


Parental Aspirations for Their Children's Upper Secondary Education from the Perspective of Pupils at the End of Elementary Education

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ABSTRACT

Parental upper secondary educational aspirations are the ambitions and goals that parents have for their children's upper secondary education. In the Croatian context, they have not been researched so far, despite contributing significantly to pupils' aspirations and school success and being a predictor of parental involvement in children's education. This paper aims to research the nature and determinants of parental upper secondary educational aspirations from the perspective of pupils and describe the patterns of communication and interaction between parents and children related to aspirations and the transition from elementary to upper secondary school. Parental upper secondary educational aspirations were examined from the pupils' perspective by a mixed-model study involving a survey of 1,031 8th-grade pupils from elementary schools in Zagreb and semi-structured interviews with 29 pupils at the end of the first semester of the 8th grade. The quantitative part of the research indicates that pupils' expected school achievement and parental educational status were significant predictors of parental upper secondary educational aspirations, while the effect of pupils' gender was not significant. The qualitative part of the research points to a congruence between pupils' and parental aspirations and the substantial involvement of parents in the process of selection of upper secondary educational options. In families where parents have different educational statuses, the patterns of communication and interaction regarding aspirations and upper secondary school choice varied to some extent and were related to different valuation of grammar schools and vocational education in these families.

Key words: parental educational aspirations, upper secondary educational aspirations, parental educational status, pupil's educational achievement

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, educational aspirations are defined as the ambitions and goals of pupils and parents in relation to immediate and future educational experiences and outcomes (Jokić et al., 2019). Aspirations are understood to have different levels of specificity, from very vague and poorly articulated ideas to specific goals. In literature, aspirations usually refer to ambitions towards higher education (Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Gorard, See and Davies, 2012), although one can also consider them in relation to lower educational stages, and it is especially important to address them related to periods of transition between educational levels. Specifically, it is in these periods that the need to formulate desires and plans for the future is expected to strengthen, which may lead to the intensification of considering one's own potential and opportunities to realize one's educational aspirations (Rimkute et al., 2012).

This paper examines parental upper secondary school aspirations as desires related to their child's education at the upper secondary school level (Jokić et al., 2019). Parental aspirations are captured through the perspective of pupils. This perspective has rarely been used in research, mainly because of its indirect nature (Hegna and Smette, 2017). Reasons for including the pupil perspective relate on one hand to their availability for research and the ability of their statements to serve as a "proxy" of parental aspirations, while on the other they relate to the researchers' interest in capturing pupils' perceptions of parental ambitions and messages. It is especially important for research on parental aspirations from a pupil perspective that a child's perception of parental aspirations may differ from the aspirations of the parents. Also, the way children perceive their parents' aspirations for them can influence their educational experiences, behaviours, and decisions independently of actual parental aspirations (Gill and Reynolds, 1999).

The aim of this paper is to describe the nature and determinants of parental upper secondary school aspirations for their own children in context of the Croatian education system and to explore the communication and interaction patterns of parents and children in relation to upper secondary school aspirations and the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education.

This transition is of interest in Croatia because it marks the transition from a single-structure elementary school system to highly differentiated upper secondary education, which is divided into grammar school and vocational education which can last three years (CROQF level 4.1) and four/five years (CROQF level 4.2). Data for the school year 2018/19 shows that 30% of pupils enrolled in the 1st grade of grammar school, 30.4% enrolled in four-year and five-year vocational programs, and 23.5% in three-year vocational programs (CBS, 2019). Enrolment in certain programs is determined by the structure of the upper secondary school system, i.e. the number of places available in individual programs, but also by their attractiveness among pupils. By selecting a grammar school education, pupils choose to

acquire general education competencies and educational qualifications that imply their continuing at the higher education level. Through vocational education, pupils acquire vocational qualifications that enable them to enter the labour market or, in the case of four- and five-year programs, to continue their education at institutions for higher education. Population analyses of the transition from upper secondary to higher education show that almost all pupils who complete four years of upper secondary education express a desire to continue their education, and 94.6% of grammar school pupils and 60.7% of vocational pupils succeed in this endeavour in their final year of upper secondary education (Jokić and Ristić Dedić, 2014).

A study of pupil aspirations in Zagreb schools showed that 8th grade pupils were oriented towards four-year programs, with emphasis on grammar schools and extremely low interest in three-year programs (Ristić Dedić and Jokić, 2014). Other studies also indicate low interest and a decline in enrolment in three-year programs (Matković et al., 2013). Enrolment in grammar school programs is generally more selective than enrolment in vocational programs (the ratio of the number of applicants to the number of available places is higher), so prior school achievement of pupils entering grammar school programs is on average significantly higher than the school achievement of pupils enrolling in vocational programs. Although it could be concluded from this data that the aspiration towards grammar school is more desirable or a higher level aspiration than that towards vocational education, such a position is not taken in this paper. Both aspirations are treated as equal in value and seen as aspirations that provide the pupil with different opportunities on their educational and career path.

Previous research, conducted mainly in the context of educational systems in Western countries, has examined the determinants of parental aspirations towards higher education, taking into account the gender and educational achievement of the child as personal factors that determine the level of parental aspirations. Findings about the effect of a child's gender are ambiguous, with older research suggesting lower parental educational aspirations for daughters, and the opposite trends in more recent research (e.g., Schoon, Martin and Ross, 2007; Raty, 2006). Research also points to different patterns of gender effects depending on cultural and ethnic factors (Gutman and Akerman, 2008).

Regarding the effect of a child's educational achievement, a number of studies suggest that parental aspirations are higher for more successful children (e.g., Sacker, Schoon and Bartley, 2002; Jacobs and Harvey, 2005). Parents adjust their desires and ambitions depending on their assessment of the child's abilities and educational achievement. At the same time, the relationship between the child's educational achievements and parental aspirations is probably two-way; parents' high aspirations encourage the child to achieve success in school, but the child's level of achievement also leads to the adjustment of parental aspirations (Spera, Wentzel and Matto, 2009).

Research has also addressed the social determinants of parental aspirations for higher education and identified significant effects of the socioeconomic status of the family on parental aspirations (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Multiple studies show that families of higher socioeconomic status have more pronounced aspirations towards higher education for their own children (e.g., Schoon, 2006; Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Tynkkynen, Vuori and Salmela-Aro, 2012). In particular, parents' educational status stands out as a significant predictor of their higher education aspirations and the aspirations of their children (Hossler and Stage, 1992; Zhan, 2006).

Although research shows the socioeconomic status of the family is a significant predictor of parental aspirations, the underlying mechanisms of the identified differences have not been fully explored. The mechanisms by which parents influence the formation and development of their children's educational aspirations are also insufficiently elucidated, so the research presented in this paper seeks to provide some insights into these processes. Previous research highlights the contextual nature of aspirations and the key role of parental educational experiences, beliefs, expectations, and parenting practices (Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Gorard et al., 2012). Research shows that parental aspirations and expectations of their children are influenced by their own educational biographies and the values they attribute to education (Spera et al., 2009; Desforges and Abouchar, 2003). These values are imposed within the family as a norm that children internalize and strive to achieve (Yamamoto and Holloway, 2010). Research also shows that parental aspirations towards higher education may be limited by the anticipation of a lack of financial and other resources and conditioned by a limited knowledge of the system and less exposure to different educational opportunities (Gutman and Akerman, 2008).

Differences in parental aspirations between families of different socioeconomic status are typically explained from different theoretical positions. According to the arguments of the rational choice theory (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Hatcher, 1998; Elster, 2007), an individual's aspiration is shaped based on some form of cost and benefit evaluation arising from individual educational options. Aspiration develops based on ideas about what is possible in a particular social environment, taking into account the perceived probability of educational success and the perceived costs arising from following a particular educational option. It is assumed that the parent chooses the "most profitable" path for the child with regard to the assessment of his abilities and achievements so far, available information about the system, assessed risks and limitations, etc.

Explaining the fact that certain individuals make choices that are not optimal in terms of the cost-benefit ratio according to the economic model, Boudon (1974) emphasizes that choices are the result of estimates of costs and benefits associated with them, but also depend on their position in the social structure. Families with different socioeconomic status assess the costs and benefits of certain educational

options differently, and are often guided by the motive of maintaining their social position, i.e. the fear of losing it (Puzić and Košutić, 2015).

Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction attempts to explain why certain educational choices are acceptable not only to individuals but also to social groups. According to explanations derived from this theory, aspirations and educational choices are socio-culturally conditioned and can be understood as an expression of a particular distinctive habitus in which a person is socialized (Bourdieu, 1990). Special importance in explaining class differences in aspirations is given to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which is embodied in a person, manifested in his attitudes, linguistic and cognitive competencies, cultural habits, inclinations and choices, and acquired by socialization in a particular social environment and the accumulation of investment in education and possession of cultural property. It is suggested that people from the same social strata are exposed to similar socialization influences and share the same cultural capital and habitus, which are different from that of people from other social strata. Differences in experiences and available forms of capital and resources result in parents applying different strategies to maximize investments in their children's education and future (Vryonides and Gouvias, 2012). Families actually use strategies to reproduce their own class position through the selection of certain educational options (Ball, 2003; Power et al., 2003). Socialization within a particular social environment communicates to children the limits of their possibilities and gives a sense of which choices and educational pathways are acceptable and what "people like us" do. A person internalizes these ideas and they guide them in their own actions and thoughts. Parents of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to set high aspirations because they know that acquiring certain qualifications will help their children maintain dominant positions in society (Bourdieu, 1977). In addition to cultural capital, social capital is also important for the development of parental aspirations, as a value that arises from the network of relationships and social connections that a person can mobilize to achieve a certain goal (Bourdieu, 1986). This value can be related to access to information, the influence of the social circle on the educational decision, etc. People of higher socioeconomic status will set higher goals for their children knowing that they can rely on networking and social connections to help the child achieve their goals. Lareau (2000) emphasizes that families of higher socioeconomic status better understand the functioning of institutions and what it takes to succeed because the school system is modelled on the upper classes and systematically teaches children the "rules of the game" that help them navigate the system.

So far, no research in Croatia has explored parents' educational aspirations and how they are communicated and transmitted within the family. This paper therefore opens this topic in our educational context by capturing the pupil perspective in an explorative manner through the application of mixed model research.

This paper answers the following research questions

1. From a pupil perspective, what is the nature of parental upper secondary school aspirations for children and are they predicted by the gender and educational achievement of the child and the educational status of the parents?
2. With regard to the parents' educational status, do the patterns of communication and interaction between parents and children about upper secondary school aspirations in different family settings differ, and in what way?

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper presents the results of mixed model research collected at the end of the first semester of the 8th grade in the school year 2017/2018. In the project, the same importance is attached to the qualitative and quantitative sections, the qualitative and quantitative data are used equally and simultaneously in order to develop the most complete understanding of the nature and determinants of aspirations.

2.1. Research participants

The quantitative research section was conducted in 23 elementary schools, which represents a sample of 21.9% of all public elementary schools in the City of Zagreb. The sample of schools was selected as a stratified random sample, with stratification carried out based on the location of the school by city district. In each school, we selected at least two class groups, from which all pupils were invited to participate. The participation of pupils was conditional on the informed consent of the parents, and the project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb. 1031 8th grade pupils participated in the research.

The qualitative research section was conducted in five Zagreb schools that were selected purposefully to achieve maximum variation based on previous data on educational and socioeconomic indicators at the school level. Of the five schools, one can be characterized as a school of "high parental educational status and more frequent enrolment in grammar school education", two schools have "average parental educational status and diverse enrolment in upper secondary school programs", and two have "lower parental educational status and more frequent enrolment in vocational education". Six eighth-graders from each school participated in the study. This paper presents the results of 29 pupils (one pupil moved away in the meantime and was unavailable for the interview). The participants were placed in three categories according to their educational achievement in the 7th grade:

- a) average educational achievement - pupils with a grade point average (GPA) categorized as very good or good,

- b) higher educational achievement - pupils with a GPA categorized as excellent,
- c) exceptional educational achievement - pupils with a 5.0 GPA (the highest grade in all subjects).

In accordance with the results of the quantitative analysis of significant predictors of parental aspirations, the qualitative analysis compared the perspectives of pupils with different educational attainment, but also used data on the educational status of their parents. They are divided into three distinct categories:

- a) pupils with both parents who have completed higher education degrees,
- b) pupils whose one parent is highly educated and the other is not, and
- c) pupils with both parents who have completed upper secondary education

2.2. Measures and procedures

Quantitative research stage

The quantitative section included the application of a questionnaire at the end of the first semester of the 8th grade. For the purposes of this paper, the following parts of the questionnaire were selected:

Parental aspiration for upper secondary school education

Pupils were asked to answer the question: *What type of upper secondary school education do you think your parents would like you to pursue?* The available responses were: *three-year vocational education; four-year vocational education; grammar school education; I do not know.*

Expected school achievement at the end of the 8th grade

Pupils were asked to write an open-ended answer on what grade point average (GPA) they expected at the end of the 8th grade (an example was given of an average of 4.3 or 5.0). Pupil responses range from 2.3 to 5.0, with mean values of $M=4.46$ ($SD=.529$) and $C=4.6$. For analytical purposes, this variable was recoded as categorical¹ with four categories of uniform size in proportion to the number of

¹ We decided not to treat the expected GPA as a continuous variable in multinomial logistic regression because such treatment results in a large number of cells with 0 cases for interaction effects. Therefore, the variable was recoded as categorical and treated as a factor. Finally, only 1 cell (in the intersection of the dependent variable categories by predictors categories) had a frequency of zero (1.4% of cases).

pupils: average 2.3–4.0 (24.8%), average 4.1–4.5 (22.5%), average 4.6–4.8 (26.8%) and average 4.9–5.0 (25.9%).

Pupil gender

The sample contained 47.4% of female pupils and 52.6% of male pupils.

Educational status of parents

Pupils were asked to give an answer about their mother and father's highest completed level of education. The answers offered were: *completed elementary school*; *completed upper secondary school*; *completed higher education level*.

Data on education of mothers and fathers were combined into a single measure of parental educational status. The categorization did not take into account whether a certain educational status was achieved by the mother or the father. In the first category, in addition to the combination of *both parents with completed upper secondary school* (33.0%), there were also combinations with a low incidence in the total sample: both parents with completed elementary school (1.5%), one parent with completed upper secondary school and one parent with completed elementary school (2.6%). 26.0% of participants were in the category *one parent completed higher education and the other parent completed elementary or upper secondary school*, while 41.0% were in the category *both parents completed higher education*. Statistical analyses included only those pupils who had data on the educational status of both parents (95.9% of the sample).

Qualitative research stage

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with pupils with an average duration of 30 minutes. The following questions were asked by the researchers:

1. Have you talked to your parents about choosing an upper secondary school/program? What is your parents' position on this topic? Do they have influence on your decision about an upper secondary school/program? Are you asking for their help in making this decision?
2. Which school/program would your parents like you to enrol in? Why do they think this is best (for you)? How do you experience their wishes?
3. Do you think your parents want you to go to university later? Does it matter to them? Why do they want this for you?

The conversations were recorded and transcribed, and the data organized using the NVivo 12 program. The coding of the interviews was performed by the authors

of this paper, who also conducted the interviews. No double coding was used, but coding carried out by one researcher was reviewed by another, and any diverging interpretations on the assignment of a single code were discussed and agreed upon. The general framework for qualitative analysis was based on the 13 tactics for generating meaning described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), with the tactics particularly relevant in this paper being: identifying patterns and themes, clustering, and comparison of responses based on parental educational status and pupil achievement. Thematic analysis was performed on qualitative data using an exploratory cyclic process of deriving themes and patterns. Initial coding was based on more general, explicit and descriptive codes, while the second iteration attempted to develop codes that are more analytical and interpretive with an inductive (data-driven) approach.

The analytical framework developed based on the thematic analysis of pupils' responses on parental educational aspirations and upper secondary school selection is shown in Figure 1.

In the Results section we present the topics from this analytical framework: the relationship between the child's and parents' upper secondary school aspirations, the parents' role in the process of transition from elementary to upper secondary school and the approach to seeking information about a possible secondary school destination. In that section, we clarify these topics in relation to family environment with respect to parental educational status and the pupils's school achievement.

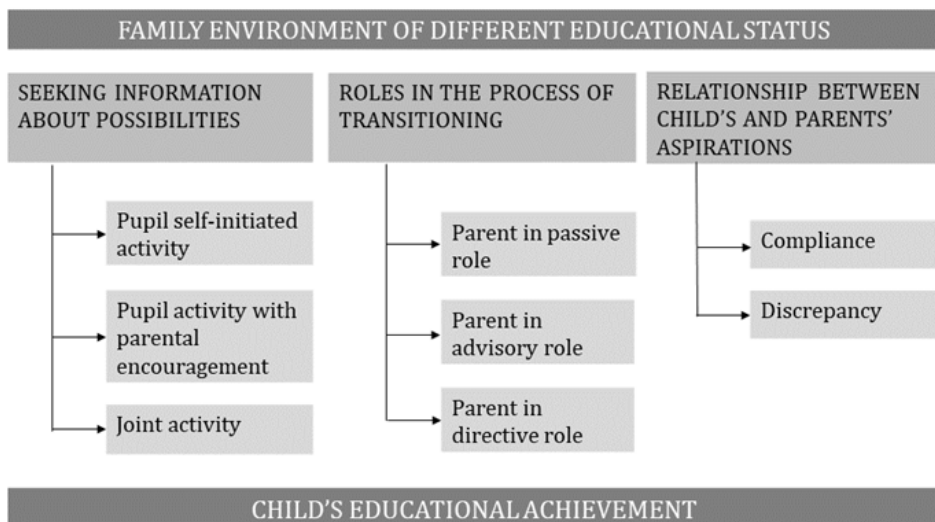


Figure 1. Analytical framework of the qualitative research stage

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The nature and determinants of parental upper secondary school aspirations

From the pupils' perspective, parents' upper secondary school aspirations are most often directed towards the grammar school (50.3%). A smaller proportion of pupils (28.1%) believe that their parents want them to enrol in a four-year vocational school, while only 2.2% of pupils report parental aspiration towards a three-year vocational education. A significant proportion of pupils, 19.3%, do not know what type of upper secondary education their parents want them to enrol in after elementary school. The observed results on the nature of parental aspirations confirm previous findings on pupil aspirations towards four-year programs and on the attractiveness of a grammar school education (Ristić, Dedić and Jokić, 2014). It is significant that a relatively large number of pupils state that they do not know what kind of education their parents want for them. Various underlying reasons may be the basis for this response: from uncertainty caused by the lack of final information about a pupil's educational achievement, through parental non-communication of their own aspirations to the child, to the communication of the acceptability of different educational options.

Multinomial logistic regression was used to model the relationship between the three predictors (gender, expected pupil achievement in the 8th grade, and parental educational status) and perceived parental upper secondary school aspirations for the pupil. In the outcome variable, the categories "three-year vocational education" and "four-year vocational education" were merged into a single category "vocational education" due to the small number of pupils in the three-year education category. The category "vocational education" is defined as a reference category. All three predictors were treated as categorical variables (factors). Data for one or more variables were missing for 45 participants, so the analysis was performed on 986 pupils (95.6% of the sample).

Regression was performed as a stepwise analysis in which the main effects of the predictors were included in the model in the first step. The inclusion of predictors in a model containing intercept only significantly increased the fit between the model and the data ($\chi^2(12, N=986)=394.27, p < .001; R^2= .33$ (Cox & Snell), $.38$ (Nagelkerke). In the second step (the forward entry procedure) all two-way interaction effects of the predictors were introduced, assuming the effect of each predictor could be different depending on the categories of the another predictor. The introduction of the second step did not contribute to the improvement of the model, which means that the interaction effects were not significant and that the final model was based only on the main effects of the predictors.

Of the three predictors, expected GPA in the 8th grade has a statistically significant unique contribution ($\chi^2(6)=244.74, p < .001$) and the educational status of par-

ents ($\chi^2(4)=50.35$, $p < .001$), while the effect of gender is not significant ($\chi^2(2)=3.54$, $p=.17$). Table 1 shows estimates of the individual parameters. The parameters presented compare pairs of categories: the “grammar school education” aspiration to “vocational education” and the answer “I do not know” to the “vocational education” aspiration.

Table 1. Estimates of parameters in the model of the relationship between the categories of perceived parental upper secondary school aspiration and the three predictors obtained by multinomial logistic regression

		B (SE)	Standard error	95% reliability interval		
				Lower bound	Odds ratio	Upper bound
Grammar school vs. vocational aspiration	Intercept	3.291***	.324			
	Gender	.277	.181	-.925	1.319	1.881
	[Parental education status= Both with upper secondary school or less]	-1.457***	.216	.152	.233	.356
	[Parental education status=One parent with higher education degree]	-.921***	.227	.255	.398	.621
	[Expected GPA=up to 4.0]	-3.785***	.356	.011	.023	.046
	[Expected GPA=4.1- 4.5]	-2.887***	.329	.029	.056	.106
	[Expected GPA=4.6 – 4.8]	-1.686***	.327	.098	.185	.352
“I do not know” vs. vocational aspiration	Intercept	.949*	.379			
	Gender	-.051	.198	.645	.950	1.400
	[Parental completed education status= Both upper secondary school or less]	-.518*	.239	.373	.595	.951
	[Parental completed education status=One parent with higher education degree]	-.366	.257	.419	.694	1.147
	[Expected GPA=up to 4.0]	-1.019**	.380	.171	.361	.759
	[Expected GPA=4.1- 4.5]	-1.211**	.385	.140	.298	.634
	[Expected GPA=4.6 – 4.8]	-1.241**	.406	.130	.289	.640

R²= .33 (Cox & Snell), .38 (Nagelkerke). Model $\chi^2(12)=394.27$, $p < .001$. AIC=225.70; BIC=294.21; -2 LL=197.70.

*p < .05 **p < .01 *** p < .001

The results show that the pupils' expected school achievement significantly predicts whether parental aspiration will be for grammar school or vocational education. The likelihood that parental aspiration will be towards grammar school, relative to vocational, falls as expected school achievement falls from the highest category to the categories of lower school achievement. For pupils with excellent school performance (GPA 4.9–5.0), the probability of parental aspiration towards grammar school is 43.48 (1/.23) times higher than for pupils with GPA up to 4.0, 17.86 (1/.056) times higher than for pupils with a score of 4.1–4.5 and 5.41 (1/.185) times higher than for pupils with a score of 4.6–4.8, when the other variables are held constant.

Parental educational status also significantly predicts whether their upper secondary school aspiration for a child will be grammar school or vocational. The relative probability that parents who both have higher education degrees will have a grammar school aspiration versus vocational is 2.5 times higher (1/0.398) than for pupils with one parent who has completed a higher education degree. Compared to pupils whose parents have both completed upper secondary school, the probability is 4.29 times higher (1/.233).

Comparison of "I do not know" responses and vocational aspirations also indicates that expected school achievement has a significant effect. Compared to the highest category of GPA, the probability that pupils' response will be "I do not know" as opposed to vocational aspiration is 3.5 times higher for pupils with an expected GPA of 4.6–4.8 and 4.1–4.5, and 2.77 times higher for pupils with an expected GPA of up to 4.0.

Whether a pupil's response to parental aspiration will be "I do not know" or "vocational aspiration" can also be predicted based on parental education status. If a pupil's parents have both completed upper secondary school, compared to pupils whose parents have both completed higher education degrees, the probability that the answer will be "I do not know" is 1.68 times higher. For pupils with one parent who has completed a higher education degree, compared to pupils with both parents, the 95% reliability interval exceeds a value of 1 and the effect is not statistically significant.

Based on the logistic model, 66.4% of observed cases where the aspiration is "vocational education", 85.7% of cases where the aspiration is "grammar school education" and 0% of cases of "I do not know" answers were correctly classified. The model's inability to correctly classify "I do not know" cases points to the complexity and heterogeneity of this category of pupils and to the idea that this answer is based on very diverse patterns of parental aspirations (or their non-existence or (non)communication), and cannot be predicted based on the determinants examined.

In line with expectations, the results of the quantitative analysis show that a pupil's school achievement is a strong predictor of parental upper secondary school

aspirations for their child. In addition to this individual determinant of parental aspirations, parental educational status has a significant, albeit much more modest, effect. The effect of gender does not prove to be significant, although based on the findings of the representation of girls and boys in grammar school education, a greater focus on parental aspirations towards a grammar school education for girls and a vocational education for boys could be expected. Another interesting finding is the lack of interaction effects of the examined predictors, which shows that the effect of pupils' school achievement is the same for all categories of parental educational status. The expectation that the probability of a grammar school aspiration, compared to a vocational aspiration, could be higher for more educated parents than for less educated parents in certain categories of children given their school achievement has not proved justified.

3.2 Communication and interaction of parents and children about upper secondary school aspirations

Based on the results of quantitative analysis of the significant effects of pupils' achievement and parental educational status, three categories of pupils were compared in the qualitative analysis based on the analytical framework developed for this research: pupils whose parents have both completed higher education degrees, pupils with one parent who has completed a higher education degree while the other has not, and pupils whose parents have both completed upper secondary school education. Within these categories, special attention was paid to contrasting cases of different educational achievement.

A. Communication and interactions between parents and children about upper secondary school aspirations – environment where both parents have a higher education degree

This environment is largely characterized by a high level of expectations towards children. The words of higher-achieving pupils describe such expectations:

I guess they always wanted me to excel.

High educational expectations are associated with high aspirations, so pupils uniformly report that their parents want and expect them to acquire a higher education qualification. Parental upper secondary school aspirations are predominantly towards the grammar school and children perceive them as very strong. It goes without saying that tracking through the grammar school to a university destination is a desirable and prestigious educational path, one intended for "better" pupils. The firmness of parental grammar school aspirations is also indicated by the fact that other possibilities are not considered at all, because to them, choosing a grammar

school represents a “normal” and “natural” choice. While this choice is unquestionable for parents, the child is left with a choice between “a couple of good schools”. An excerpt from a conversation with a higher-achieving pupil speaks about the firmness of a parent’s grammar school aspiration and leaving the choice of a specific school to the child:

Researcher (R): *Where would they like you to enrol?*

Research participant (P): *Ah, certainly a grammar school, of course.*

R: *Which one? Do they have some personal pick?*

P: *Ah, they don’t, they don’t. They told me to choose a couple of good ones.*

R: *Aha.*

P: *And then to go to the one I like the most.*

It is important to note that pupils in this category have largely internalized parental expectations and shaped their own aspirations as exclusively towards the grammar school probably based on long-term parental guidance about the desired educational path. As a result, they feel that their parents support them in their choices, that their wishes match, and express satisfaction with such developments in the upcoming selection of an upper secondary school. Although they mostly talk about choosing a particular upper secondary school as their own choice, some pupils point out that it is a joint decision, made long ago, as can be seen in the following quote collected in an interview with an exceptionally achieving pupil:

R: *Have you talked to your parents about wanting to join MIOC?*

P: *Well, I did, but we decided that a long time ago.*

R: *Did they “push” you into it a little bit, or did you choose for yourself?*

P: *Well they didn’t, like, they gave me an option. They told me which one was the best. They said whichever way I went, it was actually my decision, but they said MIOC was still the best.*

The impression of parental support is especially expressed by the most successful pupils, as shown by the characteristic statement of exceptionally high-achieving pupils:

R: *How are your parents positioning themselves in relation to the “problem” of choosing an upper secondary school?*

P: *They support me in my choice (The XV. Grammar school)...*

R: *Did they influence your choice of upper secondary school?*

P: *Well, I mean... They went to MIOC, so now, now it seems like I’m following them... Although, I chose that. They’re just supporting me now... They just tell me to go where, like... where I feel best. Where I want.*

In addition to parental support, the above quote speaks of another common occurrence in families with both parents holding higher education degrees, which relates to the child's following the same educational path, and even to choosing the same grammar school. In such cases of continuing the family tradition, pupils retain the idea of autonomy of their own decision to enrol in the "best" school, although they acknowledge that the decision was shaped by the parental educational experience, as seen in the following excerpt from an interview with a pupil of exceptional educational achievement:

R: *What do your parents say?*

P: *Mum and Dad went to MIOC. Now it sounds a bit that it's because of them (AN: that she wants to go to MIOC), but it's not... They gave me a choice to choose a school for myself, there was no pressure but they just told me I have to make an effort no matter what I do.*

R: *Do they somehow influence your decision?*

P: *I mean, they certainly influence... Somehow they're always telling me their anecdotes from school and I think it influenced me and somehow I would wish the same for myself.*

It only happens exceptionally that pupils in this category feel that their upper secondary school-related desires do not coincide with their parents'. In the case of pupils of exceptional educational achievement, it was evident that parents have very ambitious desires and plans that do not necessarily correspond to what the pupil wants for himself:

R: *Have you talked to your parents about choosing an upper secondary school?*

P: *Well yes, I actually involved them a lot... But they force something a lot. They would like me to go to SOME school. They even suggested that I go to a private school. And then they mentioned some kind of MIOC program in English... They were the first to talk about going abroad to study, so that, it's all quite ambitious... And then, like, I said, we'll come to an agreement.*

In the case of another higher-achieving pupil, the discrepancy between the pupil's and parents' upper secondary school aspirations related to the choice of a specific school. This pupil had a clearly formed interest in the technical field and expressed a desire to enrol in a vocational program, which the parents supported in principle (because this option also allows going on to university), but did not quite agree with his proposed school. They wanted the child to enrol in the "best" vocational school. After intense discussion and searching for information on schools and programs online and in their circle of friends, they came to an agreement. The following excerpt from the interview talks about this:

R: *What would your parents want you to enrol in?*

P: *Well, what I want, but then they still advise me which is better, which is not, and so on.*

R: *Do you ask for their help or are they getting involved themselves?*

P: *They involve themselves mostly.*

R: *Alright. How do you perceive their desires for your education?*

P: *Well, I perceive them as equal to mine, I mean, if I want to go to a school, they just look at which is better.*

R: *What did they tell you about Tesla?*

P: *Well, they used to be more for Ruđer, but now that they have realized that Tesla has also made progress this year, then they support me to go to Tesla.*

In addition to talking about the process of reconciling desires for the choice of an upper secondary school destination, the above excerpt from an interview also reveals something about the typical pattern of engagement of highly educated parents in the process of transition to upper secondary school. These parents proactively involve themselves in conversations on this topic, offer direct help in choosing in case the child does not have a clear desire or has doubts about what to choose. They actively seek information about programs and schools from family and friends, and are very engaged in informing themselves from other sources. They often search for information together with the child, and they are happy to share with the child the experiences and knowledge gained during their own education.

Intensive parental involvement, their zeal and constant reminders to the child of the need to make an early decision and take a strategic approach in order to maximize the possibility of achieving the goal causes a kind of resistance in some pupils. The following quote from a higher-achieving pupil speaks of a lack of perspective for the future and different perception of urgency in relation to his parents:

...well they advise me to start choosing as soon as possible, but I don't know, I'll do it later. I don't want to bother with that yet.

This is also evident in the testimony of this exceptionally achieving pupil:

Well, I mean... I won't refuse my parents' help, but like... It's not all that to me, like they are much more excited about it than I am, like. It's not so intense for me...

Since parents feel that they know the child's character and interests well, they are willing to recommend options and generally take an advisory role in the process of the child's transition from elementary to upper secondary school. At this point, they

mostly focus their communication with the child on a short-term goal (enrolling in a desirable upper secondary school) while keeping in mind a long-term vision that includes a higher education destination.

Such a strategic approach is especially important in the case of children who are not excellent pupils and as such are not candidates for what are considered to be the most desirable upper secondary school destinations. Parents then focus intensively on looking for vocational program options that ensure “a good job and a good life” (according to one average achieving pupil), or a grammar school with a lower enrolment requirements, also taking into account the possibility of enrolling in private grammar schools. In this way, the problem of the existing lower grades from elementary school is bridged, and the possibility of achieving a longer-term higher education aspiration is left open.

B. Communication and interactions about upper secondary school aspirations - an environment with one parent with and the other without a higher education diploma

Pupils from this environment report very similar patterns of communication and interaction about upper secondary school aspirations as pupils whose parents have both completed higher education degrees.

Parents and children often search for options together and are informed about specific programs and schools and enrolment procedures. Parents in this category also take on the role of advisors on various possibilities and recommend programs that they consider as having perspective and/or being aligned to the interests and abilities of the child. Children respect their parents' opinions and often actively seek them out. They feel that they have the support of their parents in their wishes, even when their choices are still uncertain, with pupils who are achieving exceptional educational results expressing especially high sense of parental support and trust.

When it comes to children who have not yet fully formed their aspirations and their choice of upper secondary school is uncertain, in families of both pupils of very good and pupils of excellent achievement, a set of options expands that are considered as possible upper secondary school destinations, and a grammar school is not the only option taken into account. For higher-achieving pupils, a grammar school is the preferred option, but it is not the only option insisted on. Parents do not consider it necessary for a child to follow a grammar school education path, but their priority is to enrol in “some good” school. This is clearly shown in the following interview excerpt with a higher-achieving pupil who does not yet have a clearly defined upper secondary school aspiration:

R: *Have you informed yourself about upper secondary schools and enrolment?*

P: *Well, I talked to my mum again and I decided that I probably want to go to some grammar school because I don't know where I will go next...*

R: *What kind of grammar school would it be, then?*

P: *Well, I do not know, general I guess... My mum keeps telling me to research that so I can see what I like.*

R: *I wonder if she thinks she should look beyond a grammar school?*

P: *Well my mom prefers these vocational schools. She went to an economics school. But... She... Like... She claims that a grammar school would be good for me because I don't know what I'm going to do... She says that I should choose whatever I want, that she won't interfere. To ask her if I'm interested in something, to start researching, that it's important for her that I enrol somewhere good, but that she doesn't care what, she won't force me to enrol somewhere.*

A similar view of the parental perspective, which shows that parents are open to different possibilities but support the child's wishes, is from another higher-achieving pupil, whose upper secondary school aspiration is towards a grammar school, but in its formation were conversations with parents about other possibilities, arising from their upper secondary school experience. In her testimony, it is possible to see her looking back at her parents' educational path and the search for other opportunities for herself, which correspond to her interests and existing achievements:

R: *Is it also their wish that you go to the X. Grammar school?*

P: *Well, their wish is for me to enrol somewhere good, I mean like, they said, if you want it, you go there. I mean, it's all the same to them.*

R: *Did you ask for advice on where to enrol?*

P: *Well, yes, but they, I mean, my mother went to the economics school, but she wouldn't like me go to an economics school. Dad didn't go to a grammar school, he went to an electrical engineering school and so on... They know I'm not attracted to it, simply... Well, they want me to go to a grammar school because they think I'll get out of it, I'll get into university much easier from a grammar school, but now whether I want the X. or I want another, they don't care.*

Parental support for the child's choices, i.e. the compatibility of their own and their parents' aspirations, is also experienced by average-achieving pupils in this category of the family environment. The upper secondary school aspiration shared by these pupils and parents is predominantly vocational (but 4-year), and any differences between the child's and parents' thoughts relate to the range of vocational programs being considered. Parents generally take care that these are programs that provide good opportunities in the labour market, and also retain the possibility of enrolling in higher education. The existence of these dual possibilities is evidenced by the advice received by an average-achieving pupil, which includes continuing the family business, with the acquisition of a higher education diploma:

R: *What do they tell you?*

P: *Well my mum advises me to definitely go to university and to open my salon and everything when I'm done. So does dad, only he would have preferred me to enrol in some medical school.*

R: *What do they say to you about wanting to be a hairdresser or a beautician?*

P: *Mum also went to the school for hairdressers and all, and like, she said she would be glad too, to be happy if I open my own salon one day.*

Only exceptionally are parental upper secondary school aspirations higher than a child's. This is stated in a statement collected in an interview with average-achieving pupil who wants to enrol in a grammar school with a sport program because she is an athlete:

P: *Well... Mum would definitely want me to enrol in some grammar school now too. But I don't think that's for me at all.*

R: *But this is also a grammar school – with sports.*

P: *I know, but a difficult one like these, grammar schools that some from my class will go to... But I don't think it's for me at all and I don't think I have time to make up for it now.*

This mother's desire for enrolment in a more demanding program is related to her higher education aspiration for the child and the expectation that she can meet the requirements of the grammar school program if she makes the effort. It is interesting that the mother and the child, although not exactly compatible in terms of upper secondary school aspirations, still share the expectation that the pupil will one day study and are even in agreement on the chosen field of study.

C. Communication and interactions about upper secondary school aspirations – an environment where both parents have an upper secondary school education

The parents of these pupils, as well as those from the other two categories, want the best for their children and show a great willingness to help the child choose an upper secondary school destination and participate in the final decision-making process. As with families with one highly educated parent, different upper secondary school options are also acceptable to these families. When it comes to pupils with higher educational achievement, parents, as well as children, think of grammar schools and "some other better upper secondary schools" as good options. Although the grammar school option is open when the child has such a desire and the appropriate school achievement, which in some way guarantees later enrolment in higher education and obtaining a university degree, the grammar school

aspiration is not considered superior to the vocational, given the parents' belief that completing a vocational education, if four-year, provides broader opportunities than a grammar school – and the gain of some qualifications with which to enter the job market and continue their education at the higher education level.

The following excerpt from an interview about the doubts on choosing a grammar school or vocational school and the related advantages and disadvantages with a higher-achieving pupil:

P: *I don't know, grammar school or a better upper secondary school... I don't really know what I would like. Do I want to choose a grammar school so that I have more time to decide on university later, or a vocational. And then, if I change my mind in those four years, then what will I do?*

R: *Have you talked to your parents about choosing an upper secondary school?*

P: *Yes, I talk to them a lot about it, but like... They said, you choose, this is your future, your life and you do as you wish...*

R: *What school or program would your parents like you to enrol in?*

P: *Well, I don't know, mum and that female side of the family, that is, the aunts, they are more for a grammar school, while dad is more for a better vocational school, like: "What if you don't go to college, what will you do then?" And the aunts are already calculating and mum is the same, you will go to university, they already see me as a grammar school pupil. [laughter]*

The above quote also testifies to certain differences in views within a family, between the parents themselves. Moreover, it points to the parents' belief that the decision on the educational path should be left to the child, to ensure that the choice corresponds with the wishes of the child, while the parental position should be more background and indirect.

It is important to point out that pupils from this family environment report significant engagement and an active role of parents in the process of choosing an upper secondary school program, as in the other categories of pupils. And for average-achieving pupils, parents strive to find opportunities that provide good opportunities in life, primarily good employment and financial stability, in some promising sector which does not require a higher education degree. In some cases, parents suggest three-year vocational education options that represent a continuation of a family tradition or participation in a family business, as this allows for secure employment and rapid entry into the labour market, as shown by the following quote from an interview with an average-achieving pupil:

R: *...What are you going to do after primary?*

P: *Hmm... I'll be a blacksmith... Dad found that somewhere, I'm not a hundred percent sure where, but dad found a school somewhere...*

R: *When you finish that school, do you plan to work on those things with your dad?*

P: *I'll probably work for other people, but all the same I'll make parts for dad when I need to.*

This excerpt points to the father's active involvement in finding the best solution for his son. Other interviews with pupils in this category also show that parents, together with the child, inform themselves and inquire about the available possibilities. However, it is observed that parents who do not have higher education degrees are less informed, do not have so many developed contacts within the social circle who could give them direct information about certain upper secondary school options, and generally lack certain personal experiences of the system that they could share with their children. The following quote clearly shows the parents' willingness to help, but also their lack of information about issues important to the child:

Well, when I have to ask them something about upper secondary school, they always help me. If they don't know, then I go to the Internet with them and we search ... As far as I can see, they're not really in on upper secondary schools. It has changed a lot since they went to school [laughs]. Because, I asked my dad something like what it was like in the VII grammar school, he said, "I'm not sure, but go and look," and then I looked. I got the answer [laughs]!!!

(higher-achieving pupil)

Children of these parents therefore often turn to sources of information among their own friends and other peers, while they expect only general support and acceptance of their own choices from parents.

Although in (almost) all families parents strive for the best for their children, and are actively involved in deciding on their educational choices, parental aspirations and messages about them are not exactly the same.

In families with both highly educated parents, the grammar school aspiration is communicated as the only desirable educational pathway. The selection is made almost automatically as if the potential risks are not even considered, believing that this provides children with good starting positions for further education. Children often follow the parental path and build aspirations based on internalized messages about the prestige and highest quality of a grammar school education. In the case of average educational achievement, the choice of upper secondary school is approached very strategically and studiously, making use of social capital and other resources available. These findings are consistent with concepts derived from Bourdieu's considerations of normal biography and aspiration as an expression of the distinctive habitus in which a person is socialized. Through setting and communicating high, but actually narrow, aspirations, these parents communicate to

children the importance of education and set the boundaries of what is acceptable. Children accept these values and boundaries and present them as what they want for themselves. While the choice of grammar school is not in question, the child is told that he can independently choose a specific school from among several quality ones. Such a situation is spoken of by the authors as the illusion of democratic decision-making behind which lies tight parental control (Reay and Ball, 1998).

In families with one highly educated parent and in families with both parents with completed upper secondary education, the “aspiration space” is significantly wider. The child’s wishes are accepted and solutions are sought that are open enough to allow for different options in the future. Although the grammar school aspiration remains a valid choice if the child shows high achievement and expresses the desire for such an educational path by themselves, the vocational aspiration, albeit only one that allows vertical access to higher education, appears and is communicated in many families as an equally good quality choice, one that offers more opportunities. Even for pupils of exceptional educational achievement, a grammar school aspiration is not considered the only acceptable option. Jackson et al. (2007) encounter a similar pattern in people of lower socioeconomic status who choose “less ambitious” pathways, even when more ambitious options are feasible. Labelling educational options as more or less ambitious, however, is subject to different interpretations depending on a person’s social position. For parents without a higher education degree qualification, pursuing a vocational aspiration is a desirable and equally ambitious option that means a ticket to higher education, while at the same time providing the security of acquiring a profession, in case the child’s circumstances or success do not continue. Seen from this perspective, vocational aspiration, even for children of exceptional educational attainment, is a reasonable solution. It is likely that these families, in shaping their aspirations, weigh the potential gains and losses arising from individual educational options and opt for those that represent the greatest benefit to them. Consistent with the tenets of rational choice theory, Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) suggest that lower socioeconomic status family aspirations should be viewed from the standpoint of their greater resource constraints, greater material instability, and uncertainty related to certain decisions. Due to such life circumstances, these families may be risk-averse and motivated primarily by the need to avoid threats (Manstread, 2018), prone to “conservative” decisions that follow the parents’ educational biography (Schnabel et al., 2002), or choose less prestigious directions, even when the estimated benefits exceed the estimated costs (Becker and Lauterbach, 2004 according to Puzić and Košutić, 2015). In contrast, growing up in an environment of higher socioeconomic status is determined by more available resources, a greater sense of personal control, and a belief in the possibility of influencing events (Kraus and Stephens, 2012). This also explains why parents of higher socioeconomic status assess a lower level of risk of failure and encourage children to high goals and exposure to the most demanding programs (Schnabel et al., 2002). Although

these findings are likely to be more related to the economic than to the educational status of parents, testimonies from our pupils suggest that parents consider risk and benefit elements when prioritizing vocational aspiration in pupils of excellent achievement.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the present study are the first look at parental upper secondary school aspirations from the perspective of pupils in the Croatian educational context. Quantitative analyses show that half the parents want the child to enrol in a grammar school program, which suggests that the number of aspirants to this type of education exceeds the number of grammar school enrolment places in the overall structure of these places. The results on the very low incidence of parental aspiration towards three-year vocational education also indicate large differences in the attractiveness of individual upper secondary school destinations. Without the possibility of vertical mobility to higher education, three-year vocational education is an undesirable option that is filled mainly by pupils with lower school achievement for whom other opportunities are not available. The low level of aspiration towards three-year programs has serious social and economic implications, pointing to the problems that Croatia is already facing, which concern the lack of certain qualification profiles in the labour market. It is to be expected that these shortcomings will become clearer over time. Education policy must necessarily promote vocational education more strongly, and in particular that of three years. Quantitative analyses indicate that parents in our educational context adjust their own aspirations for children primarily to the level of the child's educational achievements, but their aspirations are to some extent also influenced by personal biographies and educational experiences. We should not ignore the fact that aspirations are also significantly determined by some system-level factors, among which one of the most important is the way in which the system transitions from one educational level to another. In Croatia, where enrolment in upper secondary education is almost exclusively based on school grades, it is quite expected that pupils' prior school achievement is a key determinant of what parents expect and want for their child.

The results of the qualitative section of the research indicate that families of different parental educational status have somewhat different patterns of communication and interaction related to upper secondary school aspirations and transition to upper secondary school. However, in all environments, pupils predominantly report on the congruence of their own and parents' aspirations and present the choice of a certain option as a personal choice that they have the opportunity to decide freely and autonomously, without parental pressure. In our context, pupil aspirations are mostly shared with parents as "significant others" and are shaped through an interactive process (Hart, 2016). Parental influence is partly expressed explicitly through communicating certain "ideals", sharing one's own experiences

and knowledge, and emphasizing the desirability of certain options, and partly based on more implicit messages. Parental influence is also manifested through longer-term socialization processes within the family environment that lead to the internalization of norms, values and expectations to which children are exposed from an early age. No pupil testimony was collected to suggest that pupil and parental aspirations were highly conflicting or completely imposed by parents. At the general level, it can be assumed that the already mentioned conditionality of upper secondary school destinations with school grades from lower secondary level contributes to the uniformity of aspirations of parents and children, although there is also a possibility that it is a consequence of the prevailing cultural pattern of supportive parenting and increasing sensitivity to children's needs and desires (Raboteg-Šarić, Franc and Brajša-Žganec, 2004; Lacković-Grgin, 2015). Pupils perceive parents primarily as supportive, and consider active parental involvement to be appropriate and mostly desirable. It is obvious that, from the pupils' perspective, the parental role in the process of transitioning from elementary to upper secondary school is advisory and especially strong in cases when the pupil does not yet have a formed aspiration, feels insecure facing the decision, has some doubts about upper secondary school choices, or their level of achievement is not adequate for achieving primary aspirations. Such a parenting approach responds well to pupil's growing developmental need for autonomy, sense of personal control, and the expression of one's own will, while at the same time allowing for parental influence on a more subtle level. Similar processes are reported by Hegna and Smette (2017) in the Norwegian context where educational choices are normatively constructed as the autonomous and free decision of pupils, but it is observed to be a quasi-individualised decision, structured and partly limited by numerous external factors.

Although this is the first study on this topic in the Croatian context, it is necessary to express its clear limitations. The research was conducted in Zagreb and it is possible to problematize the generalization of results to the rest of Croatia, especially its rural parts. The research design is also based on the pupil perspective and did not include the views of the parents. It is for future research endeavours in this direction to provide new insights into parental aspirations for children and compare them with the children's perspective. Of additional value would be distinct coverage of the aspirations of mothers and fathers and the examination of their individual influences on the child's educational decisions at key transition points of the system.

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Roditeljske srednjoškolske aspiracije za djecu iz perspektive učenika pri kraju osnovnog obrazovanja

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SAŽETAK

Roditeljske srednjoškolske aspiracije su ambicije i ciljevi koje roditelji imaju za svoju djecu u vezi s obrazovanjem na srednjoškolskoj razini. U hrvatskom kontekstu dosad nisu bile istraživane iako značajno pridonose učeničkim aspiracijama i školskom uspjehu, a prediktor su i pokazatelj uključenosti roditelja u obrazovanje djece. Cilj je ovog rada istražiti prirodu i odrednice roditeljskih srednjoškolskih aspiracija iz perspektive učenika te opisati obrasce komunikacije i interakcije roditelja i djece vezano uz aspiracije i prijelaz iz osnovne u srednju školu. Roditeljske srednjoškolske aspiracije ispitane su iz perspektive učenika istraživanjem miješanog modela, koje je uključivalo upitničko ispitivanje s 1 031 učenikom 8. razreda zagrebačkih osnovnih škola te provedbu polustrukturiranih razgovora s 29 učenika na kraju prvog polugodišta 8. razreda. Kvantitativna istraživačka dionica pokazuje da su značajni prediktori roditeljskih srednjoškolskih aspiracija očekivani školski uspjeh učenika i obrazovni status roditelja, dok učinak spola učenika nije značajan. Kvalitativna istraživačka dionica upućuje na podudarnost učeničkih i roditeljskih aspiracija te na znatnu uključenost roditelja u proces odabira srednjoškolskih opcija. U obiteljima različitoga obrazovnog statusa roditelja utvrđeni su ponešto različiti komunikacijski i interakcijski obrasci vezano uz srednjoškolske aspiracije i odabir srednje škole, koji se vežu uz razlike u vrednovanju gimnazijskog i strukovnog obrazovanja u tim obiteljima.

Ključne riječi: roditeljske obrazovne aspiracije, srednjoškolske aspiracije, obrazovni status roditelja, obrazovno postignuće