

Compulsory Education: An Open Debate

La educación obligatoria: un debate abierto

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The 2023 report prepared by the Spanish State School Council included, among its proposals for improving education, the need for the educational community to debate the extension of compulsory education and training up to the age of 18. Over the past few decades, there has been a trend toward expanding compulsory schooling beyond its current boundaries—before the age of six and after sixteen, even from three to nineteen in some cases. Such measures have been progressively implemented in several neighboring countries, often independently of other collateral reforms.

The arguments in favor are both pragmatic—aimed at reducing early school leaving—and pedagogical, linked to the need to ensure comprehensive schooling over an extended developmental period to guarantee the right to education. Lifelong learning, reform of the current post-compulsory and pre-higher education offer, employability and vocational training, the very function of the state school apparatus, and even the meaning of education

itself and the roles of professionals across current educational stages are all questioned by a debate of this magnitude.

This monograph aims to respond to, and generate new questions from, the following issues:

- What reasons have historically and comparatively justified the progressive extensions of compulsory schooling?
- What results have these extensions yielded in terms of improved educational quality, inclusion, reduced dropout and disengagement, etc.?
- On what arguments are both the defense and the opposition to compulsory schooling based?
- What robust alternatives to compulsory education can still guarantee the right to education?
- What gaps within public systems hinder the assurance of quality education?
- What pedagogical, social, cultural, and even economic or labor implications are associated with extending compulsory education from ages 4 to 18–19?
- How do structural reforms to the educational stages affect other areas—such as curriculum, organization and management, academic and career guidance, and the role and training of teachers and other education professionals? Does this influence the comprehensiveness of contents and objectives, or does it open the door to curricular diversification?

When this monograph, *“Compulsory Education: An Open Debate,”* was conceived, our intention was to give space to voices that could demonstrate the inherent complexity of this issue.

As a result, the collection of works presented here addresses the multiple dimensions of extending compulsory schooling—examining its historical justifications, its effects on quality and equity, the structural challenges it poses, and the ideological and pedagogical debates it sparks, particularly in the Spanish context.

The issue opens with Ortega, Fontán, and Sánchez, who present a systematic review of international literature on the implications of expanding compulsory education. Their conclusion is that the effects are mixed and

often fail to meet initial expectations. The review categorizes the impact into four key dimensions: (1) Educational: Improvements in access and training, though sometimes accompanied by a decline in level, quality, and academic rigor. (2) Sociopolitical: While the expansion of compulsory schooling does not necessarily ensure effective inclusion or greater social mobility, it does contribute to sociocultural equality. (3) Economic: It supports growth through increased human capital, though it raises concerns about financial sustainability. (4) Personal: It can foster educational benefits and better decision-making but may also lead to school fatigue, demotivation, or rejection of compulsory schooling among certain students. In conclusion, the authors affirm that expansion alone does not guarantee improvement; its effectiveness depends on complementary policies that ensure resources, teaching quality, and inclusive pedagogical strategies.

Álvarez Álvarez presents a study focusing on the challenges and impacts of policies extending compulsory education across different stages (Early Childhood, Primary, and Secondary). The results show that expansion particularly benefits the most vulnerable students—especially girls and adolescents (by delaying marriage and motherhood, and reducing the likelihood of justifying domestic violence), students from rural areas, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. It also improves employability and long-term income.

However, the main challenge lies in the significant investment required for infrastructure, teacher training, and educational resources. Additionally, there is the opportunity cost for low-income students who forgo immediate earnings by staying in school. The study emphasizes the need for curricular updates and alternative pathways for low-performing students who wish to enter the labor market. Thus, as with previous authors, the expansion of compulsory education is not automatically synonymous with quality and equity; specific measures are needed in these areas.

Sánchez Gil analyzes counter-reformist discourses in Spain that question the current model of compulsory schooling and the innovative reform promoted by recent legislation. The opposing arguments rely on poor results in standardized tests such as PISA, the perceived loss of schools' traditional role in knowledge transmission, and a competency-based curriculum viewed

as disorganized and lowering standards. Critics also point to disciplinary problems in classrooms and the notion that compulsory schooling retains “ungovernable” students.

According to these counter-reformists, schooling should be elective and merit-based, returning to the fundamentals of learning and reconsidering compulsory education up to 16. They argue that parental school choice is one of the main drivers of educational segregation, leading to the “ghettoization” of public schools for the most vulnerable students.

Prieto, Fernández-González, and Villamor focus on a specific structural reform in the Community of Madrid: authorizing Primary Schools (CEIP) to teach the first two years of Lower Secondary Education (ESO). This measure creates two fundamental pedagogical tensions, suggesting a potential “primarization” of early secondary education. On one hand, there is the view of the 12–14 age range as still part of childhood (the CEIP perspective—focused on protection and monitoring within a “family-like” environment), versus the view of early adolescence (the IES perspective—focused on autonomy and transition). On the other hand, the conflict between the generalist school grammar of CEIPs (globalized model) and the specialized structure of Secondary Schools (IES—organized by departments and subjects) generates additional tension. According to the authors, IES leadership fears disruption of the educational stage and a decline in quality if integration comes at the expense of teacher specialization and staff stability (by creating interim or partial positions in CEIPs).

Rivas and Caldach address the issue of teacher education in the face of extended compulsory schooling. Their work focuses on teacher training for a possible extension to age 18, analyzing challenges in both initial training and professional development. They argue that such an extension would require profound transformations in teacher education models, across four key dimensions: (1) Ethical commitment: Reinforcing vocation and ethics as central to entering the profession, given that the current system does not adequately assess these aspects. (2) Modeling commitment: University teaching must itself model ethical and professional commitment in its own practice. (3) The practicum: It must be a strategic formative space ensuring exposure to diverse, real educational contexts, fostering a socially engaged

professional identity. (4) Formation teams: Building diverse, socially committed training teams with multiple profiles.

Egea and Paredes introduce the debate on literacy and reading culture within compulsory education. Their article reviews the irreplaceable role of schools in constructing a critical, equitable, and community-based reading culture. Ultimately, they approach reading culture as a complex social practice that transcends technical skill, functioning as a tool for democratic transformation.

Compulsory schooling and its regulation give the school a decisive potential to guarantee equity and reduce cultural divides generated elsewhere (such as in families or digital environments). The school thus exercises a democratizing and normative role, legitimizing what counts as valid reading and compelling the system to ensure that reading is a right, not a privilege.

Del Barro contributes a historical and comparative perspective on the expansion of compulsory education, focusing on Buenos Aires in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Compulsory schooling was adopted as both a principle and a mechanism for expanding the primary education subsystem, tied to literacy and national identity formation.

However, the process was problematic due to rapid urban growth, mass immigration, and child labor, which prevented many children from attending school. The state responded with major investments in new schools (“palace schools”), but non-compliance persisted. The approach thus shifted from coercion and penalties to persuasion and material support (free supplies and clothing) for poor families. Reducing the minimum required instruction to third-grade content was a recognition of the limits of official action in the face of child labor.

Finally, the last article in the monograph addresses the ethical and legal tension of compulsory schooling in Spain and proposes a pedagogical framework to ground the debate on its possible extension. Compulsory education is considered an achievement of advanced societies, justified by the need for an optimal education enabling democratic citizenship, satisfactory employment integration, and full personal development.

The authors outline four fundamental functions of compulsory education to bring the debate back to the pedagogical sphere: (1) Consensual:

Symbolizing the basic social agreement on the common content (knowledge and experiences) all citizens should share; (2) Enabling: A present right that prepares minors for the exercise of future rights (“anticipatory autonomy”); (3) Propedeutic: Ensuring the shared space and time required for educational processes (curriculum, socialization, cultural transmission) to occur; (4) Guaranteeing: Obliging public authorities to effectively ensure the right to education.

The article warns that the current age limits of compulsory education (6 to 16 years) lack pedagogical justification, responding instead to political and economic rationales. The main obstacle to extension is political polarization and the risk that education may be used as a tool of partisan interference.

In summary, this monograph offers elements for debate—it does not close the discussion but rather opens new pathways for reflection and decision-making. Educational systems have progressively increased the length of compulsory schooling, often guided by political and economic motives alone. It is therefore essential to delve deeper into pedagogical arguments that reinforce and clarify the meaning, content, and direction that compulsory education should take in a highly literate and technologically advanced society.