease of interpretation, the 15-year-olds' background characteristics—minority status and social background (in italics)—are placed according

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

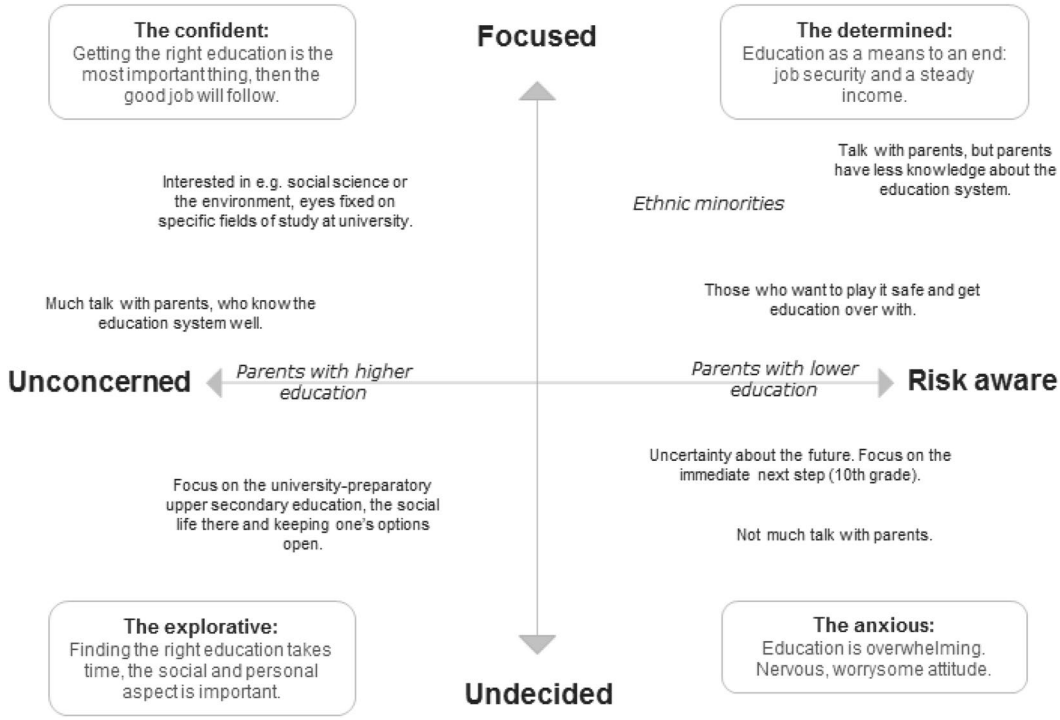


FIGURE 2 Four approaches to shaping educational expectations. Normal text describes the approaches in each quadrant. Background characteristics appear in italics. Of the 100 interviewees, 22 were categorized as anxious, 23 as confident, 30 as determined, and 25 as explorative (recall that the sample is not meant to be proportionally representative). Minority status and social background (in italics) are placed according to where they appear most frequently.

to where they appear most frequently.[7] The classification into four approaches in Figure 2 highlights the distinctive characteristics of each approach, and young people may in real life fall in between classifications. However, the classifications are meant to reduce complexity while still exhaustively representing the empirical data. As discussed in the methods section, these four approaches was found to represent the major distinctive differences in the young people's stories. The theoretical perspectives discussed in this paper supports the importance of these four approaches as the underlying dimensions represents major distinctions in the literature, namely the role of risk-aversion and the degree to which young people place weight in a clear goal with their educational choice. Below, I detail the characteristics of each of the four approaches to shaping educational expectations.

5.2.1 | The confident – focused and unconcerned

The focused and unconcerned young people primarily want to get an education that will allow them to pursue their academic interests and subsequently access a lucrative or prestigious job. In the data presented here, most of these young people are from homes with highly educated parents, where the importance of getting a university degree is a given. The abundance of home resources (cultural, social, and economic) and support leads to a confidence in the choice process, where worries about income and unemployment are absent. Parents have been greatly involved and have actively guided their child in choosing an educational path, through conversations, by attending open-house events and by seeking information on educational possibilities.

Agnes is a case in point. She considers the support of her university-educated parents very important for her expectations, and she looks to them as role models. She has "always" wanted to study medicine, like her mother,

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

but is now leaning toward a biotech program, "to be a bit independent", as she says. Another girl, Ceyda, with highly educated ethnic minority parents, is very determined and "99% certain" she will move on to higher education: "I want to study at university, definitely". She is aiming for the international upper secondary school program International Baccalaureate, and explains that:

> It's a higher academic level than the normal gymnasium, and it prepares you for studies abroad and working and living abroad. So it puts you in a better position to get access to university, and later on a job abroad. (Ceyda, group 4)

Ceyda relates her high expectations to parents that have always been very explicit about wanting her to get a university education, hoping that she will study medicine, because there is "always a need for doctors", and because Ceyda would then be able to work all over the world. Generally, the young people with this approach come from homes with highly educated parents highly familiar with the education system and with high expectations of their children. Drawing on Bourdieu, these young people have what Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010), calls a "college-going" habitus, and for them a university program is the natural choice.

5.2.2 | The determined – focused and risk aware

The focused and risk aware have an instrumental approach to education; it is a means to an end: a satisfying job, a good income, being able to provide for a family, "a good life". With a strong vocational orientation, these students do not distinguish between educational and occupational expectations. Many of them have parents that are supportive but lack the skills to navigate the education system. Some students are ambitious and often have their eyes set on well-known, prestigious professional programs, such as law, medicine, or engineering. Other students with manually skilled parents tend to focus on the practical, applied nature of an education ("Gymnasium is not for me"), and they prefer to move quickly into the labor market. It must be a "safe" choice, and a lengthy, higher education is normally not within their horizon. Mikkel, who aims to train as a carpenter, explains:

> For me it [training to be a carpenter] is about getting out and working, especially when you didn't do well at school and you're just tired of school and you know what you want to do. (Mikkel, group 2)

With his eyes fixed on "getting out and working", Mikkel has known for a long time that he wanted to be a carpenter. Kirsten (group 2) is another example. She "likes to play it safe" and aims for the applied technical gymnasium and then an engineering program; she prioritizes job security and earning enough to lead a good life without fear of unemployment. These young people are focused and risk-averse (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997) – they are preoccupied with job possibilities and look to well-known occupations with low unemployment and good earnings, and education is a means to get there. It is the safe choice.

5.2.3 | The explorative – undecided and unconcerned

The students who are undecided and unconcerned put emphasis on personal development and social life, and display a clear element of identity formation in their attitude toward education. Their educational plans most often involve the general higher education-preparatory *gymnasium*, because of the wide social network the *gymnasium* offers them, because it opens many doors to higher education programs, and because they can postpone making their "real" choice for 3 years. Andreas' parents are both university-educated and they have helped him "quite a lot" in his choice process. For Andreas, life is about being in the present, he is "not future oriented at all", and when people ask him

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

about his plans after finishing *gymnasium*, he says, "that's 3 years from now, there's plenty of time". Another student, Benjamin, talks about his plan to choose the general *gymnasium*:

> […] I guess I thought, the technical gymnasium track is just too narrow, it closes the door on too many things. […] I have a broad idea of what I want, and I have chosen the academic gymnasium track now. Who knows, what if I want to be a politician? I just do not want to limit my options. (Benjamin, group 4)

For the young people who are unconcerned and undecided, educational expectations are characterized by an open-endedness that they feel comfortable with, and they are confident that a plan will eventually crystalize. These young people are predominantly from homes with highly educated parents who are involved in facilitating their children's educational transitions. Referring to Bourdieu (1977), these young people are habitually predisposed to know that they will succeed, and they do not consider their explorative approach risky in the same way working-class students do (Reay, 2003).

5.2.4 | The anxious – undecided and concerned

The group of undecided and concerned young people worry about their educational prospects and approach them with a sense of anxiety and nervousness. Many of them have not been assessed as ready for upper secondary education in the eighth or ninth grade, and they often give off an attitude of insecurity, passivity, and sometimes resignation regarding the choices they are facing. They get overwhelmed and have difficulties coping with their educational future. They focus on the immediate next step, which is often the 10th grade, not knowing what will happen afterward. This insecurity is evident in the absence of imagined futures:

> Joanne: I don't know what I want, right now. I think it's difficult.
> Interviewer: So, if you look 10 years ahead, do you have any thoughts on how you would like your life to be?
> Joanne: No. Not at all. It's completely blank.
> Interviewer: So, you don't know what is going to happen?
> Joanne: No. I am really at a loss. (Joanne, Group 1)

These young people are typically anxious about being able "to cope with the choices", and their feelings of insecurity are apparent. They are most often from homes with no secondary education, where resources are limited and where their parents are not familiar with the education system and how it works. Their educational expectations have not crystallized, and this leads to worries and feelings of disempowerment, and many are not enthusiastic about the prospect of getting an education at all. They are risk-aware, but lack the resources to deal with and act on this risk-awareness.

6 | SUMMARY

Young people's educational expectations are not only a strong testimony of the social disparity in imagined futures, they are also powerful predictors of young people's educational career (e.g., Jacob & Wilder, 2011; Johnson & Reynolds, 2013; Khattab, 2015). In this paper, I have offered a classification of the different approaches to shaping educational expectations and how these approaches are affected by the social class context in which the young people have grown up. I argue that the classification provides us with a richer understanding of how young people shape expectations than the dominant low or high expectations approach. I have outlined four approaches to how

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

expectations are shaped, and I have highlighted the social mechanisms that make young people from different social strata likely to shape their expectations in qualitatively different manners. I have analyzed how the young people's stories share commonalities that translate into two dimensions: a degree of risk awareness that ranges from being very risk averse to having an unconcerned, easy-going attitude, and a degree of goal orientation that ranges from being very determined to being very open or undecided. I have presented a map that captures how these dimensions offer a conceptual understanding of the major approaches to shaping educational expectations: *the confident (focused and unconcerned), the explorative (undecided and unconcerned), the determined (focused and risk aware), and the anxious (the undecided and concerned).*

Focused and unconcerned ("confident") young people have a relaxed approach to the choice process and focus on the many lucrative or prestigious job opportunities that come with getting the right education. They have most often grown up in highly educated homes with plenty of cultural, social and economic resources, instilling in them a firm belief that everything will work out. *Undecided and unconcerned* ("explorative") young people, also most often from highly educated homes, have a relaxed and unconcerned attitude toward education and view education as a gradual process of making up their minds. Their stories are characterised by a sense of entitlement and confidence that comes from growing up in privileged surroundings where education is of key importance (Lareau, 2011).[8] *Focused and risk-aware* ("determined") students are often from working-class homes. Because they are risk-averse (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997), education is a safety net for them, and they focus on well-known professional or vocational educational pathways that lead to low-unemployment occupations. For them, educational and occupational expectations are the same. *Undecided and concerned* ("anxious") young people are predominantly from homes with little or no education, and they are overwhelmed by the pressure to choose and worry about what lies ahead of them. This group also tries to avoid risk, but as they are from homes without resources to deal with these risks, their risk-averse attitude evolves into anxiety, and they display an immobilizing attitude toward their educational future. Ravn (2019) has termed this lack of capacity to imagine the future an "apathetic-fatalistic mode of deferment".[9]

The approaches highlighted in this paper point to disparate ways in which families and institutions support young people in their educational pathways. At one end, when young people from middle-class homes struggle with their academic level, parents step in to compensate, providing a scaffold to maintain high expectations despite their children's mediocre or below-average academic qualifications. Scholars have labeled this mechanism *compensatory advantage* (Bernardi, 2014; Bernardi & Triventi, 2020). At the other end, academically qualified young people from working-class homes aim lower than their middle-class friends with similar qualifications – what Hanson (1994) has termed "lost talent". For young people from homes unable to provide the same kind of scaffolding as middle-class parents, prospects of further education often hinge on their talents being spotted by someone. Here, supportive and inspiring counsellors or teachers can be instrumental for how disadvantaged students shape their educational expectations. We see an example of this when students whose parents have no post-secondary education mention school professionals as important influences more often than students with university-educated parents. In contrast, students with university-educated parents more often mention their parents as important influences. These class differentials in young people's approaches to shaping their educational expectations are a product of social forces at work in the family and schooling system. These social forces maintain a systematic injustice in young people's opportunities, when high expectations are structurally "guaranteed" for some, while for others they hinge on chance encounters with influential persons.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the young people who participated in this study. I received outstanding research assistance from project team members Louise Høyer Bom, Marie Lunau Dejgaard, Sidsel Vive Jensen, Alexandrina Schmidt, Kirstine Kamsteen, Julie Lund Hansen, Tomas Vlk, Emilie Jacobsen, and Anne Byrge Winther. I am grateful to assistant professor Asta Breinholt for providing excellent comments on earlier versions of this paper. This research was generously supported by the Lauritzen Foundation, grant number 34224.

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This project complies with the rules of the Danish Data Protection Agency. Parents were asked for permission to approach their children, and the young people gave their informed consent prior to participating in the research. To protect confidentiality, the paper uses pseudonyms for all participants and other identifying information has been anonymized (schools, places, etc.).

ENDNOTES

[1] Expectations differ from aspirations in that expectations refer to realistic appraisals (what you realistically expect), whereas aspirations may denote idealistic values (what you hope or wish for) (see Morgan, 2007). Even though many studies have operationalized them in the same way, this paper uses the concept of expectations, as it examines the realistic appraisals shaped by the social context (e.g., school experiences, family and friends) and the individuals' abilities and ambitions.

[2] I refer to valuable contributions by Glaesser and Cooper (2014) and van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007) to mediate between cultural-reproduction theory and the relative risk-aversion perspective, and Frye (2012), that builds on pragmatist theory and cognitive sociology to understand the seemingly irrational optimistic expectations of Malawian schoolgirls.

[3] Students are assessed based on their personal, social and scholarly qualifications. In 2019/2020, out of the ninth graders that opted for a VET education, 8 out of 10 were found ready for enrollment, and among those looking to continue onto *gymnasium* (Danish high school), 9 out of 10 were found ready for enrollment. Those not found ready for enrollment may work together with an educational guidance counselor toward improving their qualifications.

[4] We informed the 15-year-olds that we were interested in their realistic expectations and not what they hoped and wished for (with reference to the distinction between expectations and aspirations).

[5] Ethnic minority families in our sample often took a different stance. Despite being largely working class, families were typically involved in the process of choosing an education. Wanting their children to take advantage of the educational possibilities that the parents had not had access to themselves, they often expected their children to progress to gymnasium, because this would be the gateway to prestigious, internationally recognized professional programs such as medicine, law and engineering. Even though many ethnic minority students told of parents with high expectations, they also said that their parents would "settle for less". As such, their parents' expectations were often more akin to hopes or wishes, and because the parents were not familiar with the Danish educational system, they referred to the prestigious programs they knew themselves.

[6] The four approaches capture the dominant variation in the data open to a sociological analysis. Remaining variation was of a nature less generalizable (life experiences not necessarily attributable to family SES, e.g., parental divorce, mental problems in the immediate family, influential interests, such as sports, outdoor pursuits, IT, hospital/crime shows, etc.).

[7] Three out of four students from lower educated homes were found to be in the "anxious" or "determined" approaches, while four out of five students from higher educated homes appeared in the "explorative" or "confident" approaches. While there were no discernible gender differences, ethnic minority students were mostly found in the 'determined' approach.

[8] The two unconcerned approaches are predominantly made up of students from privileged backgrounds. A reasonable assumption would be that variations in the composition of parents' resources would prompt some students to adopt an explorative attitude, while others would be more focused. Much of the research that draws on Bourdieu identifies key differences between the culturally and economically privileged, and the differences found between the two unconcerned approaches could likely mirror such a distinction. However, the size of the sample makes it difficult to meaningfully disaggregate parent characteristics by occupation. This question would be highly relevant to pursue in a survey.

[9] Being undecided is much less stressful for those privileged students that exhibit a laid-back and unconcerned explorative strategy. In late-modern theories of individualization (Beck et al., 2003; Giddens, 1991), this kind of postponement of choices has been viewed as a new temporal dynamic. Yet, it is important to remember that postponement of choices and widened opportunities may be experienced by the culturally and economically privileged only when an explorative attitude can be viewed as part of a class identity (see e.g., Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Savage, 2000). For disadvantaged youth who lack the resources to navigate these opportunities, new choices emerge as an added stressor to deal with (Silva, 2013).

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

REFERENCES

Andres, L., Adamuti-Trache, M., Yoon, E.-S., Pidgeon, M., & JensThomsen, P. (2007). Educational expectations, parental social class, gender, and postsecondary attainment: A 10-year perspective. *Youth and Society*, *39*(2), 135–163. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x06296704

Andrew, M., & Hauser, R. M. (2012). Adoption? Adaptation? Evaluating the formation of educational expectations. *Social Forces*, *90*(2), 497–520. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sor005

Archer, L., & Hutchings, M. (2000). "Bettering yourself"? Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *21*(4), 555–574. https://doi.org/10.1080/713655373

Astone, N. M., & McLanahan, S. S. (1991). Family structure, parental practices and high school completion. *American Sociological Review*, *56*(3), 309–320. https://doi.org/10.2307/2096106

Ball, S. J. (2003). *Class strategies and the education market: The middle classes and social advantage*. RoutledgeFalmer.

Beattie, I. R. (2002). Are all "adolescent econometricians" created equal? Racial, class, and gender differences in college enrollment. *Sociology of Education*, *75*(1), 19–43. https://doi.org/10.2307/3090252

Beck, U., Bonss, W., & Lau, C. (2003). The theory of reflexive modernization: Problematic, hypotheses and research programme. *Theory, Culture and Society*, *20*(2), 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276403020002001

Bernardi, F. (2014). Compensatory advantage as a mechanism of educational inequality: A regression discontinuity based on month of birth. *Sociology of Education*, *87*(2), 74–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040714524258

Bernardi, F., & Triventi, M. (2020). Compensatory advantage in educational transitions. *Acta Sociologica*, *83*(1), 40–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699318780950

Bernardi, F., & Valdés, M. T. (2021). Sticky educational expectations: A cross-country comparison. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, *75*, 100624. online first July 15. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2021.100624

Bernstein, B. (1990). Class, codes and control. In *The structuring of pedagogic discourse* (Vol. 4). Routledge.

Blau, P. M., & Duncan, O. D. (1967). *The American occupational structure*. Wiley.

Bodovski, K. (2010). Parental practices and educational achievement: Social class, race, and habitus. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *31*(2), 139–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690903539024

Boudon, R. (1974). Education, opportunity and social inequality. In *Changing prospects in western society. Rev. And r.* John Wiley and Sons.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The state nobility: Elite schools in the field of power*. Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1997). The forms of capital. In A. H. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown, & A. S. Wells (Eds.), *Education: Culture, economy, and society* (pp. 46–58). Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1999). *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society*. Polity.

Bozick, R., Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., Dauber, S., & Kerr, K. (2010). Framing the future: Revisiting the place of educational expectations in status attainment. *Social Forces*, *88*(5), 2027–2052. https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2010.0033

Breen, R., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (1997). Explaining educational differentials: Towards a formal rational action theory. *Rationality and Society*, *9*(3), 275–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/104346397009003002

Brint, S., & Karabel, J. (1989). *The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. Oxford University Press.

Buchmann, C., & Park, H. (2009). Stratification and the formation of expectations in highly-differentiated educational systems. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, *27*(4), 245–267. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2009.10.003

Byun, S.-y., Meece, J. L., Irvin, M. J., & Hutchins, B. C. (2012). The role of social capital in educational aspirations of rural youth. *Rural Sociology*, *77*(3), 355–379. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00086.x

Calarco, J. M. (2014). Coached for the classroom. *American Sociological Review*, *79*(5), 1015–1037. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122414546931

Di Prete, T. A., & Buchmann, C. (2013). *The rise of women: The growing gender gap in education and what it means for American schools*. Russel Sage Foundation.

Domina, T., Conley, A.M., & Farkas, G. (2011). The link between educational expectations and effort in the college-for-all era. *Sociology of Education*, *84*(2), 93–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/1941406411401808

Feliciano, C., & Lanuza, Y. R. (2016). The immigrant advantage in adolescent educational expectations. *International Migration Review*, *50*(3), 758–792. https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12183

Fishman, S. H. (2020). Educational mobility among the children of asian American immigrants. *American Journal of Sociology*, *126*(2), 260–317. https://doi.org/10.1086/711231

Frye, M. (2012). Bright futures in Malawi's new dawn: Educational aspirations as assertions of identity. *American Journal of Sociology*, *117*(6), 1565–1624. https://doi.org/10.1086/664542

Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (1997). *Young people and social change: Individualization and risk in late modernity*. Open University Press.

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Polity Press.
Glaesser, J., & Cooper, B. (2014). Using rational action theory and bourdieu's habitus theory together to account for educational decision-making in england and Germany. *Sociology*, *48*(3), 463–481. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038513490352
Goldthorpe, J. H. (1996). Class analysis and the reorientation of class theory: The case of persisting differentials in educational attainment. *British Journal of Sociology*, *47*(3), 481–505. https://doi.org/10.2307/591365
Goyette, K., & Xie, Yu (1999). Educational expectations of asian American youths: Determinants and ethnic differences. *Sociology of Education*, *72*(1), 22–36. https://doi.org/10.2307/2673184
Goyette, K. A., & Mullen, A. L. (2006). Who studies the arts and sciences? Social background and the choice and consequences of undergraduate field of study. *Journal of Higher Education*, *77*(3), 497–538. https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2006.0020
Gregory, A., & Huang, F. (2013). It takes a village: The effects of 10th grade college-going expectations of students, parents, and teachers four years later. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *52*(1), 41–55. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-013-9575-5
Grodsky, E., & Riegle-Crumb, C. (2010). Those who choose and those who don't: Social background and college orientation. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *627*(1), 14–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209348732
Haller, A. O. (1982). Reflections on the social psychology of status attainment. In R. M. Hauser (Ed.), *Social structure and behavior*, *David mechanic*, *and archibald O. Haller* (pp. 3–28). Academic Press.
Hamilton, L. (2016). *Parenting to a degree*. University of Chicago Press.
Hamilton, L., Roksa, J., & Nielsen, K. (2018). Providing a '"Leg up"': Parental involvement and opportunity hoarding in college. *Sociology of Education*, *91*(2), 111–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040718759557
Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). Taylor and Francis Ltd.
Hanson, S. L. (1994). Lost talent: Unrealized educational aspirations and expectations among U.S. Youths. *Sociology of Education*, *67*(3), 159–183. https://doi.org/10.2307/2112789
Holm, A., Hjorth-Trolle, A., & Meier Jæger, M. (2019). Signals, educational decision-making, and inequality. *European Sociological Review*, *35*(4), 447–460. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcz010
Jackson, M. (Ed.) (2013). *Determined to succeed? Performance versus choice in educational attainment*. Stanford University Press.
Jacob, B. A., & Wilder, T. (2011). Educational expectations and attainment. In G. J. Duncan & R. J. Murnane (Eds.), *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality and the uncertain life chances of low - income children* (pp. 133–162). Russel Sage Press.
Johnson, M. K., & Reynolds, J. R. (2013). Educational expectation trajectories and attainment in the transition to adulthood. *Social Science Research*, *42*(3), 818–835. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.12.003
Khattab, N. (2015). Students' aspirations, expectations and school achievement: What really matters? *British Educational Research Journal*, *41*(5), 731–748. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3171
Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods. Class*, *race*, *and family life* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
Lehmann, W. (2009). University as vocational education: Working-class students' expectations for university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *30*(2), 137–149. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690802700164
Lucas, S. R. (2001). Effectively maintained inequality: Education transitions, track mobility, and social background effects. *American Journal of Sociology*, *106*(6), 1642–1690. https://doi.org/10.1086/321300
Morgan, S. L. (2005). *On the edge of commitment: Educational attainment and race in the United States*. Stanford University Press.
Morgan, S. L. (2007). Expectations and aspirations. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *The blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeose085
Mullen, A. (2009). Elite destinations: Pathways to attending an ivy league university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *30*(1), 15–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690802514292
Mullen, A. L. (2010). *Degrees of inequality: Culture*, *class*, *and gender in American higher education*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
OECD. (2017). *PISA 2015 results (volume III): Students' well-being*. OECD Publishing.
Ravn, S. (2019). Imagining futures, imagining selves: A narrative approach to "risk" in young men's lives. *Current Sociology*, *67*(7), 1039–1055. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119857453
Reay, D. (2003). A risky business? Mature working-class women students and access to higher education. *Gender and Education*, *15*(3), 301–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250303860
Reay, D., David, M. E., & Ball, S. J. (2005). *Degrees of choice: Social class*, *race and gender in higher education*. Stoke-on-Trent.
Renzulli, L., & Barr, A. B. (2017). Adapting to family setbacks: Malleability of students' and parents' educational expectations. *Social Problems*, *64*(3), 351–372. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spw052
Reynolds, J. R., & Burge, S. W. (2008). Educational expectations and the rise in women's post-secondary attainments. *Social Science Research*, *37*(2), 485–499. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2007.09.002
Roth, T. (2017). Interpersonal influences on educational expectations: New evidence for Germany. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, *48*, 68–84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2016.12.001

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Savage, M. (2000). *Class analysis and social transformation*. Open University Press.
Sewell, W. H., Haller, A. 0., & Portes, A. (1969). The educational and early occupational attainment process. *American Sociological Review*, *34*(1), 82–92. https://doi.org/10.2307/2092789
Silva, J. M. (2013). *Coming up short: Working-class adulthood in an age of uncertainty*. Oxford University Press.
Small, M. L. (2009). How many cases do I need?': On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research. *Ethnography*, *10*(1), 5–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138108099586
Stinebrickner, T., & Stinebrickner, R. (2012). Learning about academic ability and the college dropout decision. *Journal of Labor Economics*, *30*(4), 707–748. https://doi.org/10.1086/666525
Thomsen, J. P. (2015). Maintaining inequality effectively? Access to higher education programmes in a universalist welfare state in periods of educational expansion 1984-2010. *European Sociological Review*, *31*(6), 683–696. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcv067
Thomsen, J. P. (2022). *Uddannelsesforventninger blandt danske unge: En repræsentativ spørgeskemaundersøgelse af elever i 9. klasse. [A survey of young people's educational expectations]*. The Danish Center for Social Science Research.
Thomsen, J. P., Munk, M. D., Eiberg-Madsen, M., & GroHansen, I. (2013). The educational strategies of Danish university students from professional and working-class backgrounds. *Comparative Education Review*, *57*(3), 457–480. https://doi.org/10.1086/670806
van de Werfhorst, H. G., & Hofstede, S. (2007). Cultural capital or relative risk aversion? Two mechanisms for educational inequality compared. *British Journal of Sociology*, *58*(3), 391–415. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00157.x
Wells, R. S., Seifert, T. A., Padgett, R. D., Park, S., & Umbach, P. D. (2011). Why do more women than men want to earn a four-year degree? Exploring the effects of gender, social origin, and social capital on educational expectations. *Journal of Higher Education*, *82*(1), 1–32. https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2011.0004
Willis, P. E. (1981). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Columbia University Press.
Winterton, M. T., & Irwin, S. (2012). Teenage expectations of going to university: The ebb and flow of influences from 14 to 18. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *15*(7), 858–874. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2012.683407

How to cite this article: Thomsen, J.-P. (2023). Social class and approaches to shaping educational expectations. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *74*(2), 131–147. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12998

APPENDIX

Table A1.

TABLE A1 Mentioning of persons, institutions, etc.

Person/event/institution	From the exercise (listed as actual influence)	From interviews (number of times coded)
School		
'Bridge building'/job experience programs	56	98
Educational counselor or teacher	50	96
Other guidance events (open-house events, career days, etc.)	11	33
Family		
Parents	79	100
Extended family	43	80
Siblings	37	52
Other		
Interests/life events, etc.	61	71
Friends	47	95
Media	25	29

Note: Column 2 lists influences mentioned in the interviews (both major and minor), while column 3 lists all the times these persons or institutions were mentioned (but not necessarily as influences).

14684446, 2023, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-4446.12998 by VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Wiley Online Library on [09/12/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License