

Extended Abstract

Title: Dreams Divided: Educational Aspirations and Left-behind Places in Italy

Introduction

Aspirations, fundamentally shaped by individual experiences and social interactions, play a critical role in determining educational outcomes and, in turn, perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities. While an extensive body of research has examined the relationship between socioeconomic conditions and educational aspirations, the Italian context remains comparatively underexplored. Italy presents a particularly compelling case study due to its low proportion of tertiary-educated young adults—only 25% of 25–34-year-olds hold a tertiary qualification compared to an OECD average of 50% in 2021—and pronounced territorial disparities. This imbalance is especially stark in regions designated as “left-behind” areas, where economic stagnation and limited opportunities contribute to a cycle of reduced educational ambition and persistent inequality.

This study investigates the extent to which local socioeconomic conditions and trends influence the educational aspirations of young Italians, with a focus on disadvantaged and left-behind territories. By employing a quantitative research design that integrates individual-level educational data with contextual socioeconomic indicators, the analysis seeks to uncover the spatial dimensions of aspiration formation. This research not only aims to fill a gap in the literature but also to provide evidence-based insights for policymakers looking to mitigate territorial disparities and promote inclusive development strategies.

Motivation

Educational aspirations are central to individual achievement and socioeconomic mobility. They function as both a reflection of personal ambition and as a mediator of structural inequalities. In Italy, where the educational attainment gap is significant and territorial disparities are entrenched, understanding the dynamics of aspiration becomes even more crucial. Disadvantaged regions often face systemic barriers that limit access to quality education and hinder upward social mobility, thereby reinforcing regional development traps.

The Italian educational landscape is marked by contrasts: metropolitan areas and economically vibrant regions tend to offer more robust educational resources and higher levels of tertiary attainment, while peripheral and economically lagging areas struggle with chronic underinvestment in human capital. This dichotomy has significant implications for long-term national development and social cohesion. Against this backdrop, the present study explores how local socioeconomic conditions—such as unemployment rates, income levels, access to educational resources, and infrastructural development—impact the educational aspirations of students. The study is particularly interested in whether these contextual factors act as barriers or enablers for students in left-behind areas, thereby either perpetuating or mitigating existing inequalities.

Methodology

To address these research questions, the study employs a quantitative approach that leverages multiple

data sources. Individual-level data are drawn from the INVALSI assessments, which include 10th Grade Mathematics and Italian exam results, along with comprehensive student questionnaires. These instruments provide detailed insights into students' academic performance, self-reported aspirations, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The rich dataset is complemented by socioeconomic and demographic indicators sourced from ISTAT, Eurostat, and the OECD. These indicators provide contextual information on regional economic performance, labor market conditions, and educational infrastructure, thereby allowing for a multifaceted analysis of the determinants of educational aspirations.

The analytical framework centers on the use of multilevel modelling and regression analysis. Multilevel modelling is particularly suited for this investigation because it allows for the examination of nested data structures—individual students nested within schools and geographic regions—while accounting for variability at each level. This approach enables the study to control for individual characteristics such as socioeconomic background and cognitive ability, and to isolate the effect of contextual factors on educational aspirations. Regression analysis further refines the investigation by quantifying the strength and direction of the relationships between local socioeconomic conditions and the students' aspirations. Variables of interest include local unemployment rates, average household incomes, educational resource allocation, and other indicators of economic vitality.

This methodological design ensures a rigorous assessment of how spatial and contextual factors influence educational aspirations, particularly in areas characterized by economic stagnation and limited opportunities. It also facilitates an exploration of potential mediating mechanisms—such as the role of community norms or the availability of role models—that might amplify or mitigate the effects of adverse local conditions.

Findings

Preliminary analyses suggest a pronounced association of local socioeconomic conditions and the educational aspirations of young Italians. In regions identified as left-behind, adverse economic conditions—marked by high unemployment rates, lower average incomes, and underfunded educational institutions—appear to correlate with significantly lower educational aspirations among students. Conversely, areas with relatively better socioeconomic profiles tend to nurture higher levels of ambition and academic motivation. The multilevel models indicate that even after controlling for individual factors such as family background and academic ability, the geographic location of a student remains a significant predictor of their educational aspirations.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that the effects of local conditions are not uniform across all students. The influence of a disadvantaged environment is more pronounced among those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, suggesting a compounding effect where pre-existing disadvantages are exacerbated by adverse local conditions. This reinforces the notion that local context can act as both a barrier and an enabler of educational aspirations. In more economically vibrant areas, better access to quality education and more positive community role models appear to support higher aspirations,

while in left-behind territories, the absence of these resources contributes to a downward spiral of limited ambition and reduced educational outcomes.

Discussion

The study's findings underscore the critical role of local socioeconomic conditions in shaping educational aspirations, which in turn affect long-term educational outcomes and socioeconomic mobility. In left-behind regions, the interplay between adverse economic conditions and low educational aspirations creates a self-reinforcing cycle that can perpetuate regional inequalities. Students in these areas face a double disadvantage: not only are their immediate socioeconomic environments less supportive of high academic aspirations, but the structural challenges in these regions further diminish their prospects for upward mobility.

This research also points to the importance of targeted policy interventions that address both the individual and contextual dimensions of educational attainment. Policymakers must consider strategies that not only improve the quality of local educational institutions but also address broader economic challenges. For instance, investment in regional economic development, coupled with initiatives aimed at enhancing educational infrastructure and access, could serve to break the cycle of disadvantage. Moreover, the findings suggest that local community engagement and the provision of positive role models might help to bolster students' aspirations, even in economically challenged areas.

Another implication of the study is the need for a more nuanced understanding of how local context interacts with individual characteristics. While individual socioeconomic status is a well-documented determinant of educational outcomes, the current analysis demonstrates that geographic location exerts an independent and significant influence. This calls for an integrated approach in both research and policy that simultaneously addresses micro-level factors (such as family background and personal ability) and macro-level contextual variables (such as regional economic conditions and public resource allocation).

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive quantitative examination of how local socioeconomic conditions shape the educational aspirations of young Italians, with a specific focus on disadvantaged and left-behind territories. By integrating individual-level data from INVALSI with regional socioeconomic indicators from ISTAT, Eurostat, and the OECD, the analysis reveals that local economic and demographic factors significantly influence students' aspirations, independent of individual socioeconomic backgrounds and academic abilities. The findings suggest that in regions marked by economic stagnation and limited opportunities, local conditions act as both barriers and enablers of educational ambition, thereby contributing to the persistence of territorial inequalities.

The insights derived from this research offer valuable guidance for policymakers. Addressing Italy's territorial disparities requires a dual approach that improves local economic conditions and enhances the educational environment. Interventions that foster local economic development, invest in educational infrastructure, and promote community engagement are essential for breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Ultimately, the study advocates for an integrated policy framework that recognizes

the interplay between individual aspirations and local context, aiming to reduce educational gaps and promote inclusive, sustainable development across all regions.

In summary, the research highlights the importance of contextualizing educational aspirations within the broader socioeconomic landscape. It demonstrates that local conditions are not mere backdrops but active, influential factors that shape the ambitions and future trajectories of young individuals. By bringing to light the mechanisms through which territorial disparities affect educational outcomes, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges facing left-behind regions in Italy and provides a roadmap for fostering a more equitable educational and socioeconomic future.