This is an open access article under the
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026
778

SELF-REPORTED STUDENTS' REASONS FOR CHOOSING A SPECIFIC TRACK IN A GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Aleksandra Maksimović, Filip Stašević, Aleksandar Milenković
University of Kragujevac, Republic of Serbia
E-mail: aleksandra.maksimovic@pmf.kg.ac.rs, filip.stasevic@pmf.kg.ac.rs,
aleksandar.milenkovic@pmf.kg.ac.rs

Abstract

Educational track selection represents an important transition in students' educational pathways, as choices made at this stage may influence subsequent educational opportunities and trajectories. Understanding how students explain these choices provides insight into the processes underlying educational transitions. Drawing on contemporary perspectives on educational choice, this exploratory qualitative study examines students' explanations for choosing STEM, non-STEM, and bilingual grammar school tracks in Serbia. Data were collected through an electronic questionnaire from 1,045 grammar school students who responded to an open-ended question about their track choice. Reflexive thematic analysis identified recurring patterns across the three groups. Six themes emerged: personal interests and academic self-concept; academic and strategic reasons; social environment influences; school and track image; practical and structural factors; and indecision and low commitment. Personal interests and perceived academic strengths were the most prominent considerations, particularly among STEM students, while non-STEM students more frequently referred to curricular breadth, structural circumstances, and uncertainty about future direction. Bilingual students showed a more varied pattern combining language-related considerations with academic interests and future-oriented reasoning. Social influences were present but less frequently articulated as primary reasons. Overall, educational choice emerged as a multidimensional and context-dependent process, shaped by students' interests and aspirations as well as by their social and institutional contexts. The findings highlight the importance of continuous, developmentally appropriate career guidance that helps students reflect on their interests and abilities, explore educational pathways, and make informed decisions before entering secondary education.

Keywords: *bilingual, non-STEM, Serbia, STEM, students' choice, qualitative approach*

Introduction

Across Europe, educational systems differ in the age at which students are required to choose educational pathways and in the extent to which secondary education is differentiated. Despite these institutional differences, students' educational choices have long-term consequences for educational participation, labour market opportunities, and social mobility. Consequently, understanding how young people make these decisions has become an important concern in European educational research, while transitions from one level of education to another represent a critical phase for both young people and society worldwide (Poulsen, 2020). These transitions are shaped not only by broader socio-economic and institutional structures but also by the ways in which individuals interpret and integrate them into their personal educational trajectories. Patterns of educational progression are influenced by a combination of factors, including social class, family background and values, as well as students' academic achievement and aspirations (van den Broeck et al., 2023; Varjo et al., 2020). While multiple contextual and individual factors shape educational decisions, certain theoretical perspectives emphasize the role of personal orientations and socially embedded influences in guiding these

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778
ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

choices. In this regard, expectations, subjective values, and prior experiences are frequently highlighted as key elements in educational decision-making processes. Such perspectives tend to foreground the individual level, conceptualizing educational choice as driven by factors that attract students toward particular educational and career pathways (Mouton et al., 2023).

In previous decades, within the current pool of approaches to educational trajectories, the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Albert Bandura were dominant. Bourdieu (1986) focused on students from non-traditional and underprivileged backgrounds who struggle to understand the rules governing academic practices, an approach recognized as *social inclusion*. Bandura (1986), within the framework of *social cognitive theory*, suggests that outcome expectations involve the belief that specific behaviours will lead to designated consequences. An individual's self-perceptions, goals, and academic intentions inform and influence these behaviours, which are also affected by social status and the degree of personal agency (Bandura, 1989).

However, contemporary research and projects highlight a coherent body of critical educational and career theory that responds to current crises of inequality, precarity, and ecological breakdown. The labour market is also undergoing transformation, with access to remote and blended work expanding alongside the growth of precarious employment. The technological revolution threatens to replace many jobs. This situation in the fields of education and work has been described as liquid modernity, in which individualisation as the main form of socialisation fragments communities and social bonds, leading to significant implications for educational choice, career theory, and the policy and practice of educational and career guidance (Hooley, 2022; Wren et al., 2025).

Research Problem

The determination of young people's educational and career pathways has been a longstanding focus of research worldwide. In her analysis of students' educational choices, Holmegaard (2015) identifies three major research traditions that approach this issue from distinct perspectives. The first, rooted in the American research tradition, is characterised by large-scale quantitative studies that map how structural factors, such as ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, interact with prior educational trajectories to shape students' choices. Within this perspective, educational decisions are primarily understood as outcomes of measurable background variables and systemic inequalities. The second tradition, developed predominantly in the United Kingdom, places greater emphasis on the role of social class in shaping access to and participation in education. This line of research frequently employs longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to explore how students' decisions evolve over time, highlighting the persistence of social inequalities and how they are reproduced through educational pathways. In contrast, the Scandinavian research tradition conceptualizes educational choice as a process of identity construction. Rather than focusing primarily on structural determinants, this perspective examines how young people interpret their options and construct meaningful educational trajectories as part of their broader life narratives. In this view, choosing a field of study is understood as a biographical project, embedded in personal aspirations and self-understanding, rather than merely a rational or structurally constrained decision (Holmegaard, 2015).

The growing global demand for qualified STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) professionals has increased the academic emphasis on preparing students for enrolment in (post)secondary programs in these fields (Cedere et al., 2020). Public debate on the issue has been dominated by concerns about a future shortage of engineers and scientists (Committee on STEM Education, National Science & Technology Council, 2018; OECD, 2013). Since the developmental processes leading to STEM interest begin years before university, previous research has identified key predictors of enrolment, such as family background,

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

financial resources, and prior familial academic achievement (Balta et al., 2023). These issues are reflected in research focused on uncovering the specific reasons for continuing STEM education at both secondary and postsecondary levels (Holmegaard, 2015). As a result, many studies have aimed to understand the complexities of these educational choices by identifying the main interpersonal and environmental factors that influence students' subject selections and later career paths (Dawes et al., 2015).

A common characteristic of earlier studies on STEM educational and career pathways is their reliance on large-scale quantitative designs. Recently, Smith et al. (2026) have conducted research involving more than 4,000 students at the end of primary school in the UK, aiming to create an intervention to increase the inclusion of young people in STEM. The study examines the relationship between career aspirations, student characteristics, and school-based factors linked to enjoyment and motivation for learning about science. In 2011, the Interests and Recruitment in Science (IRIS) study surveyed 3,500 first-year students in STEM courses from 30 Australian universities and found that young people are attracted to STEM courses primarily by personal interest, passion, enjoyment, and practical application (SiMERR National Research Centre, 2012). Similarly, a 2015 survey of 649 first-year STEM students at Queensland University examined predictors that strongly influence students' decisions to pursue a STEM degree (Dawes et al., 2015).

Prior research has also examined the predictors of STEM versus non-STEM interest, ability, and efforts to support young people in choosing educational and career paths in STEM fields. Guzey et al. (2014) developed and implemented an instrument to assess attitudes toward STEM, which was administered to 662 students from two STEM schools and three non-STEM schools in Minnesota. Results showed a statistically significant difference in means between students attending STEM and non-STEM schools on the two subscales of the survey and the overall survey. Researchers from the University of Pittsburgh analyzed demographic, academic, attitudinal, and experiential data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program for over 12,000 students at two universities to test a methodology for identifying variables that show significant differences between students intending to major in STEM versus non-STEM subjects (Nicholls et al., 2007). Another study in the USA examined factors influencing STEM career aspirations in a nationally representative sample of 9th-grade students (N = 21,444) and found that race, gender, socio-economic status, math interest, and science self-efficacy were the most important predictors of STEM career aspirations (Mau & Li, 2018).

At the same time, considerably less research has focused on the choice of non-STEM disciplines. In contrast to the attention given to STEM pathways, non-STEM fields are often framed in a markedly negative light. Some studies highlight that political discourse frequently portrays degrees in the humanities and social sciences as offering limited labour market prospects, with suggestions that enrolment in these fields should be reduced. This has real-world consequences, resulting in interventions aimed at changing enrolment patterns. Australia's 2020 tuition change is a recent example of such a policy: it aims to shift the balance between STEM and non-STEM fields by more than doubling the costs of studying humanities or social sciences while reducing fees for STEM fields (Zając et al., 2023). Bruno and Faggini (2021) emphasized that the narrative about the debate on STEM versus humanities includes two main directions. For some, arts and humanities are simply less useful than STEM, and the challenges of the 21st century require more technological competencies. For others, the arts and humanities are merely different but have societal value. Observers also take different positions, arguing that the humanities yield high returns but noting a stigma against them. The debate about the need for STEM to enhance international competitiveness has a strong normative approach based on two basic intuitions. On the one hand, the growing impact of technological progress in economic production implies that more technological competencies need to be adopted. On the other hand, STEM graduates usually have higher wages compared with non-STEM graduates,

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778
ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

signalling the higher value of STEM competencies in the productive system (Bruno & Faggini, 2021).

Nevertheless, in contemporary literature, some voices assert that in the current socio-political climate, it is extremely important to develop various social skills, especially empathy, within STEM education. It is emphasized that while the progress enabled by STEM sciences is considered the fundamental goal of societal development, intense tensions and existential dangers are erupting across the planet. Han et al. (2026) note that the public often perceives STEM disciplines as objective and neutral, separate from human and societal factors. However, recent movements in STEM education have increasingly challenged this value-free assumption, advocating for the integration of empathy into STEM education reform.

In the Serbian context, it is worth noting that several recent studies have examined STEM education from different perspectives. Maksimović et al. (2020) have explored the perspectives of STEM education regarding Serbian secondary school students' motivation for career choice, while Stašević et al. (2025) have examined interest in STEM and its relationship to educational achievement and the socio-demographic characteristics of grammar school students in Serbia. Differences in parental involvement and expectations between STEM and non-STEM students have also been explored in research by local authors (Maksimović et al., 2025a), as well as perceptions of teaching subjects and student achievements as factors influencing orientation toward mathematics and natural sciences in secondary school (Maksimović et al., 2024).

Overall, various research perspectives provide the conceptual lens for understanding students' educational choices in the present study. Educational choice is treated as a multidimensional process in which students' interests and perceived competencies interact with their expectations for future educational pathways, social influences, and the opportunities and constraints embedded in specific school and track contexts. This framework guided the research toward both individual and contextual explanations of track choice and informed the interpretation of differences across these pathways.

Research Aim and Research Questions

Students' educational choices have long attracted attention in both public and research (Holmegaard, 2015). The comprehensive literature review provides an overview of the distribution and characteristics of studies focused on STEM and non-STEM educational tracks. Although there is extensive research on STEM education, there are relatively few STEM and non-STEM comparisons (Richardson & Bledsoe, 2025). Furthermore, there has been a call for qualitative studies to explore how choices create a sense of fit for individual students (Holmegaard, 2015). As the population of students grows increasingly diverse, there are suggestions to move toward qualitative studies to explore how choices create a sense of fit for individual students.

The present study responds to this gap by adopting a qualitative research approach. It includes a large and diverse sample of 1,045 students across different grammar school tracks, thereby extending the analytical focus beyond STEM to encompass non-STEM and bilingual pathways. In contrast to the existing literature, which has primarily emphasized identifying predictors and supporting students' engagement with STEM fields, this study examines a broader spectrum of articulated reasons underlying educational choices. In doing so, it considers the perceived value and positioning of both STEM and non-STEM domains, without privileging one over the other, and explores how students make sense of their choices across different areas of study.

Beyond providing evidence from Serbia, this study contributes to the European discussion on educational transitions by examining how students themselves explain their educational choices within a tracked secondary education system. By foregrounding students' perspectives,

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

the study offers insights that are relevant for educational policy, career guidance, and debates on equity and student agency across diverse European contexts. Furthermore, this study extends existing literature by providing a contextualized analysis of educational trajectories within a distinct socio-cultural framework. Although geographically part of Europe, Serbia has been in transition for several decades to become a member of the EU, which represents a broader and the non-specific Western environment.

Through participants' responses, this study provides insight into how students explain and make sense of their choice of a specific educational pathway – a grammar school track. Accordingly, the aim of the study was to examine the students' reasons for enrolling in a specific grammar school track and to analyse the distribution of these reasons across the identified themes. In line with this aim, the research addressed the following questions:

1) What reasons do grammar school students report as influencing their choice of track?

2) How can students' reported reasons be systematically classified using thematic analysis?

3) What dominant themes and patterns emerge from students' responses?

4) How can these themes be interpreted in relation to broader educational and social contexts?

Given that the study focuses on students' responses, it is important to clarify their analytical role. These responses are not treated as direct representations of objective reality, but as context-dependent expressions through which students interpret and justify their choices. In line with qualitative research perspectives (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), such responses provide insight into how individuals make sense of their experiences. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on the meanings and occurrences expressed in students' responses and their relation to broader patterns of educational decision-making.

Research Methodology

General Background

The present study forms part of a broader examination of educational track choice among grammar school students in Serbia conducted during the 2023/24 academic year. The broader research employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative data to examine students' educational pathways and the factors associated with their track choices. The present study focuses specifically on the qualitative component, adopting an exploratory qualitative research approach to examine how students themselves explain their choice of grammar school track. Data were obtained through an electronic questionnaire containing an open-ended question asking students to explain the reasons for their choice. The study included students enrolled in STEM, non-STEM, and bilingual grammar school tracks, enabling comparison of students' accounts across different educational pathways. The analysis was informed by contemporary perspectives on educational choice and educational transitions, which view educational decision-making as a process shaped by the interaction of individual orientations and the broader social and institutional contexts in which choices are made. The qualitative component therefore provides a large-scale qualitative account of the considerations students articulate when explaining their transition from primary to secondary education within the Serbian educational system.

Sample

The sample consisted of 1,045 grammar school students from Serbia, enrolled in different tracks. Students from the two cities were relatively evenly represented in the sample:

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778
ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

52.7% (n = 551) were from Kragujevac and 47.3% (n = 494) from Novi Sad. The sample was predominantly female, with 68% girls (n = 751) and 32% boys (n = 330). In accordance with the primary aim of the study, to examine the students' reported reasons for choosing a specific academic track, participants were categorized into three groups based on their current academic orientation.

The STEM group (n = 435) included: 222 students from the Natural sciences and mathematics track, 63 students from the Specialized track for mathematics, 84 students from the Specialized track for computer science, 11 students from the Specialized track for physics, and 55 students from the Specialized track for biology and chemistry. The non-STEM group (n = 555) encompassed 464 students from the General track, 48 students from the Socio-linguistic track, 14 students from the Specialized track for sports, as well as 29 students from the Specialized track for philology. Students from the bilingual track (n = 55) represent the third group. Importantly, the bilingual track constitutes a formally separate educational pathway: students apply for and enrol in it separately, and it is organised as a distinct class rather than as a sub-track within the standard Specialized track for mathematics. Within the Serbian grammar school system, bilingual education represents a distinct form of academic tracking, in which some subjects are taught in a foreign language. Although such programs may be implemented across different tracks, the students included in this study are based on the natural sciences and mathematics curriculum. They are nevertheless analytically distinguished due to their specific combination of subject specialization and enhanced language demands, which differentiates them from both standard STEM and non-STEM pathways. The bilingual students were treated as a separate group because, although the bilingual track follows a natural sciences and mathematics curriculum, it incorporates an additional language component that distinguishes it from the standard STEM tracks included in the study. This distinction was considered analytically relevant because students in the bilingual track may encounter a combination of academic and linguistic considerations that are not present to the same extent in the other groups. Thus, the bilingual group was examined separately to preserve this potentially distinctive feature of students' educational context rather than being subsumed within the STEM group.

Instrument and Procedures

The present study analyses students' responses to the open-ended question, "*Why did you choose this grammar school track?*", which was included in a self-report questionnaire as part of a broader survey examining factors associated with the choice of educational pathways among grammar school students in Serbia. The use of an open-ended format enabled participants to articulate their reasons in their own words, allowing for more nuanced and contextually grounded accounts of their educational choices.

Data were collected during the 2023/24 school year using an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire was developed by adapting selected items from existing instruments (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik & Warner, 2007; Japashov et al., 2022). To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by two independent experts in the field. The instrument was designed to capture key socio-demographic and educational characteristics of the participants, including gender, number of siblings, parental education, place of residence, and end-of-term grades in STEM subjects. Only those background variables that have been identified in previous research as relevant for educational decision-making were included.

Data Analysis

The responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021; Byrne, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis was

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

selected because the aim was to explore patterns of meaning in students' responses while recognizing that themes were developed through the researchers' interpretative engagement with the dataset. This approach was consistent with the study's focus on how students articulated and made sense of their educational choices, while acknowledging that such responses were situated within broader social and educational contexts. The analysis followed an inductive orientation, meaning that the coding and development of themes were primarily guided by the content of students' responses rather than by a predetermined coding framework or theoretical categories. Inductive analysis was therefore used in conjunction with, rather than as an alternative to, the reflexive thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021).

The analytical process involved repeated engagement with the dataset, familiarization with the responses, generation of initial codes, development and review of candidate themes, refinement and definition of themes, and production of final thematic structure. First, the responses were read repeatedly to facilitate familiarity with the dataset and to identify initial patterns of meaning. Initial codes were then generated from the content and wording of the responses, with attention to both the explicit reasons students gave and the meanings conveyed in their responses. The codes were subsequently examined in relation to one another and developed into broader patterns of meaning. Candidate themes were reviewed and refined in an iterative process, during which some codes were combined, others were differentiated, and the scope and boundaries of themes were reconsidered. The analysis was conducted collaboratively by three researchers. In keeping with the reflexive thematic analysis approach, the researchers were not treated as independent coders whose agreement was required to establish coding reliability, and inter-coder reliability was neither calculated nor used as a criterion for the quality of the analysis. Instead, the involvement of multiple researchers provided opportunities for reflexive engagement with the data and for questioning and extending individual interpretations. The researchers discussed emerging codes, patterns, and candidate themes throughout the analytical process. These discussions did not aim to reach a single objectively correct interpretation; rather, they were used to examine alternative readings of the data, challenge assumptions, consider the boundaries of emerging themes, and develop a more nuanced interpretation of students' responses. Differences in interpretation were therefore treated as analytically productive rather than as discrepancies to be eliminated through consensus. The researchers' active role in developing the thematic interpretation was acknowledged as an integral part of the reflexive analytical process.

Because the study relied on a single open-ended question, the analysis was necessarily focused on the reasons that students chose to articulate in response to that particular prompt. The responses represented students' perspectives at a single point in time; therefore, the analysis was not intended to reconstruct the full complexity or longitudinal development of students' educational decision-making. Rather, the findings were interpreted as an examination of how students articulated their reasons for choosing a particular grammar school track at the time of data collection. This distinction was important given that educational choices may develop dynamically and may be continuously reconsidered over time (Holmegaard et al., 2014, 2015).

Importantly, when a response contained more than one analytically meaningful reason for choosing a grammar school track, it could contribute to more than one theme. Thus, the themes were not treated as mutually exclusive, and the reported frequencies represented coded occurrences rather than the number of unique students. The sum of frequencies across themes could therefore exceed the number of analysed responses. This analytic decision allowed the study to capture the multiple and potentially overlapping reasons expressed within individual responses. The use of frequencies and coded occurrences in this descriptive manner alongside thematic analysis has also been reported in previous qualitative studies (Marzano & Pautasso, 2026; Soulage et al., 2025).

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778

ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

The study remains qualitative in design, and the identification and interpretation of themes were based on reflexive thematic analysis rather than on statistical comparison of frequencies. Given the relatively large dataset, frequencies and percentages were used as a descriptive complement to the thematic analysis, providing an indication of how commonly particular patterns of meaning occurred within and across the three groups. They were not used to establish statistical significance, causal relationships, or quantitative differences between groups.

Study Context and Participating Schools

This study was conducted in four grammar schools located in northern and central Serbia, all operating within the national educational framework defined by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia (Law on the Foundations of the Education System, 2024). Grammar schools constitute a key segment of the secondary education system and are typically attended by students following the completion of eight years of primary education, usually at the age of 15. These schools offer four-year programs and may provide either a general curriculum or multiple specialized tracks with differentiated curricular emphases. Admission to grammar school tracks is based on a centralized allocation system. Students submit a ranked list of preferred schools and tracks, and placement is determined according to a composite index that includes prior academic achievement and results from standardized final examinations at the end of primary education. All students are required to take exams in mathematics, Serbian (or their native language), and one elective subject (biology, geography, history, physics, or chemistry). Students are then allocated sequentially, starting from the highest-ranked candidates to the most preferred track with available capacity. As a result, admission to highly competitive tracks depends on surpassing the achievement threshold defined by the last admitted student. The relevance of examining grammar school choice in Serbia is underscored by the relatively low proportion of students enrolled in these programs. While in many developed education systems, approximately half of students attend academically oriented secondary schools, in Serbia this proportion is considerably lower, at around one-quarter (Ivić, 2023). At the same time, grammar schools are widely regarded as a key pathway to higher education and as an important foundation for the development of future academic and professional elites (Ivić et al., 2021; Kostić, 2023).

The selected schools are large institutions, each enrolling approximately 800 to 1,000 students, and are situated in two major urban centres with distinct socio-cultural characteristics. Two of the schools are located in Novi Sad (approximately 400,000 inhabitants), in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, the most ethnically diverse region in Serbia. In addition to the majority Serbian population, the region includes significant communities of Hungarians, Slovaks, Romanians, Croats, Rusyns, and others. The remaining two schools are located in Kragujevac (approximately 200,000 inhabitants), the largest city in central Serbia, where the student population is generally less culturally and linguistically diverse. Across all participating schools, most students are native speakers of Serbian and come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The selected schools represent institutions with relatively high academic achievement at the national level.

The four participating schools differ in their program structures but together reflect the diversity of grammar school provision in Serbia. One grammar school in Novi Sad is a highly prestigious institution and offers the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP)[1], positioning it within both national and international educational contexts. The school provides a wide range of tracks, including general, specialized (e.g., mathematics, computer science, physics, biology and chemistry), sports, and bilingual programs. The second school in Novi Sad

1 It is the oldest Grammar school in Vojvodina, founded in 1810.

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

offers a general curriculum, with classes available in both Serbian and Hungarian, reflecting the multicultural context of the Vojvodina region. In Kragujevac, one of the participating schools has been designated as an institution of special national importance[2], and is recognized for its strong academic orientation, particularly in mathematics and the natural sciences. It offers specialized tracks, including mathematics, computer science, and biology and chemistry. The second school in Kragujevac, established approximately 30 years ago, provides a more diversified program structure, combining general education with specialized tracks in areas such as sports, philology, and arts, alongside natural sciences and socio-linguistic orientations.

Ethics

Participation in the study was voluntary and was approached in line with the highest ethical principles upheld in educational research. Prior to gathering empirical data, a comprehensive form was prepared outlining all relevant details, including the study's purpose, procedures, and requirements. The research adhered to applicable laws and institutional regulations and received ethical approval from the relevant Ethics Committee (No. 01-06/24).

Research Results

The initial dataset comprised responses from 1,045 students. Of these, 129 responses were excluded from the thematic analysis because they did not provide interpretable information relevant to the research questions. Responses were excluded when they were left blank, consisted only of isolated letters, characters, or symbols without meaningful content, or contained humorous, ironic, or otherwise nonsensical statements that could not reasonably be interpreted as expressing a reason for choosing a particular grammar school track. Responses were excluded based on the interpretability and relevance of their content, rather than on their length, linguistic accuracy, or the absence of a detailed explanation. The remaining 916 responses were retained for the thematic analysis. Of the 129 excluded responses, 35 were from the STEM group, 85 from the non-STEM group, and 9 from the bilingual group. Although the absolute number of excluded responses was higher in the non-STEM group, this was partly attributable to the larger size of this group. The proportion of excluded responses was lower in the STEM group (8.0%) than in the non-STEM (15.3%) and bilingual (16.4%) groups. Thus, the excluded responses were not disproportionately concentrated in any single group, although the slightly lower exclusion rate in the STEM group was taken into consideration when interpreting the group-level distributions.

The reflexive thematic analysis resulted in six themes encompassing 18 subthemes. The themes were developed to capture recurring patterns of meaning in students' responses concerning their reasons for choosing a particular grammar school track. Because a single response could contribute to more than one theme or subtheme, the themes and subthemes were not mutually exclusive. Accordingly, the frequencies reported in Table 1 represent coded occurrences rather than unique students, and their sum exceeds the number of responses retained for analysis. Across the dataset, 942 coded occurrences were identified: 416 in STEM group, 464 in non-STEM group, and 62 in bilingual group.

To facilitate descriptive comparison between groups of different sizes, Table 1 reports both frequencies and percentages. Percentages are calculated using the number of analysed responses within each group as the denominator (n = 400 STEM group; n = 470 non-STEM group; n = 46 bilingual group). Because responses could contribute to more than one theme or subtheme, percentages are not expected to sum to 100% within groups.

2 It is the oldest Grammar school in central Serbia, founded in 1833.

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778 ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

Table 1
Distribution of Coded Occurrences Across Themes, Subthemes, and Track Type

Themes	Subthemes	Distribution across sample, *n* (%)		
		STEM	Non-STEM	Bilingual
Personal interests and academic self-concept	Positive interest toward the chosen domain	225 (56.3)	55 (11.7)	0 (0)
	Avoidance of the opposite domain	0 (0)	9 (1.9)	2 (4.3)
Academic and strategic reasons	Future university plans	44 (11.0)	38 (8.1)	0 (0)
	International university plans	0 (0)	0 (0)	19 (41.3)
	Knowledge orientation	43 (10.8)	11 (2.3)	12 (26.1)
	Deliberate generalism	0 (0)	101 (21.5)	13 (28.3)
	Defensive generalism	0 (0)	61 (13.0)	0 (0)
Social environment influences	Family influence	11 (2.8)	8 (1.7)	2 (4.3)
	Teacher and school influence	2 (0.5)	3 (0.6)	2 (4.3)
	Peer influence	9 (2.3)	8 (1.7)	2 (4.3)
School and track image	Prestige/elite status	34 (8.5)	15 (3.2)	2 (4.3)
	Perceived lower difficulty	2 (0.5)	19 (4.0)	0 (0)
	Perceived greater difficulty	10 (2.5)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Practical and structural factors	Coordination with extracurricular activities	0 (0)	11 (2.3)	0 (0)
	Only available option	5 (1.3)	46 (9.8)	0 (0)
	Not enough points	10 (2.5)	15 (3.2)	2 (4.3)
	Non-native Serbian language background	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (8.7)
Indecision and low commitment	Uncertainty about interests	18 (4.51)	53 (11.3)	2 (4.3)
	Random/accidental choice	3 (0.8)	7 (1.5)	0 (0)
	Explicit lack of commitment	0 (0)	4 (0.9)	0 (0)
Total		416	464	62

The first theme, *Personal interests and academic self-concept*, captures rationales based on students' intrinsic subject-related preferences or perceived academic strengths. This theme includes both affirmative expressions of enjoyment, affinity, and competence regarding subjects within the selected track, as well as explicit avoidance of alternative domains. Together, these responses reflect how students described their track choice in relation to the subjects they felt drawn to, confident in, or, alternatively, less interested in.

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

Overall, this theme was the most frequently represented in the dataset, with positive interest in the chosen domain being the most frequently reported reason. However, the distribution of these responses reveals a sharp divergence across the three groups. This pattern is especially pronounced among STEM students, whose responses more often framed track choice in terms of subject-specific preferences and perceived strengths. In contrast, this theme was less prominent among non-STEM students and almost absent among bilingual students, suggesting that explicit reference to interest in a specific academic domain was less prominent in the responses of these groups. The avoidance of the opposite domain was identified only among non-STEM and bilingual students, although it occurred relatively infrequently in both groups. For example, participants whose reasons for choosing the specific grammar school track were classified within this theme explained their choice by stating:

> "*Back in elementary school, I loved physics and I was really good at it. When it came to the entrance exam, physics was the subject I felt most confident in, so I decided to choose this track to get to know physics as a science.*" (STEM, natural sciences and mathematics track, girl, Novi Sad)
> "*I've always leaned more toward the social sciences and languages rather than natural sciences or math.*" (non-STEM, socio-linguistic track, boy, Kragujevac)
> "*I'm in the bilingual English science and math track. I've always loved learning languages, and they've always come easily to me, which is why I chose the bilingual class. But I'm definitely more into STEM and natural sciences than social studies, and that's what I want to pursue as a career.*" (bilingual track (Serbian–English), girl, Novi Sad)
> "*Mathematics does not interest me as much as languages, which I find more appealing.*"(non-STEM, socio-linguistic track, girl, Kragujevac)

The second theme, *Academic and strategic reasons*, encompassed forward-looking or deliberately reasoned considerations. Responses were coded into this theme when students explicitly aligned their choice with intended university studies or longer-term educational trajectories, including plans to pursue higher education. It also included statements reflecting a general orientation toward knowledge acquisition or intellectual development independent of immediate outcomes. Within this theme, particular analytical care was taken to distinguish between two forms of generalism. Deliberate generalism referred to cases in which curricular breadth was framed as a consciously chosen and positively valued strategy, typically articulated as a desire to maintain balanced exposure to both natural and social sciences or to preserve flexibility for future pathways. In contrast, defensive generalism captured responses in which selection of a general track appeared to stem from hesitation, postponed specialization, or the absence of a clearly dominant academic preference. The distinction was based on the framing of breadth: when students described it as enabling exploration or maintaining options, it was coded as deliberate; when breadth was presented primarily as a consequence of indecision or difficulty choosing between domains, it was coded as defensive.

A clear pattern within this theme relates to generalist orientations, which are predominantly associated with non-STEM students, particularly those enrolled in general track. Both deliberate and defensive generalism are far more frequent in this group than in STEM tracks, showing that breadth of curriculum was a recurring consideration in their reported reasons for choosing a track. While deliberate generalism reflects a structured attempt to maintain flexibility across domains, defensive generalism points to uncertainty and delayed specialization. In contrast, these orientations are absent among STEM students. Several bilingual students referred to the opportunity to develop their language skills alongside their interest in science. Within the bilingual responses, participants show a moderate presence of deliberate generalism, suggesting that students choosing this track may have sought to combine subject-specific focus with broader academic exposure.

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778 ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

"*I have had a passion for mathematics from a young age, viewing it as the foundation for all other disciplines. Furthermore, I believe it provides an excellent prerequisite and foundation for various university programs. The intensive curriculum in math, computer science, and physics prepares us for technical and science-oriented faculties. However, the program also allows those with interests in other fields to broaden their knowledge.*" (STEM, specialized track for mathematics, girl, Novi Sad)
"*I have always planned, and still intend, to study chemistry. I believed that the foundation built during my grammar school years would be a significant advantage once I started my university studies.*" (STEM, specialized track for biology and chemistry, girl, Kragujevac)
"*I was torn between social sciences and natural sciences, so I wanted to get a well-rounded general education during my four years of secondary school.*" (non-STEM, general track, girl, Novi Sad)
"*I couldn't bring myself to choose just between sciences, social studies, or the arts. I basically gave myself four more years to be undecided. General track lets me keep studying math and chemistry alongside history and art.*" (non-STEM, general track, girl, Novi Sad)
"*I like languages, but I also wanted a science and math path, plus opportunities for exchange programs and studying abroad, so I chose the bilingual department.*" (bilingual track (Serbian–English), girl, Novi Sad)

The third theme, *Social environment influences*, included responses indicating that track selection was associated with interpersonal factors, such as parental expectations, teacher recommendations, or peer-related considerations. Coding in this theme required explicit reference to external actors in relation to the decision. This theme is relatively weakly represented across all groups, indicating that students less frequently attribute their choices to external interpersonal factors such as family, teachers, or peers. When present, these influences appear slightly more evenly distributed, without strong differentiation between groups. Thus, unlike the themes centred on personal, academic, or practical considerations, social influences were less prominent in students' reported reasons for track choice. For example:

"*My primary school chemistry teacher was the reason I chose this.*" (STEM, specialized track for biology and chemistry, boy, Novi Sad)
"*I just followed my crowd from elementary school.*" (non-STEM, general track, boy, Novi Sad)
"*My parents told me it's better to go with the general track instead of picking just languages or math.*" (non-STEM, general track, girl, Novi Sad)

The fourth theme, *School and track image*, captured references to perceived symbolic, reputational, or comparative characteristics of the school or track. The included statements emphasized prestige, selectivity, or academic status, as well as choices framed around perceived rigor or relative ease. Importantly, this theme was distinguished from personal interest by focusing on perceived characteristics of the school or track rather than students' own subject preferences. Differences between groups become more apparent in this theme. STEM students more often refer to prestige and perceived academic rigor, including the selection of more demanding tracks, while non-STEM students more frequently mention perceived lower difficulty. This pattern suggests that students' perceptions of academic challenge and status also formed part of the reasons they gave for choosing a particular track, alongside interests and future plans.

"*Because it best met my criteria for grammar school, apart from the specialized computer science tracks in vocational schools. I chose the specialized math department because everyone said it was more rigorous and of higher quality, which turned out to be true.*" (STEM, specialized track for mathematics, boy, Novi Sad)
"*I didn't want to go with the science track, and I'd heard really good things about this school.*" (non-STEM, general track, girl, Novi Sad)

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

The fifth theme, *Practical and structural factors*, reflected contextual or institutional constraints influencing track selection. These included compatibility with extracurricular commitments, limited availability of alternative tracks, admission thresholds based on entrance examination scores, and a non-native Serbian language background. Responses were coded into this theme when the stated reason emphasized structural conditions rather than personal orientation or strategic planning. These factors were more prominent among non-STEM students, where responses such as "*only available option*" and "*not enough points*" are more common. This pattern shows that structural considerations, including admission criteria and the availability of particular tracks, were more frequently mentioned in the reported reasons of non-STEM students. In contrast, such factors are less prominent among STEM students and appear only selectively among bilingual students, for example, in relation to language background.

> "*I chose the track that seemed closest to my interests, while also being one I had enough points for to get into.*" (STEM, specialized track for computer science, boy, Kragujevac)
> "*It's the only track offered at this school. I thought the general program would be an easier version, like a little bit of social sciences and a little bit of natural sciences, but I really messed up. It turns out it's actually both of them combined, not just a little of each.*" (non-STEM, general track, girl, Novi Sad)
> "*Serbian isn't my native language, so I enrolled in the bilingual track that features my mother tongue.*" (bilingual track (Serbian–English), girl, Novi Sad)

The sixth theme, *Indecision and low commitment*, encompassed responses marked by limited clarity, weak engagement, or minimal deliberation in the decision-making process. This included explicit statements of uncertainty regarding interests or strengths, descriptions of the choice as random or accidental, and indications of limited personal investment. Notably, this theme was analytically distinguished from defensive generalism. While defensive generalism involved postponement within an educationally structured rationale (for example, choosing breadth to delay specialization), indecision and low commitment referred to broader uncertainty or lack of engagement without an articulated strategic framework.

A notable pattern within this theme is the greater prominence of responses among non-STEM students. Responses expressing uncertainty about interests are particularly common in this group, suggesting that uncertainty about interests and future direction was more often expressed by non-STEM students in explaining their track choice. In contrast, such responses were less frequently observed among STEM and bilingual students, whose reported reasons more often referred to specific academic interests, future plans, or other considerations.

> "*First, I enrolled in physics, but then I transferred to biology and chemistry. I'm not really sure yet, I'm just trying to find my path.*" (STEM, specialized track for biology and chemistry, girl, Novi Sad)
> "*Because I never knew what I wanted to be when I grew up, not even when I was a kid.*" (non-STEM, general track, girl, Kragujevac)

Discussion

The present study examined students' reported reasons for choosing different grammar school tracks and identified six themes encompassing personal interests and academic self-concept, academic and strategic reasons, social environment influences, school and track image, practical and structural factors, and indecision and low commitment. The findings showed that students' explanations were multidimensional, with personal academic interests, future educational considerations, perceptions of the school or track, structural circumstances, and uncertainty all appearing in their accounts. Rather than pointing to a single basis for educational

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778 ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

choice, the findings suggest that students describe their decisions through a combination of personal orientations and contextual considerations. The following discussion situates these patterns within previous research on educational choice and transitions, with particular attention to the similarities and differences across STEM, non-STEM, and bilingual tracks.

The analysis showed that personal interest in the chosen academic domain was particularly prominent in students' explanations, especially among those enrolled in STEM tracks. This finding is consistent with a substantial body of research identifying subject interest as an important component of students' educational choices. Grimalt-Álvaro et al. (2022), for example, highlighted the role of subject-specific interest in students' engagement with learning activities, while Varjo et al. (2020), in a qualitative study of 113 young people in the final year of comprehensive education in Finland, found that personal interest, passion, enjoyment, and practical application were central to students' attraction to STEM courses. The present findings are also compatible with the concept of *interest-based choice*, which conceptualizes educational pathways as partly reflecting students' interests and orientations toward particular fields of study (Holmegaard, 2015). What the present study adds is evidence that this interest-based pattern is not equally articulated across different grammar school pathways. Its particular prominence among STEM students suggests that choosing a more specialised track is frequently explained through an already established sense of affinity with a particular academic domain, whereas other pathways are more often associated with a broader combination of considerations.

Evidence from contexts that share some similarities with the Serbian educational setting provides further support for this interpretation. In a recent national study in Romania involving 10,267 students from 292 schools, more than 95% of students reported that it was important for a school, university, or occupational option to correspond with their interests and abilities (Ainsworth et al., 2025). The present qualitative findings complement such survey evidence by showing how this perceived fit is expressed in students' own explanations of an actual track choice. Rather than merely rating interest and ability as important, students used these considerations to construct explanations for why a particular educational pathway appeared appropriate for them.

The current findings also resonate with research showing that interest and perceived competence can operate together in educational choice. Shin et al. (2016), for example, found that students commonly described the distinction between STEM and non-STEM courses in terms of differences in subject matter, personal interests, and perceived abilities, although some students remained uncertain about their choices at the end of primary education. Similarly, Stearns et al. (2020) found that interest and confidence were important considerations in students' decisions to move toward or away from STEM-related study. The present findings extend this literature by showing how such orientations are articulated at the point of grammar school track selection in the Serbian context, where students' accounts frequently connected their choices with subjects they enjoyed, felt confident in, or considered more compatible with their abilities.

The presence of avoidance-based statements, particularly among non-STEM students, is also consistent with research suggesting that students may make educational choices not only because of attraction to a particular domain but also because of perceived difficulties or lack of interest in alternative subjects. Previous research has identified perceived difficulty, dislike, boredom, and lack of relevance as factors associated with students' decisions not to continue with mathematics (Brown et al., 2008). Nardi and Steward (2003) similarly found that students aged 11–14 placed considerable emphasis on enjoyment when describing effective mathematics learning. Taken together, these findings suggest that educational choice can involve both an affirmative orientation toward a preferred field and a process of distancing oneself from subjects perceived as less appealing. Importantly, however, the present findings should not be interpreted as demonstrating that interest or perceived competence objectively determines

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

subsequent educational success. Rather, they show that students themselves frequently invoke these considerations when explaining why they selected a particular track. This distinction is important because the present study examines students' accounts of educational choice rather than subsequent academic outcomes.

The second major pattern concerned students' orientation toward future educational possibilities. The analysis showed that students frequently referred to university plans, knowledge acquisition, and the perceived value of grammar school as preparation for further education. These findings are consistent with research conceptualizing secondary-school choices as part of longer educational trajectories rather than as isolated decisions. Wang (2013), for example, found that students' intention to pursue STEM at university was related to their choice of a STEM-oriented secondary-school track. In the present study, however, future orientation was not confined to a simple correspondence between a secondary-school track and a predetermined university field. Students also described track choice as a way of acquiring knowledge, preserving future possibilities, or positioning themselves for subsequent educational decisions. This broadens the interpretation of strategic choice beyond direct preparation for a specific university programme.

At the same time, the present findings reveal an important distinction within students' accounts of generalism. Some students described a broad curriculum as a deliberate way of maintaining flexibility and exploring different academic fields, whereas others referred to general education in connection with uncertainty or difficulty committing to a particular domain. This distinction adds nuance to the common characterization of general tracks as simply providing greater flexibility. Shin et al. (2016) similarly reported that non-STEM tracks were often perceived as offering greater flexibility because students could retain exposure to a broader range of subjects. The present findings suggest that such breadth may be experienced in different ways: for some students, it represents a positively valued opportunity to keep options open, whereas for others, it is connected to unresolved uncertainty about future direction. Recent evidence from Serbia provides a particularly relevant context for interpreting this pattern. Maksimović et al. (2025b) found that grammar school students tend to demonstrate diverse academic interests and strong performance across both natural and social science subjects, while many prefer to keep their future university options open. The same study also highlighted the value students place on the quality of knowledge acquired in grammar school and on teachers' academic expectations. The convergence between these findings and the present results suggests that the broad curriculum of grammar school may be valued not only as an educational experience in itself but also as a means of preserving future educational possibilities.

The bilingual responses included some patterns that were less prominent in the STEM and non-STEM groups. Students in this group referred both to subject-specific interests and to broader opportunities, including international study and exchange. This combination suggests that bilingual education may be perceived simultaneously as a specialized and flexible pathway, linking particular academic interests with broader educational and international opportunities. Given the smaller size of the bilingual group, these patterns should be interpreted cautiously. Because students apply separately for the bilingual track, the distinctive patterns observed in this group should not be attributed solely to the bilingual curriculum; they may also reflect characteristics and prior educational aspirations of students who self-select into this pathway. However, they are compatible with Varjo et al. (2020), who emphasized the international dimensions of educational trajectories and the importance some students attach to opportunities for studying, training, and working beyond their home country

Social influences were less prominent in students' explicit explanations than personal and academic considerations, but they were nevertheless present across the three groups. The analysis identified references to parents, teachers, and peers as influences on track choice. This finding is broadly consistent with previous research showing that educational decisions are

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778 ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

embedded in social relationships rather than made in isolation. Lazarides and Watt (2017) and Ristić Dedić and Jokić (2020), for example, demonstrated the relevance of parental education, occupation, and educational values to students' educational choices.

Moreover, the data obtained in this research are consistent with the 2015 Australian study, which involved 649 adolescents and reported similar percentages of STEM and non-STEM respondents saying they pleased parents (30%) or took the same subjects as friends (27–28%). In Australia, for both STEM and non-STEM groups, 25% of respondents indicated that proud parents influenced their educational course choice to a large or very large extent, while parental careers affected course choice for about 60% of STEM and 65% of non-STEM respondents (Dawes et al., 2015). A study from Romania conducted a decade later showed that both STEM and non-STEM students were generally similarly encouraged to choose their educational tracks by their teachers (46% and 42%), or their choice reflected what their school friends selected (22%) (Ainsworth et al., 2025). Although Varjo et al. (2020) did not compare students from different educational trajectories, their data are relevant to this study and showed that, regarding influencers, teachers were rated as most important, followed by parents and peers, while career advisors were rated by students as the least important in decisions to take STEM courses. In the present study, however, none of the students explicitly referred to career advisors when explaining their track choice. This does not indicate that career guidance was unavailable or had no influence, but rather that it was not explicitly identified by students as part of their decision-making. This finding is particularly relevant when considering the role of career guidance in supporting students during educational transitions. The same researchers examined reasons why some students in Finland study in English-speaking classes and quoted one girl's response: "*It was not my decision, really, my mother sent me*". (Varjo et al., 2020). Similar patterns have been observed in the Serbian context: Maksimović et al. (2025b) report that family members, particularly parents and siblings, can play a notable role in shaping students' educational choices. However, in line with the findings of the present study, such influences tend to appear less dominant in students' own explanations, suggesting that while social influences are present, they are not always explicitly articulated as primary reasons for track selection.

Students from the present study also referred to the perceived reputation, prestige, and academic characteristics of schools and tracks. Although these considerations were less prominent than personal interests and academic planning, their presence indicates that educational choice is also embedded in students' perceptions of the symbolic value and academic character of particular pathways. In Serbia, grammar schools with a long tradition and reputation are often regarded as prestigious, which can influence the decisions of students and their families. Although it was not the dominant motive, some students expressed the belief that the grammar school is "*a school for good students*" and a "*prestigious school*". This indicates that the social status of the school still carries some weight, but is not the main factor in the decision. Comparative research in the European context shows that the social perception of school elitism strongly influences the choice of educational path, especially in systems with pronounced selection, such as Germany or the Netherlands (van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007). A recent qualitative study examined students' perceptions of the educational system in the Netherlands. It confirmed previous findings that educational tracking is strongly influenced by societal views that associate academic pathways with higher ability, status, and future success. In contrast, vocational tracks are often regarded as less prestigious and intended for students perceived as less academically capable (van Wanrooij et al., 2026). In addition, the present research identified an attitude among respondents that can be linked to the findings of an ethnographic study conducted in Zurich: grammar school students themselves play a significant role in creating and maintaining the image of themselves as extremely hardworking, intelligent, academically privileged students, as they tend to distance themselves from peers

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

who do not attend grammar school and characterize them as "*less hardworking and less intelligent*" (Reh & Landolt, 2024). All these can also be considered in relation to research on school culture. Sliwka et al. (2015) emphasized that school culture encompasses shared values, expectations, norms, traditions, and learning environments that can influence students' educational experiences and sense of belonging. From this perspective, students' references to reputation and academic atmosphere may reflect not only the formal characteristics of a track but also the meanings they attach to the educational environment associated with it. The findings also showed that educational choice was not always presented as a purely preference-based decision. Some students referred to the availability of particular tracks, admission points, extracurricular commitments, or language background. This finding is important because it qualifies an exclusively individualistic understanding of educational choice: students may express preferences while simultaneously making choices within institutional and structural constraints. Terrin and Triventi (2022) similarly highlighted the role of the availability and organization of educational tracks in shaping students' educational opportunities. In other words, educational choice may involve both choosing among preferred alternatives and adapting preferences to the options that are realistically accessible.

The findings gathered from bilingual students introduce an additional structural dimension. Some students referred to language background and the opportunity to receive education in their mother tongue. In the present study, the multicultural context of Novi Sad should also be considered. One of the schools in the sample offers only a general track in Hungarian, which is the mother tongue for about 11% of the Vojvodina province's population. Some students from the sample explained that they chose a specific school because of the opportunity to study in Hungarian at grammar school. In this respect, bilingual education may represent not simply an academic preference but also an important linguistic and institutional resource. This observation is consistent with research emphasizing the challenges multilingual learners may face when learning complex academic content in a language that is not their primary language (Mills & McInerney, 2024). The international orientation expressed by some bilingual students is also consistent with Varjo et al. (2020), who identified international educational opportunities as part of students' broader educational trajectories. Thus, the bilingual track appears in the present data as a pathway in which academic, linguistic, and international considerations can intersect.

The final theme concerned indecision and low commitment. The analysis showed that uncertainty about interests was more frequently expressed among non-STEM students, particularly in relation to general tracks. While such tracks may provide flexibility for students who remain uncertain about their future plans, students' accounts also suggest that this flexibility can coexist with a lack of clear direction or focus. Shin et al. (2016) similarly found that general and broad educational tracks were often preferred by students entering university without specific career aspirations, as they provide a wider range of educational options. The findings of the present study supported the view that students who enrol in grammar school have high educational achievements and aspirations, but have not yet focused on specific educational and career profiles at the end of primary school (Maksimović et al., 2025b). Research examining the educational aspirations of students in the neighboring Republic of Croatia also affirmed that a large number of grammar school students intend to continue their education after secondary school and have high aspirations (Jokić et al., 2019). This indicates that grammar school, as an educational framework, remains an attractive option for students who strive for academic development but are not yet entirely professionally oriented.

Taken together, the findings show within the present sample that educational choice is shaped by the interplay of various factors rather than by a single determinant. Students reported their decisions as emerging from the interaction of personal interests, perceived competencies, family support, school reputation, and expectations regarding future educational opportunities. This multidimensional pattern is consistent with ecological perspectives on educational

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778 ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

transitions, which conceptualize educational decision-making as a dynamic process influenced by interconnected personal, social, and institutional contexts. Beyond demonstrating that educational choice is multidimensional, the present study shows that the relative configuration of these considerations differs across educational pathways. STEM students predominantly articulated choice through domain-specific interest and academic self-concept; non-STEM students more often combined breadth, uncertainty, and structural considerations; and bilingual students articulated a distinctive combination of academic, linguistic, and international considerations. These differences suggest that similar educational transitions should not be understood through a single model of choice, as students may arrive at different tracks through qualitatively different forms of reasoning.

The findings also emphasize that students actively construct their educational trajectories rather than passively receiving external influences. Although their decisions are situated within family and school contexts, students consistently highlighted their own interests and aspirations as central to their choices. These results underscore the need to support young people in making informed educational decisions, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary education, when such choices may have significant long-term implications for further education and career development. The presence of uncertainty about interests, references to future educational plans, and the absence of explicit references to career advisors in the present sample suggest that career guidance may benefit from being more continuous and integrated into earlier stages of schooling, rather than being limited to the immediate period of track selection. Such guidance could provide opportunities for structured self-reflection, exploration of educational and career pathways, and access to information about different study options. At the same time, the findings indicate that guidance should not focus exclusively on students' interests and aspirations. Because some students described choices in relation to admission requirements, track availability, language background, and other contextual conditions, effective guidance should also help students understand the opportunities and constraints associated with different educational pathways.

Across diverse educational systems, policymakers are increasingly concerned with ensuring that students are equipped to make informed choices that reflect both their individual aspirations and the opportunities available to them. Although the study was conducted in Serbia, these findings resonate with wider European discussions concerning equitable educational transitions, student agency, and the importance of providing comprehensive career guidance during primary education. In this regard, the present study contributes to a growing body of research highlighting the need for comprehensive guidance and supportive school environments that enable students to navigate educational pathways with confidence and autonomy.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reasons for choosing an educational track were based entirely on students' self-reports collected through a single open-ended questionnaire item. As such, responses may have been influenced by a tendency to present socially acceptable or generally appropriate answers. Moreover, unlike in-depth interviews, the use of a single open-ended item provided limited opportunity to probe students' responses, clarify ambiguities, or explore the meanings underlying their stated reasons. Second, the study design did not allow for follow-up questions, which limited the possibility of exploring certain responses in greater depth, as would be possible in interview-based research. This is particularly relevant for responses concerning complex decision-making processes, in which students may have mentioned only the most immediate or salient reason for their choice. Additionally, the analysis relies on students' interpretations of their own choices, which may not fully capture the complexity of the decision-making process, particularly in relation to factors that accelerate

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

or delay commitment to a specific track. A further limitation concerns the unequal sizes of the three analytical groups. The bilingual group was considerably smaller than the STEM and non-STEM groups, which limits the extent to which patterns observed in this group can be compared with or generalized to the other groups. Moreover, the bilingual group has a somewhat distinct conceptual status. Its inclusion broadens the perspective on students' educational choices, although comparisons involving this group should be interpreted with some caution given its smaller size and distinctive educational characteristics. Finally, although explicit criteria were applied to exclude non-interpretable responses, the exclusion of 129 responses may have influenced the distribution of coded themes. The proportions of excluded responses were relatively comparable across the non-STEM and bilingual groups, while somewhat lower in the STEM group; therefore, the possibility of a minor selection effect cannot be entirely ruled out. Finally, considering the inclusion of four grammar schools from two Serbian cities, which limits the generalizability of the findings, the results should be interpreted within this specific educational and geographical context.

Conclusions and Implications

The present study suggests that students' choices of grammar school tracks are shaped by multiple, interrelated considerations rather than by a single determining factor. The analysis identified six themes underlying students' explanations: personal interests and academic self-concept; academic and strategic reasons; social environment influences; school and track image; practical and structural factors; and indecision and low commitment. Among these, personal interests and perceived academic strengths emerged as the most prominent basis for track choice, particularly among STEM students. Academic and strategic considerations, including preparation for future studies and the desire to maintain broader educational options, also formed an important part of students' decision-making. Social influences such as parents, teachers, and peers were present but less prominent in students' own explanations, while perceptions of school and track reputation and practical or structural circumstances provided additional contexts for choice. Distinct descriptive patterns were observed in how these considerations were expressed across the three groups. STEM students more often articulated choices in terms of subject-specific interests and perceived strengths, whereas non-STEM students more frequently referred to curricular breadth, structural circumstances, and uncertainty about future direction. Bilingual students occupied a distinctive position, combining references to language-related interests and broader educational opportunities with STEM-oriented aspirations.

Students actively articulated their own interests, abilities, and aspirations, but their choices were also situated within the opportunities, expectations, reputations, and constraints associated with particular school and track. The findings indicate that students' accounts of educational choice cannot be adequately understood by considering academic interest alone: they need to be interpreted in relation to the broader educational and social context in which choices are made. By examining students' own explanations across STEM, non-STEM, and bilingual tracks within the Serbian grammar school system, this study provides an empirically grounded account of how these different dimensions intersect at the transition from primary to secondary education.

These findings have several implications for educational practice. First, the results indicate a need for career guidance to begin before students are required to make track-selection decisions and to continue as a developmental process rather than being treated as a single, isolated intervention. Such guidance should help students identify and reflect on their interests and perceived strengths, while also providing opportunities to explore different educational pathways and understand their possible implications for further study and careers. Second, the findings suggest that guidance should extend beyond the provision of information

https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.778 ISSN 1822-7864 (Print) ISSN 2538-7111 (Online)

about available programmes. Students may benefit from structured opportunities to compare educational pathways, discuss their expectations and uncertainties, and develop a more realistic understanding of how their present interests and abilities relate to future educational and occupational possibilities. Encounters with professionals, discussions with teachers and parents, and activities that promote self-reflection and exploration could therefore form complementary components of career guidance during the later years of primary education.

Because students referred not only to their interests and aspirations but also to family influences, school reputation, admission requirements, track availability, and uncertainty about future directions, schools have an important role in providing accessible and balanced information about educational options. This is particularly relevant for students who have not yet developed a clear academic or career orientation. Rather than treating indecision as a weakness, educational support should recognize uncertainty as a normal part of adolescent decision-making and provide students with opportunities to explore alternatives before committing to a particular pathway.

The study also makes a specific empirical contribution by bringing STEM, non-STEM, and bilingual students into a common qualitative analysis of the reasons underlying grammar school track selection. This comparison demonstrates that different groups do not simply differ in which tracks they attend, but also in how they explain the choices that led them there. In particular, the prominence of subject-related interests among STEM students, the stronger orientation toward breadth and uncertainty among non-STEM students, and the combination of language-related and broader academic considerations among bilingual students provide a more differentiated picture of educational choice than a simple STEM versus non-STEM distinction would suggest.

Future research could build on these findings through longitudinal studies that follow students from the end of primary education into secondary and higher education, examining how interests, aspirations, and perceptions of educational pathways develop over time. Comparative research across educational systems could further investigate how institutional arrangements, tracking structures, school cultures, and career guidance practices shape these processes. Future studies could also combine open-ended responses with interviews or other qualitative methods to explore the reasoning behind students' choices in greater depth and to examine how students' initial explanations develop as they gain further educational experience.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Serbian Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation (Agreement No. 451-03-34/2026-03/ 200122).

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

References

Ainsworth, R., Dehejia, R., Munteanu, A., Pop-Eleches, C., & Urquiola, M. S. (2025). *Malleable minds: The effects of STEM- vs. humanities-focused curricula* (NBER Working Paper No. 31450). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://users.nber.org/~rdehejia/papers/w34502.pdf

Balta, N., Japashov, N., Karimova, A., Agaidarova, S., Abisheva, S., & Potvin, P. (2023). Middle and high school girls' attitude to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics career interest across grade levels and school types. *Frontiers in Education*, *8*, Article 1158041. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1158041

PROBLEMS
OF EDUCATION
IN THE 21st CENTURY
Vol. 84, No. 5, 2026

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American Psychologist*, *44*(9), 1175–1184. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.44.9.1175

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook for theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021), "Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches". *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, *21*(1), 37–47. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360

Brown, M., Brown, P., & Bibby, T. (2008). "I would rather die": Reasons given by 16-year-olds for not continuing their study of mathematics. *Research in Mathematics Education*, *10*(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14794800801915814

Bruno, B., & Faggini, M. (2021). To be a STEM or not to be a STEM: Why do countries differ? *Growth and Change*, *52*(3), 1535–1551. https://doi.org/10.1111/grow.12494

Byrne, D. (2021). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity*, *56*, 1391–1412. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y

Cedere, D., Birzina, R., Pigozne, T., & Vasilevskaya, E. (2020). Perceptions of today's young generation about meaningful learning of STEM. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, *78*(6), 920–932. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/20.78.920

Committee on STEM Education, National Science & Technology Council. (2018). *Charting a course for success: America's strategy for STEM education*. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/STEM-Education-Strategic-Plan-2018.pdf

Dawes, L., Long, S., Whiteford, C., & Richardson, K. (2015). Why are students choosing STEM and when do they make their choice? In A. Oo, A. Patel, T. Hilditch, & S. Chandran (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 26th Annual Conference of the Australasian Association for Engineering Education (AAEE2015)* (pp. 1–10). Deakin University.

Grimalt-Álvaro, C., Couso, D., Boixadera-Planas, E., & Godec, S. (2022). "I see myself as a STEM person": Exploring high school students' self-identification with STEM. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, *59*(5), 720–745. https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21742

Guzey, S.S., Harwell, M.R., & Moore, T.J. (2014). Development of an instrument to assess attitudes toward science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). *School Science and Mathematics*, *114*(6), 271–279. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssm.12077

Han, Z., Chen, C., Chiu, T.K.F., Qiu, K., Yang, L., Wang, Z., & Chan, K.K.H. (2026). As an end or as a means to an end: Positioning empathy in STEM education. *International Journal of STEM Education*, *13*, Article 4. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-026-00594-2

Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, J. H. P., & Warner, U. (2007). How to survey education for cross-national comparison: The Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik/Warner-Matrix of education. *Metodološki zvezki, 4*(2), 117–148.

Holmegaard, H. T., Ulriksen, L. M., & Madsen, L. M. (2014). The process of choosing what to study: A longitudinal study of upper secondary students' identity work when choosing higher education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *58*(1), 21–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2012.696212

Holmegaard, H. T. (2015). Performing a choice-narrative: A qualitative study of the patterns in STEM students' higher education choices. *International Journal of Science Education*, *37*(9), 1454–1477. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2015.1042940

Hooley, T. (2022). Building a radical career imaginary: Using Laclau and Mouffe and Hardt and Negri to reflexively re-read Ali and Graham's counselling approach to career guidance. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *50*(4), 660–675. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2022.2058697

Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Ivić, I., Pešikan, A., & Kostić, A. (2021). *Ključni podaci o obrazovanju u Srbiji* [Key data on education in Serbia]. SANU.

Ivić, I. (2023). Kritička analiza stanja u obrazovanju i obrazovne politike u Srbiji [Critical analysis of the state of education and education policy in Serbia]. In A. Kostić & A. Pešikan (Eds.), *Obrazovanje: stanje, perspektive i uloga u razvoju Srbije* [Education: state, perspectives and role in the development of Serbia] (pp. 39–82). SANU.

Japashov, N., Naushabekov, Z., Ongarbayev, S., Postiglione, A., & Balta N. (2022). STEM career interest of Kazakhstani middle and high school students. *Education Sciences*, *12*, 397–414. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12060397

Jokić, B., Ristić Dedić, Z., Erceg, I., Košutić, I., Kuterovac Jagodić, G., Marušić, I., Matić Bojić, J. & Šabić, J. (2019). *Obrazovanje kao cilj, želja i nada* [Education as aim, faith and hope]. Institute for Social Research in Zagreb.

Kostić, V. (2023). Formiranje kulturne i intelektualne elite [Formation of the cultural and intellectual elite]. In A. Kostić & A. Pešikan (Eds.), *Obrazovanje: stanje, perspektive i uloga u razvoju Srbije* [Education: state, perspectives and role in the development of Serbia] (pp. 165–175). SANU.

Lazarides, R., & Watt, H. M. G. (2017). Student-perceived mothers' and fathers' beliefs, mathematics and English motivations, and career choices. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *27*(4), 826–841. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12317

Maksimović, J. Ž., Osmanović, J. S., & Mamutović, A. S. (2020). Perspectives of STEM education regarding Serbian secondary school students' motivation for career choice. *Journal of Baltic Science Education*, *19*(6), 989–1007. https://doi.org/10.33225/jbse/20.19.989

Maksimović, A., Milenković, A., & Stašević, F. (2024). Percepcije o nastavnim predmetima i postignuća učenika kao činioci usmerenja ka matematici i prirodnim naukama [Students' perceptions of the teaching subjects and student achievements as factors of orientation towards mathematics and natural sciences in grammar school]. *Teaching Innovations*, *37*(3), 29–42. https://doi.org/10.5937/inovacije2403029M

Maksimović, A., Stašević, F., & Milenković, A. (2025a). Differences in parental involvement and expectations during primary education: Reflections of STEM and Non-STEM grammar school students. *International Journal of Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology*, *13*(6), 1595–1614. https://doi.org/10.46328/ijemst.5521

Maksimović, A., Milenković, A., & Stašević, F. (2025b). Dobra osnova za studiranje i/ili odlaganje konkretnog usmerenja – učenici u Srbiji o upisu u gimnaziju [A solid foundation for higher education and/or delaying specific career orientation – students in Serbia about enrollment in grammar school]. In Vaspitanje i obrazovanje između teorije i prakse: Zbornik radova sa naučne konferencije [Education between theory and practice: Proceedings of the scientific conference] (pp. 397–416). Faculty of Education Užice, University of Kragujevac. https://doi.org/10.46793/zbVO25UEI.397M

Marzano, D., & Pautasso, S. (2026). Teacher technophobia toward Generative AI: Evidence from an Italian survey. *Frontiers in Education*, *11*, Article 1825182. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2026.1825182

Mau, W. J., & Li, J. (2018). Factors influencing STEM career aspirations of underrepresented high school students. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *88*(3), 246–258. https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12146

Mills, N., & McInerney, K. (2024). Resource to bridge language and learning: Empowering multilingual learners in STEM. *Connected Science Learning*, *6*(3), 96–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/24758779.2024.2348470

Mouton, D., Hartmann, F.G., & Ertl, B. (2023). Career profiles of university students: How STEM students distinguish regarding interests, prestige and sextype. *Education Sciences*, *13*(3), Article 324. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13030324

Nardi, E., & Steward, S. (2003). Is mathematics T.I.R.E.D? A profile of quiet disaffection in the secondary mathematics classroom. *British Educational Research Journal*, *29*, 345–367. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920301852

Nicholls, G., Wolfe, H., Besterfield-Sacre, M., Shuman, L.J., & Larpkiattaworn, S. (2007). A method for identifying variables for predicting STEM enrollment. *Journal of Engineering Education*, *96*(1), 33–44. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2007.tb00913.x

OECD. (2013). *PISA 2012 Assessment and analytical framework: Mathematics, reading, science, problem solving and financial literacy*. OECD Publishing.

Poulsen, B.K. (2020). Insights and Outlooks: Career learning in the final years of compulsory school. *Education Inquiry*, *11*(4), 316–330. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1713691

Reh, C. & Landolt, S. (2024). "We learn Latin, they learn to cook": Students', principals', and teachers' coproductions of exclusive public secondary schools. *Geographica Helvetica*, *79*, 343–356. https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-79-343-2024

Richardson, D.S., & Bledsoe, R.S. (2025). Comparing STEM and non-STEM instructor motivation suggests directions for STEM education innovations. *Education Sciences*, *15*(6), Article 720. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060720

Ristić Dedić, Z., & Jokić, B. (2020). Parental aspirations for their children's upper secondary education from the perspective of pupils at the end of elementary education. *Croatian Sociological Review*, *50*(2), 161–188.

Shin, J.E., Levy, S.R., & London, B. (2016). Effects of role model exposure on STEM and non-STEM student engagement. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *46*(7), 410–427. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12371

SiMERR National Research Centre. (2012). *QuickSmart Numeracy Annual Report for 2012. University of New England*. https://simerr.une.edu.au/quicksmart/program-evidence/ (accessed May 6, 2026).

Sliwka, A., Klopsch, B., & Maksimović, A. (2015). Schulkultur durch kulturelle Bildung entwickeln: Die Kulturschule als wirksame Lernumgebung. In M. Fuchs & T. Braun (Eds.), *Die Kulturschule und kulturelle Schulentwicklung: Grundlagen, Analysen und Kritik* (Vol. 1, pp. 151–164). Beltz Juventa. https://content-select.com/de/portal/media/view/552557cc-df84-4806-a263-4cc3b0dd2d03

Smith, E., Villa-Marcos, B., Williams, D. P., Cullis, P., & Perry, T. (2026). 'I enjoy it a bit, but I wouldn't want to do it in the future': Pupil aspirations for STEM careers in lower secondary school. *International Journal of Science Education*, *48*(3), 342–361. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2024.2415095

Soulage, C. O., Legeay, S., Chevrier, T., & Baetz, D. (2026). Using a physiology virtual laboratory to explore vascular reactivity: Feedback from undergraduate biology students in France. *Advances in Physiology Education*, *50*(2), 613–625. https://doi.org/10.1152/advan.00276.2025

Stašević, F., Milenković, A., Maksimović, A., Svičević, M., & Krstić, L. (2025). Interest in STEM and its relations to the educational achievement and socio-demographic characteristics of grammar school students in Serbia. *Journal of Baltic Science Education*, *24*(2), 360–376. https://doi.org/10.33225/jbse/25.24.360

Stearns, E., Bottia, M. C., Giersch, J., Mickelson, R.A., Moller, S., Jha, N.K., & Dancy, M.H. (2020). Do relative advantages in STEM grades explain the gender gap in selection of a STEM major in college? A multimethod answer. *American Educational Research Journal*, *57*(1), 218–257. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45280783

Terrin, E., & Triventi, M. (2022). The effect of school tracking on student achievement and inequality: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, *93*(2). https://doi.org/10.3102/003465432211008

van Wanrooij, B., Volman, M., & Elffers, L. (2026). "I can do it if I work hard": Perceived educational opportunity in the Netherlands' tracked system. *European Educational Research Journal, 25*, 184-201. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041251401055

van de Werfhorst, H. G., & Hofstede, S. (2007). Cultural capital or relative risk aversion? Two mechanisms for educational inequality compared. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *28*(3), 317–332. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690701252564

van den Broeck, L., Blöndal, K. S., Elias, M., & Markussen, E. (2023). A search for the determinants of students' educational expectations for higher education in four European cities: The role of school SES composition and student engagement. *European Educational Research Journal, 22*(3), 433-455. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041211062434

Varjo, J., Kalalahti, M., & Jahnukainen, M. (2020). The reasoning behind the envisioned educational trajectories of young people from Finnish and immigrant origins. *Education Inquiry*, *11*(4), 360–378. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1716552

Wang, X. (2013). Postsecondary context of support why students choose STEM majors: Motivation, high school learning. *American Educational Research Journal*, *50*(5), 1081–1121. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831213488622

Wren, H., Hetherington, L., Chappell, K., O'Kane, E., Sotiriou, M., Quacinella, D., Ribeiro, A., & Duca, E. (2025). Conceptualising and exploring creative pedagogies and design thinking in transdisciplinary STEAM higher education courses. *Research Papers in Education*, *40*(5), 742–771. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2025.2493622

Zając, T., Żółtak, T., Bożykowski, M., & Jasiński, M. (2023). All that glitters is not gold–Mixed early labour market outcomes of STEM graduates in Poland. *European Journal of Education*. *58*(3), 477–497. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12564

Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja Republike Srbije [The law on the foundations of the education system in the Republic of Serbia]. Official Gazette, 2024. https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_osnovama_sistema_obrazovanja_i_vaspitanja.html

Received: *July 23, 2026* Revised: *September 24, 2026* Accepted: *October 05, 2026*

Cite as: Maksimović, A., Stašević, F., & Milenković, A. (2026). Self-reported students' reasons for choosing a specific track in a grammar school. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, *84*(5), 778–801. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/26.84.801

Aleksandra Maksimović	PhD, Associate Professor, Faculty of Science, University of Kragujevac, Radoja Domanovića 12, 34000 Kragujevac, Republic of Serbia. E-mail: aleksandra.maksimovic@pmf.kg.ac.rs Website: https://www.pmf.kg.ac.rs/?id=724 ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0696-3564
Filip Stašević *(Corresponding author)*	PhD Student, Teaching Assistant, Faculty of Science, University of Kragujevac, Radoja Domanovića 12, 34000 Kragujevac, Republic of Serbia. E-mail: filip.stasevic@pmf.kg.ac.rs Website: http://chem.pmf.kg.ac.rs/?id=569&page=nastavnik ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4790-6099
Aleksandar Milenković	PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Science, University of Kragujevac, Radoja Domanovića 12, 34000 Kragujevac, Republic of Serbia. E-mail: aleksandar.milenkovic@pmf.kg.ac.rs Website: https://imi.pmf.kg.ac.rs/index.php?id=4038&page=nastavnik ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6699-8772