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## **The Intergenerational Transmission of NEETs Status: A Comparative Analysis of Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, and Romania**

*Abstract:* NEET trajectories are generally analyzed in relation to macro elements such as labor market characteristics and, less often, micro-level dimensions such as the characteristics of a person's family of origin. Employing EU-SILC 2019 data, we analyzed the relation between micro-level dimensions, with an emphasis on the level of education of parents, and NEET status in four EU countries: Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, and Romania. The results show that NEET status in all four countries is the combined result of factors related to socio-familial, economic, and cultural origin, where the level of education of the parents plays a central role.

*Keywords:* NEETs, intergenerational transmission, education

### **Introduction**

One of the most pressing challenges currently facing the EU-27 is how to concomitantly support young people who are not actively engaged with education and those who are not in the labor market—NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Given the increasing prominence of this challenge it is not surprising that, in recent years, the number of studies undertaken on the causes of young people falling into NEET status and the dissemination of effective interventions has increased significantly (Levels et al. 2022; Cace et al. 2021; Caroleo et al. 2018). The majority of this work, relating to NEETs, has focused on the macro dimension: labor market characteristics or the transition process from school to the labor market (Pohl & Walther 2007); support for professional guidance (Bálint et al. 2024) or the development of support programs such as the Youth Guarantee (O'Higgins & Brockie 2024). Building on this extant literature, we aim to add a more holistic understanding of the challenges faced by these young Europeans by focusing on the relationships between micro-level characteristics such as the socio-familial background and educational attainment level of the parents in the context of falling into NEET status. Studies that have focused on the causes that lead some young people to NEET status have

indicated that a low level of education has the greatest influence on this (Müller & Yossi 1998). While the aforementioned work has, for many decades, examined the effect of family background on the educational achievement of children, through this article, we aim to advance our understanding to how some young people end up with a low level of education leading them to NEET status, and to what extent a low level of education and/or the condition of NEET is itself the consequence of a socio-familial disadvantaged background. Given that NEETs are no longer just a national phenomenon, but a pan-European challenge and that different economies and education systems have localised effects on the NEET propensity—we aimed to further our understanding of this problem through a comparative analysis of different EU countries. Our article aims to answer two research questions: (1) how the socio-familial and economic characteristics of the origin of young people can direct them towards the status of NEETs? (2) how do these characteristics combine with other risk factors (e.g. geographic region or area of origin; gender) to influence the likelihood of young people becoming NEETs?

For the selection of the countries included in this analysis, we considered several models proposed by the literature. The first model considered was proposed by Pohl & Walther (2007), in their study, they analyzed the transition process from school to the labor market of disadvantaged young people and proposed five elements that characteristics of the structure of the labor market: universalistic (DK, FI), employment centred (AT, DE), liberal (UK), sub-protective (EL, ES, IT, PT), and post-communist countries (BG, PO, RO, SK, SI). However the model considered for employment in this study emerged from work by Berloff, et al. (2017) which extended the work carried out by Pohl & Walther (2007) by adding new countries and new selection criteria: geographical and/or cultural affinity; common historical background; and various strategies of privatisation and liberalisation; the intergenerational transmission of disadvantages in the labor market and built six groups of countries: Nordic (DK, FI, NL, NO, SE), Continental (AT, BE, FR, DE, CH), English-speaking (CY, IE, MT, UK), Mediterranean (EL, IT, ES, PT), CEE-low (CZ, PL, RO, SI, SK), and CEE-high (BG, EE, HR, HU, LT, LV). Employing this model we sought to analyse how NEET status can be transmitted from parents to children in countries representing different welfare state regimes, specifically in the EU. Following the classification established by Berloff et al. (2017) the following countries were included in this study: Italy, as representative of the Mediterranean sub-protective model, Ireland, as English-speaking and liberal countries, Romania and Lithuania, representative of CEE-low and CEE-high groups, respectively. Countries from the Nordic and Continental groups were excluded from this work in order to concentrate on similar types of socio-economic structures and educational systems. However, the results from our analyses are easily extensible to other countries, at least to those closer to the countries included in the analysis in terms of welfare and transition regimes and labour market characteristics. We start by analyzing the effect of the parent's level of education on their children's educational attainment and then, through extended probit regressions, we verify how the personal level of education is connected to the probability of becoming a NEET, controlling for other relevant covariates. Then, using an extension of the Oaxaca and Blinder decomposition of the differentials for non-linear models, we aim to verify if and to what extent the personal disadvantage connected with a disadvantaged familial background translates into lower

personal human capital characteristics. Finally, as a robustness check, we compare our results with those introducing parents' level of education as a direct effect on the probability of becoming a NEET.

### Literature Review

Literature pertaining to the intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic status is typically presented from one of three interconnected perspectives: the sociological perspective has a particular focus on the transmission of cultural and educational capital from parents to children; the psychological perspective seeks to understand behaviors, projected attitudes of parents onto their children relating to school success, performance, high educational attainment, and professional aspirations; and finally the economic perspective in which an important emphasis is placed on understanding education as an investment and how support for this is positioned within household budget priorities. Parents with a high level of education typically have an occupation aligned with an income through which they can support and encourage their children to remain in school for as long as possible and to obtain, in turn, their own professional and financial stability (Crawford et al. 2016; Macmillan 2010; Davis-Kean et al. 2021; Schmid & Garrels 2021). In contrast to this, children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, typically where there is a low level of parental educational attainment, are more likely to experience lifelong socio-economically disadvantage, lower educational engagement, and reduced adult occupational opportunities (Blanden 2013; Onuzo et al. 2013; Palomino et al. 2017; Stahl et al. 2018; Breen 2019).

However, despite this body of literature establishing a broad characterization of structural and collective social, educational, and occupational exclusion processes it is becoming clear that the individual characteristics of young people have a more significant role to play in shaping their future and perhaps avoiding NEET status (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; van Vugt 2022). Such individual considerations are directly impacted by the relationship between the parent's level of education, occupation, level of income, and their ability and availability to support their children. For example, parents who have a low level of education and face difficulties making a successful and sustained integration into employment often require their children to leave school early to contribute to the family's income by finding work in the informal economy (Such & Walker 2002; Quintano et al. 2018). This trend of early school leaving, in many instances, represents a lack of trust in the role of education as well as a lack of an appreciation of the value of educational attainment by parents from disadvantaged backgrounds resulting in higher numbers of absenteeism, falling grades, and untimely dropout (Rennison et al. 2005; De Luca et al. 2020).

This lack of trust in education is associated with the development of limited aspirations for their children's school performance and can establish a lack of motivation for engagement while at school (Schoon 2014; Bynner & Parsons 2002). Parents with a high level of education are familiar with the education system, have a greater ability to understand the changes that have occurred in its structure, organization and are therefore better positioned to make an informed decision regarding family commitment to pursuing educational pathways and maximizing the chances of socio-professional development of

their children (Rennison et al. 2005). Crawford et al. (2016) take this position further by exploring the intergenerational transmission of school orientation attitudes. They contend that parents from socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged backgrounds orient their children towards short forms of schooling because they consider it much more important for them to find a job as soon as possible and to begin to contribute to the general household budget, while households with parents with a high level of education encourage their children to complete the highest levels of education to ensure higher incomes and long-term occupational stability. Hence, the choice of path through life is heavily influenced by social origin where professional status is not only achieved through educational attainment but also the path chosen (Delès 2018) and the familial influence brought to bear on the decisions taken along the way. Inside the household, these familial influences are evident with the level of educational attainment and the occupational status of the parents acting differently depending on the number of children they have, as well as the age and gender of the children (Lindemann & Gangl 2019). Gregg et al. (2012) found that unemployed fathers harm the level of education of children, and the risk of the child experiencing long-term unemployment was much higher in such circumstances.

Comparative analysis at the European level has led researchers (Berloff, et al. 2017) to conclude that in some countries, particularly northern European countries, where both parents were in steady employment a positive effect on the probability that their male children would also experience the same was evident, however for female children the same conditions resulted in only the employment status of the mother having a positive effect. However, a more nuanced study of this effect, specifically in Italy, concluded that parents' educational level can have a protective effect on the risk of falling into NEET status for both genders, where the higher the level of education of either parent the lower the probability that their child will fall into NEET status (Aliferi et al. 2015). It is also the case that the number of children in a household has a critical bearing on the income allocated for some or all of their education. Indeed, in any given household, there may be some children in which little is invested and where their siblings experience greater opportunities over a longer period of time (Becker & Gregg 1973). Schoon & Silbereisen (2009) suggest that the process of intergenerational transmission is not immune to the influences of the region or community to which people belong. These effects manifest in various forms: limited educational opportunities (Gordon & Monastiriotis 2007), additional costs with education (Bauer & Riphahn 2007), difficulties in finding a job, or risk of accentuating social exclusion (Atkinson & Kintrea 2001). The impact of the region or the community to which the young people and their families belong is much stronger in the case of those with a low level of education, without an occupation, or where a lack of employment opportunities and resultant income makes it difficult to cover additional costs for children's education further increasing the risk of dropout (Cinquegrana et al. 2023; Rocca et al. 2022). Further, the socio-familial environment of origin of young people is also potentiated by the structural characteristics of the countries in which they live: in countries with a sub-protective system, in particular less liberal Mediterranean and Eastern European non-English speaking countries, where young people depend on a greater extent on family support. It is essential therefore that the intergenerational transmission of characteristics such as a desire for success, an appreciation of social capital, and the capacity for

independent decision-making is supported across all socio-economic strata and not just in the cases where parents have succeeded educationally, professionally, and socially are able to encourage and support their children to do the same because they know it is possible.

To address the importance of the country of residence, we decided therefore to extend the analysis to four countries with different regimes: Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, and Romania. The inclusion in the analysis of two ex-communist countries was motivated, among the others, by the fact that Romania and Lithuania are representative of two different ways the Eastern countries reacted to the end of the communist regime. Indeed, there are some countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and the Czech Republic where the female participation rates remained higher than the EU-27 average: in 2019, based on the Eurostat data, it was around 68% for the age class 25–64. On the other side, in countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, and Hungary women reduced their participation in the labour market, with a share of those actively participating that was minimal in Romania, with 58.5%, but lower than the EU-27 average even in Poland (63%), Hungary (65.4%), Slovakia (66.6%) and Bulgaria (67.8%). These findings strongly affect the propensity to the NEET status, as we know that women are over-represented in the NEET category, and one of the main reasons for this status is the need for care for children or elderly, which is typical of women.

In order to support this, we must know more about these micro-level dimensions.

## Data and Methodology

### *Data*

We employ the 2019 ad hoc module of EU-SILC (European Union Survey on Income and Living Conditions) on the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage to verify if NEET status can be considered as an aspect of disadvantage. EU-SILC is the most important statistical source at the European level on individuals' and households' conditions. It is conducted every year in each EU country to provide Eurostat cross-country comparable information. We chose the 2019 wave as it is the most recent one including a specific ad hoc module on the Intergenerational transmission of the disadvantage (Wirth and Pforr 2022). In this study, we are concerned with NEETs in the age range of 25–34 years. In 2019, the share of NEETs ranged from 15% in Ireland to 23% in Italy, with Lithuania and Romania in an intermediate position, with 17% and 18%, respectively. Among these countries, Lithuania has the highest proportion of unemployed, 38%, followed by Italy with 35% while in Ireland and especially in Romania the share of unemployed was lower (27% and 23% respectively). EU-SILC provides a unique set of information on the socio-economic condition of these individuals and those they live with. The 2019 ad hoc module adds an information set connected with the family of origin of respondents at 14 years of age. Besides the parents' level of education and employment status, it includes information on the family composition and on the degree of urbanization where the respondent lived. We included in the analysis the following typologies of information:

- a) information on family characteristics: for the parental level of education, we used two dummy variables considering a medium and a low level of education, leaving

as a reference category a high level of education; mother's and father's professional status: the reference category, in this case, a parent not working; we considered a dummy variable for the possible high qualification as manager position; concerning the family composition, we considered the number of children in the household, leaving a reference category for more than three children, as a higher number of children meaning higher education costs and lower chances that all siblings could be supported to reach a high level of education; finally, our analysis included two composite measures indicating the possible immigration background and the degree of severity of household deprivation. The migration index is a composition rate, assuming the minimum value of 0 if the respondent has been born in the country where they live and has both native-born parents and a maximum of 1 if the respondent has foreign citizenship. The intermediate values of this indicator are as follows: 0.167 in the case of one immigrant parent; 0.333 in the case of both immigrant parents; 0.5 if one of the parents has foreign citizenship; 0.6667 if both the parents have foreign citizenship; 0.833 if the respondent was born in a foreign country but has the citizenship in the host country. The poverty index is a composite measure considering as indicators of deprivation the incapacity of the household to provide for the following basic needs when the respondent was 14 years old: books and equipment for school; meals with meat, chicken, fish, or the vegetarian equivalent daily; having a one-week annual holiday away from home. It ranges from 0 if none of these measures of deprivation is declared and 1 in the case that all of them are declared by the respondent.

- b) information on personal characteristics: gender, having as reference category men, and personal level of education (reference category is highly educated);
- c) information on the place of residence: for Italy and Romania, we considered a repartition into the NUTS1 regions, leaving as the reference category, respectively, South and Isles for Italy and RO4 for Romania, which are the regions with a higher share of NEETs;
- d) As EU-SILC provides the information on the degree of urbanization of both the place where the individual lived when they were 14 years old and the current place of residence, we included in the analysis all possible combinations: movement from the rural area to towns, movement from the rural area to the city, leaving as a reference category permanence in a rural area, that is considered the condition usually more likely to result in young people entering into NEET status.

### *Methodology*

The analysis of the effects of the parents' human capital (education) on the propensity of their child to enter into NEET status follows some steps. In line with Becker & Tomes (1979), based on the crucial role exerted by the parents' human capital on their pupils' educational and professional outcomes, as a first step, we measured the direct effect of parents' level of education on the probability that their children will not progress to higher education:

$$Pr(\text{low-educated} = 1) = \beta(\text{Parents' level of education}) + e_1 \quad (1)$$

Subsequently, as a second step, we tested to determine if the parent's level of education translates into a significant influence on their children's probability of becoming NEET. Indeed, according to Raitano's mechanism of the intergenerational transmission of inequalities (Raitano 2015), we try to measure both direct and indirect influences of family background on children's prospects, using the following extended probit model for the probability of being a NEET:

$$Pr(NEETs = 1) = \alpha + \beta_1 educ + \beta_2 X_2 + e_2 \quad (2)$$

with *educ* measuring the personal number of years in education and considered as dependent on the parent's level of education, while  $X_2$  is the vector of variables controlling for familial, personal, and geographical characteristics.

Finally, in the third step, we wanted to verify if the difference in the probability of becoming a NEET is directly affected by a lower level of educational attainment or not. After identifying the main determinants of NEET status, for each determinant, we split the sample into two groups: the most disadvantaged, having a higher probability of being a NEET, and then a group the less disadvantaged, with a lower probability. Then, we decomposed the difference in the probability of becoming a NEET for these two groups using an extension of the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition linear technique for non-linear models and identified the part of this gap due to the observed personal characteristics and the part that remains unexplained, as it derives from how these different characteristics are rewarded in the labor market. The decomposition is based on the following formula:

$$Pr(A) - Pr(B) = [\bar{X}_A - \bar{X}_B] \beta^A + \bar{X}_B (\beta^A - \beta^B)$$

where  $Pr(A)$  and  $Pr(B)$  are the probabilities of being NEET for group A and group B, respectively. The first component in the second term captures the differences in the individual characteristics while the second component is the coefficient effect, which quantifies the part of this gap due to the differences in coefficient estimates, that is, how personal characteristics are treated (the rewards that they receive) in the labor market. Equation (1) may be considered as a generalization of the following linear decomposition:

$$\bar{Y}_A - \bar{Y}_B = [\bar{X}_A - \bar{X}_B] \beta^* + \bar{X}_A (\beta^A - \beta^*) + \bar{X}_B (\beta^* - \beta^B)$$

where  $\beta^*$  is a weighted average of the coefficient vectors,  $\beta^A$  and  $\beta^B$ , and  $W$  is a weighted matrix and  $I$  an identity matrix (Oaxaca and Ransom 1994):

$$\beta^* = \Omega \beta^A + (I - \Omega) \beta^B$$

It is important to note that, as we compare the probability of being a NEET for the most disadvantaged group with the probability of being a NEET with those referred to as the less disadvantaged, this difference is expected to be positive. In the case that the total difference is positive, but the part due to the characteristics is negative, this means that the characteristics related to the disadvantaged part are higher than the characteristics of the other group. In other words, according to the observed characteristics (for example, they

have a higher level of education), the disadvantaged group should have a lower probability of becoming a NEET.

### *Descriptive statistics*

**Table 1** describes the variables introduced in the model and the main descriptive statistics.

The countries analyzed show very different characteristics in terms of the levels of education attained both by the young individuals and their parents. In Italy and Romania, less than 3 out of 10 young people progress to tertiary education while in Ireland and Lithuania the majority progress. In Italy, 6 out of 10 young people have parents who have low levels of education while in other countries no more than 3 out of 10 experience this. Strong differences across countries arise even when looking at the share of individuals with a mother involved in a working activity. In Italy and in Ireland the individuals having a mother not employed outside of the household when they were 14 years older are 54.45% and 41.23%, respectively. In Lithuania and Romania, they are less at 10.83% and 31.49%, respectively. The analysis of the distribution of the individuals in terms of the degree of urbanization of the place of origin highlights significant differences even regarding the place of residence. In Ireland, Lithuania, and Romania those living in rural areas are a significant portion of the population (24%, 35%, and 39% respectively) while in Italy there is a prevalence of people living in municipalities with an intermediate level of urbanisation with those living in towns represents 24% of the population. The share of NEETs is very different in the countries analyzed. It ranges from 15% in Ireland to 23% in Italy (**Table 2**). However, the share of NEETs is also quite different within each country within the sub-samples identified, according to the family and personal characteristics presented in **Table 1**, making it reasonable to expect a strong influence of these covariates on the NEET status. The level of education has a strong effect on the propensity to NEET status with the share of NEETs among young people with a low level of education exceeding 40% everywhere. Particularly significant was the effect of the parents' low level of education, especially in Lithuania and Romania, with the share of NEETs at over 30%. We found the same higher percentages of NEETs among the individuals having more than two siblings in Romania, Lithuania, and Italy. In this latter country, of particular importance was the economic stability of the family where more than 6 out of 10 young people with an unemployed father are NEETs. Finally, according to the influence of the place of residence, while in Italy there is a strong concentration of NEETs for the individuals living in the South, in Lithuania and Romania the share of NEETs among those living in rural areas is at least double in comparison to those living in the cities.

In all the countries included in the study, we can observe the tendency to a general increase in the levels of education from the previous generation to the next one<sup>1</sup>: comparing the fathers' and the respondents' levels of education, we can see that where the father has a low level of education, the results relative to the target group show a low level of education in 54% of the cases in Romania while in the other countries the prevalence in the status of low level of education is generally around 13%. Furthermore, while in Romania and in Italy the medium level of education continues to be predominant among the young generation,

<sup>1</sup> For a direct comparison between the parents and their children's level of education, we constructed transition matrixes, here not reported for sake of brevity, but available on request by authors.



Table 1  
Descriptive statistics

Socio-economic characteristics	Italy	Ireland	Lithuania	Romania
	Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)
Parents' level of education				
Low-educated father	59.19 (0.49)	30.17 (0.46)	9.67 (0.30)	19.68 (0.40)
Medium-educated father	30.38 (0.46)	44.81 (0.50)	61.99 (0.49)	73.55 (0.44)
High-educated father	10.43 (0.30)	25.02 (0.43)	28.34 (0.45)	6.76 (0.25)
Low-educated mother	62.13 (0.49)	23.77 (0.43)	31.07 (0.46)	25.62 (0.44)
Medium-educated mother	30.58 (0.46)	55.54 (0.50)	43.62 (0.50)	68.05 (0.47)
High-educated mother	7.29 (0.26)	20.69 (0.40)	25.31 (0.47)	6.32 (0.24)
Parents' professional condition				
Unemployed father	1.36 (0.11)	4.44 (0.21)	0.60 (0.08)	0.08 (0.03)
Father Employee or self-employed	97.12 (0.24)	92.88 (0.26)	97.50 (0.15)	97.81 (0.25)
Father Inactive	1.52 (0.25)	2.67 (0.16)	1.90 (0.14)	2.11 (0.28)
Father With manager position	13.60 (0.34)	19.06 (0.39)	10.85 (0.31)	5.20 (0.22)
Unemployed mother	0.22 (0.05)	0.37 (0.06)	0.24 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)
Mother Employee or self-employed	45.33 (0.50)	58.40 (0.49)	88.93 (0.36)	68.48 (0.46)
Mother Inactive	54.45 (0.50)	41.23 (0.49)	10.83 (0.31)	31.49 (0.45)
Mother with manager position	5.81 (0.23)	9.11 (0.29)	7.16 (0.26)	2.26 (0.15)
Number of children in the household				
One	38.88 (0.49)	24.26 (0.43)	22.66 (0.42)	29.61 (0.46)
Two	45.29 (0.50)	38.85 (0.49)	56.79 (0.50)	44.64 (0.50)
Three	11.38 (0.32)	18.48 (0.39)	13.79 (0.34)	16.38 (0.37)
More than three	4.45 (0.21)	18.41 (0.39)	6.76 (0.25)	9.37 (0.29)
Only one parent living in the household*	2.93 (0.17)	10.89 (0.31)	7.83 (0.27)	1.61 (0.13)
Immigration index*	1.60 (10.41)	14.67 (32.65)	1.16 (9.74)	0.19 (3.47)
Poverty index*	0.11 (0.21)	0.08 (0.17)	0.09 (0.19)	0.13 (0.23)
Personal Characteristics				
Gender: females	48.96 (0.50)	53.30 (0.50)	47.69 (0.50)	48.01 (0.50)
Low-educated	20.08 (0.40)	7.66 (0.27)	7.75 (0.27)	18.96 (0.39)
Medium-educated	50.47 (0.50)	21.04 (0.41)	34.53 (0.48)	52.62 (0.50)
High-educated	29.45 (0.46)	71.30 (0.45)	57.72 (0.50)	28.42 (0.45)
Degree of urbanization				
Rural	9.30 (0.29)	23.94 (0.43)	34.54 (0.48)	39.47 (0.49)
Moved from rural area to town	15.63 (0.36)	11.41 (0.32)	1.34 (0.11)	13.97 (0.35)
Moved from rural area to city	6.68 (0.25)	9.60 (0.29)	6.35 (0.24)	5.80 (0.23)
Moved from town to rural area	6.91 (0.25)	4.14 (0.20)	11.40 (0.32)	1.50 (0.12)
Town	24.44 (0.43)	10.40 (0.31)	0.01 (0.09)	9.21 (0.29)
Moved from town to city	15.18 (0.36)	14.26 (0.35)	12.10 (0.33)	12.66 (0.33)
Moved from city to rural area	1.90 (0.14)	1.21 (0.11)	1.39 (0.12)	0.21 (0.14)
Moved from city to town	6.75 (0.25)	5.06 (0.22)	0.10 (0.03)	2.06 (0.14)
City	13.30 (0.34)	19.98 (0.40)	32.763 (0.47)	15.13 (0.36)
Region of residence				
North West	28.95 (0.42)			
North East	19.45 (0.38)			
Centre	22.03 (0.39)			
South	29.57 (0.44)			
RO1				26.68 (0.44)
RO2				24.03 (0.43)
RO3				30.02 (0.46)
RO4				19.27 (0.39)

\* Even if of interest, we could not use the information about the presence of both the mother and the father in the household in the econometric analysis, as the information about parents' level of education and professional condition was detected only for the cohabitant parents.

Source: Adapted by the authors from EU-SILC-2019.

Table 2

**Share of NEETs for homogeneous sub-samples**

<b>Share of NEETs</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Lithuania</b>	<b>Romania</b>
Parents' level of education				
Low-educated father	27.00	18.98	35.26	32.04
Medium-educated father	19.08	16.32	18.30	14.78
High-educated father	9.47	8.22	8.19	3.48
Low-educated mother	27.42	25.03	42.21	31.19
Medium-educated mother	13.80	11.58	18.97	13.49
High-educated mother	19.67	11.28	8.62	4.21
Parents' professional condition				
Unemployed father	64.28	26.62	12.65	33.68
Father Employee or self-employed	21.99	14.09	17.67	16.88
Father Inactive	34.10	29.87	5.61	33.37
Father with the manager position	18.28	9.55	14.93	10.04
Unemployed mother	21.64	—	0.00	13.20
Mother Employee or self-employed	17.07	10.22	16.65	12.04
Mother Inactive	27.38	21.58	31.67	30.71
Mother with the manager position	17.55	9.81	22.01	5.09
Number of children in the household				
Number of children in the household: 1	24.04	15.51	12.92	13.06
Number of children in the household: 2	21.23	11.97	16.91	15.92
Number of children in the household: 3	22.50	12.48	16.17	18.48
Number of children in the household: > 3	32.25	23.36	34.81	37.84
Only one parent living in the household*	27.54	20.58	17.13	24.27
Personal characteristics				
Gender: females	30.26	19.22	22.45	29.83
Low-educated	43.74	52.01	45.25	40.91
Medium-educated	19.54	18.10	20.06	14.93
High-educated	14.64	10.13	11.58	6.81
Degree of urbanization				
Rural	21.26	14.57	25.75	26.13
Moved from rural area to town	26.15	20.90	24.67	18.19
Moved from rural area to city	35.38	7.36	13.97	11.37
Moved from town to rural area	17.66	11.60	22.12	9.51
Town	21.41	17.49	11.14	10.08
Moved from town to city	24.29	14.38	14.16	11.04
Moved from city to rural area	18.99	16.39	29.68	0.00
Moved from city to town	18.46	16.56	0.00	0.00
City	21.06	15.27	7.34	10.32
Region of residence				
North West	17.28			
North East	13.68			
Centre	18.29			
South	32.53			
RO1				18.00
RO2				18.31
RO3				15.18
RO4				19.56
Unconditional share of NEETs in the sample	22.957	15.02	17.12	17.54

\* See note in [Table 1](#)

Source: Adapted by the authors from EU-SILC-2019.

in the other countries the majority of young people receive a tertiary education. Indeed, those having a medium-educated father resulted in a medium level of education in 60% of the cases in Romania, 39% in Italy, and 27% in Lithuania and Ireland. This suggests from an educational perspective that while educational mobility can be observed this does not necessarily translate to the development of sustained professional or occupational mobility, particularly in Southern Europe. The strong intergenerational transmission of the advantages/disadvantages is still more evident when looking at the highly educated respondents. While the highly-educated respondents are only 28% in Romania and 29% in Italy, in the other countries they are the majority.

### *The Econometric Estimate*

**Table 3** shows the unconditional estimates of how parental levels of education affect the probability that their children will not progress to a higher level of education. Results show that a low level of education of both mother and father significantly affects the educational outcomes of their children in Italy, Lithuania, and Romania. This effect is particularly high in Romania. In Ireland, this dependence has been mitigated in recent decades and can be attributed to a series of government interventions over multiple decades resulting in free access to higher education regardless of socioeconomic status. In concert with this approach significant efforts have been made to recognize the experience and ‘on-the-job training’ resulting in sustained higher incomes without a return to formal education pathways (Flynn 2021). The prevalence in Italy of young people with low-educated parents, evident in **Table 1**, is here confirmed by the fact that in this country having a parent who attained high secondary school graduation is already sufficient to significantly reduce the probability for a child being limited to a low level of education. These outcomes reflect the different economic growth rates of the analyzed countries in the years under consideration (Callan et al. 2018; Thewissen et al. 2018).

Table 3

#### **Pupils’ low-education propensity considering the parents’ level of education**

<b>Pr(being low-educated)</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Lithuania</b>	<b>Romania</b>
Low educated father	0.5253***	0.4639	0.6110*	1.7605***
Medium educated father	-0.3815**	0.2881	-0.0789	0.9628**
Low educated mother	0.6720***	0.4513	1.3722***	1.5696***
Medium educated mother	-0.1881	0.0940	0.4860**	0.9088**
Constant	-1.5931***	-1.9172***	-1.9180***	-3.1569***
N	2946	583	676	1268
Wald chi2	179.79***	11.54**	30.95***	144.09***
Pseudo R2	0.1597	0.0458	0.1775	0.2055

Source: Adapted by the authors from EU-SILC-2019.

**Table 4** shows the outcomes of the extended probit regression model, which considers the personal level of education attained as dependent on the parent’s level of education. In addition, as control variables, we include the parents’ professional condition and a set of personal characteristics and factors connected with the place of residence (see section 3.1).

Table 4

**Determinants of the NEET status considering the indirect effect of the parent's level of education**

	Italy	Ireland	Lithuania	Romania
Parents' professional condition (ref. not employed)				
Employee or self-employee father	-0.3595***	-0.0756	0.2106	-0.0177
Father with the manager position	-0.1122	-0.2124	0.0560	0.0455
Employee or self-employed mother	-0.1188	-0.3938**	-0.1180	-0.3570***
Mother with the manager position	0.1040	0.0181	0.3149	-0.4697
Number of children in the household (ref. > 3)				
One	0.0595	-0.2296	-0.4149*	-0.4353**
Two	-0.1795	-0.3043	-0.2732	-0.3097*
Three	-0.1747	-0.4246*	-0.5152*	-0.3590*
Immigration index	0.0023	0.0027	0.0011	0.0605***
Poverty index	0.3475*	0.7223*	0.5067	0.5089**
Personal characteristics				
Gender (ref. male)	0.5828***	0.5974***	0.4829***	1.0360***
Degree of urbanization (ref. rural-rural)				
Moved from rural area to town	0.0581	0.1915	-0.2688	-0.2891*
Moved from rural area to city	0.2197	-0.2975	-0.4083	-0.4882*
Moved from town to rural area	-0.1872	-0.2153	0.0265	-0.7147*
Town	0.0135	-0.0759	-0.3348	-0.4853**
Moved from town to city	0.0904	0.0463	-0.1913	-0.4010**
Moved from city to rural area	-0.1719	-0.0310	0.1791	-6.3609***
Moved from city to town	-0.1475	-0.0979	-4.3294***	-6.2368***
City	0.1171	0.1239	-0.5078***	-0.3041
Region of residence				
North West	-0.4660***			
North East	-0.6023***			
Centre	-0.4197***			
RO1				-0.2452
RO2				-0.3328**
RO3				-0.2452
Constant	-0.5797	0.9662	0.1166	-0.4205
Level of education				
Low-educated father	-2.0973***	-1.4385***	-1.8320	-7.0438***
Medium educated father	-0.6465**	-1.5549***	-0.4587	-7.3428***
Low-educated mother	-2.0900***	-2.0688***	-6.6804***	-2.7541*
Medium-educated mother	-0.0847	-0.1221	-3.0551***	-1.9211
Constant	15.1079***	17.2834	13.2422***	15.5955***
Var(e.education)	12.2256	14.8294	65.8081	54.0435
Corr(e.education,e.NEET)	0.0665	0.2080	0.5378***	0.1518
N	2946	583	676	1248
Wald chi2	174.42***	87.89***	65.56***	174.62***

Note: \*\*\* stands for significant at 0.01; \*\* at 0.05 and \* at 0.10.

Source: Adapted by the authors from EU-SILC-2019.

As a robustness check, **Table 5** shows the basic probit model specification with the same covariates, controlling also for the parents' level of education. The number of years

Table 5  
**Determinants of the NEET status**

	Italy	Ireland	Lithuania	Romania
Parents' educational level (ref. high level)				
Low-educated father	0.3436***	0.0870	0.0425	-0.1834
Medium educated father	0.4518***	0.4542*	0.0843	-0.0882
Low-educated mother	-0.3960	-0.1848	0.3282	0.2196
Medium-educated mother	-0.4917***	-0.5006*	0.0741	0.0627
Parents' professional condition (ref. not employed)				
Employee or self-employee father	-0.3193**	0.0430	0.3236	-0.0037
Father with the manager position	-0.0997	-0.2219	0.0767	0.1790
Employee or self-employed mother	-0.1363	-0.4297**	-0.1611	-0.2971***
Mother with the manager position	0.1327	-0.2576	0.3037	-0.6608
Number of children in the household (ref. > 3)				
One	0.0859	-0.1636	-0.5256**	-0.2256
Two	-0.1501	-0.3588	-0.3225	-0.1220
Three	-0.1566	-0.4218	-0.6028*	-0.2213
Immigration index	0.0015	0.0037	0.0022	0.0585***
Poverty index	0.2102	0.9825**	0.2365	0.1754
Personal characteristics				
Gender (ref. male)	0.5869***	0.7572***	0.6640***	1.0452***
Level of education (ref. high)				
Low Educated	0.8852***	1.4918***	1.1687***	1.0742***
Medium Educated	0.2408***	0.2863	0.3410*	0.4911***
Degree of urbanization (ref. rural-rural)				
Moved from rural area to town	0.0294	0.2881	-0.1726	-0.2044
Moved from rural area to city	0.1368	-0.2610	-0.6613	-0.2290
Moved from town to rural area	-0.1757	-0.1553	0.1284	-0.4682
Town	0.0071	0.0642	-0.1558	-0.3997
Moved from town to city	0.0666	0.0084	-0.1424	-0.2125
Moved from city to rural area	-0.1879	0.0022	0.2987	—
Moved from city to town	-0.1715	-0.0894	—	—
City	0.0848	0.2541	-0.5850***	-0.0778
Region of residence				
North West	-0.4842***			
North East	-0.6110***			
Centre	-0.3966***			
RO1				-0.2856*
RO2				-0.4606***
RO3				-0.3128*
Constant	-0.7012***	-1.4027***	-1.3075	-1.3759***
N	2946	583	675	1248
Wald chi2	229.08***	87.89***	65.56***	174.62***
Pseudo R2	0.1403	0.2046	0.1558	0.2414

Source: Own elaborations by the authors on the EU-SILC-2019.

Note: \*\* at 0.05 and \* at 0.10; for Lithuania and Romania the coefficients related to the variables moved from city to town and for Romania moved from city to rural area too are not estimated for the low number of cases; \*\*\* stands for significant at 0.01.

of education experienced by the children is inversely related to their parents' low and medium levels of education. However, while in Italy, Ireland, and Romania the strong relationship concerns the fathers' level of education, in Lithuania only the mothers play a significant role. Further, looking at the coefficients of correlation between the residual of the two models, only in Lithuania it is statistically significant, confirming the presence of endogeneity. Conversely, in other countries, we did not observe the existence of unobserved factors affecting both the personal level of education and NEET status. The results from the two different models' specifications are similar.

Indeed, the parent's level of education is strongly connected with the level of education attained by their children and still significantly affects the propensity to NEET status for Italian and Irish young people. In particular, in Italy, a father's low or medium level of education significantly increases the probability for their children of being a NEET, with coefficients, respectively, of 0.34 and 0.45. In Ireland, only a father's medium level of education has a significant effect (0.45). Conversely, when we look at the mother, a medium level of education in both Italy and Ireland is associated with significant probabilities for progression to NEET status ( $-0.48$  and  $-0.50$ , respectively). However, an active professional status of both mother and father significantly decreases the probability of being NEET in Italy while in Ireland and Romania, this relationship is significant only regarding the mother. Conversely, in Lithuania, the absence of significance on this covariate is probably due to the higher levels of female participation in the labor market. Indeed, according to the Eurostat data (Eurostat 2022), the female participation rate in 2019 was 58.5% in Romania, 60.5% in Italy, 69.6% in Ireland, and 82.3% in Lithuania, against an average at the EU-27 level of 71.4%.

A migration background acts by significantly increasing the probability of being NEET only in Romania, while in Ireland this probability is strongly connected with a deprived familial background, as measured by the poverty index. As for personal characteristics, being female significantly increases the probability of entering NEET status everywhere, but the effect in Romania is higher. The coefficient of gender in Romania is notably high, 1.04, while in Italy it is significant, but reaches only 0.59. Also, a medium, but especially a low level of education significantly increases the propensity to the NEET status everywhere; however, the coefficients corresponding to the low level of education are particularly high in Ireland and Lithuania, 1.49 and 1.17 respectively, where the share of people with a low level of education is very low. Finally, considering the factors connected with the region of residence, only for Italy and Romania was it possible to include in the analysis the NUTS1 macro-region of residence. In both countries, the region of residence strongly affects the predisposition to NEET status. While in Italy the divide between the North-Centre and the South emerges, in Romania, it is reflected in the difference between the RO4 regions and all the others. According to the degree of urbanization, results show that especially in Lithuania and Romania living in a place different from a rural area reduces the probability of the NEET status.

The analysis of the decomposition of the differences in the probability of becoming a NEET between the groups of young people sharing similar characteristics resulted in some interesting findings (Table 6). Young people with low-educated parents show a higher probability of becoming a NEET. The statistical significance of the part of the gap specific

Table 6  
 Decomposition of the probability of being NEET according to specific sub-groups of young people

Sub-groups	Italy		Ireland		Lithuania		Romania	
	Total gap	Part due to characteristics	Total gap	Part due to the characteristics	Total gap	Part due to the characteristics	Total gap	Part due to the characteristics
Low educated father	0.0960***	0.0959***	0.0541	0.0710**	0.1974*	0.2508**	0.1771***	0.1557***
Low educated mother	0.1147***	0.1000***	0.1302***	0.0950***	0.2625**	0.2909***	0.1803***	0.1593***
Unemployed father	0.1619***	0.0118	0.1151*	0.1451**	-0.0367	-0.0151	0.0991*	0.0936
Regional gap	0.1624***	0.0417***					-0.0250	0.0268
Migration background	0.0761**	-0.0173	0.0520	-0.0025				
Gender	0.1411***	-0.0116	0.0868***	-0.0607**	0.0998**	-0.0287	0.2363***	0.0355**
Low personal level of education	0.2612***	-0.0217	0.3960***	0.0554	0.3018***	0.2391	0.2698***	0.0754***
Rural/urban	-0.0377	-0.0161	-0.0122	-0.0018	0.1463***	0.04522	0.1361***	0.0996***

Source: Adapted by the authors from EU-SILC-2019.

to personal characteristics shows that a low level of education of parents is reflected even in lower individual characteristics. The part of the gap due to the observed characteristics is indeed statistically significant everywhere and particularly high in Lithuania (0.25 for the low-educated father and even 0.29 for the low-educated mother). Gender shows a significant difference in the propensity to NEET status. The gap in the probabilities of becoming a NEET between men and women is particularly high in Romania. The negative sign of the characteristic part of the gap in Italy, Ireland, and Lithuania denotes that this difference in penalizing women persists even though they have higher personal characteristics in terms of human capital. However, the strong differences in the probabilities of being NEET are connected to the individual level of education everywhere, even if in Lithuania the gap between low and high educated is not much higher than that between those with a low-educated mother and those with a highly educated mother. For Italy, the gaps connected to the region of residence and the fathers' professional condition are very high, reflecting the existence of high regional divides and high levels of unemployment. Finally, it is interesting to note that according to the degree of urbanization, young people living in rural areas are associated with higher probabilities of becoming NEET only in Lithuania and Romania.

### Discussions

Our article includes in the analysis the recognized dependence of children's level of education on their parents' education and additional dimensions in understanding how the process of intergenerational transmission takes place: migration; and regional and community influence. Most analyses carried out have been limited to the study of individual countries or include similar countries from the point of view of the level of socio-economic development, socio-political history, structure, and organization of social systems. In the current analysis, we have included countries with a complex and diverse socio-economic history and countries that belong to distinct development models. Moreover, because we are focused on the intergenerational transmission of NEET status, in our analysis we used the classification of the occupational status of the parents into employed, unemployed, and inactive so that we could understand not only the channels through which this process takes place but also what exactly they have passed on to the parents of the children.

Our analysis shows us that the process of democratization of education, even when we are only talking about "quantitative democratization" (Merle 2002), had the effect of increasing the level of education of citizens i.e. the majority of the population has at least a medium level of education. However, it must be taken into account that the democratization of education in the four countries included in the analysis was based on very different policies and motivations. In the case of Romania and Lithuania, we must take into account the changes in class structure generated by the communist regime (Tomescu-Dubrow 2006) accelerated industrialization requiring a qualified labor force and this increased the accessibility of education to service this need. The former communist countries feel the effect of communist policies (Torul & Öztunali 2017) through downward



educational mobility due to the parents of young people today having reached at least a medium level of education under communism.

Another aspect specific to the two ex-communist countries is that, at present, the population's trust in education has decreased mainly as a result of the inadequacies between the level of education, acquired skills and competencies, and socio-professional position. Jecan & Pop (2012) consider that, in former communist countries, education has become a symbolic power that makes a difference between those who can afford to stay in school until the highest level and those who do not have the resources to invest in education. Moreover, if the parents needed at least a medium level of education to integrate socio-professionally, at present the same level of education increases the risk of becoming NEETs, a fact confirmed by EU-SILC 2019 data. In Ireland and Italy, access to high-level education is facilitated by the existence of high financial resources because the holistic cost of entering this level of education is relatively expensive, and parents with a low level of education, with low incomes, do not possess financial resources. The relationship between the education level of the parents and that of the children is much closer in Italy and Ireland where young people who reach a high level of education have parents with the same level of education. Conversely, in Lithuania both the mechanisms of attaining a low level of education and becoming a NEET are associated with common unobserved factors, that may be associated with the levels of unemployment, as we found that Lithuania has the highest incidence of unemployment among NEETs in comparison to the other countries analyzed.

In instances where the school is not considered a safe source of investment, the population with a low level of education turned to other sources: migration for work. In Ireland and in the two ex-communist countries, migration for work has become a more accessible solution for young people from socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged families than continuing school to the highest level. Our analysis reveals that belonging to a migrant community significantly increases the probability of becoming a NEET. This is possible because those who migrated to other countries meet major obstacles within the labor market in gaining recognition for the level of education attained in their country of origin. For those at school, similar challenges exist in reaching a high level of education due to difficulties with second language acquisition for learning. Even if their material-financial situation improved, their educational situation suffered—absenteeism, low academic performance, and repetition—which represents the beginning stages of the process of entering NEET status (Leino et al. 2013).

As noted in our analysis of the literature, parents influence children's education levels differently. The father's education level has a higher influence on children compared to the mother's education level in Italy and Ireland. We contend that one explanation is that these countries are characterized by a persistent traditional family model, in which mothers are responsible for raising children, while fathers are the ones who provide the financial and material support of the family. This type of attitude also comes as a result of some pressures exerted by the community to which the family belongs and which encourages young people to adopt a certain lifestyle such as early marriage, especially for girls. The data analysis reveals that this traditional model is transmitted from one generation to another. In all four countries, being a woman and having an inactive mother increases the probability of entering NEET status. This outcome persists even though women are on average more

educated than men, as shown by the characteristic part of the gap in the probability of being NEET between men and women that is negative everywhere, except Romania. The risk of becoming a NEET is also determined by the type of family in which the young person grows up: the EU-SILC 2019 data support the relationship between the presence of a large family and the risk of becoming a NEET. Although the data allowed us to analyze the relationship between the intergenerational transmission process and regional influence for only two of the countries selected for the comparative analysis—Italy and Romania. We consider this aspect to be important not only because the family influences the educational path and later the socio-professional one, but also the community. The literature reveals the fact that poor communities are characterised in this way because they are inhabited by a poor population (Coley et al. 2019). By including a regional consideration in our analysis, we see that the argument presented in Raaum et al. (2006) is supported when they contend that regional characteristics have a significant impact on the educational results of young people. This is not related to the country as different although, in Italy, Lithuania, and Romania the risk of becoming NEETs is much more likely in the case of young people who come from families living in poorly developed regions.

### Conclusion and Practical Implications

One of the most important results revealed by our analysis is that the recognition and acceptance of this distinct socio-economic category—NEETs—contributes to changing the perspective of approaches to studies on intergenerational transmission. Within the socio-economic education hierarchy, current generations no longer occupy a position higher or lower than previous generations, but they may end up in a position that their parents have not experienced, the status of NEET. The data analyzed in this article support the fact that certain socio-familial and economic characteristics of the origin of young people (parents' level of education, their occupational status, the number of children in the household) increase the risk of them becoming NEET. Also, the risks generated by the origin of young people are amplified by situations external to the socio-familial environment, such as belonging to the rural environment or to socio-economically disadvantaged regions.

The results of our analysis lead to a series of practical implications. First of all, it suggests that the action of public policies cannot be directed exclusively towards NEETs, but towards the complex factors that bring them to this situation and, therefore towards their family of origin. To “break” intergenerational transmission, public policy actions must support the family of origin and the communities to provide the young with an environment as safe as possible from an economic point of view, with real chances of professional integration. It is clear that the NEET population emerges from disadvantaged socio-economic, family, and cultural backgrounds in the countries included in the analysis and more work is required to inform both macro-level policy movements and localized micro-level bespoke interventions. Secondly, the population, especially the disadvantaged, must be restored to trust in education and the labor market as a real way to avoid social-professional failure.

### Limits of Research

Our study is not without limitations that come from the type of data used, restricting the analysis to only 4 countries. The data analyzed by us are those collected in 2019 and, although contain unique longitudinal information on the socio-familial, and economic origin of NEETs are only available for this time frame limiting the observation period. Consequently, our investigation focuses only on the current situation of NEETs, not the medium and long-term changes of the effects of intergenerational transmission that will manifest themselves later. Secondly, our analysis focused only on some of the “legacies” passed on by the family to young people: educational capital, and professional capital. However, the family is much more complex from the perspective of the legacy it can transmit (for example, social capital). Regarding the methods used in this article, they are sufficient to verify how poverty creates the conditions for the transmission of this disadvantage. However, for the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition, it is important to underline that not all of the gap which is captured by the unexplained part is necessarily connected to a disadvantage due to poverty; indeed, it may depend on the incapacity of the model to capture other relevant characteristics which remain unobserved. Future research can expand the observation window if the EU-SILC data contains more extensive information, providing insight into longer-term effects.

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