Repetition and school dropout. Policies for the frontiers of education systems

Repetición y abandono escolar. Políticas para las fronteras de los sistemas educativos

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At the outer and inner borders of the education system are the most vulnerable students. They are the students who have serious difficulties during their compulsory education. They may be the students who leave the system without secondary certification. And they may also be the adults who will never return to training processes in this context of lifelong learning.

This situation translates into an indicator of the functioning of the educational system which, fortunately, is now called "*Early dropout from education and training*" as opposed to the previous, less fortunate, name of early school dropout. In any case, according to the State System of Educational Indicators (MEFPyD, 2024), we are referring to the percentage of people aged 18 to 24 years who have as their highest level of studies the first stage Secondary Education or previous educational levels (ISCED 0, 1 and 2), and who do not pursue any type of education or training.

The limiting effects of repetition and early dropout on the present and future of students and their social impact are reflected in educational, medical, economic and psychological literature. Hence, early dropouts constitute one of the main challenges for educational, social and economic systems in many countries. Let's see:

- Early dropout from education and training is associated with higher unemployment rates, lower quality jobs and lower wages. These disadvantages tend to be perpetuated throughout the life cycle, generating discontinuous and vulnerable labor trajectories (Lyche, 2010; Madia et al., 2022).
- Numerous studies have found a strong correlation between low educational level and physical and mental health problems. High school dropouts have higher rates of chronic diseases, poorer mental health and shorter life expectancy, even when controlling for variables such as age, gender and social class (Kivimäki et al., 2020).
- Early dropout from education is an important factor of social exclusion. The lack of a basic

qualification limits access to social networks, cultural capital and economic resources, hindering full participation in social and civic life (Dräger et al., 2024; European Commission, 2013; Lyche, 2010). It also contributes to the intergenerational reproduction of poverty by reducing opportunities for socioeconomic improvement and upward mobility.

- There is also empirical evidence suggesting an association between early dropout and a greater propensity to engage in delinquent or antisocial behaviors. Several longitudinal studies show that young people who drop out of school are more likely to conflict with the law or to be part of prison systems (Staff & Kreager, 2008).

- Dropping out of school leads to a significant restriction of opportunities for personal and professional development. Those who do not complete secondary education face more barriers to continue higher education, access vocational training or retraining (Rumberger, 2011). This limitation prevents effective adaptation to the changing demands of the labor market in the knowledge economy. According to the OECD report (OECD, 2023a), achieving a higher academic level is associated with greater job opportunities, better health, greater social commitment, higher economic rewards and a reduction in the wage gap between men and women.

The individual and social consequences are overwhelming. The question arises as to whether this is a problem that is not only important, which it is, but one of great impact due to the volume of the population it affects. And, unfortunately, the answer is yes.

In Spain, early school dropout rates are a major concern, because they are high and because they are still well above European Union rates. According to the State System of Educational Indicators (MEFPyD, 2024), in 2023 the dropout rate for both sexes stand at 13.7% of students, this percentage being higher for males (16%) than for females (11.3%). It is also observed that in the year 2021 there is a slight change in trend, with these percentages rising slightly again to those indicated, since 2010 the values had begun to fall significantly. A comparison of the figures with the rest of the EU countries is certainly striking in the case of Spain. Seventeen countries are below the EU target for 2030, which is 9% dropout. Spain is at the bottom of the ranking along with Germany (12.8%) and Romania (16.6%).

The rates of repeating students, which we could consider as a prior indicator of educational dropout, also rise in secondary education. The State System of Indicators (MEFPyD, 2024) reports that in the 2021-22 academic year the rate in Secondary is 7.6% on average, finding the highest values in 2nd ESO (8.4%) and 3rd ESO (8%). Compared to the rest of the EU countries, the Spanish repetition rates are only surpassed by those of Luxembourg.

Dropout, sometimes with no return, is a complex problem. It is conditioned by various factors, including low academic performance, gender, lack of school support, or social or economic vulnerability, among others, and could be preceded by some behaviors that place the subject at risk of dropping out, such as absenteeism, segregation or conflict in the classroom (Carabaña, 2011; García and Weiss, 2020; Gubbels et al., 2019; Nieto-Isidro and Martínez-Abad, 2023).

A recurrent pattern that underlies a good part of the situations of early school dropout, identified in recent literature, is the decrease in self-esteem and self-confidence together with a lack of interest in the study as it is planned. The progressive loss of self-esteem is on the side of the causes of dropout, but also, on the side of the consequences, since the process following dropout intensifies these feelings in those who decide to leave their studies (Consejo Escolar de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2025a). The individual's academic and personal journey, with a progressive loss of self-esteem, will contribute to his or her eventual decision to drop out or not to return to school and, at the same time, will suffer the consequences of dropping out with a decrease in self-esteem.

All these factors are also common to the precursors of grade repetition, although not all of them

are linked to individual student characteristics, but to structural and cultural characteristics of our educational system (Save the Children, 2022).

In this context, it is necessary to ask ourselves about the capacity of systems to "retain" the students who have the greatest needs and whose irregular trajectory throughout their schooling puts their future at serious risk. As pointed out by the School Council of the Community of Madrid (2025a), many of the students who drop out have suffered school disengagement processes, either because of a lack of interest in what school can provide them, or because of adverse experiences related to compulsory schooling (learning process, grade repetition, problems with their peers, with teachers, etc.), among others. The controversial effects of grade repetition on school trajectories continue to be analyzed in recent literature (Contini and Salza, 2024). Replacing repetition with alternative measures, based on the principles of individualized treatment and early intervention (Choi et al., 2018), may be a first step to favor a decrease in dropout rates.

The unique rigidity of the systems puts those students who cannot follow a mainstream academic pathway in great difficulty. Offering alternatives adapted to the individual characteristics and needs of the student body is the challenge we face to prevent students from fleeing a system with which they do not feel connected. In this sense, it is necessary to analyze what alternatives exist and whether it is feasible to develop accompanied schooling for those students with more difficulties. In the same way, flexibilization with alternative itineraries, gateways and modular learning systems are plausible ways to reduce dropout.

It is essential to highlight the educational and social value of preventing early school leaving, prioritizing retention measures and considering return as a subsidiary action that accompanies them. The older the age of return, or the greater the temporal distance between dropout and return, the greater the adverse effects for the individual (Consejo Escolar de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2025a). There is no doubt that it is advisable to avoid dropping out and, if necessary, to reduce the return time in order to minimize the negative consequences and maximize the chances of success in those cases in which the student decides to return. Thus, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023b), points out the relevance of identifying those young people who are at risk, thanks to the use of a school vulnerability index, and providing appropriate guidance to ensure the completion of secondary schooling. Early school dropout is not a phenomenon that happens abruptly and can be defined as a process of progressive disengagement (Conde Vélez et al., 2023; Fernández-Enguita et al., 2010) that is more or less visible (Patton and Price, 2010). Early detection, as well as the reinforcement of guidance systems, is at the center of all approaches, forming an indivisible polynomial (guidance, diagnosis, retention, return). Among the school factors that condition this problem to a greater extent are those variables linked to the teaching staff and the provision of academic-vocational guidance (Consejo Escolar de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2025a; Gutiérrez-de-Rozas et al., 2025). Specifically, this academic-vocational guidance will make possible the individualized accompaniment and follow-up (accompanied schooling), which will allow students to contemplate diverse options and paths adapted to their circumstances, motivational and vocational (Consejo Escolar de la Comunidad de Madrid, 2025b).

The aim of this monograph is to provide contrasted knowledge to researchers, educational policy makers and the educational community in general, in order to define a common knowledge space to design policies that contribute, on the basis of diverse evidence, to the understanding and prevention of students with school vulnerability. There are eight articles in this issue. However, they can be grouped by their subject matter into three large blocks.

The first three articles analyze in depth the determinants of grade repetition and school dropout and the consequences within the school context.

The article by Fernández-Alonso, Cañamero, Postigo, and Núñez opens this first section with

an innovative and original methodological contribution, thanks to their approach to the relationship between repetition and socioeconomic and cultural level, considering the difficulty of neutralizing the two types of bias inherent to studies on repetition: selection bias and covariate control. Thus, the research carried out combines propensity analysis to control pre-repetition selection bias and adjustment through multilevel logistic models to control for post-repetition covariates. The discussion on repetition may be enriched using robust data from research in which both biases are controlled for.

The contribution by Brañas-Garza and Jorrat addresses the difficult and understudied issue of the social integration of students who repeat grades. By studying the social relationship networks in the classrooms of a large sample of students, they compare, on the one hand, "twin" students with similar academic characteristics except for repetition, using propensity score matching techniques to analyze whether social integration in the classroom is similar between the two groups. On the other hand, repeaters who are repeating this academic year are compared with those who were repeaters in previous years, to study the evolution of their socialization. It is an original article due to its subject matter, with excellent research design and very pleasant to read. However, the results offered are not encouraging.

Martínez Abad, Nieto-Isidro and Rodríguez-Conde make an avant-garde contribution, thanks to the analysis of the relationship between grade repetition and contextual and non-cognitive factors of the student, including the analysis of the peer effect. Secondary work with data from the latest PISA assessment, applying multilevel logistic models with fixed slopes and random intercepts, allows us to identify a significant impact of the student's school environment on grade repetition. The impact of the peer effect, with a classification of protective and promoter factors on repetition, invites us to rethink the strategies applied in the educational system to promote school success.

The next block is made up of four contributions that address the issue of second-chance schools and other alternative routes for educational return.

The contribution by Aymá, García-Montero, Vila and Bayón shows the evolution and impact of Second Chance Schools in Spain. It also has the essential collaboration of the Second Chance Schools Association (E2O Association), which has made it possible to analyze and present the Second Chance Schools in Spain as an effective and successful alternative that makes it possible for young people between 15 and 29 years of age who have dropped out of school prematurely to return to the educational system, improving their living conditions and favoring their insertion into the labor market. It does this by integrating three key elements into its model: transversal competencies, personalized accompaniment and the concept of a positive exit. The E2O are an educational and social reference that, thanks to the work of Aymá and collaborators, we can understand and know in depth from a practical point of view.

Camilli, Fontana and Pastor-Gil, allow us to continue delving deeper into Second Chance Schools, this time, from the solid approach of an exploratory systematic review, which allows us to clarify what research studies about Second Chance Schools, as well as the main characteristics and results of their training programs in the young people who participate in them. The analysis of the selected articles reveals the importance of a comprehensive and personalized approach, key to the success of these schools. The study contributes to consolidate and disseminate knowledge about the functioning of Second Chance Schools and their pedagogical implications. This is an essential reading that crosses the boundaries between theory and practice, thanks to the final proposal of a series of implications for educational public policies.

Closing the block dedicated to Second Chance Schools, the in-depth look at the qualitative study by Chisvert, Palomares, García and Merino, allows us to understand how the transitions between these educational institutions are articulated and the logic behind them, as well as the coordination and intended bidirectionality in the trajectories to which they give rise. The qualitative methodology

and the triangulation of agents and instruments are the characteristic notes of the scientific support of this solid research that allows us to explore the viewpoint of IES teachers, E20 professionals and the young people themselves. From the diagnostic point of view, the analysis has made it possible to identify some undesired effects of educational policies and some divergences in their application at the autonomous level. The work is a must-read for an in-depth understanding of the reality of the E20.

Analyzing the benefits of the experience as a student in Basic Vocational Training (FPB), as well as the study of the socio-educational strategies that make it possible to achieve these benefits, is the objective of the work of Piñero, Fonseca and Moro, which, from the discursive analysis of 132 key informants (students, family members, educational team and managers) through 17 discussion groups in 12 centers in the Basque Country, unravels the complex network that these benefits entail for the students. The results show how the experience is not only limited to academic gains, but transcends to personal, family, peer and adult relationships. The surprising findings on the feeling of protection and "re-cognition" will be of special interest to the educational community in general and, especially, to FPB professionals.

Educational dropout closes this monograph and constitutes the last conceptual block. The article by Mello-Román, Escobar-Torres, Segura, De la Iglesia, Giménez, Hernández, Mello-Román and Pérez addresses factors associated with school dropout in the years prior to the completion of secondary education in Paraguay. The application of machine learning models for the identification of dropout patterns and the prediction of their risk is undoubtedly an innovative and necessary contribution that brings us closer to the desired "school vulnerability index" proposed by the OECD (2023b). The main findings of the paper highlight the importance of carrying out massive data analysis, applying advanced models for the strengthening of school retention policies and the design of evidence-based early intervention strategies. The challenges we face in this line are not few, but they are undoubtedly very encouraging.

We return here to the initial metaphor, it is possible that borders in the educational system will never disappear, since it does not seem reasonable to aspire to the non-university system`s lack of difficulties in academic trajectories. What we can aspire to is thar there should be small frontiers considering the volume of the population affected and that they should be permeable, since the emphasis of educational policies should be on the adaptation of educational environments and programs for all people with a view to the return to lifelong learning. We would like to think that the concept of academic trajectories can be described as constant rather than successful (although this is also desirable).

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