The Social Construction of Education Statistics: Dropout & Grade Retention in Portugal

CO/N/STATED Project, sponsored by FCT.
WWW.CONSTATED.PT

2023.14129.PEX; doi.org/10.54499/2023.14129.PEX

Tiago Neves, University of Porto. tiago@fpce.up.pt

CONTEXT

Why “dropout” numbers come under pressure

Educational statistics can enable transparency — and also produce blind spots when definitions, thresholds, and infrastructures shift.

Governance

Indicators, rates, and benchmarks steer performance management and policy evaluation.

Comparability

Redefinitions, formula changes, and discontinued series weaken longitudinal monitoring.

Equity

Classificatory choices can make some trajectories visible — and others invisible to scrutiny.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What we ask (and why)

Objectives

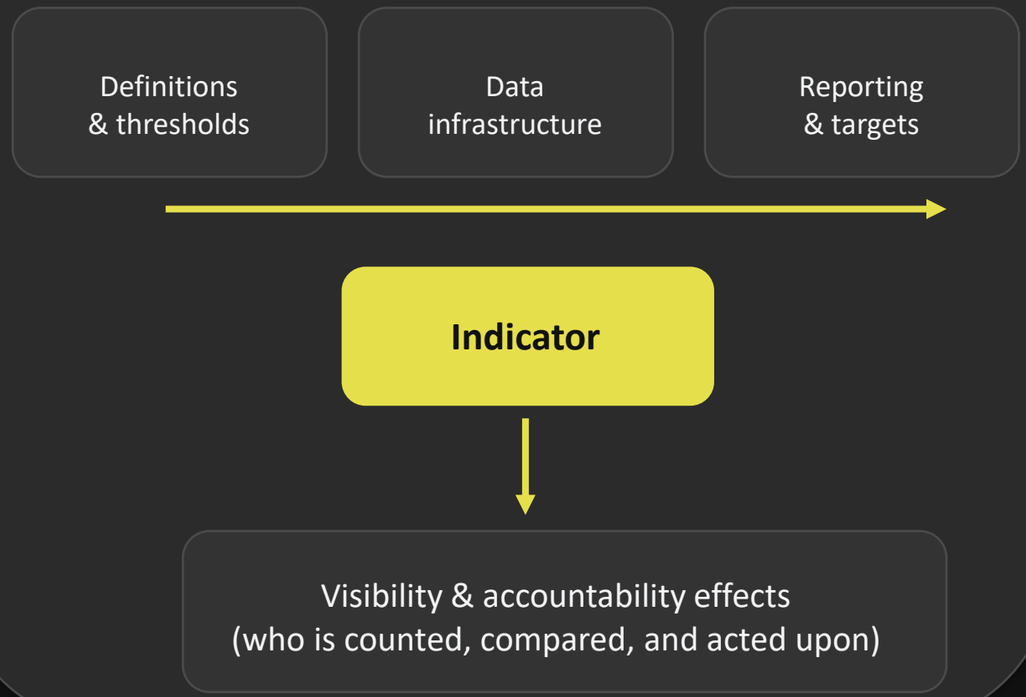
- Map the indicators used to capture school dropout and grade retention in Portugal.
- Trace how definitions and operationalisations differ across national and international frameworks.
- Identify inconsistencies, conceptual overlaps, and their governance consequences.

Key questions

- How do definitional and data-production changes affect longitudinal comparability?
- How do classificatory operations distribute responsibility and risk?

Conceptual lens

Indicators are built from choices:



Core idea: measurement tools can produce both transparency and obfuscation.

METHODOLOGY

Data sources & analytical approach

Conceptual & statistical mapping

Systematic examination of national and international sources, tracing changes in definitions, formulas, and reporting practices.

Sources (examples)

- INE
- DGEEC
- PORDATA
- EDUSTAT
- EUROSTAT
- UNESCO UIS
- OECD

Qualitative interview analysis

Semi-structured interviews with 25 participants:

- Opinion-makers (n=7): teachers, researchers, journalists
- Teachers (n=18): public and private schools

Analytical approach

Thematic analysis of how indicators are interpreted, contested, and contextualised — focusing on limitations and the gap between statistics and lived educational realities.

Mixed-methods: indicator mapping + actor accounts of how measurement works in practice.

INDICATOR LANDSCAPE

Dropout & grade retention indicators are not interchangeable

A compact “metadata passport” view of what each indicator counts — and what it cannot see.

Indicator (owner)	Population	What it measures	Key blind spot
Early Leaving from Education & Training (Eurostat)	18–24	Low attainment + not in education/training	Misses dropout processes within compulsory schooling
School abandonment rate (INE)	10–15	Leaving before completing compulsory schooling	Age group became outdated; series discontinued after 2011
Out-of-school rate (Eurostat/UIS)	15-year-olds	Not enrolled at any education level	Captures non-enrolment, not early leaving; methodological divergences
Dropout & grade retention rate (DGEEC)	School system	Aggregates retention + temporary withdrawal	Conflates distinct trajectories; sensitive to “ghost students” and tracking gaps

Use-case tip: treat each indicator as a different “window” onto dropout/retention — not as a single stable object.

CONCEPTUAL MAPPING

Three diverging definitions of school abandonment

Portugal’s dropout metrics are conceptually fragmented; each indicator makes different students visible.

Early School Leaving (ELET/ESL)

Definition: 18–24 with at most basic education and not in education/training.

Defined by: Eurostat.

Limitations: post-compulsory focus; data collected in the Labour Force Survey; weak link to school-system dynamics.

School abandonment rate

Definition: leaving before completing compulsory schooling.

Defined by: INE.

Limitations: age group (10–15) became outdated; excludes never-enrolled; discontinued after 2011.

Out-of-school rate

Definition: % of 15-year-olds not enrolled at any education level.

Defined by: Eurostat (similar to UNESCO UIS).

Limitations: captures non-enrolment, not early leaving; methodological differences.

Takeaway: “Dropout” is a shifting set of partially overlapping realities — anchored in different populations and infrastructures.

ADDITIONAL INDICATOR

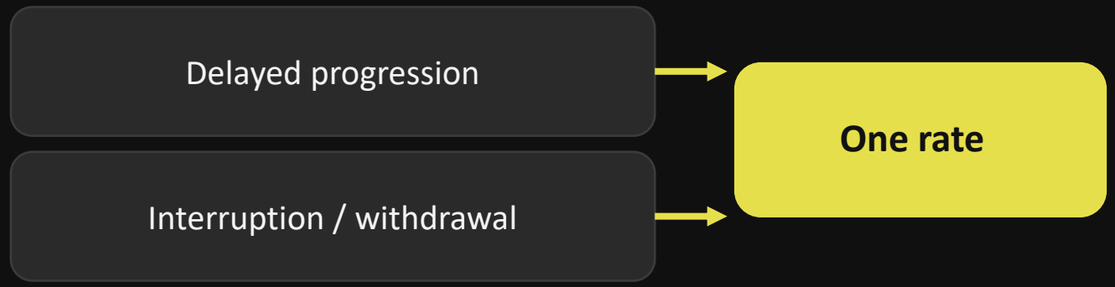
Grade retention + dropout rate: aggregation → analytical opacity

Defined by DGEEC using administrative school-system data.

Core definitions

- Grade retention: student does not progress due to academic failure.
- Dropout: temporary discontinuation of attendance.

Retention formula: (Students retained / Enrolled) × 100



Inconsistencies & limitations

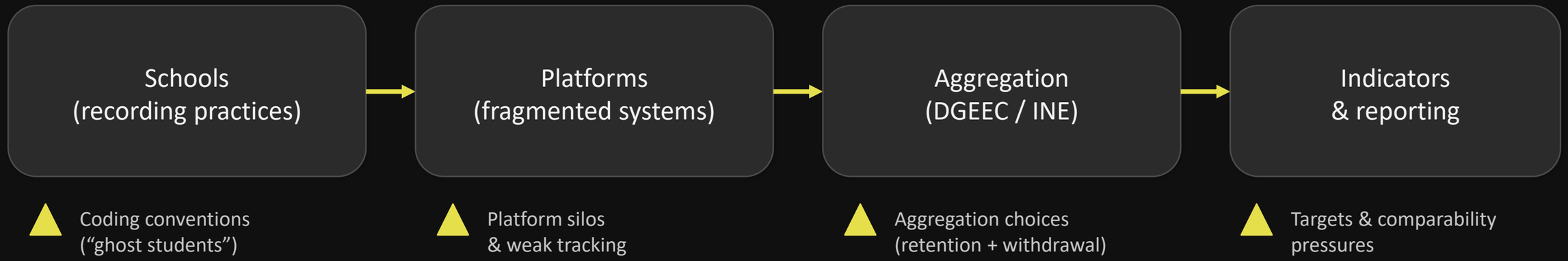
- Aggregated presentation: retention and dropout are combined, hindering analytical distinction.
- “Ghost students”: enrolled but non-attending students distort rates.
- Monitoring failures: weak tracking of compulsory enrolment/attendance.
- Platform fragmentation: multiple systems hinder reliability and longitudinal tracking.

Aggregation conflates distinct situations (delayed progression, interruption, non-completion), reducing interpretive power and accountability.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Where the “measurement ecology” creates distortion

A simplified pipeline showing where discontinuities and blind spots enter.



When data is discontinuous and platforms are siloed, the student’s lived experience of struggle is often lost in the transition between categories: e.g. both cases where there are enrolled but non-attending students, and cases where a student may reach the 9th grade with severe learning gaps that prevent actual continuation of studies.

FINDINGS

Diffuse and concrete pressures on grading and reporting

Diffuse pressures

- Performance regimes and quantification shape what “good results” look like.
- Pressure to justify negative grades exhaustively pushes standardisation.
- Fabricated or strategically curated results can emerge to meet statistical targets.

Concrete pressures

- Specific targets embedded in school plans, evaluation criteria, and autonomy contracts (especially in schools running compensatory education programs).
- Evaluation meetings can create explicit expectations about pass numbers.
- Teacher appraisal and institutional self-assessment can hinge on metric achievement.

Interpretive limits are not only technical: they reshape accountability, intervention strategies, and what counts as educational “risk”.

CONCLUSION

Takeaways for assessment, equity, and social justice

Four takeaways

- Conceptual plurality is structural: different indicators produce different “dropout” realities.
- Aggregation and discontinuities create analytical opacity and weaken longitudinal governance.
- Measurement choices have equity effects: they can conceal disadvantage or make it legible, at least partially.
- While statistics have mostly been used to remove pressure from the system (making it ‘look good’), those cosmetic procedures can actually increase pressure on individuals’ lives

Practical implications

- Publish “indicator metadata passports”: definitions, formulas, age ranges, and change logs.
- Separate retention from temporary withdrawal; avoid one-rate reporting for multiple trajectories.
- Strengthen longitudinal student tracking across platforms (reduce silos and ghost records).
- Acknowledge the grading and reporting pressures many schools and teachers are subjected to, and work to change the contexts that promote them.

By “denouncing and producing” numbers simultaneously, we can transform rumours of inequity into scientific evidence.

CONSTATED • 2023.14129.PEX • doi.org/10.54499/2023.14129.PEX