Chapter 4
School Dropout and Completion in Spain

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What Are the Main Features of Spain's Upper Secondary Education and Training Provision?

Secondary education in Spain is structured into two parts. Lower secondary education (*Educación Secundaria Obligatoria*) is compulsory and lasts over four school years divided into two cycles each of 2 years. It begins after the conclusion of primary school at the age of 12; therefore, when a student finishes compulsory education, he or she is 16 years old. After this period, upper secondary education begins, which includes three main tracks: the academic (baccalaureate), the professional and the occupational.

Until the 1990 Educational Reform, only primary schooling was comprehensive; secondary schools were divided into baccalaureate secondary schools (*institutos de bachillerato*) and vocational training schools (*institutos de formación profesional*). However, the 1990 Reform extended the comprehensive curriculum to compulsory secondary education, and integrated the two types of training into secondary education schools (*institutos de enseñanza secundaria*), although keeping separate academic and professional tracks.

The application of comprehensiveness to compulsory secondary education has caused much controversy within the educational community and in political debates. It may be said that, at present, and since the educational reform of 2006, the comprehensiveness of compulsory secondary education is limited. This is because the Programs of Curricular Diversification (*Programas de Diversificación Curricular*), in which the curriculum is adapted to low-performing students by means of less abstract learning and more practical activities, are implemented in the second cycle. Although it is not accurate to say that upper secondary education is comprehensive, more and more links are being fostered between academic and professional tracks,

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thus moving from a tracked system to a linked one (Raffe & Spours, 1997). It should also be added that although there is only one curriculum within compulsory education, there are important differences between schools, as will be shown later on – for instance, between state-supported and private schools.

The students who succeed in acquiring the basic competences contained in the compulsory secondary education curriculum obtain the Secondary Education Certificate (*Graduado en Secundaria*). The evaluation to award this certificate is done by the secondary school's team of teachers; they may also give the certificate to students who have not passed two or, exceptionally, three subjects. There is no external evaluation on a national level: each secondary school and each team of teachers within it carries out the evaluation based on the aims and the criteria established by the educational administration. Students who have not achieved the goals of the cycle receive something similar to an O-level Certificate (*Certificado de Escolaridad*) that has no academic value.

To access the baccalaureate or the Intermediate Level of Vocational Training (*Formación Profesional de Grado Medio*), it is necessary to hold the Secondary Education Certificate (*Graduado en Secundaria*).

Baccalaureate studies are taken over two school years, though owing to a high rate of students repeating a year, and also a high rate of dropout, the possibility of studying it over three school years is being discussed by policy-makers. There are five branches of study: nature and health sciences, sciences and engineering, social sciences, humanities and arts (although the latter is taught in only a few secondary schools). Approximately half the subjects (language, philosophy, history, physical education) are common across all branches, 40% are in the specialism, and 10% are optional, although there may be regional differences according to each Autonomous Community.[1] To obtain the Baccalaureate Certificate (*Título de Bachiller*), students must pass all the subjects, with an evaluation being carried out by the school team of teachers.

There is no external test for validating the Baccalaureate Certificate – an attempt to impose such a test in 2002 aroused large-scale opposition. Instead, there is an admission examination to access university (*selectividad*), the aim of which is to order the students' preferences according to the grade they obtained (using the average grade between the baccalaureate and the admission examination).

Vocational training in upper secondary education includes two levels: Intermediate Vocational Training (*Ciclos Formativos de Grado Medio*, CFGM) and Advanced Vocational Training (*Ciclos Formativos de Grado Superior*, CFGS). To access CFGM, students must hold the Secondary Education Certificate (*Graduado de Secundaria*) or pass an admission examination; to access CFGS, students must hold the Baccalaureate Certificate (*Título de Bachiller*) or pass an admission examination. It should be noted

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[1] Although Spain is not a federal state, educational powers have been transferred to the regional or territorial governments, the so-called Autonomous Communities (*Comunidades Autónomas*). Even though the general regulation of the system is still carried out by the state government, the development of the curriculum, the management of the schools and some important educational policies such as, for instance, the prevention of school failure depend on the autonomous governments, in collaboration with the local authorities.

that there is no direct access for students completing a CFGM and willing to study a CFGS; for those students, the normal track would be to study the baccalaureate. This has provoked many complaints that have led to the establishment, still in an experimental stage, of some promotion courses for those students holding a CFGM Certificate who are preparing themselves for the admission examinations to CFGS.

Both CFGM and CFGS are taught in secondary schools; they require about 1,300 and 2,000 hours, usually distributed over two school years. The curriculum is vocationally driven, with no optional subjects, and includes 25% work-based learning, with the remaining time being spent in the school. However, there are experiments in some Autonomous Communities, with more hours being spent in companies. Courses are provided in 26 special fields or professional families and correspond to Level 2 (CFGM) and Level 3 (CFGS) of the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications (*Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales*).

Students who pass a CFGM obtain the Technician Diploma (*Título de Técnico*), and those who pass a CFGS, the Higher Technician Diploma (*Título de Técnico Superior*). Assessments are carried out by the teachers in the secondary school. Students holding a Higher Technician Diploma may access university, especially the first cycles of technical degrees. One of the problems of these qualifications is that they do not yet have a clear correspondence with the occupational categories defined in collective agreements. Except for some very unusual cases for which the qualification is a requirement in order to be able to work in a specific profession (as in the case of healthcare, for instance), the fact of having obtained such a vocational qualification does not provide students with clear guarantees of obtaining a job related to their training. Furthermore, there is a paradox: some of the requirements to carry out a specific job are obtained in the training for the unemployed, which is provided outside of the educational system.

The students who do not obtain the Secondary Education Certificate (*Graduado en Secundaria*) have the possibility of joining some programs of First-Level Vocational Training (*Programas de Formación Profesional de Nivel 1*), presently called Programs of Initial Professional Qualification (*Programas de Cualificación Profesional Inicial*), which last for a school year (between 800 and 1,200 hours). These programs are provided in secondary schools or in authorised schools (non-profit making foundations, city councils or guilds), and have a small component of work-based training. They give students access to professional certificates (*certificados de profesionalidad*) issued by the work authority, or a second chance at the Secondary Education Certificate (*Graduado de Secundaria*) if they study a specific and voluntary module of basic skills. These programs will be analysed more thoroughly later in this chapter.

What Are the Main Rates of School Graduation or Dropout? Have These Changed from Previous Decades?

In Spain, the debate on school failure has been very important and has involved much controversy. For many years, it was considered that school failure was the result of the student's lack of adaptation, in accordance with deficit or handicap theories.

According to these theories, the students who failed in school had their own characteristics, psychological and social, which distanced them from their classmates. The introduction of the sociological theories of Bourdieu and Bernstein, among others, shifted the focus to the role of school as the cause of school failure. In the last few years, the discourse on inclusive school has introduced the concept of 'school failure', which holds that the *institution* is responsible for student failure, because of its inability to adjust to the different needs and motivations of its students.

Although there are many dimensions of school failure, there is some consensus on the basic indicator of failure, which is the rate of non-graduation at the end of compulsory education; that is, the percentage of an age cohort that does not succeed in obtaining the Secondary Education Certificate when completing compulsory secondary education.

Another indicator is that of the 'schooling net participation rate', defined as the number of students enrolled according to age, divided by the total number of the population belonging to the age group. The dropout concept is also used, but related to school absenteeism; that is to say, the number of boys and girls who do not succeed in completing compulsory secondary education, although this phenomenon is much more complex to analyse and measure (Garcia, 2008). But it is the rate of non-graduation that appears in the official statistics.

The concept of dropout in post-compulsory education, which is the number of students who have enrolled in the baccalaureate or in vocational training but who do not complete it, is also commonly used. Finally, and according to the Lisbon Goals, a standard and comparable indicator of school success presently being used is the percentage of young people between 20- and 24-years-old holding a certificate of post-compulsory education.

First is an analysis of the schooling net participation rate, allowing examination of changes over the last 3 decades. According to the official statistics of the Ministry of Education, these rates at ages 15 and 17 are shown in Table 4.1.

Full schooling by the age of 15 was not achieved until the end of the 1990s for two reasons. Until the 1990s, compulsory primary education lasted up to age 14, and although, theoretically, the students who did not pass this cycle were compelled to follow a program of initial vocational training, in practice, many students did not attend it or quit it during the first course (Merino & Llosada, 2007). Educational and social policies were not able (or it was not considered a priority objective enough) to do something more for this group. In 1990, the Law on the General Planning of the Educational System (*Ley de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo*, LOGSE) was passed that established compulsory secondary education (*Educación Secundaria Obligatoria*) from 12 to 16 years. Despite its many problems, it has achieved almost full schooling of students at age 15. However, some aspects of the quality of this schooling have been very much criticised, such as high rates of school failure. The percentage in schooling at age 17 (that is, in the post-compulsory stage) has steadily increased: from the beginning of the 1980s to the middle of the 1990s, it rose from 50% to 75% of the cohort. But since the end of the 1990s, this figure has not changed, especially due to the persistence of a high 30% rate of school failure in compulsory education. Spanish educational authorities and the public are well aware of these data, which show that the country is far from

Table 4.1 Schooling net participation rates at significant ages, 1983–84 to 2006–07

Schooling net rate	At age 15	At age 17
1983–84	71.3	48.3
1984–85	73.8	50.9
1985–86	76.7	51.9
1986–87	79.4	53.6
1987–88	82.6	56.6
1988–89	83.7	59.6
1989–90	86.2	62.1
1990–91	89.5	64.3
1991–92	91.5	66.6
1992–93	93.8	69.1
1993–94	n.d	71.7
1994–95	n.d	73.3
1995–96	n.d	74.4
1996–97	n.d	75.1
1997–98	n.d	76.1
1998–99	n.d	75.9
1999–2000	100	74.9
2000–01	100	74.8
2001–02	100	75.7
2002–03	100	75.3
2003–04	100	74.9
2004–05	100	74.8
2005–06	100	75.5
2006–07	100	75.7(p)

n.d = no data available; p = provisional
Source: Estadística de la Enseñanza en España (Statistics of Education in Spain). Several years. Ministry of Science and Education.

achieving the goal of 85% of young people between 18- and 24-years-old holding a certificate of post-compulsory education, as established by the Lisbon Strategy.

To calculate the rates of students who obtain the Secondary Education Certificate and the rates of dropout at the different levels and educational stages, two approaches may be used. The first approach is based on official statistics. Figure 4.1 shows the flows of students in the transition from compulsory education to the different post-compulsory pathways over the period 2000–05 (Merino & Garcia, 2008).

Percentages have been calculated for each level and program; those in brackets are for the total age cohort. The first point to note is the student failure to complete compulsory secondary education, which happens in about a third (33%) of the cohort. For this group, the 1990 Law designed the Social Guarantee Program (*Programa de Garantía Social*), which offered a first-level vocational training. However, it was scarcely appealing, for it did not allow students to continue on in the educational system. If added to that is the lack of resources allotted to these programs, it may very well be understood why only a little over one quarter (27%)
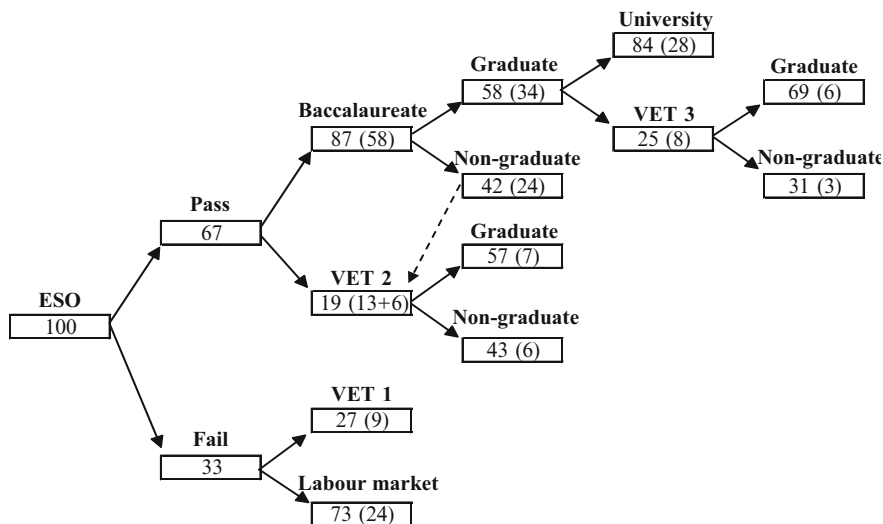
Fig. 4.1 Educational flows in Spain, 2000–05 (%)

of those who had failed have enrolled in these programs. The others, about one quarter of the age cohort (this figure is similar to the schooling net participation rate at the age of 17), are facing a transition to the labour market without any kind of certificate or professional training.

The academic track, the baccalaureate, shows a non-graduation rate of just over 40%, including both those students who drop out and those who do not pass. To reduce this percentage, in the last few years some measures of flexibility have been undertaken, such as the possibility of studying a third year, but only the subjects that the students have not passed. Another set of students who have dropped out of the academic track reorient into vocational training, thus contributing to the image of vocational training as the place where students who have failed the baccalaureate end up going (Merino, 2007).

Intermediate Vocational Training (CFGM), taken by almost 20% of the young people who have passed compulsory secondary education, shows a dropout rate of 43%. This very high rate may be accounted for by many who take up employment opportunities that have been offered, thus raising the opportunity costs of pursuing studies (Merino, 2006). It may well be that what happens during the economic crisis that began in 2008, which is predicted to be a long one, will lower these opportunity costs, and, therefore, will (potentially) reduce the very high dropout rate. Some indices regarding occupational training point to this trend.

After the 1990 reform, a professional track – the Advanced Vocational Training (*Ciclos Formativos de Grado Superior*, CFGS) – was established for those students who completed the baccalaureate, partly as an alternative to the academic track in university. This newly created higher professional track has ended up attracting 25% of the students holding a baccalaureate certificate. However, it is not exactly

an alternative track to the university, for a significant percentage of these students use Advanced Vocational Training (CFGS) as a different pathway to attain the former, as sample data will show. Although to a lesser extent than in Intermediate Vocational Training (CFGM), due to students joining the labour market, the dropout rate in these courses is about 30%.

Figure 4.1 was built on official enrolment data gathered and published by the Ministry of Education. But these are stock data, and the flow reconstruction has important limitations. For instance, it does not show the real tracks that young people follow when they go from first-level programs to Intermediate Vocational Training through admission examinations or special preparation courses. To analyse these tracks, it is necessary to use data from a survey carried out in 2005 showing the educational options in a sample of young people including both those holding and others who did not hold the Compulsory Education Certificate (*Graduado en ESO*) from school year 2000–01 to school year 2004–05. The relevant data appear in Fig. 4.2.

These data, which come from a different statistical source, are similar but not identical, and confirm some previously described trends, such as the preference of young Spanish people for the academic pathway and for considering vocational training a second option when the previous one fails. This is also confirmed by the fact that a third of Intermediate Vocational Training (CFGM) students have failed in the baccalaureate, and that the students who have taken more years to complete the baccalaureate are those who tend to choose Advanced Vocational Training rather than university study. They also account for phenomena that do not appear in official statistics, such as the dropout from the educational system of those students who obtained the Secondary Education Certificate. Although the latter do not represent a large percentage (3.5% of the whole age cohort, 5% of those who have
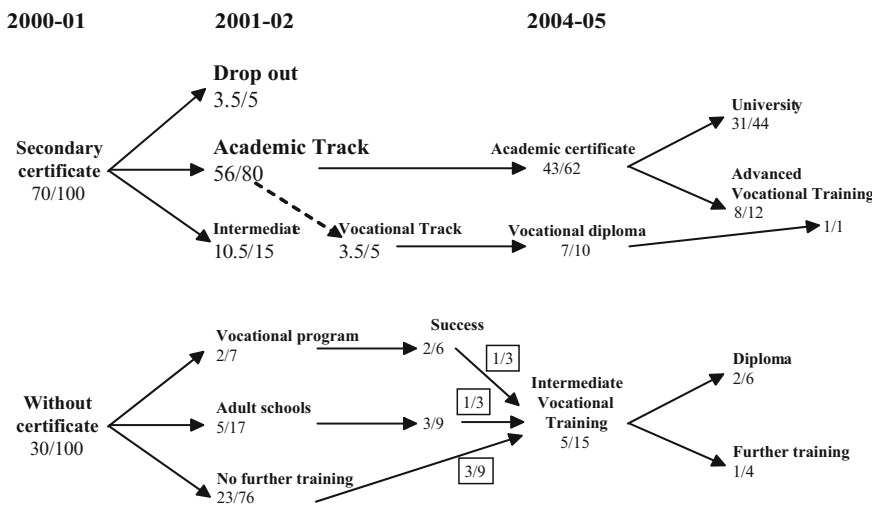

Fig. 4.2 Educational flows based on Spanish young people's pathways, 2000–05 (Source: ETEFIL)

obtained the Certificate, as shown in Fig. 4.2), they deserve to be thoroughly studied. This dropout makes failure in the baccalaureate appear to be less than the one detected in official statistics; however, one out of every four students enrolled do not complete it. Of those, some move into vocational training, where dropout also occurs: almost 50% do not obtain the Technician Diploma. Another phenomenon that official statistics do not show is the transition from Intermediate Vocational Training to Advanced Vocational Training: although it is not a major pathway, the fact that it exists is nevertheless significant in itself. Legislation is being introduced so that this transition may take place more easily.

There is much more information, apart from the official statistics, about the students who do not obtain the Certificate. Approximately one quarter (24%) of these students start a program of recovery, be it a vocational or an academic one, to obtain the Secondary Education Certificate. The vocational programs (the so-called Social Guarantee Programs) have less weight, for they enjoy very little prestige and almost all the students who enrol (2% of the cohort, or 8% of those not obtaining their Secondary Education Certificate) complete them. The academic programs (taken by 5% of the cohort, or 17% of those without a Certificate) are available in adult schools and are not necessarily courses aimed at young people who have not obtained the Certificate; rather these programs have been designed for the general adult population. They are less successful but allow students to obtain an official certificate. At any rate, the most interesting success or recovery measure is the access to Intermediate Vocational Training, which involves one out of every six students (16%) who have not obtained the Secondary General Certificate. These students have been able to continue post-compulsory studies, although a third of them have not been able to complete them.

In summary, the Spanish educational system faces a very important challenge when compared with the other countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): almost one quarter of each age cohort does not continue post-compulsory studies. Of the students who do undertake these academic studies or vocational training, almost one third do not complete them. And of those who do not enrol for them, only a small percentage make use of the recovery programs, which are far from being a true recovery for a significant percentage of the potential population.

Who Graduates and Who Drops Out?

In the empirical studies on school failure, the classic variables of social inequalities have been used: those that are related to social class, gender and ethnic groups. Regarding social class, basically two variables have been used: the type of work or occupation and the parents' level of education. The parents' career appears in several surveys, mainly in the EPA (*Encuesta de población activa*; Survey of the Working Population), and is classified according to the National Classification of Occupations (*Clasificación Nacional de Ocupaciones*) matrix. Based on this

classification, different socioeconomic classifications may be carried out that are an approximation to the reference social class.

According to the data analysed by Martínez (2007a), a child from an upper class family had a 5.8% (1 in 17) chance of not obtaining the certificate of compulsory education by the age of 20, whereas for a child of a working class family it was a 24.4% (1 in 4) chance, and for a child of a farmer's family, a 31.4% (1 in 3) chance. These differences have remained more or less equal since compulsory schooling was introduced. In 1995, a book was published in Catalonia on school success and failure that prompted some debate, for it showed the social differences of students obtaining the certificate at the end of compulsory education, but also that middle class children did not avoid the risk of non-completion: 13% had not obtained the certificate (Cirem, 1995). Despite economic means, and despite the educational strategies of families, school failure was not only a problem affecting the working class.

Regarding the level of education, the relationship between the parents' education and their children's school performance has been demonstrated, especially mother's level of education (Calero, 2006). Using data from the European Household Panel and multinomial logistic regression, this author analysed the different probabilities of pursuing the academic path in post-compulsory education; the most discriminating variable was mother's level of education. Although the latter is not a specific indicator of school success or failure, it is nevertheless related to it, for students who study the baccalaureate have the best results in compulsory education.

The studies based on statistical correlations are somewhat limited when interpreting data. First, they do not explain non-expected situations; for instance, why some working class boys and girls obtain good results and pursue their studies and even go to university. Second, and related to this first aspect, they do not account for the specific mechanisms that cause parents' social inequality to bring about their children's educational inequality. To do this requires studies of a qualitative kind that analyse how, based on similar objective conditions (of occupation and education), families belonging to the same social class are different regarding expectations and educational strategies. This is what a team of Spanish sociologists have attempted to do (Martín Criado et al., 2000), that is to say to study the different attitudes of working class families regarding education. Thus, subjective aspects such as the relationships established with school, the priority given to studying by the family environment or passing responsibilities on to the children must be incorporated into the explanation of the different school outcomes and of the probabilities of school success or failure.

Gender and educational inequalities have also prompted much debate in the scientific community and, no doubt, in the educational one. The new datum is that over the last decades, school failure has been more frequent among male students; also, more female students are in post-compulsory secondary education (mostly in baccalaureate) and even the university. This phenomenon has taken place in many countries from the 1980s onwards (Baudelot & Establet, 1992). Several explanations have been provided (Merino et al., 2006a) ranging from biological to cultural factors. At any rate, female students have adapted much better overall than male

students to school environment, which has paradoxically caused the phenomenon of girls' school failure to become 'invisible'. This has consequences for the programs of transition to work, as will be seen in the following section; these programs are often designed for occupational areas to which young women with low skills have very few opportunities to access.

Regarding ethnic groups, in Spain, studies have been carried out on the schooling of the Rom population, an ethnic group with an established presence that has traditionally been marginalised in several domains – work, housing and obviously in education too. In fact, the incorporation of Rom girls and boys into compulsory education has involved difficulties, and, still today, for this group absenteeism rates in secondary education are high. Many boys quit school when they are 14 years of age due to a lack of interest or because they must help to financially support the household; girls quit even earlier to help the family with housework or due to the reluctance of the family to allow them to continue their studies. Furthermore, the presence of ethnic boys and girls in post-compulsory and higher education is difficult to quantify. Neither statistics on education nor national population surveys record the Rom people as a different group; thus, most studies that have been carried out are on a local level or are qualitative approximations. It should be pointed out that a study by a team of anthropologists analysed school success factors in Rom boys and girls (Abajo & Carrasco, 2004), in which, by means of qualitative methods, they found factors of school success, among which non-segregated schooling stood out; however, the risk of non-segregated schooling is that it may lead to a process of acculturation.

The relationship between the ethnic groups and educational inequalities has undergone a very important development in the last few years due to the very important arrival of immigrants. In a 10-year span, Spain has gone from being a country of emigrants to becoming a country of immigrants (from 2.3% of foreigners in 2000 to 10% in 2008; the percentage of students in compulsory education has also followed this pace) and, therefore, a multicultural country. This situation has remarkably changed the social scenery in urban and rural areas, and has provoked conflicts and tensions, the most important setting of which has been school. Prompted by social and political concern regarding this issue, in the last few years a considerable number of research studies have been carried out on the access and incorporation of children who, together with their families, go through their migratory or second-generation processes. Although sometimes the media exaggerate the negative impact of immigrant students entering the educational system, it clearly appears to be harder for immigrant students to obtain the compulsory education certificate and to continue in post-compulsory education. Whereas for Spain as a whole, in the 2007–08 school year, 10% of the students in compulsory secondary education were foreigners, they only amounted to 4% of baccalaureate students and to 6% of vocational training students (Carabaña, 2008). The explanations for such differences are more or less the same ones that were used to explain school failure among working class young people, perhaps just emphasising more the cultural dimensions, but it is very difficult to establish correlations with a situation as heterogeneous as immigration.

From a statistical point of view, only citizenship (Spanish or foreign) is recorded. This in itself causes problems as increasingly more and more people from immigrant origins obtain Spanish citizenship. However, from the point of view of the internal composition of immigration, there is large diversity. Although majority groups come from Latin America (especially Ecuador and Colombia), or from Morocco, families also come from Argentina, Romania, Senegal, Pakistan or China, to name a few, to settle in Spain. This is a recent phenomenon, and there is still need to study in depth the education and training trajectories of these young men and women.

In addition to factors related to the biographic profile of the students and their families, another factor partially explaining differences in rates of school failure is the regional context, more specifically, the economic structure and local labour markets. In the early 1990s, it was already clear that school failure was very different in areas of Spain such as Catalonia, Galicia and Andalusia (Planas & Comas, 1994). Whereas in Catalonia, the non-graduation rate when finishing compulsory education was 30%, in Andalusia and Galicia it was only 20%. The explanation is twofold. The industrial structure of Catalonia provided more job opportunities, thus vocational training was more attractive. Instead, the tendency to pursue studies is higher in areas where the economy is weaker and where the educational system functions as a temporary buffer. But this tendency happened with the educational system defined by the Law of 1970, which made it compulsory for students who did not pass primary education to enrol in lower-level vocational training (*Formación Profesional de Primer Grado*). With the application of the educational reform of 1990, this mandatory connection disappeared, and so this factor could no longer explain the higher level of school failure in Catalonia.

Furthermore, in the beginning of the 1990s, the Spanish economy was in recession. Then, from 1996 onwards, there was a cycle of great economic growth, when millions of jobs were created, partially explaining the increase in the immigrant workforce (although this was generally in those sectors requiring low skills, such as construction and tourism). This economic boom accounts for the fact that in the last few years, the differences in school failure have increased throughout the country. In the 'Mediterranean Arc', where there are high levels of employment, dropout and school failure rates are higher than in other areas of the country. It is relevant to highlight the case of the Balearic Islands, with a school failure rate of almost 40% (Calero, 2006), which is a case of a labour market that basically offers low-quality jobs related to mass tourism. This often encourages students to give up their studies and enter the labour market. This is referring to what economists call 'opportunity cost': the lack of difficulty finding a job and a salary means a lack of incentive to make an effort to study and to pursue secondary education. This phenomenon is well known in vocational training, where between 30% and 50% of enrolled students do not complete the course, generally because they find a job (Merino, in press). The period of economic growth ceased in the first part of 2008, with increasing numbers of unemployed people. It is still necessary to verify empirically if this economic downturn will lower opportunity costs and therefore encourage young people to continue studying, or whether school failure rates will continue to be as high as they are now.

To sum up, explanatory factors for school failure can be found in the 'supply-side' characteristics of individuals and their families and in the 'demand-side' characteristics of local labour markets. To these two sets of factors can be added a third, which here is called the 'institutional' factors – what schools can do and actually do to increase or reduce school failure. This issue is analysed in the following section.

Programs, Policies and Practices to Reduce Dropout

There is a general consensus today in Spain that the dropout and school failure rate is too high. Over previous decades, political priority was given to schooling participation rates, to ensure that schooling during compulsory primary education (and in the last few years, in the non-compulsory pre-school period) was provided to all children. In this way, historical discrimination experienced by many generations excluded from school was rectified. But once participation rates of almost 100% in compulsory education and 70% in post-compulsory education had been achieved, emphasis has been put on the efficiency of the system. The public agenda has moved from quantity to quality. When the data on non-graduation from compulsory education for students who are aged 16 are compared, the Spanish rate is far from the average of the other countries in the European Union or the OECD.

Every time a survey or a report (such as PISA) discussing graduation and dropout rates is made public, the focus of Spain's media, in its political debates, and within the educational community is that something has to be done to reduce the school failure rate of approximately 30%. The problem is to achieve consensus in what must be done, which inevitably involves hardships. In addition to logical (and legitimate) ideological differences regarding the definition and treatment that school failure deserves, there are important intrinsic difficulties, such as the appearance of unwanted effects.

If the diagnosis is focused on *individual* variables, then emphasis is put on the *compensatory* dimension of the programs to be implemented; they focus on offering more hours to the students so that they may be able to follow the normal pace of the group. Compensatory education may be private; for instance, a middle class family that provides private lessons to their child, because he or she learns more slowly than other classmates. It may be state-supported, like the support programs of afternoon centres for students with such family problems that they cannot normally follow their studies. It may also be mixed, with the collaboration of the Administration and of cooperative and associative networks to carry out so-called 'school reinforcement' (*refuerzo escolar*).

If the diagnosis focuses on the *external* variable, eventual solutions are very difficult. This is another of the weak points of statistical correlations when trying to give them shape in political proposals. The fact that working class young people or those who have illiterate mothers have a higher probability of failing in school tells us little about what could be done, for neither their class nor their mothers can be

changed. Grant policies may be established (and they actually are) to compensate for the direct and indirect school costs, but they have greater impact on access to the different educational levels than on school performance (Martínez, 2007b). In addition, it is also very difficult to impinge on the structure of the labour market; although the knowledge economy might be fostered, reality is reality and the demand for a low-skilled workforce will continue to be a lack of incentive for educational endeavour. Calls for active employment programs focus on training and operate under the assumption that unemployed individuals are those who do not adjust to the requirements of the labour market, so that they appear as responsible for their situation (Walther & Stauber, 2002).

Finally, what can schools do? Educational policy has been the scene of strong ideological, political and academic debates about the steps to be taken to reduce school failure. As discussed in the first section, one of the aims of every educational reform from the last 40 years in Spain has been to reduce the rate of early dropout and non-graduation in compulsory education. To achieve this aim, basically two kinds of proposals have been made: organisational and didactic, each of them focusing on discussion of the positive and negative aspects of comprehensive education. In the 1980s, consensus was reached regarding 14 as the age for students to complete compulsory education, and to decide between the academic path and the professional one. The 1990 reform extended the common curriculum by 2 years and fostered the methodology of significant learning based on constructivist theories to address the obvious difficulty of managing classes with a greater diversity of students. The first years of the application of this reform were extremely conflicted; the second cycle of compulsory secondary school, from ages 14 to 16, was the most difficult one. Many teenagers behaved badly and they started to be called 'school objectors' (*objetores escolares*); also, many teachers complained about the increasing impossibility of controlling their classrooms and secondary schools, about the lack of resources and the unavoidable fall in the levels of school performance of all students. Many families also complained about the fact that interested and motivated students were combined in classrooms with students who wanted to quit school (Merino, 2005).

At the bottom line of this whole debate, beyond biased exaggerations, the internalisation or externalisation of school failure was being debated (Planas et al., 1998), as well as the role and aims of compulsory education. Either school engages itself to make every student acquire the so-called 'basic competences', or it has only a fundamentally classificatory function to sort students according to their attainment. The responses to school failure very much depend on this dilemma.

From the first point of view, the response is basically a didactic one: methodology should be changed and teachers' training should be improved. From the second point of view, the response to school failure is clear: the reason why students fail at school is because it cannot offer them anything that may interest them. Therefore, what school should do is to diversify its curriculum, for example, by offering programs based on manual skills with a vocational orientation, even if this is at the risk of creating a hierarchy of status among the different paths of the curriculum; or these programs could be provided by institutions outside the secondary school system.

The 1990 educational reform chose the former way, whereas the 2002 reform chose the latter. In a law passed in 2006, the importance of didactic orientation was partly reinforced, but doors were also opened to curricular diversification, which *de facto* already existed in many secondary schools.

This first important debate focuses on how to reduce school failure at the end of compulsory education; however, there is a second important debate on what to do with the students who have not obtained the Secondary Education Certificate. As already mentioned, the 1990 reform prevented these students from entering school-based vocational training and instead established specific programs called Social Guarantee Programs (*Programas de Garantía Social*, PGS). These had a vocational orientation, but greater possibilities of becoming stigmatised programs. In fact, the PGS have only interested a third of the students who have not obtained their Secondary Education Certificate, and most classes have been provided in institutions outside the secondary school system despite serious problems maintaining stability (Merino et al., 2006b). The idea was to establish programs that lasted one school year and that were based on professional-skill modules. However, they did not enable students to either obtain the Secondary Education Certificate or pursue vocational training studies.

The *Ley Orgánica de Educación* (Organic Law on Education) of 2006 rectified these fundamental problems by establishing the Programs of Initial Professional Qualification (*Programas de Cualificación Profesional Inicial*, PCPI), which are programs that last 2 years, incorporate a module of basic skills that allows students to obtain the compulsory Secondary Education Certificate and makes access to intermediate-level vocational training (*Formación Profesional de Grado Medio*, CFGM) easier. Although the external character of educational institutions has been maintained, it seems that educational administrators have taken the structuring and follow-up of these programs more seriously. Because they were to be implemented for the first time in the 2008–09 school year, it is still too early to carry out an assessment of the programs as to whether they become a true second opportunity for students who have failed in school.

The evaluation of educational reforms, in general, and of the policies against school failure, in particular, is not easy to resolve. To the technical difficulty related to this kind of assessment should be added the ongoing ideological and political disputes regarding the best way of approaching the problem of school failure. An example of this is the substitution of the new Programs of Initial Professional Qualification (*Programas de Cualificación Profesional Inicial*, PCPI) for Social Guarantee Programs (*Programas de Garantía Social*, PGS). The PGSs have been criticised, but no assessment of their strong and weak points has been carried out. In November 2006, when the Ministry of Education was beginning to enforce the LOE (*Ley Orgánica de Educación*, Organic Law of Education), a monograph on how the new PCPIs should be implemented was published, in which the present authors participated (Merino et al., 2006a). However, this was done without an assessment of the results over the previous 15 years that PGSs have been in operation.

One possibility for obtaining the Secondary Education Certificate, for those who did not obtain it while they were at secondary school, is to attend courses in adult

schools. These schools, which in the beginning were a response to the high rate of illiteracy of the adult population, are increasingly 'being rejuvenated' as a result of this possibility (Planas & Monturiol, 2006). According to some data of the Ministry of Education, in the 2006–07 school year, 40% of students who enrolled in adult schools to obtain the Secondary Education Certificate were aged under 20. At these schools, students can also prepare themselves for the examinations to enter vocational training; however, not many young people actually do so.

An aspect that must be taken into account is that Spain is a strongly decentralised country with regard to education. Although the State Administration still holds power over the general regulation of the educational system, territorial or regional governments (the Autonomous Communities) have some regulatory power and, more than anything else, a management role. In the curriculum of compulsory secondary education, for instance, some Communities have transformed the optional subjects to obligatory ones in either the academic or vocational paths. Also, some specific devices have been set up for groups of students with special difficulties, such as language immersion classrooms (*aulas de enlace*) for teenagers of immigrant origin who join the educational system but who are not literate in Spanish. Some Communities have designed their own Social Guarantee Programs, such as the Programs of Transition to Work (*Programas de Transición al Trabajo*) in Catalonia, in very close collaboration with the local administrations.

Despite having virtually no powers in educational matters, these local administrations have taken on great responsibility in the establishment of programs to encourage school success; many of the problems derived from early dropout and school failure are concentrated in some specific areas, and are usually linked to social problems that appear in the local community. It is worth highlighting the programs against school absenteeism (Garcia, 2008), launched by many city councils with the participation of the social services, the local police and other agencies in order to identify those children and teenagers not attending school. The network of municipal institutions of occupational training is also very important; these institutions provide a broad offering of training courses, counselling workshops and other resources for young people who lack academic training. Although part of this counselling and training is regulated by the Ministry of Employment and the Autonomous Governments (with the financing of the European Funds), city councils are in charge of giving momentum to and managing many programs. All of the programs managed or fostered by local administrations have two main problems, which make them less efficient: not enough financing, since financing is unstable and subject to political or administrative changes in the higher levels; and lack of networking among various areas and departments.

Finally, many secondary schools have developed innovative projects to reduce their dropout and/or school failure rates. While there may not be official records of these projects, some research has been carried out on them (Ferrer, 2007). The vast majority of these projects are based on diversification or on curricular adaptation, with some degree of external training, which provides students with different educational agents and environments. The aim of these projects is to offer something more interesting and appealing than mathematics, language or history to the

percentage of teenagers (who, depending on the school, may number between 40% and 50%) who are not motivated regarding their studies. Project classrooms (*aulas de proyecto*) or open classrooms (*aulas abiertas*) replace the ordinary curriculum, with practical activities within or outside the school premises, often with the collaboration of local associations and companies that take these students for some hours in order to get them away from the routine of secondary school and to increase their motivation in a 'real' environment.

Basically, these projects have two limitations: they are mostly fostered and carried out on the initiative of teachers who are very motivated and feel empathy for these students, with no clear institutional support, and they may have a boomerang effect, increasing the temptation of ordinary teachers to direct more students towards these programs so that the complex management of mainstream classrooms diminishes.

The problem of school failure is on the public agenda, especially in the context of the common aim of the European Union countries that was part of the Lisbon Declaration. Spain is still far from the 10% dropout rate that European countries established as a goal for 2010, and, even worse, there is not any downward trend in the rate of dropout. The structural programs may make it difficult to find solutions in the mid and long run, which is the reason why the challenge for the educational community and for policy-makers is much greater and more urgent.

The importance of this issue is such that on November 11, 2008, an agreement between the Ministry of Education and the Autonomous Governments was announced. This was to develop a plan to combat premature school dropout, aiming at reducing by half the dropout rate in 2012 and thus getting closer to the OECD average. This plan has been provided with funds (the idea is to obtain €240 million) and will focus on strengthening the aforementioned strategies (including PCPI, admission examinations to vocational training, schools for adults, improved counselling and teacher training), as well as completely new ones, such as schools for parents, and the recognition of non-formal learning. The hope is that it will be more than just another plan, and that it will be implemented over the next few years.

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