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Ability as legitimation of tracking: Teachers' representations of students in vocational and academic tracks

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Abstract

The division of educational systems into different tracks—academic and vocational—represents one of the key elements in explaining social stratification and inequalities. Previous research identifies teachers' expectations as a critical factor to understand the relationship between tracking and social inequality. This paper discusses how ability is represented in teachers' discourses and whether and to what extent it works as a legitimation of systemic forms of tracking. Using in-depth interviews with 35 secondary school tutors, we analyse how teachers draw on the concept of ability to explain students' unequal transitions from a lower comprehensive to an upper tracked education system in Barcelona (Spain). The results indicate three main elements: a highly naturalistic conception of students' abilities among teachers; a remarkably dichotomised conception of theoretical and practical abilities that match with the academic and vocational tracks; and a direct association between types of student and types of track based on different types of ability at a cognitive, behavioural and personal level. Overall, the analysis contributes to opening the 'black box' of the notion of ability as

represented by teachers and to identifying what we call the 'mechanisms of misrecognition' which serve to naturalise, legitimise and reproduce a highly segmented post-16 school system.

K E Y W O R D S
educational transitions, post-16 education, teachers' beliefs, tracking

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper discusses how ability is represented in teachers' discourses and whether and to what extent it works as a legitimation of systemic forms of tacking. By means of qualitative analysis, it explores teachers' conceptions of ability and the discursive connections between types of ability and types of track.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper opens the 'black box' of the notion of ability as represented by teachers and identifies different 'mechanisms of misrecognition'—naturalisation, omission, individualisation and blaming—which serve to legitimise and reproduce a highly segmented post-16 school system.

INTRODUCTION

The division of educational systems into differentiated tracks has been highlighted by the international literature as a key mechanism for reproducing social inequality (Gamoran, 2009; Van de Werfhorst, 2019). Among the multiple factors that explain the relationship between educational tracks and social inequality, specialised literature has drawn attention to the role that teachers' expectations play as a crucial factor in understanding the assignment of different students to different tracks (Bonizzoni et al., 2016; Lappalainen et al., 2012; Van Houtte et al., 2013). These expectations, based on biased conceptions of students' abilities, play a central role in explaining what type of students are enrolled in different tracks and, specifically, help to understand why, on aggregate, vocational tracks tend to be over-represented by students of low socioeconomic and cultural status and with low academic results (Sevilla & Polesel, 2020). Despite this, research that connects teachers' expectations with systemic forms of tracking often approaches the notion of ability as a 'black box'. That is, it does not always provide details about how ability is discursively represented by teachers; whether different types of ability are identified in their narratives; and what kind of discursive connections are made between types of ability and types of track. Therefore, we aim to explore how the discursive connection between ability and tracking works, by identifying their underlying mechanisms.

With this objective in mind, the paper is based on a qualitative study containing 35 in-depth interviews with secondary school tutors in Barcelona (Spain), which, according to Walther (2006), belongs to a subprotective transition regime. Some of the main features of

this regime, also shared by countries such as Portugal or Italy, are the following: a comprehensive organisation of schooling until the end of compulsory education, that in the case of Spain includes primary education (ages 6–12) and lower-secondary education (12–16); a scarce development of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in upper-secondary education (16–18), where systemic tracking in Spain starts; and a high rate of Early School Leaving (ESL) at the end of compulsory schooling, which is highest in Spain by comparison with all other European Union (EU) countries.

It is, therefore, in post-16 education that the Spanish education system is divided into two clearly differentiated tracks: the academic (Baccalaureate) and the vocational (VET). These tracks, as has been pointed out by previous research (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2021a,b), are widely segmented not only in terms of their structure and functions, but also as regards their social composition and their pedagogical and curricular-provision models. Thus, we aim to investigate how the construction of ability within schools contributes to naturalising and legitimising these forms of systemic segmentation.

Following this introduction, the paper is organised as follows. The first section presents the theoretical framework, focusing on in-school production of abilities. The second sets out the methodology of the study. The third section presents the results of the analysis. We first present teachers' general conceptions about ability; we then explore how teachers describe and assess different types of 'theoretical' and 'practical' ability; and we finally identify a set of 'behavioural' and 'character' traits that, beyond 'cognitive abilities', teachers mobilise to define the students in different educational tracks. The final section offers a global reflection on the relationships between tracking, teaching discourses and the (re)production of social inequality.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF ABILITY IN SCHOOLS

Since the mid-1970s, the sociology of education has provided a broad range of evidence to demonstrate the socially constructed nature of ability[1] and has shown that teachers' conceptions and school responses to them play a central role in explaining the reproduction of inequality (Oakes, 1985). The concept of the 'ideology of intelligence', coined by Oakes et al. (1997), serves to refer to the way through which the dominant teaching discourses on the intelligence of students tend to be constructed independently of their social contexts of reference, thereby serving to maintain and legitimise systematically asymmetric power relations among social groups. This, in fact, resonates with the classical notion of the 'ideology of giftedness' coined by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). The authors exposed the fact that the ideology of natural gifts broadly misrecognises the social conditions through which different 'educated' or 'cultivated' dispositions are produced. This leads to dominant explanations of school success as the 'natural' result of personal qualities, abilities and effort, irrespective of social advantage.

Following this line of research, Hatt (2012) proposes that intelligence be referred to as a cultural practice and not exclusively as an ideology since, according to the author, it is mostly used as a practice based on implicit theories about what it means to be smart. Similarly, Ladwig and McPherson (2017) propose an analytical approach to the school concept of ability that they define as *ability in-use*. This concept should be able to identify the tacit ideas that teachers have about their students' abilities and explore how the uses of the concept not only refer to what students 'are capable of doing' but, above all, to what they are *not* capable of.

Whether as an ideology or a practice, most of the research carried out in this field coincides in highlighting that teachers tend to articulate theories on intelligence that conceive it as something stable, mostly one-dimensional and easily objectifiable. It has been 20 years

since Gillborn and Youdell ([2001](#)) demonstrated that, although the concept of intelligence had lost centrality in teaching discourses through its tendency to associate itself with *biologicist* theories, it had been progressively replaced by a new discourse on ability (the new *IQism*, as the authors term it). This is a discourse that, whilst it enjoyed greater respect and social acceptance, nevertheless had the same impact in terms of social inequality, since it was mobilised in an eminently uncritical and decontextualised manner. Furthermore, as the authors stated, it seems that ability is something that exists objectively and is taken for granted both in teaching discourses and in educational policies and practices, and—consequently—there is no need to discuss its meaning and implications.

Following the same argument, Nash ([2005](#)) affirms that although the classic concepts related to students' intelligence and IQ are increasingly criticised within the school environment, teachers continue to maintain practices ensuring that their taken-for-granted ideas on the social distribution of ability materialise in distinct patterns of academic achievement. Recent research by Ladwig and McPherson ([2017](#)) also refers to the idea of common-sense conceptions of ability to explain the daily use of the concept within schools and its function as a tool for legitimising processes of educational and social exclusion through mechanisms such as ranking, sorting or moralising. Furthermore, Au ([2011](#)) argues that widespread modalities of ability testing within schools are congruent with the 'normalised' mechanisms of standardisation and separation within education systems.

Additionally, recent research conducted by Gillborn ([2016](#)) and Gulson and Webb ([2017](#)) argues that the genetic conceptions of intelligence are increasingly adopting subtle forms that ensure their efficacy. This 'inexplicitness', as Gillborn ([2016](#)) terms it, is precisely what naturalises and legitimises racialised thinking (and we will add classist and sexist thinking) in the name of meritocracy and individual abilities. In fact, the concept of intelligence–ability together with that of merit–effort plays a central role in the dominant explanation of inequality. As Reay ([2020](#)) points out, meritocratic discourse is deeply embedded in school practices of testing, hyper-competition and setting, and has a profoundly damaging effect on working-class, migrant and ethnic-minority students. According to this meritocratic discourse, if these students are not successful in school, it is not because of the organisational forms, curriculum and pedagogical/evaluation models that are closer to the white professional middle classes but rather because they, the working-class, migrant and ethnic-minority students, are not smart or dedicated enough.

As research on teachers' expectations has shown (Van Houtte, [2011](#)), such conceptions are explicitly or implicitly intersected by variables of gender, race/ethnicity and social class. Research demonstrates that 'giftedness' is a social construct that cannot be understood independently of students' social class, gender and origin/ethnicity, as well as the school processes that contribute to its naturalisation, through the everyday practices of dividing, sorting and classifying students (Mazzoli Smith & Campbell, [2016](#)). In this way, teachers' perceptions of ability cannot be understood independently of their conceptions about the 'ideal student' (Archer, [2005](#)). As Korp ([2011](#)) points out, the hegemonic notion of intelligence is associated with criteria that reflect the cognitive, linguistic and behavioural styles of the dominant groups. It is for this reason that the ideology of intelligence (Oakes et al., [1997](#)) or the ideology of giftedness (Bourdieu & Passeron, [1977](#)) marks particular forms of cultural capital as more recognised and more valued within the school and, as a result, more easily equated with dominant notions of ability. There is considerable research demonstrating that students whose knowledge, forms of communication and modes of behaviour within the school are far from the dominant patterns of the white middle classes (also boys) are more likely to be perceived as less intelligent by their teachers (Musto, [2019](#); Nieto & Bode, [2007](#); Valenzuela, [1999](#)). Therefore, the social and school construction of learning (dis)abilities perpetuates intelligence as a privileged category for white middle classes, whilst marginalising and labelling the other students.

The results of the research carried out in this field also show that teachers' conceptions about ability inform teachers' actions, interactions and pedagogical practices, and that these conceptions are institutionalised in distinct educational devices (Agirdag et al., 2012; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012). Ways of grouping students are, in particular, one of the key mechanisms through which teachers' conceptions regarding student ability are (re)produced and, as an upshot, are those that have received much of the attention in the specialised literature (Gamoran, 2009; Oakes et al., 1997). There is considerable research showing how the practices of ability grouping or tracking are based directly and indirectly on classification criteria that depend precisely on identifying, classifying and separating students according to their perceived abilities. These abilities are supposed to be clearly identifiable and distinguishable, and students' outcomes in various examinations and competence and/or level tests are frequently used in determining them. Using the terminology of Korp (2011), course grades function as *signifiers of smartness* that tend to be thought of as purely technical, objective and neutral. Added to this, existing research on forms of ability grouping and tracking shows the powerful effect that teachers' expectations have not only on ways of detecting and classifying the abilities of distinct types of student, but also on the curricular, pedagogical and evaluation practices carried out in different groups and tracks (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2019). Among other reasons, this is why the lowest-ability groups and VET pathways are globally over-represented by students of low socioeconomic and cultural status, migrant origin and/or ethnic-minority groups (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). It is also for this reason that these same groups and tracks present pedagogical typologies that are far more focused on controlling behaviour and learning basic concepts than transmitting theoretical concepts of a 'higher order' (Nylund & Rosvall, 2016). The connection between teachers' beliefs and tracking is, in light of this, a crucial element for understanding the modes of social reproduction in contemporary educational systems.

DATA AND METHODS

To carry out the analysis, 35 in-depth interviews were conducted with tutors from the final academic year of lower-secondary education and the first year of upper-secondary education, in both academic and vocational modalities in Barcelona (Spain). Teachers were selected from a sample of eight secondary schools in the city of Barcelona, which differ in terms of their social composition, urban location and the types of upper-secondary modality provided. It is beyond the length and scope of this paper to elaborate a comparative analysis across these schools, but all of them were purposely selected within a 5-year project (EDUPOST16) that, along with tutors' interviews, included interviews with principals and coordination staff, interviews and questionnaires with students, and plenty of informal meetings and observations that allowed the building of a trust relationship within each school.

The interviews with the tutors, lasting approximately 60 min, were carried out in school over the 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 academic years, and were recorded in audio format for subsequent transcription. The interview script did not include explicit questions on how teachers described and interpreted student abilities. Rather, teachers were invited to reflect on the social and academic profiles of different types of student, on the characteristics of the two upper-secondary education tracks, on their guidance strategies and on the reasons for choosing tracks that they attributed to distinct students. In this sense, the interviews explore teachers' spontaneous uses of the concept of ability from which tacit reasoning is inferred.

The interviews were analysed by means of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining deductive and inductive codes that were structured around three main themes: (1) characteristics of the students; (2) characteristics of the various abilities; and (3) types of

ability. The discourses on these three areas were analysed in relation to the characteristics attributed to the two upper-secondary education tracks, both in terms of their social composition and functions and in terms of their distinct pedagogical and curricular modalities. For the objectives of this paper, we do not discuss the way different teachers refer to *their students* and how these discourses vary according to the schools' social composition and pedagogic practices. In line with previous research (Ball et al., 2012), we defend the need to approach teachers' discourses and practices in relation to particular contexts. But due to the goals of the analysis, the context that we approach here is not that of the specific schools but the systemic context of a particular territory, and particularly the features of the post-16 tracking in Spain and its impacts on teachers' work. In this sense, we focus on teachers' *general* discourses about students, abilities and tracking, and not on the specificities of their own students. Before digging into the results of the analysis, it is also relevant to highlight that the discourses on abilities within our sample reveal differences between teachers working in different tracks. As we will observe, overall, VET teachers have a more critical conception of the notion of ability than teachers in the academic track and, particularly, of the theoretical–practical dichotomy that traverses the organisation of the Spanish educational system and its upper-secondary tracks.

RESULTS

The nature of abilities

The first aspect deriving from the analysis of teachers' interviews is the constant appeal to the term 'ability' in defining the students in the distinct post-16 educational tracks and in explaining their correspondence to these tracks. Starting from a notion of ability as a matter that is intrinsic to all individuals, the idea prevails in teaching discourses that one either has an ability or not; that students 'are made for', 'are good at' or 'have a gift for' different types of knowledge and skills. As the following teacher expresses, abilities are interpreted from the perspective of talents or gifts that individuals either have or lack as if they were the result of a 'natural order' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977):

> There's something that's just undeniable, and that's the matter of abilities, and it's real, it's out there… Sometimes we just refuse to face it, because nobody likes to be told that their son or daughter has difficulties, so in come the euphemisms, as many as you like. But in the end, that's life. (International Baccalaureate Tutor, School 2)[2]

The fallacy of supposing that individuals possess innate intelligence or 'giftedness' supposes, according to Gillborn (2016), a colour-blind discourse (and we will add a class and gender-blind one) that neutralises the effects of social divisions on the development and recognition of different abilities and celebrates individuality and the meritocratic illusion (James, 2015). Moreover, the fact of conceiving abilities as natural and innate implies that these in turn are understood as mostly stable and not modifiable. This static connotation, however, does not operate equally for all students. In teaching discourses, it has been observed that these static conceptions are more frequent when referring to students with 'low abilities'—who, in turn, are generally VET students and are predominantly males of a working class and migrant background—than to those who are defined as 'highly able or talented'. In fact, when teachers speak of 'high-ability' students, they tend to use the concept of *potential*, underlining the possibility of change and evolution associated with such abilities and with this particular student profile, which is not neutral

in terms of social origin. This is consistent with previous research regarding the school construction of 'giftedness', which demonstrates its socio-political role in maintaining social inequalities (Mazzoli Smith & Campbell, 2016). Furthermore, in line with Ladwig and McPherson's (2017) research, the concept of ability in our teachers' discourses not only serves to define students' characteristics and attributes, but also their shortcomings. As expressed in the following quote, this is especially present in the teaching discourses that characterise VET students as not being sufficiently able or gifted to pursue an academic curriculum, consequently being oriented towards VET:

> As teachers, we say: 'Look, this kid's just not up to it, academically, so let's see if we can nudge him towards VET'. Instead of saying 'he's not up to it', I think we should be looking for different positive ways of defining students who aren't academic: 'Look, this guy has manual abilities, he's got real precision and patience; he'd be fantastic on this VET'. (Baccalaureate Tutor in Science, School 2)

Likewise, when abilities are related to the socioeconomic and cultural contexts to which students belong, this relationship is based on a broadly static, fixed and often deficient approach (Valencia, 2010). Based on the cultural deficit perspective, it is assumed that the fact of having certain abilities is explained almost mechanically by modes of family socialisation. In this way, educational advantages granted by certain social positions tend to be 'normalised' without problematising the effect of social inequalities or questioning the role that the school can have in their reproduction. As the following quote expresses, high-ability students are perceived as the result of family efforts and aspirations and not in terms of family structure of opportunities, clearly expressing social-Darwinist ideas around the emergence of abilities (Gulson & Webb, 2017):

> Family environment explains a lot about what kids are like. Students who have a good family environment have a better idea about what they want to do, and those who don't are a bit lost. When parents show an interest in their kids, they come to speak to the tutor, those students are at a clear advantage, they develop better, show more potential. (Year 4 Lower-Secondary-School Tutor, School 3)

One of the main mechanisms through which misrecognition operates is the naturalisation and omission of the effects of social and educational inequalities in the production of different abilities for different students.

Theoretical abilities versus practical abilities

Based on the conception of abilities as being intrinsic to individuals, teachers tend to construct two clearly dichotomous profiles of young people: 'academic' students, to whom they attribute a greater ability to produce elaborate thinking or to acquire abstract knowledge, and 'practical' students, who are considered more suitable for manual work. As the following quote highlights, there is a clear distinction between being 'smart with the hands' versus 'being smart with the head' (Hatt, 2007) that is assumed to be purely neutral and objective, not connected to social inequalities or to the capital distribution and recognition within and beyond the school system:

> I really have no idea how intelligence develops… But, you know, we are not equally smart or stupid… We're all different, right? What I can see is that there

> are different abilities here. Ones are more able for the hands, others for the head. (VET Chemistry Tutor, School 6)

One of the most important omissions of this logic is the very presence and recognition of theoretical and practical knowledge in the making of the school curriculum. As we have indicated elsewhere (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2021a), the dominant model of secondary education in Spain is based on a strong curricular classification (Bernstein, 1977) and a high degree of pedagogical homogeneity, with a pronounced academic orientation. This model offers few possibilities for students to experience and develop competences other than academic ones, and legitimises the idea of theoretical knowledge as the only knowledge of value. Moreover, as the following quote reflects, VET teachers often complain that it is precisely within lower-secondary education, and particularly through guidance practices, that teachers themselves transmit the false idea of VET as lacking theoretical knowledge and being conceived as an easy track. As previous research demonstrates, guidance practices tend to reinforce rather than challenge the social segmentation between the academic and the vocational track in terms of social class, gender and ethnicity (Bonizzoni et al., 2016; Lappalainen et al., 2012):

> It is still very rare to guide a 'good student' towards VET. The idea that vocational training is easy is still very widespread. There is a saying that goes: 'if you can, you can; and if you can't, go and do VET' this is still very much alive within schools. (VET Administrative Management Tutor, School 7)

In fact, among teachers' discourses, mostly in lower-secondary education and in the Baccalaureate, it is broadly assumed that if students have struggled academically over their educational trajectory, they will not be able to succeed in the academic track. As a consequence, 'good students', identified in terms of academic results, are massively oriented towards the Baccalaureate, whilst 'bad students' are suggested to choose VET. In line with Korp (2011), our analysis reveals that grades are mostly perceived as an objective and neutral way of measuring abilities that, in turn, serve as a proxy to guide students towards different post-16 tracks. However, as widespread research demonstrates (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008: Van Houtte et al., 2013), both school achievement and grading practices within schools are intrinsically classed, gendered and racialised, thus generating a double form of misrecognition. This relates firstly to the social determinants of abilities and secondly, is associated with schools' arbitrariness in terms of their recognition, classification and hierarchisation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In fact, as James (2015) expresses, one of the main processes by which misrecognition operates in the education system is through an arbitrary curriculum that is 'naturalised', so that social classifications are transformed into academic classifications. The following quotation is very clear in expressing the linear and natural relationship that is discursively established between students' abilities, school achievement and post-16 track allocation:

> A student whose grades aren't too good academically and who wants to do a Baccalaureate, well, naturally they'll be told 'look, right now this isn't really the best option for you; try something that suits your own abilities a little better'. (Year 4 Lower-Secondary-School Tutor, School 3)

Abilities, therefore, acquire a 'ranking' function (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017) that allows us to explain and compare why students are in the academic or the vocational track. As expressed in the following quotations, this idea is supported by a widely generalised belief among teachers, mostly in lower-secondary education and in the upper-secondary academic track, that there is a net dichotomy between the type of knowledge that predominates in each training path: the

theoretical, abstract, conceptual knowledge that defines the Baccalaureate and the practical, applied knowledge that characterises VET:

> As a teacher, you can easily see if a student is academic or not and the Baccalaureate is mainly academic. If students have been struggling with grades during their compulsory schooling, if they had problems coping with their work… then… of course… this is basically pointless. Don't send these students to the academic track; they're just going to fail. (International Baccalaureate, School 2)

> VET programmes are more hands-on, more practical. They're more attractive to someone who doesn't like the academic work. (Baccalaureate Tutor in Humanities, School 6)

In spite of this, some voices within VET criticise this attributed linearity between different types of knowledge/ability and different types of track. As the following teacher expresses, VET also needs theory, and the fact of denying it contributes to (re)producing its dominant image as a demonised educational space (Hollingworth & Archer, 2010):

> I get very mad when people tell us that here, we do nothing. They belie[ve] we just waste our time doing easy and silly things; that you don't need to study or to make any effort. But we are working with the idea of the craftsperson here (…) Head and hands cannot be separated (…) our students need theory and practice to succeed. (Aesthetics VET Tutor, School 5)

It is important to bear in mind that, although in recent years the prestige and provision of VET in Spain have increased, it is still perceived by families, students and teachers alike as a second-rate track (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2021b), and as a result fewer than 40% of students enrol in VET courses. Moreover, lower-secondary education and the post-16 academic track in Spain share the same form of curricular provision, which is based on the predominance of theoretical knowledge, whilst practical knowledge is exclusively relegated to the realm of VET. This generates a symbolic image of 'natural continuity' between the lower-secondary and the academic track, both in the minds of students and teachers. VET, in contrast, is projected as the 'exception', as the 'subsidiary track'. In this sense, teaching discourses often fail to mention that theoretical and practical abilities do not have the same recognition or the same prestige, either in the labour market or the curricular organisation of schools. This adds a new mechanism of misrecognition, namely, the omission of the social hierarchies of different types of knowledge within the school and beyond its gates.

Beyond cognitive abilities: Students' behaviour and personality in the classroom

As we have argued so far, abilities are a discursive resource that serves to explain and justify the differences between Baccalaureate and VET students; to distinguish 'academic' students from 'practical' ones. This dichotomy, however, is not limited exclusively to cognitive abilities; there are, in fact, further differences between the types of ability attributed to each of these profiles. 'Study habits' and 'effort' are, in particular, two central qualities that teachers forward as characterising young 'academic students' and that are often lacking in students who do not belong to this category, and this is a widely spread discourse among teachers, regardless of the educational sector in which they work. In view of this, and according to teachers' discourses, it is not only necessary to be an 'academic' student

to successfully study Baccalaureate, but it is also essential to have 'habits' and to 'make an effort'. Our analysis shows that teachers generally tend to consider that Baccalaureate students have inclinations, work habits and ways of behaving in the classroom that are more 'appropriate' for learning and, as an upshot, it is this type of ideal student who sets the standard of 'normality' to which the others must adjust. As the next tutor expresses, the only suitable students for the academic track are the ones adapted to the prevailing standards of the grammar of schooling (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). In accordance with Rose (2007, cited in Gulson & Webb, 2017), this is also part of a new 'behavioural tranche' that increasingly manages the population (and the students) in terms of the governing of their bodies and conduct:

> You have to have certain characteristics to be able to study the Baccalaureate […]. You have to have the ability to adapt to the academic world, to books, to be stuck at your desk for hours on end, to listen carefully and not get distracted […]. And so we try to guide those people who don't have that ability over to the other side. (Baccalaureate Tutor in Science, School 4)

Another element that emerges from our analysis of the interviews relates to teachers' interpretation of young people's 'interest' and 'motivation' with respect to their studies. In this regard, substantial differences are observed depending on the educational track in question. In this sense, the motivation of VET students is placed far more in doubt; in contrast, in the case of Baccalaureate students, it is simply taken for granted that they are interested in their studies. In general, according to the teaching staff, VET students are more indecisive, less clear about what they want to do, show more demotivation, are in class simply because they have to be, could actually be doing absolutely anything else, or choose a VET course just because it is close to home. As expressed in the following quote, this rationale goes along with a moralising discourse that labels young people and their educational choices as inadequate:

> In the past, people who took Administration Studies did it because they liked it. Now you ask them and most of them have no idea why they're studying it. So that already means that they're demotivated, because, you know, you ask them why they're here and some of them'll tell you that they chose this but could just as equally have chosen something else […]. They could perfectly well have signed up for hairdressing. (VET Administrative Management Tutor, School 7)

Interest and motivation, therefore, acquire that moralising function (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017) referred to before, in the sense that a lack of motivation or interest in one's studies is heavily penalised. Although cognitive abilities are assumed to be something that one has or does not have, in the case of interest and motivation it is observed that those students who do not show an interest in what they are studying elicit strong disapproval. It is somehow assumed that, while ability cannot be controlled, 'interest' depends exclusively on individual will. The following teacher is very clear in expressing a dominant view of what a 'good choice' means, impinging on individualistic and meritocratic logic:

> A good choice is the one that you make according to your own motivations, your interests and your aptitudes. Not because you'll earn a lot of money or because it's what your parents do, but because you've taken stock of yourself, you're aware of your own abilities and they're in line with your interests and with the activities that you want to do later with your job. You need to make sure that everything's joined-up. (Baccalaureate Tutor in Arts, School 2)

A final element that emerges from our analysis is the allusion to questions of 'personality' or 'character' in explaining the choice of post-16 tracks. In this sense, it has been claimed on multiple occasions that a student 'was born' to study a certain discipline, assuming there is some kind of innate vocation (Tarabini et al., 2022, in press). The resource of 'character' in describing students is especially significant in certain training modalities, among which the Artistic Baccalaureate and VET in the socio-sanitary field are particularly relevant. In these cases it would seem that having a 'special character' is an essential requirement to successfully carry them out. As highlighted in the following comments, teachers identify certain personality traits such as empathy, creativity, kindness or responsibility as a requisite to study certain disciplines. But character—as well as cognition, behaviour and emotion—far from being merely individual, is socially embedded by the working of habitus (Lawler, 2005):

> A nursing assistant is a totally vocational job, so these are people who have to have certain characteristics, you might call them psychological. They have to have a special character. (VET Nursey Tutor, School 1)

> They tend to be very tactful, with a lot of manual skill, great sensitivity, and with a real interest in creative things, in photography, video… They tend to be very curious. (Baccalaureate Tutor in Arts, School 2)

In this sense, it is important to observe that when inquiring into the reasons that might explain this construction of 'character' or personality, although social or cultural issues may appear, these are described from a mostly essentialist perspective, reinforcing the aforementioned social-Darwinist ideas. By way of example, when the greater presence of women in VET within the socio-health field is mentioned, it is taken for granted that women have a greater vocation for caring, but the consequences of this are not questioned, nor are the causes of such differences between men and women problematised. Similarly, in the case of students studying for the Artistic Baccalaureate, although the variable of cultural capital is not made explicit, some mention is made of a process of 'cultivation' by parents as one of the main factors explaining the temperament of a creative, curious and sensitive 'character'. In spite of this, and as expressed in the following teacher's comment, this process of cultivation is mainly constructed in terms of families' moral responsibility to ensure the transference of their advantages to their children (Gillies, 2005). This approach fails to recognise the socially and materially grounded nature of social class 'cultivation', treating it as a matter of individual investment. This is therefore an example of the way in which the ideology of the 'gift' works as a negation of the social conditions of the production of cultivated dispositions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This also constitutes an example of what Meloni (2016, cited in Gulson & Webb, 2017) calls 'soft heredity' ideas, which ultimately seem to assume that changes need to be made in the minds of individuals—above all the disadvantaged individuals—and not in relation to social structures:

> A lot of parents tell me that their kid has always liked to draw, that their family frequently visit museums, exhibitions, comic book fairs… this kind of stuff […] Unconsciously, parents have been cultivating this artistic part for many years. They've been nourishing it little by little, they invested in it. (Baccalaureate Tutor in Arts, School 1)

Ultimately, our analysis reveals how teachers explain and justify the fact that students are in the academic or in the vocational upper-secondary track because of issues relating to their behaviour and personality, over and above cognitive abilities. In this sense, having certain study habits, greater or lesser motivation, or having certain personality traits are all interpreted from an essentialist and decontextualised perspective that omits the effect of social inequalities and

school processes in students' attitudes and dispositions. The last mechanism of misrecognition that our analysis identifies relates to individualisation and blaming the most disadvantaged students for their situation.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis carried out in this paper derives from an interest in studying the role of teachers in configuring patterns of social inequality associated with young people's transition to upper-secondary education. The factors that explain the relationship between educational tracks and social inequality are multiple and diverse, and are associated with elements of an institutional, economic, social and cultural nature (Nylund et al., 2017; Seghers et al., 2019). Teacher beliefs, in particular, play a crucial role in understanding the assignment of distinct students to distinct tracks (Bonizzoni et al., 2016; Lappalainen et al., 2012; Van Houtte et al., 2013). As the international literature has pointed out, teacher expectations have an impact on students' self-esteem, attitude and results and, in global terms, help to explain why vocational tracks tend to be over-represented by young people of a low socioeconomic and cultural status, and of migrant and/or ethnic-minority origin (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013).

The specific objective of this paper has been to analyse how teachers' conceptions of ability contribute to naturalising and legitimising systemic forms of tracking at post-16 level. Through qualitative research based on 35 interviews with secondary-school tutors, the results of our analysis proved three main elements: a highly naturalistic conception of students' abilities among teachers; a remarkably dichotomised conception of theoretical and practical abilities that match with the academic and vocational tracks; and a direct association between types of student and types of track based on different types of ability at a cognitive, behavioural and personal level. These three elements contribute to the previous research by identifying multiple mechanisms of misrecognition (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; James, 2015) through which discursive connections between ability and tracking are made.

First, as demonstrated, teachers tend to draw on implicit theories regarding ability that conceive it as essentially innate, derived from students' intrinsic characteristics and/or their contexts of reference. In this way, abilities are interpreted as talents that individuals either have or lack, as if they were natural gifts. Additionally, when teachers establish a discursive relationship between students' abilities and their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, they tend to do so in a largely static and fixed way, reproducing deficit theories (Valencia, 2010) that presuppose intelligence is explained in an almost mechanical manner by the modes of family socialisation. In line with Gulson and Webb (2017) we understand these narratives as social-Darwinist, as they use hidden and inexplicit eugenic ideas relating to ability (Gillborn, 2016) that are inherently classed as gendered and racialised. Similarly, we have highlighted the role that grades play as an artefact through which to demonstrate the existence of distinct abilities and to legitimise student guidance towards distinct educational tracks. In this way, students who get good grades during lower-secondary education are mechanically represented as 'good students' and, therefore, referred to Baccalaureate. In contrast, students who routinely fail, have to repeat subjects and get poor grades are deemed to be 'incapable' of following an academic pathway and are, therefore, systematically oriented towards VET. We identified a double form of misrecognition here: firstly, the lack of recognition of the social nature of abilities and secondly—as highlighted in the next point—the role of school structures, processes and agents in recognising, classifying and hierarchising these abilities. In both cases, the mechanisms through which this misrecognition operates are naturalisation and omission of social and educational inequalities that traverse the (re)production of different abilities for different students.

Second, our analysis of teaching discourses identifies a largely dichotomous construction between two types of student ability, the 'theoretical' and the 'practical'. These, in turn, correspond to the type of knowledge—either 'abstract' or 'applied'—which is supposed to characterise each post-16 educational track. Our analysis reveals a broadly linear discursive association between types of student and types of track based on a putative natural correspondence between types of knowledge and types of ability (Tarabini & Jacovkis, 2021a). It is not only that the 'most capable' students, those with the best grades, are considered most suitable for the academic pathway, but it is assumed—almost naturally—that the 'theoretical students' pertain to the world of the Baccalaureate and the 'practical students' to the world of VET. In a similar manner, our analysis reveals a discursive construction of 'theoretical and practical abilities' as if these were purely differences, not associated with patterns of social and school inequality. In this way, from a discourse of 'respect for difference', this construction ends up obviating and legitimising the fact that theoretical and practical knowledge do not have the same prestige within the social and school order and, consequently, result in the reproduction of inequality. The mechanism by which misrecognition works here is omitting the arbitrariness of the school curriculum and the hierarchy that traverses the provision of school knowledge throughout the whole structure of the school system, particularly in secondary education. That way, the academic/vocational divide that configures one of the most persistent divisions in the history of education systems is mostly viewed as natural (Nylund et al., 2017; Polesel, 2008). Omission and naturalisation, therefore, come together with hierarchisation.

Third, our analysis shows that the discursive association between 'types of student' and 'types of track' is justified not only on the basis of cognitive abilities but also in terms of behavioural and 'personality' traits. In other words, to 'be a Baccalaureate or VET student' is not simply a matter of being more or less 'smart', of having one or other type of ability, but also of having specific 'habits', displaying certain inclinations at school and—especially for certain specialised options—having particular personality traits that enable the acquisition of distinct competences and subsequent professional practice. This has a critical impact in terms of governing the students' bodies and souls (Rose, 2007, cited in Gulson & Webb, 2017) in a way that does not contradict the dominant grammar of schooling (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) or the idealised notions of what a 'good student' and a 'good choice' should be. Here we can see a new mechanism of misrecognition that operates alongside those mentioned previously: the individualisation and blaming of the most disadvantaged students.

These three contributions help us to understand how teaching discourses play a key role in the legitimisation of a highly segmented and unequal upper-secondary education system. It is through the exploration of certain key mechanisms of misrecognition that the role of teaching beliefs in legitimising certain abilities for certain students is clearly identified, thus reproducing a hierarchisation of post-16 tracks in the school system.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

All the teachers interviewed for this paper signed a written informed consent to participate in the research. All their names have been removed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Following Gillborn (2016), throughout this paper we use the terms 'ability' and 'intelligence' interchangeably.

[2] Names of interviewees and schools have been omitted to protect the anonymity of our participants.

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