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To cite this article: Anna Miglietta , Stefano Tartaglia & Silvia Gattino (2020): The relationship between book reading, national identity, and nationalism among secondary school students, European Journal of Developmental Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/17405629.2020.1809372](https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2020.1809372)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2020.1809372>



Published online: 14 Aug 2020.



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The relationship between book reading, national identity, and nationalism among secondary school students

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ABSTRACT

The current study focused on the education-nationalism relationship and aimed to understand whether the positive influence of education in the reduction of nationalist attitudes simply relies on the educational level reached, or is related to the kind of school attended to reach the level. Moreover, we were interested in understanding if book reading has a role in reducing nationalism. Seven hundred twenty Italian students (female = 59%; mean age = 18, SD = .5) attending their senior year of secondary school (lyceum = 49%, technical = 51%) completed a questionnaire that included blind and constructive nationalism scales, ethnic national identification and book reading behaviour. We performed a structural equation model. Results showed that 1) lyceum students are less nationalistic than technical students are; 2) ethnic national identity drives both nationalism and patriotism; 3) lyceum attendance and book reading prevent ethnic national identity. Overall, the study highlighted that the strongest effect of education on nationalism pertains only to students with higher educational expectations, suggesting that the role of educational systems as diffusor of liberal values needs to be rethought.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 27 January 2020; Accepted 9 August 2020

KEYWORDS Education; nationalism; national identity; book reading; structural equation modelling

Several studies conducted in different cultural contexts found a consistent negative relationship between education and nationalistic attitudes (e.g., Barber et al., 2010; Coenders & Scheepers, 2003; Hello et al., 2002; Hjerm, 2001). This relationship has been traced to the so called *liberalizing effect* of education. This refers to the idea that educational systems are fundamental socializing agents that transmit norms, values and behavioural models reflecting the 'official' country cultures (vs. non-official, popular values). In the Western world, greater exposure to education corresponds to greater exposure to scientific and democratic values

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(Selznick & Steinberg, 1969). This interpretation is consistent with the findings showing a greater difference between individuals with an elementary vs. secondary education level, with the former holding more nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes than the more educated individuals (Hjerm, 2001; see also Hello et al., 2004; Sidanius et al., 2006).

However, national educational systems have a dual meaning. On the one hand, they transmit the core values of a society, which in Western democratic societies are the liberal values of democracy and respect. On the other hand, they help to strengthen national unity, impose the language of the dominant group and develop loyalty to the myths and symbols of the nation state (Billig, 1995). The educational system is a mediator of the dominant culture in society and influences the very conceptualization of the nation-state and of national identity.

The term national identity refers to a specific kind of social identity (Tajfel, 1981) implying feelings of belonging to a specific nation-state. Scholars overall agree that national identity is a determinant of the nationalist ideology, that is the claim of supremacy of own one's nation over the others and the primacy of national identification over all other forms of social identity (Cinpoes, 2008). Following the social and political psychology approach, two dimensions can be find in the nationalistic sentiment: patriotism and nationalism, (e.g., Davidov, 2009; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Following Kosterman and Feshbach (1989; see also Blank & Schmidt, 2003), nationalism implies feelings of attachment and devotion to one's own country and its goals. The uncritical support that nationalists give to any action of their national group goes together with a view of superiority and dominance of their ingroup over the national outgroups. Patriotism too refers to feelings of attachment to one's own country. However, in this case national attachment bases on critical consciousness and critical loyalty to the group (Bar-Tal, 1997; Schatz et al., 1999; Staub, 1997) and does not result in outgroup derogation (Brewer, 1999; Rajiman et al., 2008). It is self-evident that the two forms are interrelated since they share a reference to national pride. However, it is important to conceptualize them separately because they differ in the way the attachment is expressed. When patriotism is related to an appreciation of humanism, individualism, and pride in one's own national political system, nationalism refers to a belief in the superiority of one's country and ethnic group combined with a blind and uncritical attachment to one's country (Miglietta et al., 2018; Spry & Hornsey, 2007). Nationalism is related to the ethnic conception that defines national

identity as based on ascribed criteria, such as a common ethnic heritage, bonds of kinship, and linguistic and cultural homogeneity (e.g., Condor, 2001). This form of national identity raises allegiance to the nation that is the 'imagined community' of individuals who share a set of common cultural values (Anderson Benedict, 1991) and conceives nations as 'natural entities that need to be manifested politically, rather than as politically created communities' (Pehrson & Green, 2010, p. 698).

Following Hjern (2001, pp. 47–48), education contrasts the nationalistic belief system to which the ethnic conception pertains, preventing people from internalizing it. Indeed, most theoretical interpretations regarding the relationship between education and nationalism emphasize that the positive ethnic stereotypes of the ingroup that form the basis of nationalistic attitudes are a simplification of social reality that is improperly generalized and improperly applied to all members of the ingroup. The decreasing effect of educational attainment on ingroup favouritism may be understood because of the ability of education to increase cognitive skills (Arcidiacono et al., 2012; Gattino & Miglietta, 2013). These abilities allow individuals to run sophisticated analyses of problems rather than using rigid simplifications (Coenders & Scheepers, 2003). As Hello et al. (2004) state (p. 255), indeed, 'schooling promotes the use of initiative, thought, and independent judgment, i.e., educational self-direction' and leads to more intellectual flexibility. A signal in this direction comes from a study by Barber et al. (2010), who found the most negative relationship between education and nationalistic sentiment among students attending schools with the highest educational expectations (p. 13–14). On a related topic, Hainmüller and Hiscox (2007) found that college education appears to be a more robust predictor of tolerant attitudes towards immigrants than high school education.

A further element that concurs in with the development of cognitive flexibility and may influence nationalistic sentiment is book reading. Literature suggests that narratives and portraits of people from other cultures may help readers adopt different perspectives on their national identity (Paluck & Green, 2009). Moreover, recent studies showed a positive effect of book reading in reducing stereotypes and increasing positive intergroup attitudes (Vezzali et al., 2012, 2015). Even if a positive attitude towards book reading may also be influenced by the family context, there is no doubt that school plays a role in orienting students towards it and that particularly in secondary schools, reading narratives is among the students' duties.

Overall, the literature consistently suggests the relevance of education in reducing nationalism, whilst few studies have examined whether and how the attendance of different types of secondary schools may influence this relationship. In a recent qualitative study carried out in Sweden, Arensmeier (2018) compared curricula and textbooks for social studies in different tracks in upper-secondary school. Findings showed that textbooks on both paths paid little attention to democratic values. However, the more basic textbooks targeted the vocational track, while some textbooks for the academic track focused on the complexity of conceptual understanding and analytical knowledge. Albanesi (2018) investigated the presence of Citizenship education in the Italian school curricula. She analysed how much and which kind of space was devoted to Europe and active citizenship in six Italian bestseller textbooks for students of both lyceum and technical schools. The one less covering the inspected topics was the only textbook used just in technical schools. Based on the findings of Barber et al. (2010) and Hainmüller and Hiscox (2007), the current study aimed to more deeply examine whether attending a secondary school oriented towards academics versus work preparation drives students to endorse the nationalistic sentiment to different degrees. Moreover, the study aimed to examine whether book reading is related to the development of a nationalistic sentiment and whether this attitude is influenced by the type of school a student attends.

To investigate the differences between different types of schools, we included students attending their senior year at two different type of secondary schools, i.e., lyceums and technical schools. We choose this specific population based on the possibility of finding participants with equal levels of education attainment and thus allowing the school-related presence of differences in book reading and nationalism to emerge.

The current work

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between education and nationalistic sentiment in a sample of Italian secondary school students in the North-West region of the country. According to the Italian National Institute of Statistic (ISTAT¹), in Italy resident foreigners are about the 8.5% of the population. The majority of resident foreigners lives in the North-West of the country. This region is the one producing the greater part of the Italian gross domestic product. Right-wing parties following nationalistic ideologies predominantly guide the local governments of this part of

Italy. A general interest of the study was to understand whether the positive influence of education in the reduction of nationalist attitudes simply relies on the educational level reached, independently from the kind of school attended to reach the level. A further element of interest was in the role of book reading. Books enhance cognitive complexity by encouraging perspective taking (Vezzali et al., 2015; Zillmann, 1991) and this would negatively drive its relations with ethnic conceptions of national identities and nationalism.

Our starting point is that the more people are educated the less they support ethnic conceptions of national identity and nationalism. In the current work, however, we assumed that because of their different educational aims, students in lyceum are more encouraged than their pairs in technical schools to be cognitively complex, also through a greater book reading, showing as a result a lower support to nationalistic beliefs.

To investigate the differences between different types of schools, we included students attending their senior year at two different type of secondary schools, i.e., lyceums and technical schools. We choose this specific population based on the possibility of finding participants with equal levels of education attainment and thus allowing the school-related presence of differences in book reading and nationalism to emerge.

Specifically, we hypothesized the following relationships (see [Figure 1](#)):

(a) Students attending lyceums (vs. technical schools) would show lower ethnic national identity, lower nationalism and higher patriotism (Barber et al., 2010; Hainmüller & Hiscox, 2007). (b) The ethnic national identity would increase nationalistic sentiment (Pehrson et al., 2009). (c) Book reading would decrease both the ethnic national identity and nationalistic sentiments.

In order to control the role that the socio-cultural background of the family has on the expected relationships, we also included in the model the educational level of the parents.

Method

Procedure

Data were collected via a self-reported questionnaire, which took about 15 minutes to complete. Participants were contacted in nine secondary schools (lyceum = 4, technical schools = 5) in a small town (about 60,000 inhabitants) of the northwest of Italy. The questionnaires were group-administered in classrooms with the teachers' permission. The

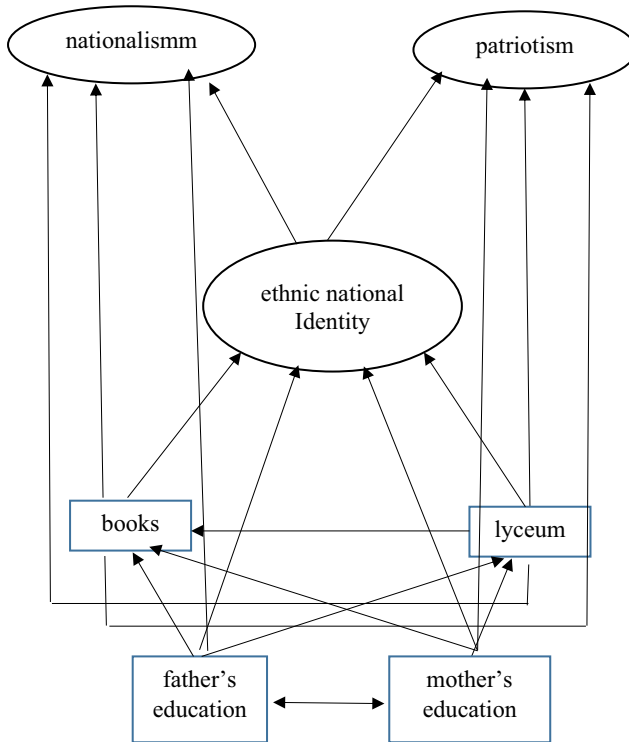


Figure 1. Theoretical path of relations among family's socio-cultural background, school attended, book reading, ethnic national identity and nationalistic sentiment.

participants volunteered to be part of the research without receiving any reward; they agreed to anonymously complete the questionnaires in accordance with Italian privacy laws. The questionnaire included background indicators of the participants' socio-demographic characteristics.

Participants

Seven hundred twenty Italian secondary school students attending their senior year (female = 59%; mean age = 18, SD = .5; lyceum = 49%, technical school = 51%) were contacted during their school lessons and were informed that they were participating in a study on issues relevant to Italian society.

In Italy, the total duration of studies in upper secondary school is 5 years (from 14 to 19 years). Upper secondary school offers both general (lyceum) and technical programmes. General upper secondary education aims to prepare students for higher level studies by providing

them with cultural and methodological tools to develop their life skills, i.e. critical thinking and planning skills. Lyceums are traditionally devoted to university preparation, emphasize human sciences and promote the critical thought, also through the students' commitment in reading narrative books from national and international literature. Differently, technical institutes aim to provide students with technical education and a solid scientific and technological background in professional economic and technological fields. In this kind of school, great emphasis is on practical experiences and stages in the world of work (Eurydice, Italian Unit, 2018/19). Nevertheless, lyceum and technical school are equal in terms of the years of attendance required to receive a bachelor diploma (5 years) and in the formal possibility to attend a university.

Measures

The questionnaire included the following indicators.

Nationalistic sentiment

The Patriotism/Nationalism Questionnaire (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989) comprises 20 items: 12 assessing patriotism (e.g., 'I'm proud to be an Italian'), and 8 assessing Nationalism (e.g., 'The first duty of every young Italian is to honour national history and heritage'). The respondents rated the item on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 to 5. The alpha scores were .70 for Nationalism and .84 for Patriotism.

Ethnic national identity

Two items assessed the conception of Italian identity in an ethnic perspective ('Only native Italians are true Italians'; 'Only native Italian speakers are true Italians'). Italy is relatively young as welcoming country for immigrants, since migration fluxes started in '90ies. This implies that the great part of migrants settled in Italy are first generation, so they are not Italian-born neither native Italian speakers. Currently children born in Italy from migrant parents represent 72.7% of foreign children under 18 years of age in the country: the share is higher in the age group 0–5 and is reduced to growing age until it reaches a minimum of 24% in the age group 14–17 years of age (ISTAT [Italian National Institute of Statistics] 2016). The respondents rated the items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 to 5 (alpha = .59).

Book reading

The participants answered the following open-ended question: 'How many books have you read in the last 12 months, with the exception of school texts?'

Data analyses

The preliminary analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 22.0 Statistics. The path of the relationships among the constructs was tested through structural equation modelling using Amos 16.0.

Results

The scales scores were calculated computing the mean of the responses to the items. The resulting scores ranged all between 1 and 5. [Table 1](#) reports the descriptive statistics and correlations for all the variables included in the model hypothesized. Overall, the participants showed low levels of nationalism and ethnic identity but higher levels of patriotism. Consistent with the literature, nationalism, patriotism and ethnic identity correlated positively. The number of books read in a year correlated negatively with both nationalism and ethnic national identity. The parents' education was measured in years of education. The years of education of father and mother correlated positively. The father's years of education correlated negatively with both nationalism and ethnic national identity. Both father and mother years of education correlated positively with the number of books read.

Concerning all the variables, we controlled the differences between lyceum and technical school students using the T test. The lyceum students scored lower in nationalism, patriotism and ethnic national identity, and they read more books than the technical school students (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among nationalism, patriotism, ethnic national identity and books read in a year (N = 720).

	Range	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
1. Nationalism	1–5	1.87	0.49	-				
2. Patriotism	1–5	3.51	0.72	.39***	-			
3. Ethnic national identity	1–5	2.55	1.11	.37***	.15**	-		
4. Books read	0–100	4.63	7.00	-.19***	-.01	-.16***	-	
5. Father's education	5–18	11.39	3.62	-.09*	.01	-.09*	.16***	-
6. Mother's education	5–18	12.30	3.46	-.04	-.01	-.06	.12**	.48***

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Table 2. Differences between lyceum (n = 356) and technical school (n = 364) students. Mean scores and T values.

	Mean scores		T
	Lyceum	Technical	
Nationalism	1.76	1.98	-6.26***
Patriotism	3.43	3.58	-2.91**
Ethnic national identity	2.34	2.76	-5.23***
Book read	6.1	3.2	5.83***
Father's education	12.63	10.17	9.67***
Mother's education	13.46	11.16	9.46***

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Structural equation model for testing direct and indirect relationships

The direct and indirect relationships among the variables were tested via a SEM model (MLE). A partial disaggregating approach (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998) was used for the latent variables of nationalism and patriotism, that is, we limited the number of indicators for nationalism to three and the number for patriotism to four, aggregating the items at random (Little et al., 2002). The latent variables nationalism and patriotism were also inter-correlated. The latent variables of ethnic national identity were measured through the two items that describe it. The number of books read in a year and the type of school attended were inserted into the model. In order to control for the role of the family's socio-cultural context, we included in the model the years of education of participants' mothers and fathers. We tested a first model where parents' education had direct effects on all the variables in the model. All the relationships among parents' education and the variables in the model were not statistically significant, with the exception of the relationship between parents' education and the type of school attended and the one between fathers' education and book reading. Then, we tested a final model where only the significant relationships of parents' education were considered. As usually recommended (Hu & Bentler, 1999), we tested the model fit using both incremental and absolute fit indices: χ^2 , CFI (comparative fit index; Bentler, 1990), SRMR (standardized root mean square residual; Hu & Bentler, 1999) and RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation; Steiger, 1990). For CFI, values higher than .95 were considered satisfactory (cf. Bentler, 1990); an SRMR smaller than .08 indicates a good fit. As for RMSEA, we followed Browne (1990), who considers values lower than .08 to be satisfactory and values lower than .05 to be good.

The final model (Figure 2) proved acceptable according to all fit indices except χ^2 : CFI = .96, SRMR = .05; RMSEA = .05 (90% CL = .05, .06), $\chi^2_{(55)}$

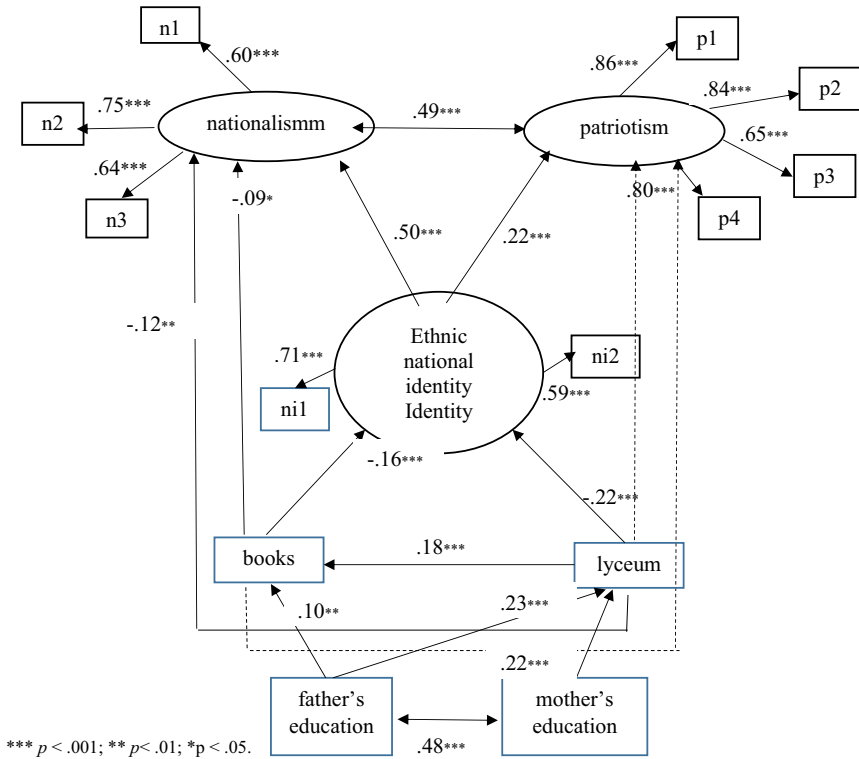


Figure 2. The final model: standardized parameters. $*** p < .001$; $** p < .01$; $* p < .05$. n1, n2, and n3 = Aggregated indicators of nationalism; p1, p2, p3, and p4 = Aggregated indicators of patriotism; ni1 and ni2 = indicators of ethnic national identity. Note. Errors of the indicators and latent variables were omitted from the figure in order to make it easier to view.

$= 173.76, p < .01$. Given that the significance of χ^2 depends on the sample size and that the sample was large ($N = 720$), we considered this model to be adequate. Almost all estimated parameters were significant, with the exception of the direct path from lyceum to patriotism and the path linking book reading to patriotism.

Looking at Figure 2 (standardized parameters), starting from the bottom, we can observe that lyceum attendance (vs. technical school attendance) was negatively related to nationalism ($\beta = -.12$) and to ethnic national identity ($\beta = -.22$) and was positively related to book reading ($\beta = .18$). Book reading lowered both ethnic national identity ($\beta = -.16$) and nationalism ($\beta = -.09$). Finally, ethnic national identity was positively related to nationalism ($\beta = .50$) and patriotism ($\beta = .22$). The inter-correlation between nationalism and patriotism was positive and significant ($r = .49$). Father's and mother's

education were positively correlated ($r = .48$) and positively drove lyceum attendance ($\beta = .23$ and $\beta = .22$ respectively). The father's educational level also slightly and positively drove book reading ($\beta = .10$). The bootstrap results (bootstrap samples: 2000; BC percentile = 90) highlighted eleven indirect effects. On the one side, lyceum attendance though book reading indirectly reduced the endorsement of ethnic identity ($c' = -.03$ (95% CI = $-.05$ to $-.01$); $p < .05$; SE = $.02$) and national identification (nationalism: $c' = -.14$ (95% CI = $-.19$ to $-.10$); $p < .05$; SE = $.08$; patriotism: $c' = -.05$ (95% CI = $-.08$ to $-.02$); $p < .05$; SE = $.08$). On the other side, also book reading reduced ethnic identity contributing to slightly lower of national identification (nationalism: $c' = -.08$ (95% CI = $-.13$ to $-.04$); $p < .01$; SE = $.01$; patriotism: $c' = -.03$ (95% CI = $-.06$ to $-.01$); $p < .01$; SE = $.02$). Both fathers' and mother's educational level indirectly enhanced book reading with a similar force (father: $c' = -.04$ (95% CI = $.03$ to $.06$); $p < .05$; SE = $.01$; mother: $c' = .04$ (95% CI = $.02$ to $.06$; SE = $.01$). Fathers' educational level seems to be more effective mothers' to reduce nationalism (father: $c' = -.08$ (95% CI = $-.11$ to $-.05$); $p < .05$; SE = $.02$; mother: $c' = -.06$ (95% CI = $-.08$ to $-.04$; SE = $.01$); parents' education showed a similar force in reducing patriotism (father: $c' = -.03$ (95% CI = $-.05$ to $-.01$); $p < .05$; SE = $.02$; mother: $c' = -.03$ (95% CI = $-.05$ to $-.01$; SE = $.01$).

The whole set of predictors explained 33% of the variance of nationalism, 6% of patriotism and 9% of ethnic identity.

Discussion

The study aimed to deepen the understanding of the negative association between education and nationalism (Coenders & Scheepers, 2003). Previous research highlighted the liberalizing effect of education (Hello et al., 2002), which acts as an antidote to the spread and/or resurgence of nationalistic values (Hjerm, 2001). The educational divide appeared to occur between elementary and secondary schooling. However, more recent findings have noted that the strongest liberalizing effect concerns people with college education compared with other types of secondary schooling (Barber et al., 2010; Hainmüller & Hiscox, 2007).

The current research compared students from two different types of secondary schools – one oriented towards university preparation and one towards technical work – to highlight the presence of differences related to the type of school attended. Moreover, we were interested in understanding whether book reading contributes to reducing nationalistic

sentiment. Indeed, findings from the literature on ethnic prejudice reduction show how book reading may help readers adopt different perspectives regarding people from other cultures (Paluck & Green, 2009). Considering the unquestionable relationship between xenophobia and ethnocentrism (Coenders & Scheepers, 2003; Pehrson & Green, 2010), we expected to find a similar effect of book reading on nationalistic sentiment.

The results supported our main hypothesis and highlighted that lyceum students have a lower degree of nationalistic sentiment than their peers attending technical schools. We found both a direct negative relationship between lyceum attendance and nationalism and an indirect one that calls into question the ethnic content attributed to national identity. Specifically, our findings confirmed the positive contribution of the ethnic national identity to both nationalism and patriotism and highlighted that lyceum attendance and book reading play a role in lowering national identification (mainly the nationalistic one) and the endorsement of an ethnic national identity. The family background had just indirect effects on the nationalistic sentiment and ethnic national identity.

Overall, our research confirmed that the strongest liberalizing effect of education mainly pertains to students with higher educational expectations. It is possible that secondary schools oriented towards work training fail (or are not interested) in developing the cognitive complexity in their students and endorse more ethnocentric and nationalistic beliefs. Support for this idea comes from the results concerning book reading. Lyceum students read more non-scholastic books than their colleagues in technical schools did, and this likely helped them to develop a cosmopolitan sense of belonging rather than a national one.

The study suffers from limitations, mainly related to its cross-sectional nature that prevent from a strict causal interpretation. Moreover, the concept of book reading should be deepened, tapping the issue of the quality of books that participants could read. Finally, we cannot exclude that, rather than from the school track itself, our findings were in part driven by students' self-selection when enrolling to a lyceum or to a technical school. This difference in the quality of the 'human capital' likely affect also the sense of nationalism that we tested, leading our estimations to be a sort of 'upper bound' of the true school track effect on cognitive complexity.

Nevertheless, these results are particularly relevant because they highlight how emerging adults, even when educated, may be attracted to populist movements that base their philosophy on ethnic resentment, among other factors (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Indeed, this is the period of life during which people define the boundaries of their personal group membership (Arnett, 2007; Esses et al., 2001). There is reason to expect that the attitudes formed during this period are predictive of individuals' opinions when they are adults (e.g., Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Jennings & Stoker, 2004). Since emerging adults represent an important voting bloc, their national identity has a developmental and political significance that must be taken in account (Rodriguez et al., 2010).

Our results drive some practical implications that deal on the one side with the need to rethink the role of educational systems as diffusors of democratic values. On the other side, our results emphasize that not all types of secondary schools help students in expanding cognitive complexity or feed students' minds by encouraging reading. These findings indicate the relevance that an education focused on the acquisition of reflective and critical skills has in preventing the development of nationalistic attitudes. The development of critical thinking and the exercise of logic and creativity play an important role in opening up to the other. The differences found between the two tracks in upper-secondary school suggest that any intervention aimed at fostering the development of democratic attitudes and civic education in a context such as secondary school, should pay particular attention to technical schools.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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