

Article

Vocational Counseling and Career Guidance: Premises for a Sustainable Educational Path—A Cross-Sectional Study in Braşov County, Romania

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Abstract

The transition from lower to upper secondary education is a critical developmental stage, requiring decisions with long-term academic and professional consequences. Addressing a gap in evidence that often treats counselling, family educational capital, and place of residence separately, this study examines how these factors jointly relate to students' high school track/profile choice and their intention to pursue higher education in the Romanian educational transition. Using a standardized questionnaire, we conducted a cross-sectional survey of 1392 lower secondary students (aged 13–14) from Braşov County, Romania, to map preferred tracks, influencing factors, perceptions of high school, and the values framing decision-making. High school track/profile choice emerged as a central “decision node”, strongly associated with participation in counselling $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.678$) and significantly related to parents' educational level and university intentions. Substantial urban–rural differences were observed in track/profile choice ($p < 0.001$; $V = 0.442$), with urban students selecting the “real” track more frequently ($\approx 68\%$) than rural students ($\approx 37\%$). University intention was high overall, with a small but significant urban–rural difference ($\approx 89.7\%$ vs. $\approx 86.9\%$; $p = 0.028$; $V = 0.072$). Findings support integrating counselling into coherent adolescent career development models and expanding services to reduce contextual disparities through stronger school–family–community partnerships. This evidence is relevant for education policy and practice by supporting the scaling of school-based career guidance and targeted measures to reduce rural–urban disparities.

Keywords: vocational counseling; career guidance; sustainable education; educational transition; high school track choice; Romania



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1. Introduction

Career counseling during adolescence plays a vital role in shaping students' academic and professional futures. At this stage, young people begin to explore their interests, skills and values, while also facing the pressure to make decisions [1] that influence long-term trajectories. Effective counseling in schools helps students better understand their strengths, the world of work, and the educational paths available [2]. It also improves decision-making skills, develops self-efficacy, and reduces confusion or anxiety about the future [3]. When integrated early and systematically, career counseling can increase motivation, prevent school dropout, and guide students toward realistic, sustainable goals aligned with both personal aspirations and labor market demands. Research results show that the risk of dropping out of school decreases when students are involved in vocational counseling and career guidance activities [4]. To contextualize our study, we note that the organisation and terminology of secondary education vary across countries. We use the international terms 'lower secondary' and 'upper secondary' for readability (aligned with ISCED 2011 levels 2 and 3) [5]; however, our empirical analysis refers specifically to the Romanian pre-university system, in which lower secondary education (middle school, grades 5–8) is followed by upper secondary education (high school, grades 9–12), as regulated by Law No. 198/2023 and described in official European education system profiles [6,7].

Despite the rich theoretical background, important gaps remain in the empirical literature on high school track/profile choice at the lower-to-upper secondary transition.

First, many studies examine single determinants (e.g., counselling exposure, family background, or residence context) in isolation, while the decision is typically shaped by the combined influence of school-based guidance, family educational capital, and local opportunity structures.

Second, fewer studies integrate students' identity-related and affective perceptions (e.g., anticipated satisfaction with high school life, perceived link between track/profile and future occupation) alongside family and contextual factors, although these perceptions can structure adolescents' choices during transition periods.

Third, evidence from the Romanian context, especially at the county level and with a large cohort close to the actual transition moment, remains limited and fragmented. To address these gaps, our study examines (i) how counselling participation, frequency, and perceived influence relate to track/profile choice and higher-education intentions; (ii) how these relationships vary by family educational capital and urban–rural residence; and (iii) how students' perceptions of high school and of the education–work link, as well as their stated values, are positioned within this decision matrix. Our analytical approach frames high school major track choice as a central “decision node” connecting counselling exposure, family resources, and educational aspirations, while acknowledging that the cross-sectional design supports association-based interpretation.

Methodologically, the study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional design based on a standardized questionnaire administered to 1392 lower secondary students aged 13–14 from urban and rural schools in Braşov County, Romania. The findings indicate that high school track or profile choice is closely associated with counselling participation, parental educational attainment, and intentions to pursue higher education. Differences between urban and rural students highlight contextual disparities in access to guidance and decisional clarity. By integrating these dimensions, the study contributes to a more coherent understanding of educational decision-making at a key transition point, with implications for school counselling practices and education policy.

2. Literature Review

The context of the educational transition and the importance of school guidance

Secondary schools need to play an important role in promoting teens' careers, providing hope and optimism about the future [8]. The transition from middle school to high school is seen as one of the riskiest phases for school failure, being characterized by significant social, emotional and behavioral changes [9,10]. The transition to high school is often associated with temporary declines in academic performance [11].

From an institutional perspective, Iacobescu et al. [12] highlight teachers' perceptions of students' difficulties and the limits of existing support structures. Although this approach provides insight into systemic challenges, it does not capture students' own decision-making processes. The present study addresses this limitation by centering students and examining how counseling exposure, family educational capital, and personal representations shape educational choice at the moment of transition.

Conceptual foundation: from vocational counseling to career guidance

Vocational counseling and career guidance are described as support activities that facilitate educational and professional decision-making [13]. Career guidance refers to services that help individuals manage their educational and occupational pathways by reflecting on aspirations, interests, skills, and available opportunities within the education system and labor market [11,14,15].

Classical theories of career development underpin counseling practices. For example, Holland proposes the RIASEC (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional) model that associates personality typologies with appropriate professional environments [16]. Donald Super [17] points out that a person's self-image and professional aspirations dictate their career goals and trajectories. Social-Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) highlights the importance of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual supports in structuring perceived options. Although these frameworks differ in analytical emphasis, they converge in recognizing that educational choices are shaped by the interaction between personal and contextual factors. However, they offer limited empirical guidance on how counseling exposure, family educational capital, and students' representations intersect at the specific transition to upper secondary education.

Career development unfolds across the life course, consolidating in adolescence, when young people clarify educational goals and relate them to realistic opportunities [18–21]. The terms 'vocational counselling', 'vocational guidance' or 'career counselling' are often used interchangeably to refer to career guidance activities.

Pordelan [22] describes career guidance as a form of support that leads to clarification of the adolescent's real position and increased self-awareness. Other authors emphasize that career guidance facilitates the exploration of vocational interests, helps students navigate structural barriers, and supports informed institutional choice while contributing to the construction of personal and professional identity [23–25]. These contributions provide the theoretical foundation for examining high school track choice as a concrete decision-making moment. In recent years, empirical research has increasingly moved beyond theoretical models to evaluate the effectiveness of structured career guidance interventions, with systematic and longitudinal studies examining measurable outcomes related to decision quality, educational alignment, and equity [26–28].

Factors that shape students' educational choices

The choice of educational path during the transition to high school is influenced by a series of personal, family and contextual factors that interact complexly [11]. Educational aspirations are shaped by the family context. Students from backgrounds with a high educational level tend to choose academic profiles, while the low level of education of parents correlates with more prudent or training-oriented options [29]. Also, the influence

of parents is not only material or symbolic, but also direct: studies show that parents' advice and the aspirations expressed by them guide children's choices, regardless of socioeconomic status.

A study conducted by Lu et al. [30] found that the availability of resources and opportunities was a crucial factor influencing students' preference for a particular major. The study noted that students who had access to resources and opportunities related to a particular major, such as equipment and facilities, were more likely to choose it. In the same manner, Lorenz et al. found that students with high academic performance tended to choose academic tracks, while those with lower academic performance preferred technological-vocational tracks [31].

Contributing to the decision-making framework, Bansal et al. [32] found that gender did not significantly influence students' preferences regarding the direction of study. In contrast, other authors found that girls were more likely to choose academic tracks, while boys preferred technological-vocational tracks or those within sports or the arts [33].

Another factor that influences the choice of vocation in the transition of students from elementary school to high school is the personal set of values [34,35]. People choose environments that fit their previous values and characteristics. In this way, researchers emphasize that students who manifest high values of self-fulfillment and conservatism tend to choose a real high school, a profile among the sciences exactly, and those who have strong values of openness move towards artistic tracks [36].

Together, these findings suggest that educational choice results from the interaction of structural resources, performance indicators, value orientations, and gendered expectations.

The dynamics of the educational decision and the construction of the school identity

The process of adolescent identity formation is closely related to high school choice, as this stage involves the clarification of values, interests, and orientations toward education [37]. Interactions in the school environment influence the development of students' academic identity. Experiences in middle school influence how students anticipate high school status and the meaning they attribute to the next educational level [38].

Educational decisions at this stage involve both autonomy and social positioning [39]. Young people seek coherence between their choice, their perceived abilities, and their emerging sense of self [40]. At the same time, the social dimension of schooling remains central. A sense of belonging, positive peer and teacher relationships, and self-efficacy contribute to students' confidence and motivation during transition [41,42]. These elements influence how students interpret high school either as an opportunity for growth or as a source of uncertainty.

Affective perceptions influence how adolescents evaluate school climate, safety, and the value of education, shaping their future trajectory [43]. Thus, high school choice reflects both structural and identity-related considerations.

Integrative synthesis of literature

Research on the transition from lower to upper secondary education consistently shows that this stage combines academic, social, and identity-related challenges [37,38,42–44]. Studies grounded in developmental and school psychology emphasize autonomy, belonging, and self-efficacy as central dimensions in shaping adolescents' educational expectations [40,41]. However, much of this literature focuses primarily on psychological processes, without systematically integrating structural variables such as family educational capital or institutional access to career guidance [45].

A second line of research examines educational stratification and tracking systems. Empirical evidence shows that parental education significantly influences both track allocation and aspirations toward higher education [46,47]. Longitudinal and comparative analyses further demonstrate that enrollment in academically oriented tracks increases the

probability of tertiary attainment [48,49]. Yet these studies often conceptualize track placement mainly as a structural outcome of social background, without explicitly examining how counselling participation and students' own representations intervene at the concrete moment of transition.

More recent international high-impact scholarships have focused on the effectiveness of career guidance systems. OECD analyses and policy-oriented research highlight that structured guidance frameworks are associated with clearer decision-making strategies, stronger self-efficacy, and improved alignment between education and labor-market expectations [50]. Empirical studies also report positive associations between counselling exposure and higher educational aspirations or more strategic transition planning [49,51–53]. At the same time, disparities in access to counselling services remain evident across social and territorial contexts [54], suggesting that guidance effectiveness is partly conditioned by contextual inequalities [55].

Recent systematic and quasi-experimental research increasingly evaluates career guidance as a measurable intervention rather than solely as a supportive service. A systematic review of classroom-based career counseling highlights both positive associations with academic and career readiness outcomes and the continued scarcity of rigorously designed impact studies [25]. Longitudinal and intervention-based research further indicates that structured guidance can improve subject alignment, decision quality, and career satisfaction, although effects remain context-dependent [26]. Moreover, evidence suggests that the effectiveness of career education may vary across socio-educational groups, raising important questions regarding equity and differentiated impact [27].

Despite these advances, relatively few empirical studies simultaneously integrate counselling participation, family educational capital, track selection, and students' affective and cognitive representations within a single analytical framework. Existing research tends to examine these dimensions separately or at different stages of the educational trajectory. As a result, limited evidence is available on how these factors intersect at the specific decision point of transition to upper secondary education.

The present study addresses this gap by conceptualizing high school track choice as a central decision point that connects counselling exposure, family educational capital, educational aspirations, and perceptions of the education–work link. By integrating these dimensions within a single empirical model at the moment of transition, the study contributes to a more coherent understanding of educational decision-making and its relevance for sustainable educational pathways.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Design

The general goal of the research is to identify a possible model based on vocational and career counseling, which would allow the knowledge of the skills, capacities and abilities of students in the education system, in order to choose a subsequent educational and professional path, in accordance with individual needs and opportunities on the labor market.

Within this framework, the following specific objectives have been formulated:

- O1—identifying the students' options regarding the high school they want to attend;
- O2—identification of the factors influencing the choice of high school;
- O3—exploring the students' perception of high school status;
- O4—investigating students' perceptions of professional opportunities after graduating from high school;

O5—identifying the elements that students consider to be the most important in life.

Based on these objectives, four particular working hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1. *Complex school counseling supports students' "strategic" educational decisions.*

Hypothesis 2. *The high school major track is a central node between family, counseling and the intention to attend college.*

Hypothesis 3. *Representations about the high school-profession link and about the usefulness of higher education mediate educational decisions.*

Hypothesis 4. *Structural factors (age and environment) modulate access to resources and transition strategies.*

The present research has a quantitative, cross-sectional, non-experimental design. It captures, at a certain point, how students in the transition from middle school to high school formulate their educational options and how they are influenced by family, school, counseling, personal values and perceptions of the labor market. The method used is the sociological survey based on a standardized questionnaire, applied to the same group of respondents, without intervention or experimental manipulation by the researcher. This methodological approach was chosen to capture students' educational decision-making at the key transition moment from lower to upper secondary education, while allowing consistent quantitative testing of associations between counseling, family educational capital, contextual factors, and transition strategies. Also, the cross-sectional design does not allow the establishment of causality, but only the formulation of interpretations regarding the associations between variables.

3.2. Participants

The target population is made up of students aged 13–14 who are at the time of choosing high school, respectively, in the transition between middle school and high school.

The actual sample includes 1392 students, selected from schools located both in urban and rural areas in Braşov County, between March and May 2024. Participation was voluntary, and students were included in the research to the extent that they were present at the time of applying the questionnaire and agreed to answer. For contextualization of the sampling frame, county-level administrative reporting indicates that 4617 Grade VIII students in Braşov County were registered for the 2024 National Evaluation (June 2024 session). The reported number provides a reference point for the approximate size of the cohort at the end of lower secondary education in the county [56]. For this reason, the sample is a non-probabilistic one of the convenience types, but large enough to allow robust statistical analyses. Because the sample was non-probabilistic and participation was voluntary, we treat the reported distributions as descriptive for the studied group and avoid interpreting them as population estimates. As this is a non-probabilistic sample of students, the results cannot be strictly generalized to the entire population of secondary school students in Romania but describe the situation and the patterns of relationships identified in this group.

3.3. Data Acquisition

The data collection tool is a structured questionnaire, composed mainly of closed-ended items (nominal and ordinal). Closed-ended items were used to ensure comparability across a large cohort and to enable consistent quantitative testing of associations between variables at the transition moment. However, we acknowledge that this format may reduce the depth of insight into students' motivations and meaning-making; this limitation is addressed explicitly, and future work is recommended to triangulate these findings using qualitative components (e.g., interviews or focus groups). The theoretical constructs and operationalized variables were derived directly from the objectives and hypotheses of the

study. The research was approved by the Council of the Faculty of Sociology and Communication of Transilvania University of Braşov, with approval number 6 of 7 February 2024.

The questionnaire is organized in four main blocks, according to Appendix A Table A1:

Socio-demographic and contextual data—gender, age, environment of residence, parents' level of education, as well as variables regarding the family's influence on the school trajectory (parents who have graduated from high school, parents' opinion about the choice of high school, their perceived influence).

Educational options and representations about high school—questions regarding the decision regarding the high school and the desired profile, the selection criteria, the intention to enroll in several high schools, the perceived link between the chosen profile and the desired profession, the intention to pursue university studies and the perception of the importance of higher education.

Experiences of counseling and educational support—items regarding participation in school counseling activities, the actors involved (headteacher, school counselor, other teachers), the frequency of these activities and the extent to which they are perceived as influencing the choice of high school major track.

Perceptions of high school status, labor market and personal values—items related to the anticipated satisfactions of high school life (acquaintances, friendships, competitions, extracurricular activities, independence from parents), the perceived difficulty of finding a job after high school, the importance of higher education and personal values (what is the “most important thing in life”), cherished human qualities, etc.).

The data were entered into and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 2.2, with a consistency of Cronbach's Alpha of 0.92. Cronbach's alpha reflects internal consistency (reliability) of the questionnaire items, and it does not, by itself, establish construct validity. The questionnaire was initially administered to a small group of students to observe item clarity and response patterns; as no major issues were identified, the research team considered it appropriate to proceed with full-scale data collection.

3.4. Operationalization of Variables

The theoretical constructs and operationalized variables were derived directly from the objectives and hypotheses of the study.

Most of the variables are measured on nominal or ordinal scales, which has guided the type of statistical analyses used (χ^2 tests, Phi and Cramer coefficients, Pearson correlations applied to the numerically treated variables).

Similar survey-based approaches underpin the construction of the present questionnaire and are reported in several studies already discussed in the Introduction and the specialized literature. Iacobescu et al. [12] examine educational transitions using institutionally grounded approaches that focus on support mechanisms during the move from middle to high school. Another study conducted by Bansal et al. [32] employs a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to operationalize family educational capital and students' educational aspirations through standardized categorical measures. These convergent methodological approaches support the relevance of the variables and measurement strategies used in the present study.

3.5. Data Handling Procedures

The data were entered into and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Because the sample was non-probabilistic and participation was voluntary, we treat the reported distributions as descriptive for the studied group and avoid interpreting them as population estimates.

3.6. Data Analysis

Most of the variables are measured on nominal or ordinal scales, which has guided the type of statistical analyses used (χ^2 tests, Phi and Cramer coefficients, Pearson correlations applied to the numerically treated variables).

In addition to statistical significance, we report standardized effect sizes for all key associations: Cramer's V (or ϕ) for chi-square tests and Pearson's r for correlations. For the main correlation coefficients that structure the career decision matrix, we also report 95% confidence intervals (95% CI), computed using Fisher's z transformation, in order to document the precision of the estimates beyond *p*-values.

Given the cross-sectional design, all reported relationships reflect statistical associations observed at a single time point and do not allow conclusions regarding directionality or causal influence between variables.

4. Results

4.1. Socio-Demographic Profile of the Sample

This section outlines the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample in order to contextualize subsequent analyses of educational options, counselling exposure, and family influences. In terms of gender, 58.2% of respondents are male ($n = 810$) and 41.6% are female ($n = 579$). A very small number of cases ($n = 3$; 0.2%) were recorded as non-response. Regarding age, the majority of participants are 14 years old (81.4%; $n = 1133$), while 18.6% ($n = 259$) are 13 years old.

With respect to residence environment, 66.9% of respondents live in urban areas ($n = 931$) and 33.1% in rural areas ($n = 461$). The sample was obtained through voluntary participation and convenience sampling; therefore, these proportions are reported descriptively. For contextual reference, administrative enrollment data for Braşov County (grades 5–8) indicate 71.6% urban and 28.4% rural students, while national figures show 58.77% urban and 41.22% rural distribution [57].

The sample captures students at a critical transition point, when high school choices become concrete educational decisions. Its socio-demographic structure, marked by a slight gender imbalance and a predominantly urban background, provides an important contextual frame for interpreting subsequent analyses. At the same time, the age homogeneity and the urban–rural distribution aligned with county-level patterns support the use of this sample for examining educational options, counselling, and family influences.

4.2. Educational Options and High School Major Track

This section examines students' educational options at the moment of transition to upper secondary education, focusing on four key dimensions: decision certainty, preferred high school track/profile, enrollment strategy, and intention to pursue higher education. Most students report having already decided on a high school. Specifically, 86.3% state that they have made a clear decision, while 10.2% report indecision. This indicates a high level of declared decisional closure at the institutional level, even before examining the specificity of the chosen track.

Regarding the preferred high school profile, 57.8% select the real profile ($n = 805$), making it the dominant option. Philology accounts for 11.4% ($n = 158$), social sciences for 4.3% ($n = 60$), and natural sciences for 3.5% ($n = 49$). Vocational profiles (pedagogical/artistic/theological and sports/military) together represent approximately 7%, while economic and technical profiles each account for less than 3%. A total of 7.5% are coded as undecided and 3.9% as missing. Regarding students' intentions to apply to more than one high school, most students report an intention to apply to more than one high school

(79.5%), while a smaller share plan to enroll in a single institution (16.5%). This pattern reflects a predominantly strategic approach to the transition to upper secondary education.

Similarly, the variable *College_Intent* shows a strong orientation toward higher education, with 83.8% of respondents indicating an intention to attend college and only 10.6% reporting no such intention.

In order to capture how students' educational options are structured according to socio-demographic characteristics, we analyzed the relationships between the desired high school major track, gender and residence environment, between the intention to pursue higher education and these variables, as well as between the intention to enroll in more than one high school and the age of the students, using contingency tables and the chi-square test. Next, we analyzed the relationships between educational options and socio-demographic characteristics, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The relationship between educational options and socio-demographic characteristics.

Relationship	χ^2 (df)	<i>p</i>	Cramer's V	Effect Type	Essential Pattern (on Codes)
Gender $\times$ high school_profile	160,240 (22)	<0.001	0.240	medium	Real profile (1): $\approx$ 49.8% boys vs. $\approx$ 69.4% girls; boys more dispersed on humanistic/vocational/technical profiles; the boys more often indecisive (98/99).
Environment $\times$ high school_profile	272,122 (11)	<0.001	0.442	strong	Urban (1): real profile (1) $\approx$ 68.0%; Rural (2): real profile $\approx$ 37.3%, but $\approx$ 11–12% on philology (2), social sciences (3) and pedagogy (5); with more undecided (98).
Gender $\times$ College_intention	34,868 (4)	<0.001	0.112	Small–medium	“YES” (1) at college: $\approx$ 85.9% of boys (valid answers) vs. $\approx$ 92.5% of girls; The intention is high in both genders, slightly higher in girls.
Environment $\times$ intent_college	7117 (2)	0.028	0.072	small	“YES” (1) at the university: $\approx$ 89.7% urban vs. $\approx$ 86.9% rural; significant difference, but little effect; pro-faculty orientation in both backgrounds.
Age $\times$ more_high_schools_intentions	935,847 (2)	<0.001	0.820	very powerful	13 years: $\approx$ 13.9% “YES” (1), $\approx$ 86.1% “NO” (2) and $\approx$ 22% absent (99); 14 years: $\approx$ 95.1% “YES” (1); The transition to 14 brings a massive strategy of enrolling in more high schools.

Source: SPSS database processing.

Regarding the high school major track, the results presented in Table 1 indicate significant associations with both gender and residence environment. The real profile is the dominant option for both sexes, but the share is noticeably higher among girls: about half of boys and almost 70% of girls indicate this profile as a preference. The data show that boys are more frequently found than girls in humanities profiles of the social sciences and in vocational profiles, while girls are better represented in the profiles of the natural sciences. Boys are, in relative terms, more often indecisive or without a clearly formulated profile. The relationship between gender and high school major track is statistically significant and shows us the magnitude of the effect of average intensity ($\chi^2(22) = 160.24$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.240).

We note that the differences are even more pronounced when the high school major track is related to the environment of residence ($\chi^2(11) = 272.12$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.442). The real profile is more frequently selected by girls and by students from

urban areas, while rural students show greater dispersion across profiles and higher levels of indecision.

Regarding the intention to pursue higher education, we find a series of significant relationships with gender and, to a lesser extent, with the environment of residence. We notice that the intention to go to college is very high among both genders, but more pronounced among the female gender: about 86% of boys who have clearly expressed an option say they want to attend college, compared to about 93% of girls. The relationship is significant, but the effect is modest ($\chi^2(4) = 34.87, p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.112$). From an environmental perspective, almost 90% of urban students and about 87% of rural students declare their intention to pursue higher education; the difference is statistically significant, but the effect size is very small ($\chi^2(2) = 7.12, p = 0.028$; Cramer's $V = 0.072$). These results suggest a generally high level of educational aspirations, with a slight advantage for girls and students in urban areas.

The strongest association is found between age and intention to apply to more than one high school ($\chi^2(2) = 935.85, p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.820$), indicating substantial variation between 13- and 14-year-old students. As the entrance exam approaches, students become much more strategic in managing educational options, preferring to maximize the chances of success by submitting files to several high schools.

To conclude this section, the main patterns regarding students' educational options can be summarized as follows:

- Most students report having already decided on a high school, although uncertainty remains for some regarding the specific profile.
- The real profile is the dominant choice, especially among girls and urban students, while rural students show more diversified options and higher indecision.
- Intentions to pursue higher education are high across all groups, with only minor differences by gender and residence environment.
- Enrollment strategies become markedly more strategic with age, as older students increasingly apply to multiple high schools.

4.3. Relationships Between Career Counseling, High School Major Track, and Intention to Continue Studies

a. Counseling and choosing the high school major track

The results we have obtained indicate a very strong link between the targeted high school major track and the students' participation in career counseling activities. Chi-square analysis indicates a significant association between high school profile and participation in career counseling activities ($\chi^2(22) = 1280.21, p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.678$). Students oriented toward real and technical/natural science profiles report substantially higher participation rates, while non-participation is more frequent among students targeting social sciences, pedagogical, and economic profiles, as well as among undecided students.

To further examine the relationship between career counseling and students' choice of high school major track, we analyzed participation in counseling activities, the frequency of involvement, and the perceived influence of counseling across different profile options. These associations are summarized in Table 2.

The results reported in Table 2 indicate a very strong association between the preferred high school major track and participation in career counseling activities. Associations between profile choice and frequency of counseling activities are also significant ($\chi^2(44) = 1077.20, p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.440$). Students selecting real and technical profiles report higher levels of repeated participation (2–3 participations or more), whereas non-participation is more prevalent in humanistic and vocational tracks.

Table 2. The relationship between the high school major track and career counseling.

Relationship	χ^2 (df)	<i>p</i>	Cramer's V	Essential Descriptive Elements
High_school_profile $\times$ counseling_participation	1280.21 (22)	<0.001	0.678	Real profile and technical/nature profiles: $\approx 100\%$ participated; social sciences: 10% participated, 87% did not; pedagogical: 4% participated, 94% did not; Undecided: only $\approx 33\%$ participated.
High_school_profile $\times$ no. Of counseling_activities	1077.20 (44)	<0.001	0.440	There is no non-participation in the real profile; Over a fifth were involved in 2 or more activities. In the social, pedagogical and economic sciences, more than 36–68% did not participate at all.
High_school_profile $\times$ influence_of_counseling_on_choosing_the_profile	764.64 (44)	<0.001	0.371	In terms of real profile, $\sim 45\%$ say that their activities have influenced them “to a large extent”, and $\sim 41\%$ “to a small extent”. In the social sciences and pedagogical profiles, the share of those who indicate a high influence is low, with many non-responses.

Source: SPSS database processing.

Regarding the perceived influence of counseling on the choice of profile, we find a significant association between the desired profile and the way in which students assess the role of these activities ($\chi^2(44) = 764.64$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.371). Students oriented toward real and natural science profiles report a stronger perceived influence compared to other groups. On the other hand, in profiles where non-participation is frequent (e.g., social sciences or pedagogical/artistic/theological), the share of students who attribute a strong influence on counselors is low, and non-responses and inconclusive answers are numerous.

b. Counseling and intention to pursue higher education

Significant associations are observed between intention to attend college and participation in career counseling ($\chi^2(4) = 320.70$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.339). Students intending to pursue higher education report higher participation rates compared to those without such intentions.

To examine the relationship between career counseling and students' intention to pursue higher education, we analyzed participation in counseling activities and the frequency of involvement, as summarized in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the frequency of counseling activities also differs significantly by college intention ($\chi^2(8) = 184.38$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.257), with higher levels of repeated participation among students expressing plans for university studies. Perceived influence of counseling is similarly associated with college intention ($\chi^2(8) = 185.57$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.258). The strongest association is found between intention to attend college and perception of the importance of higher education for employment ($\chi^2(4) = 924.10$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.576) (Table 3).

c. High School Enrollment Counseling and Strategies

A significant association is identified between intention to apply to more than one high school and participation in career counseling ($\chi^2(4) = 288.83$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.322). Students intending to apply to multiple institutions report higher participation rates, and students who do not formulate a clear intention regarding the enrollment strategy are found in the area of non-participation in counseling or non-response. The association is statistically significant and of medium intensity, which suggests that familiarization with counseling activities is closely related to the adoption of a more sophisticated high school

enrollment strategy. The relationship between high school enrollment strategies and career counseling was examined, as shown in Table 4.

Table 3. Intention to attend college, counseling and perception of higher education.

Relationship	χ^2 (df)	<i>p</i>	Cramer's V	Essentials
College Intent $\times$ Participation in Counseling	320.70 (4)	<0.001	0.339	Those who want to attend college have participated much more frequently in counseling than those who do not.
College Intent $\times$ Number of Counseling Activities	184.38 (8)	<0.001	0.257	Students with college intentions have, on average, more counseling activities and less often "not at all".
College Intent $\times$ Influence of Counseling	185.57 (8)	<0.001	0.258	Among those who want college, most say they have been influenced (to a small or large extent).
College Intent $\times$ The Importance of Higher Education	924.10 (4)	<0.001	0.576	Almost everyone who wants college believes that higher education helps to find a job.

Source: SPSS database processing.

Table 4. Intention to enroll in more than one high school and career counseling.

Relationship	χ^2 (df)	<i>p</i>	Cramer's V	Key Numerical Indicator(s) (N, %)	Essentials
Intention to enroll in several high schools $\times$ Participation in counseling	288.83 (4)	<0.001	0.322	Among students intending to apply to several high schools, 939/1082 valid answers (86.8%) report participation in counselling; among those not intending to apply to several high schools, 161/209 valid answers (77.0%) report participation.	Students who intend to enroll in more than one high school participated in counseling more frequently than those who do not; Those without a clear intention are predominantly outside counseling.
Intention to enroll in several high schools $\times$ Who carried out the counseling	248.74 (6)	<0.001	0.299	Among students intending to apply to several high schools, 767/980 valid answers (78.3%) received counselling mainly from the class teacher, 169/980 (17.2%) from the school counsellor, and 44/980 (4.5%) from other teachers; 126/1106 (11.4%) did not participate in any counselling.	For students with a clear intention (especially those who target several high schools), counseling is mostly carried out by the headmaster, completed by the school counselor.
Intention to enroll in several high schools $\times$ Influence of counseling on the decision	212.44 (8)	<0.001	0.276	Among students intending to apply to several high schools, 431/976 valid answers (44.2%) report "great influence" of counselling and 418/976 (42.8%) "small influence"; among those not intending to apply to several high schools, 69/177 valid answers (39.0%) report "great influence" and 85/177 (48.0%) "small influence".	Students who intend to enroll in more than one high school declare, in a high proportion, that counseling activities have had an influence on them (to a small or large extent).

Source: SPSS database processing.

As shown in Table 4, students who express a clear intention to apply to multiple high schools report more frequent exposure to career counseling and more clearly identify the actors involved in the guidance process. In these cases, counseling is most often carried out by the class teacher, followed by the school counselor, with a more limited contribution from other teachers. The relationship between enrollment strategy and the actor providing counseling is also significant ($\chi^2(6) = 248.74, p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.299$), with class teachers most frequently reported as the main counseling provider (Table 4).

Perceived influence of counseling is significantly associated with enrollment strategy ($\chi^2(8) = 212.44, p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.276$), with students intending to apply to multiple high schools reporting stronger perceived influence.

The results presented in this section indicate that career counseling is closely linked to how students structure their educational decisions at the transition to upper secondary education. Across all analyses, counseling emerges as a contextual factor that covaries with decisional clarity and reported educational strategies within this sample, educational aspirations, and enrollment strategies.

- Participation in career counseling is strongly associated with the choice of high school major track, with students oriented toward real, technical, and natural sciences profiles reporting substantially higher involvement, while non-participation is more frequent among undecided students and those targeting humanistic or vocational profiles (a).
- Counseling is also consistently linked to intentions to pursue higher education, as students expressing plans to attend university report more frequent participation and a clearer perception of the relevance of higher education for future employment (b).

Finally, exposure to counseling is associated with more strategic enrollment behaviors, particularly the intention to apply to multiple high schools, suggesting a higher level of awareness and planning among counseled students (c).

4.4. The Role of the Family in Shaping the Educational Path

This section examines whether family educational capital structures students' educational choices, aspirations, and access to counseling resources. Significant associations are observed between parental educational level and high school major track ($\chi^2(44) = 995.64, p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.423$). Students whose parents completed high school are more frequently oriented toward the real profile, whereas higher levels of indecision are observed among students whose parents did not complete high school or whose parental education is unknown.

The relationship between parents' education and the intention to pursue university studies is very strong, $\chi^2(8) = 426.186, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.391$. The proportion of students expressing intention to attend college increases with parental educational level (Table 5). At the level of the entire sample, 1166 out of 1392 students (83.8%) declare their intention to pursue university studies. Thus, the data we analyzed support a clear direction: as the educational capital of the family grows, so does the likelihood that students will design an educational trajectory that explicitly includes university studies.

Parental education is similarly associated with perceptions of the usefulness of higher education for labor market access ($\chi^2(8) = 414.81, p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.386$). Students whose parents completed high school are more likely to consider higher education as advantageous for employment.

Considering the data we have analyzed, we can say that participation in career counseling activities is closely related to parental education, $\chi^2(8) = 630.980, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.476$. Participation rates are higher among students whose parents completed high school and lower among those whose parents did not complete high school (Table 5). The results suggest that students from families with low educational capital are not only more

vulnerable from the perspective of designing the educational pathway, but also much less anchored in the formal support resources offered by the school. The detailed relationships between parental education, students' educational choices, counseling participation, and decision-making criteria are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. The educational status of parents, their role in decision-making and the educational path of the students.

Relationship	χ^2 (df)	<i>p</i>	Cramer's V	Key Numerical Indicator(s) (N, %)	Synthetic Interpretation
Parents graduated from high school $\times$ High school major track	995.64 (44)	<0.001	0.423	When both parents completed high school (category 1), 770/1174 students (65.6%) choose a real profile (1), and only 44/1174 (3.8%) are undecided or non-respondents (98–99). When neither parent completed high school (category 4), 0/55 students choose a real profile, while 41/55 (74.5%) are undecided or non-respondents (98–99). For missing information on parents' education (99), 49/68 students (72.1%) are undecided or non-respondents (98–99). Intention to attend university is high across all groups, but highest where at least one parent completed high school: 1001/1148 valid answers (87.2%) for category 1, 59/68 (86.8%) for category 2, and 26/27 (96.3%) for category 3. For students whose parents did not complete high school (category 4), 39/46 valid answers (84.8%) intend to attend university. When both parents completed high school (category 1), 1142/1142 valid answers (100%) believe that university studies ease access to employment. Where neither parent completed high school (category 4), only 23/44 valid answers (52.3%) share this belief; for missing information (99), 34/60 valid answers (56.7%) consider university as helpful.	The educational status of the parents is strongly associated with the type of profile chosen; Students with educated parents focus especially on the real profile.
Parents graduated from high school $\times$ Intention to attend college	426.19 (8)	<0.001	0.391	Students whose parents completed high school (category 1) report high participation in counselling: 1000/1153 valid answers (86.7%) "yes". For students whose parents did not complete high school (category 4), only 9/36 valid answers (25.0%) report participation, while 27/36 (75.0%) report no participation.	Students with both parents who are high school graduates declare their intention to pursue university studies much more frequently.
Parents graduated from high school $\times$ The importance of higher education	414.81 (8)	<0.001	0.386	Among students who report that the high school major track decision is mainly theirs ($N = 1174$), 66.5% prioritise proximity and 18.4% the fit with the desired profession, indicating clear and mostly pragmatic/vocational criteria.	Almost all students believe that higher education helps to find a job, but the distribution of answers differs depending on the parents' education.
Parents graduated from high school $\times$ Participation in counseling	630.98 (8)	<0.001	0.476	The share of students choosing a real profile is very similar when parents encourage the same pathway (59.0%) and when they are neutral (55.4%), with comparable levels of indecision/non-response, in line with the non-significant association.	Students with more educated parents participate in counseling more often and have fewer non-responses than those whose parents did not graduate from high school.
High school decision factor $\times$ choice criterion	2706.17 (70)	<0.001	0.527		When the student states that the decision belongs to him, he invokes mainly criteria related to skills and career; When the decision belongs to the parents or others, the criteria become more diffuse or relational.
Parents' influence on the trajectory $\times$ High school major track	76.99 (66)	0.167	0.096		There is no significant association between the type of perceived parental influence and the chosen high school major track.

Source: SPSS database processing.

As shown in Table 5, the relationship between the decision-maker regarding the choice of the high school major track and the criteria invoked for this choice confirms an important role of the students' autonomy, $\chi^2(70) = 2706.170$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.527$. When students report that the decision primarily belongs to them, they more frequently indicate proximity, professional fit, or personal aptitude as selection criteria. On the other hand, among the students who declare that parents are the main decision-makers ($N = 65$), none specifies a concrete criterion such as proximity, profession, skills or the quality of the school. These distributions (presented in Table 5) show that where the student explicitly assumes the decision, the selection criteria are much more clearly formulated, while decisions outsourced to parents or social networks are rarely supported by specific vocational or academic criteria.

In contrast, no statistically significant association is observed between the type of perceived parental influence on educational trajectory and the chosen high school profile ($\chi^2(66) = 76.99$, $p = 0.167$; Cramer's $V = 0.096$). This lack of significant differences suggests that it is not the explicit message "follow the same path as us" that differentiates the profile options, but rather the actual level of education of parents and the way in which this may be associated with differences in resources, expectations and concrete support for the educational path of students.

Taken together, the findings of this section show that family educational capital is strongly associated with differences in students' reported educational choices within the studied cohort, aspirations, and access to counseling. The main patterns can be summarized as follows:

- Higher parental education is associated with clearer profile choices and a stronger orientation toward academic pathways.
- Lower parental education is linked to higher indecision and less clearly defined educational trajectories.
- Intentions to pursue higher education and beliefs in its labor market value increase with parental educational level.
- Participation in career counseling is markedly lower among students from families with limited educational capital, despite their greater need for guidance.

4.5. Perception of High School Status and Professional Opportunities

A majority of students (81.0%; $n = 1127$) report that high school helps them acquire knowledge and prepare for a desired profession, while 19.0% ($n = 265$) do not share this perception.

Relational and extracurricular dimensions are less frequently indicated as sources of satisfaction. Making new friendships is mentioned by 13.7% ($n = 191$), participation in activities by 12.1% ($n = 169$), independence from parents by 7.0% ($n = 98$), and participation in competitions by 0.6% ($n = 8$).

In terms of difficulties and pressures, we note that students identify a wide range of problems, but the answers focus mainly on two areas: material resources and a conglomerate of unspecified "other problems"; 40.4% ($n = 562$) identify lack of financial resources as the main problem of high school students in Romania. Bullying or discrimination is indicated by 4.5% ($n = 63$), teachers' expectations by 1.6% ($n = 22$), and 53.5% ($n = 745$) select other problems.

More than half of respondents (56.1%) consider it difficult or very difficult to find employment after graduating from high school. A neutral position is adopted by 34.5%, while only 2.4% evaluate labor market access as easy or very easy. In contrast, 87.9% believe that holding a university degree facilitates employment. This distribution shows us that, in the perception of the majority, the high school diploma is not enough for easy integration

into the labor market. Associations between these perceptions and educational choices are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Satisfaction related to high school, perception of the educational path and occupational context.

Relationship	χ^2 (df)	<i>p</i>	Cramer's V	Key Numerical Elements
Satisfaction_knowledge $\times$ high_school_profile	695,780 (11)	<0.001	0.707	Of the satisfied students ($N = 1127$), 788 (69.9%) choose a real profile; of those dissatisfied ($N = 265$), only 17 (6.4%) choose a real profile, and 54 (20.4%) are undecided/missing vs. 104 (9.2%) in the satisfied group.
Satisfaction_knowledge $\times$ link_high_course_profession	892,866 (4)	<0.001	0.801	1030 of those satisfied (91.4%) see a close link between high school and profession; Among the dissatisfied, only 32 (12.1%) have the same perception, and 120 (45.3%) consider that the profile should not be linked to the profession.
Satisfaction_knowledge $\times$ intent_college	29,102 (2)	<0.001	0.145	Among satisfied students, 970 out of 1079 valid answers (89.9%) declare the intention to attend college; Among those dissatisfied, 196 out of 234 (83.8%) have the same intention.
High_school_job_difficulty $\times$ college_intent	270,613 (10)	<0.001	0.312	If finding a job with only high school is perceived as “very hard”, over 89–96% declare their intention to attend college; If perceived as “easy/very easy”, only ~32–33% plan to go to college.
High_school_job_difficulty $\times$ high_school_problem	15,872 (15)	0.391	0.062	The distributions by problem type do not differ significantly between the perceived levels of difficulty in finding a job after high school.

Source: SPSS database processing.

As shown in Table 6, a significant relationship is observed between satisfaction with the formative role of high school and preferred profile ($\chi^2(11) = 695.78$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.707$). Students reporting satisfaction are more frequently oriented toward the real profile.

The relationship between satisfaction with the formative role of high school and the perception of the link between profile and profession is even more pronounced, $\chi^2(4) = 892.866$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.801$. Students who report satisfaction more frequently (91.4%) indicate a perceived correspondence between school track and professional trajectory. The results indicate that students who perceive high school as relevant for knowledge and professional training are more likely to report a more coherent representation of the educational path, in which the school profile is explicitly integrated into the professional project.

The link between satisfaction with the knowledge acquired and the intention to pursue university studies is also significant, but with a moderate effect, $\chi^2(2) = 29.102$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.145$. Of the satisfied students, 970 out of 1079 valid answers (89.9%) declare their intention to attend college, compared to 196 out of 234 (83.8%) among those who are dissatisfied.

Perceived difficulty of finding employment with only a high school diploma is significantly associated with college intention ($\chi^2(10) = 270.61$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.312$). No significant association is observed between perceived job difficulty and the type of main high school problem identified ($\chi^2(15) = 15.87$, $p = 0.391$) (Table 6).

4.6. Value Elements and Axiological Orientations of Students

Our analysis indicates that the general life values of the students are not significantly structured by the chosen high school major track. The chi-square test we applied for the relationship between the “most important thing in life” and the high school major track is not statistically significant, $\chi^2(132) = 123.517$, $p = 0.689$, and the effect size is very

small (Cramer's $V = 0.090$). At the sample level, sincerity is the most frequently indicated value (47.4%), followed by family security (11.6%), justice (7.5%), and friendship (7.3%). These distributions appear across all profile categories. Two complementary explanations are plausible: first, values at ages 13–14 may still be in formation and may be expressed in socially desirable terms; second, the value measures used here capture salience via single-choice items rather than multi-dimensional value constructs, which may attenuate detectable associations.

Similarly, no statistically significant association is identified between the human quality considered most valuable and intention to pursue university studies ($\chi^2(20) = 21.83$, $p = 0.350$; Cramer's $V = 0.089$). In this case, we can outline some clear preferences at the sample level: fairness/honesty is the most frequently indicated human quality (46.7%), followed by optimism (16.3%) and trust in people (7.6%). Intention to attend college remains high across all value categories (Table 7).

Table 7. The relationship between personal values, human qualities and educational options.

Relationship	χ^2 (df)	p	Cramer's V	Main Conclusion
Important_thing_in_life $\times$ high_school_profile	123,517 (132)	0.689	0.090	There is no significant association between the “most important thing in life” and the profile.
Human_quality $\times$ intent_college	21,830 (20)	0.350	0.089	The intention to attend college is high for all types of qualities, with no significant differences.

Source: SPSS database processing.

4.7. Career Decision Matrix: Correlations Between Educational Options, School Counseling and Family Context

The correlations table shows us that the students' career decision is organized around three main “pillars”: the high school major track and the perceived connection with the profession, family resources (parents' level of education) and the school counseling experience, to which is added, to a moderate extent, the environmental context and perceptions about the difficulty of employment with only high school studies.

a. Hypothesis 1 testing

The intensity and influence of school counseling can be positively associated with the complexity of students' options (enrollment in several high schools), with the clarity of the chosen profile and with the intention to pursue higher education (hypothesis 1). The correlational results help us support this hypothesis on several levels.

First of all, the strategy of enrolling in several high schools is closely related to the counseling experience: the intention to enroll in several high schools is moderately positively correlated with participation in counseling activities ($r = 0.322$, 95% CI [0.27, 0.37]), with the person who performs the counseling ($r = 0.356$) and with the perceived influence of counseling ($r = 0.369$). Even if the link with the actual number of activities is more modest ($r = 0.113$), the direction remains the same: students reporting more intense and influential counseling also report more elaborate strategies for managing the transition to high school, diversifying their options.

Secondly, counseling can also be correlated with decisions regarding the continuation of studies. The intention to attend college is positively associated with participation in counseling ($r = 0.349$ 95% CI [0.30, 0.39]), with whom the counseling was performed ($r = 0.125$), with the frequency of activities ($r = 0.113$) and with their perceived influence ($r = 0.238$). Even if some correlations are only of low to medium intensity, the pattern is consistent: where counseling is more present and relevant to students, the probability

that they will design an educational path that includes university studies also increases. Finally, counseling is also related to a high school major track. The chosen profile is strongly correlated with participation in counseling ($r = 0.490$), with the perceived influence of counseling ($r = 0.467$), but also with the person who performs it ($r = 0.292$) and with the number of activities ($r = 0.177$). These results suggest that, beyond specific information, counseling indicators are associated with more structured reported profile choices, inserted in a longer-term educational project.

b. Hypothesis 2 testing

In the plan of hypothesis 2, the choice of the high school major track can be associated with the educational capital of the family, as well as with school counseling and with the intention to continue studies in higher education. From the point of view of educational aspirations, the high school major track is strongly correlated with the intention to attend college ($r = 0.507$ 95% CI [0.47, 0.55]). Thus, we can see that students from certain profiles—especially theoretical/academic ones—tend to design more frequently paths that include university studies, while other profiles are probably associated with options more oriented towards rapid insertion into the labor market. The profile is also closely linked to the educational capital of the family. The correlation between the profile and the fact that parents have graduated from high school is high ($r = 0.452$, 95% CI [0.41, 0.49]), which suggests that students from families with a higher educational level tend to choose profiles that maximize the chances of continuing their studies. This relationship is doubled by the strong association between the profile and the perception that higher education is important for finding a job ($r = 0.464$). In other words, the chosen profile reflects not only skills or interests, but also an educational habitus built in the family, in which the faculty is seen as a natural and useful step. The third dimension is related to school counseling. As mentioned, the profile correlates strongly with participation in counseling ($r = 0.490$) and its perceived influence ($r = 0.467$), but also with the person providing counseling ($r = 0.292$). This indicates that the choice of profile is not the exclusive result of the family context, but also of exposure to institutional guidance resources, which can strengthen or recalibrate students' expectations. Overall, we perceive the high school major track as a central node in the matrix of career decision: it concentrates effects of family, counseling and representations about higher education and, in turn, is associated with the intention to continue education.

c. Testing hypothesis 3

Students who perceive a clear link between the high school major track and the desired profession consider higher education important and are satisfied with the formative role of high school, expressing more frequently their intention to attend college. The variable that captures the perceived link between high school and the profession has strong and average correlations with a number of educational options. It is closely associated with the high school major track ($r = 0.499$ 95% CI [0.46, 0.54]), with the satisfaction with the fact that high school helps to acquire the knowledge necessary for the profession ($r = 0.442$ 95% CI [0.40, 0.48]) and with the intention to attend college ($r = 0.346$). Students who see high school as an integrated stage in a coherent professional path are also the most inclined to continue with university studies. Similarly, the perception of the importance of higher education is strongly linked to the intention to attend college ($r = 0.452$), the high school major track ($r = 0.464$) and the level of education of parents ($r = 0.327$). This variable works as a bridge between the family context, the profile options and the plans for continuing education: where college is perceived as essential for professional success, the probability that students will explicitly formulate their intention to follow it also increases.

Another important piece that resulted from our analysis is represented by the perceived difficulty of finding a job only with high school studies, moderately associated with

the intention to attend college ($r = 0.245$) and weaker with the perceived importance of higher education ($r = 0.066$) and with the high school-profession link ($r = 0.076$). Thus, we notice that students who believe that it is very difficult to engage only with high school seem to be more motivated to consider college as a necessary step and to build a continuous educational path. Together, through these correlations, we manage to support the idea that cognitive representations, the high school-profession link, the usefulness of higher education and the formative role of high school are not mere opinions, but elements that coherently structure profile decisions and plans for continuing education.

d. Testing of hypothesis 4

Our analysis indicates that age and residence environment are associated with differences in counselling indicators and transition strategies (e.g., applying to multiple high schools), without implying causal effects. Age shows us a strong negative correlation with the intention to enroll in more than one high school ($r = -0.445$ 95% CI $[-0.49, -0.40]$), which reflects the clear difference in the sample between 13 and 14-year-old students in this behavior. At the same time, we observe that age is negatively associated with participation in counseling ($r = -0.140$), with who performs counseling ($r = -0.091$) and with the perceived influence of counseling ($r = -0.096$). These results suggest that, although as the moment of decision approaches, students become more active in the enrollment strategy, not everyone benefits equally from guidance resources, and age is associated with differences in reported access and perceived relevance.

At the same time, the residential environment has an equally important role. According to the correlations we have made, we observe that it is strongly associated with the person who performs the counseling ($r = 0.624$), with the influence of counseling ($r = 0.422$) and moderately with the frequency of activities ($r = 0.334$) and participation in counseling ($r = 0.114$). The environment can also be correlated with the high school major track ($r = 0.118$) and with the intention to enroll in more high schools ($r = 0.202$ 95% CI $[0.15, 0.25]$), but also—even if weaker—with the intention to attend college ($r = 0.059$). The results we have obtained suggest that the structure of educational offers and counseling services differs between urban and rural areas, and these differences translate into distinct strategies for managing the transition to high school and, indirectly, into educational aspirations.

4.8. Multivariate Regression Models

To strengthen analytical robustness and account for potential confounding, we estimated multivariate regression models. First, we fitted a binary logistic regression predicting intention to pursue university studies (Yes vs. No), including gender, residence environment (urban/rural), age, parental educational capital (number of parents who completed high school), and counselling participation. The model shows significant independent associations for gender and parental educational capital. Specifically, female respondents had higher odds of reporting university intention (OR = 2.43; 95% CI $[1.41, 4.19]$; $p = 0.001$), while parental educational capital was the strongest correlate of university intention (OR = 4.42; 95% CI $[2.82, 6.91]$; $p < 0.001$). In this adjusted model, residence environment and age were not significant, and counselling participation did not remain statistically significant after controlling for sociodemographic factors and parental educational capital ($N = 1236$; McFadden pseudo- $R^2 \approx 0.082$). This pattern suggests that bivariate links between counselling indicators and university intention may be partly accounted for by family educational resources, without implying causality.

Second, to examine high school track/profile choice, we fitted a multinomial logistic regression using four aggregated categories (Theoretical–Real; Theoretical–Humanities; Technological; Vocational), with Theoretical–Real as the reference category. Predic-

tors included gender, residence, age, parental educational capital, and counselling exposure level (derived from the reported number of counselling activities). Results indicate that urban residence, higher parental educational capital, and greater counselling exposure are associated with a lower relative risk of choosing non-real tracks compared to the Theoretical–Real track ($N = 1152$; McFadden pseudo- $R^2 \approx 0.134$). For instance, for Theoretical–Humanities vs. Theoretical–Real, urban residence was associated with $RRR = 0.39$ (95% CI [0.27, 0.58]; $p < 0.001$), parental educational capital with $RRR = 0.27$ (95% CI [0.16, 0.48]; $p < 0.001$), and counselling exposure with $RRR = 0.56$ (95% CI [0.45, 0.69]; $p < 0.001$). Similar patterns were observed for Technological (e.g., parental educational capital: $RRR = 0.06$; 95% CI [0.03, 0.10]; $p < 0.001$) and Vocational (counselling exposure: $RRR = 0.37$; 95% CI [0.19, 0.69]; $p = 0.002$) relative to Theoretical–Real. Given the cross-sectional design, these results are interpreted as adjusted associations, indicating that contextual factors and resources—especially family educational capital—co-vary with track choices alongside counselling indicators, without supporting causal inference.

Although multivariate models adjust for several covariates, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents causal interpretation. The models identify patterns of statistical co-variation rather than directional effects.

5. Discussion

Given the cross-sectional design, the following discussion interprets the findings as associations and does not make causal claims.

A. School counseling is a central associated factor in reported educational planning

The findings are consistent with Hypothesis 1 and indicate that exposure to structured school counseling covaries with more articulated educational planning and clearer post-secondary intentions. In our data, this pattern should be interpreted as co-variation at a single time point and may also reflect self-selection (e.g., students with clearer plans may seek counseling more often) and/or differences between schools in the availability of guidance services. Furthermore, reported participation and perceived influence of counseling activities are positively associated with students' long-term educational planning and clarification of their future academic paths. For example, the relevant correlations indicate that students who report higher counseling exposure also report their intention to pursue higher education in a more structured way, compared to those who do not benefit from such services. Rather than implying an effect of counseling, these results suggest that counseling participation is a marker of students' broader informational and support context at the transition moment.

Our results are broadly consistent with findings reported in prior studies from other contexts; however, because our data come from a single Romanian county (Braşov) and the study uses a cross-sectional, convenience sample, we avoid generalising beyond the sampled population. For example, evidence from studies conducted in the United States suggests that implementing comprehensive school counseling models and a low student-to-counselor ratio has been associated with more informed academic decisions and with higher rates of continuing formal education [51,52]. For example, in nationwide research, ref. [51] finds that students from underrepresented groups who frequently interact with school counselors develop stronger post-secondary aspirations and better preparation for faculty choice. Similarly, ref. [52] highlight through a quasi-experimental analysis that supplementing the number of counselors in a high school (thus reducing the number of students per counselor) has a positive causal effect on the college enrollment rate of graduates. In addition, ref. [53] demonstrate that continuous participation in counseling activities helps students make clearer academic choices and helps them plan their career path. In a

similar way, ref. [54] highlight significant differences between students who understand the function of counseling and those who are not exposed to such activities, concluding that access to counseling drives better structured decisions, especially in contexts where students have to manage complex educational transitions. While these studies provide external evidence (including causal findings in quasi-experimental designs), our study documents associations within a specific local context and cannot test whether counseling causes the observed differences. Such evidence supports the idea that students' access to complex school counseling (including academic, vocational and socio-emotional support) helps them make strategic decisions about their educational future [51,52].

B. The family is an important factor in the development of the student

Beyond the general claim that 'family matters', our contribution is to quantify how parental educational capital co-varies with (i) students' track/profile choice, (ii) decisional clarity, and (iii) university intention at the Romanian lower-to-upper secondary transition, and to show that track/profile choice acts as an integrative decision point linking family and counselling indicators. In our data, students from families with at least upper secondary education are less often undecided, more frequently select theoretical tracks, and more often report university as a natural continuation of their educational path. The results of our study indicate that the educational level of parents is significantly associated with the chosen high school major track, the clarity of educational options and the intention to pursue university studies. This direction is confirmed by recent studies, which emphasize the role of family educational capital in shaping school aspirations. Ref. [58] shows that parents with higher education transmit strong expectations to their children regarding the continuation of education, and ref. [59] highlights that the influence of parents is highly important in establishing vocational aspirations, especially in the context of theoretical tracks.

These results are consistent with our data, and demonstrate that students from families with high school or higher education are less often undecided, choose theoretical profiles and see college as a natural part of their career. The importance of the high school major track (educational track) is as a central node for the interconnection of family influences and counseling on students' decisions to pursue university studies. This central role of the high school major track is also supported by the literature. Numerous comparative studies have shown that the educational track in high school is strongly linked to the subsequent trajectory of students towards higher education. Importantly, the multivariate models (Section 4.8) indicate that parental educational capital remains associated with track/profile selection after adjustment for residence context and counselling exposure, supporting the interpretation that family resources co-vary with educational choices beyond simple bivariate patterns.

For example, in a longitudinal study conducted in the United States, ref. [25] found that high school graduates in the academic track (university-oriented profile) were significantly more likely to obtain a college degree than their peers who had followed non-academic tracks. The authors show that belonging to an academically oriented profile increases the chances of completing higher education, highlighting the lasting influence of the high school track on the educational path [25]. Accordingly, international research on highly differentiated educational systems (tracking) suggests that the high school track also acts as a mechanism for transmitting the influence of the environment of origin: family factors (such as socio-economic status or parents' educational capital) exert their effect on students' aspirations indirectly, by directing the student to a certain profile [51]. Buchmann and Park [26] show, comparing the American system (relatively comprehensive) with the South Korean one (strongly hierarchized by streams), that students from favored socio-economic backgrounds disproportionately end up in theoretical streams, which considerably increases their chances of aspiring to and accessing college.

C. The perception of the future profession matters in shaping a strategy

The data we obtained support hypothesis 3, indicating that students' perceptions of the link between high school studies and the future profession, as well as the usefulness of a university degree, are associated with their educational decisions. Although this pattern is consistent with a mediational interpretation, mediation cannot be tested or inferred causally within a cross-sectional design. This interpretation is consistent with expectancy–value theory, which emphasizes the role of perceived utility in shaping educational choices [60]. In this well-established theoretical framework, the perceived usefulness of studies is a key predictor of educational choices: the more a student believes that education will bring him concrete benefits (a desired career, higher income, status), the more likely he is to invest effort and want to continue schooling [60]. Recent empirical evidence confirms these relationships. Experimental evidence further shows that emphasizing the practical relevance of school subjects for future careers strengthens students' academic motivation and post-secondary intentions [61]. In addition, another study [62] highlights that the perceived relevance of tertiary education determines the level of involvement of students in career path planning, and moreover, it is demonstrated that students calibrate their educational goals according to how they attribute employability value to education [63]. Together, these findings suggest that when students perceive a coherent connection between education and future employability, they are more likely to articulate ambitious and structured educational plans. In our data, these links should be read as concurrent associations among perceptions and intentions reported at the same time point.

D. Age and environment can be vectors that are the basis of a high school choice strategy

Structural factors such as students' age and residence environment (rural/urban) are associated with differences in reported access to educational resources and in reported transition strategies. The literature confirms the influence of these structural factors on the educational path. From a developmental perspective, increasing age is associated with stronger future orientation and more concrete educational planning [64]. This pattern aligns with our finding that older students adopt more strategic enrollment behaviors, particularly the intention to apply to multiple high schools. The proximity of the transition appears to intensify planning efforts and resource utilization. This may help explain why students in the final years of high school can make more efficient use of the available resources (counseling, information on admission, etc.) than those at the beginning of the high school cycle: the maturity and proximity of the transition make them more receptive and active in using these resources [64]. Regarding rural vs. urban environments, authors such as Byun et al. [65] investigated rural-urban disparities in the United States and concluded that although students in rural communities often benefit from community support and close relationships, they lag their urban counterparts in terms of college graduation rate. In addition, our findings are aligned with the results of other applicants. Students in rural areas have more limited access to competitive programs and advanced educational services, which negatively influences their subsequent path [66]. In the same direction, others emphasize that career guidance must be adapted to the realities of rural communities, as general counseling models do not reflect the needs of students in these contexts [67]. Beyond material resources, rural-urban differences may also reflect local educational cultures and labor-market expectations [67]. In some rural contexts, early entry into employment may be perceived as more attainable or desirable, while academic tracks may appear less accessible [68]. Such mechanisms offer plausible complementary explanations for the patterns observed and warrant further investigation using mixed-method designs.

Overall, structural factors appear to modulate both access to counseling and the strategic framing of educational decisions, which may be consistent with existing inequalities at the moment of transition.

6. Conclusions

The conclusions of this study indicate that the process of choosing the high school and designing the subsequent educational path is deeply relational and structured, not just the result of an individual “momentary” decision. The high school major track, access to counseling, the environment of residence, the educational capital of the family and representations about the labor market work together as a system of conditioning and opportunities. Students who have richer educational and informational resources—through family, school and counseling—more frequently reach coherent options (theoretical profiles, clear link between high school and profession, intention to attend college), while students in more fragile contexts tend to remain more often in areas of indecision or to turn to less “capitalizable” options in the long term. The results we have obtained show us that the role of school counseling is not decorative, but potentially transformative: where there is constant participation and influence perceived as relevant, more strategic educational decisions are consolidated (enrollment in several high schools, profile choices compatible with professional aspirations, valorization of higher education).

At the same time, the differences between urban and rural areas, as well as the impact of parents’ educational attainment, suggest that without targeted support measures, these mechanisms risk replicating and amplifying existing inequalities. From the perspective of social sustainability, the study manages to indicate that an educational system capable of sustaining successful transitions to work and adult life in the long term needs public policies that generalize access to quality counseling, mitigate environmental gaps and especially support students from families with low educational capital. For students from families with low educational capital, schools can strengthen school–family cooperation through structured parent guidance sessions (track options, admission procedures, and education–employment links), short written/online information packages, and scheduled parent–counsellor consultations to support informed decisions and reduce informational barriers. Thus, students’ individual decisions become not only more informed but also more sustainable for their educational and professional path, as well as for the communities in which they will operate. Students’ perceptions of high school, college, and the labor market substantially shape educational decisions.

Beyond these aspects, although the database is numerically consistent and covers a rich set of variables, the study has some important limitations, which must be explicitly acknowledged. We collected the data in a single moment, which does not allow for firm causal conclusions. We can talk about associations and patterns, but we cannot say with certainty that one factor “determines” another (for example, that participation in counseling causes the intention to attend college, and not the other way around or in a two-way relationship). All variables are based on students’ answers, which can be influenced by what they consider to be the “right answer” or “desirable” (for example, saying they want to go to college, or that they see the connection between high school and the profession). This aspect can suggest that we are overestimating certain intentions or satisfactions. Many key dimensions (satisfaction with high school, influence of counseling, representations about the labor market) are measured by simple, categorical items, not by validated composite scales, which limits the fineness of psychometric analysis. In addition, the study does not formally test construct validity through factor analysis or confirmatory measurement models. Although internal consistency was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$), this indicator reflects reliability rather than construct validity. Several key constructs, such as perceived

counseling influence, satisfaction with high school, or the high school–profession link, were operationalized using single or categorical items. Therefore, the extent to which these items fully capture the theoretical constructs remains limited. Future research should employ validated multi-item scales and perform exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to strengthen construct validity. Even if the number of respondents is large, the sample may not be perfectly representative at the national level (region, type of school, socio-economic structure).

In addition, because participation was voluntary and the sampling was convenience-based, selection effects cannot be ruled out (e.g., differential willingness to participate across schools or student groups). We therefore avoid interpreting descriptive proportions as prevalence estimates. In addition, longitudinal tracking of cohorts (e.g., from Grade VIII through upper secondary education and into early postsecondary or labour-market entry) would be more appropriate for examining sustainable educational trajectories over time and for strengthening inference about the temporal ordering of key factors.

Even with these limitations, the results we have obtained provide us with a solid basis for outlining directions of action in terms of educational policies and interventions at the school and community level. Considering the consistent links between participation in counseling, its perceived influence and strategic educational decisions (profile, faculty intention, enrollment strategy), it is justified to strengthen the institutional strength of school counseling, by increasing the number of school counselors and reducing the student-counselor ratio, clarifying and expanding the role of counselor in educational transitions (middle school–high school, high school–college).

The differences we have observed between urban and rural areas in terms of profile options, participation in counselling and clarity of educational decisions suggest the need for targeted policies on rural areas, such as the real extension of counselling and information services in rural schools (including through online counselling, educational caravans, partnerships with urban high schools). Operationally, this can be implemented through a county-level online counselling platform (synchronous and asynchronous access), a formal urban–rural school twinning scheme for joint guidance activities, and targeted professional training for counsellors and designated teachers on evidence-based career guidance tools and counselling delivery in rural contexts. Even if the satisfactions related to knowledge, friendships, independence and extracurricular activities cannot be correlated very strongly with all educational decisions, they outline the psychosocial “climate” in which students make decisions. Policies and interventions at the school level could aim to strengthen a school culture of support and inclusion, reducing problems such as bullying or excessive pressure, or diversifying extracurricular activities (clubs, volunteering, projects) where students can explore interests and skills, creating bridges between school and future careers.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Annex 1.

Variable (SPSS)	Question/Content	Category	Measurement Level	Main CODES (ANSWERS)
GENDER	Gender of respondents	Sociodemographic	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = male; 2 = female; 99 = missing (system)
AGE	Age of respondents (years old)	Sociodemographic	Ordinal/Numeric	13 = 13 years; 14 = 14 years
MEDIUM	Environment of residence	Sociodemographic	Nominal	1 = urban; 2 = rural
HIGHSCHOOL_DECISION	Have you decided on the high school you want to attend?	Educational Options	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO; 99 = missing (system)
HIGHSCHOOL_PROFILE	The profile of the high school you want to attend	Educational Options	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1 = real; 2 = philology; 3 = social sciences; 4 = natural sciences; 5–6 = vocational; 7 = economic; 8–10 = technical; 98 = NS/undecided; 99 = missing
SELECTION_CRITERIA	The most important criterion in choosing the high school	Educational Options	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1 = proximity; 2 = friends/family; 3 = according to the profession; 4 = skills; 5 = teacher; 6 = colleagues; 7 = career opportunities; 8 = reputation; 9 = other reasons; 98 = NS/NR; 99 = missing
INTENT_FOR_MORE_HIGH_COURSES	Intention to enroll in several high schools	Transition strategy	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO; 99 = missing (system)
LINK_VOCATIONAL_HIGHLINE	The perceived link between the chosen high school and the desired profession	Educational representations	Ordinal/Nominal	1 = close connection; 2 = does not necessarily have to be tied; 3 = I didn't think about it; 4 = don't know/don't answer; 99 = missing
JOB_OP1	Main Profession/Profession Option	Professional screenings	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1 = policeman/gendarme/firefighter/military; 2 = teacher; 3 = doctor; 4 = official; 5 = jurist; 6 = priest; 7 = artist; 8 = engineer; 9 = architect; 10 = economist; 11 = mechanical; 12 = driver; 13 = electrician; 14 = services; 15 = carpenter
JOB_OP2	The second option of profession/trade	Professional screenings	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1–15 = same categories as MESERIE_OP1; 16 = other profession; 99 = did not indicate the second option
COLLEGE_INTENT	Have you thought about continuing your studies through college?	Transition strategy	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO; 99 = missing (system)
PARENTS_OF_HIGH_SCHOOL_GRADUATES	Parents graduated from high school	Family context	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1 = both; 2 = only the mother; 3 = only father; 4 = none; 99 = missing

Table A1. Cont.

Variable (SPSS)	Question/Content	Category	Measurement Level	Main CODES (ANSWERS)
PARENTAL_INFLUENCE_TRAJECTORY	Parents' influence on school/professional trajectory	Family context	Nominal/Ordinal	1 = I want the same high school; 2 = same high school and college; 3 = impose the same high school; 4 = require the same high school and college; 5 = neutral; 98 = NS/NR; 99 = missing
HIGHSCHOOL_DECISION_FACTOR	Who influences the decision on the future profile	Decision-making influences	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1 = personal decision; 2 = parents; 3 = headmaster/teacher; 4 = school counselor; 5 = relative/colleague/friend; 6 = other factor; 98 = NS/NR; 99 = missing
PARENTS_OPINION_HIGHSCHOOL	Parents agree to plans related to high school	Family context	Ordinal (attitude)	1 = agree; 2 = neutral; 3 = disagree; 99 = missing
PARTICIPATION_COUNSELING	Participation in career counselling/career guidance activities	School counseling	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO; 99 = missing (system)
WHO_COUNSELING	With whom the counseling activities were carried out	School counseling	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1 = manager; 2 = school counselor; 3 = other teachers; 99 = missing
NR_ACTIVITIES_CONSULTING	Frequency of participation in counselling activities	School counseling	Ordinal	1 = an activity; 2 = 2–3 activities; 3 = >3 activities; 4 = I did not participate; 99 = missing
INFLUENCE_CONSULTING	The extent to which counseling influenced the choice of profile	School counseling	Ordinal	1 = to a small extent; 2 = to a large extent; 3 = neither large nor small; 98 = NS/NR; 99 = missing
SATISFACTION_KNOWLEDGE	High school helps me gain knowledge and prepare for my desired profession	Satisfactions related to high school	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO
SATISFCATION_FRIENDS	High school life gives me the opportunity to make new friends	Satisfactions related to high school	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO
SATISFCATION_CONTESTS	Participating in competitions is a satisfaction of high school life	Satisfactions related to high school	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO
SATISFACTION_VARIOUS_ACTIVITIES	Participating in various activities is a satisfaction of high school life	Satisfactions related to high school	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO
INDEPENDENT_SATISFACTION	Independence from parents is a satisfaction of high school life	Satisfactions related to high school	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO
HIGHSCHOOL_PROBLEM	The main problem of a high school student in Romania	Perceptions of problems	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1 = money; 2 = bullying/discrimination; 3 = teachers' expectations; 4 = other problems/unspecified
DIFFICULTY_JOB_HIGHSCHOOL	How difficult is it for a high school graduate to find a job in Romania?	Labor market perceptions	Ordinal	1 = very hard; 2 = heavy; 3 = neither hard nor easy; 4 = easy; 5 = very easy; 99 = missing
IMPORTANT_STUDIES_SUP	Is it easier to find a job if you are a graduate of a college?	Educational representations	Nominal (dichotomy)	1 = YES; 2 = NO; 99 = missing (system)

Table A1. Cont.

Variable (SPSS)	Question/Content	Category	Measurement Level	Main CODES (ANSwers)
PROFESSION_HAPP- INESS_VS_MONEY	You choose a profession that makes you happy vs. one with higher earnings	Values/professional orientations	Nominal (dihotomic + NS)	1 = YES (happiness > money); 2 = NO; 98 = NS/NR; 99 = missing
IMPORTANT_ THING_LIFE	The most important thing in your life	Personal values	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1 = friendship; 2 = equality; 3 = silence/peace; 4 = family security; 5 = justice; 6 = faith; 7 = freedom; 8 = the win; 9 = happiness; 10 = beauty; 11 = seriousness; 12 = sincerity; 99 = missing
HUMAN_QUALITY	The most cherished human quality	Personal values	Nominal (multi-categorised)	1 = optimism; 2 = adaptation to change; 3 = perseverance; 4 = respect for the authorities; 5 = correctness; 6 = professionalism; 7 = trust in people; 8 = helping the weak; 9 = modesty; 10 = creativity; 99 = missing

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