

Counting the Uncounted: The Statistical Construction of School Dropout and Grade Retention in Portugal

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Why Study Dropout and Grade Retention?

Privileged indicators of educational quality

Retention and dropout have become central benchmarks for assessing inequalities and guiding policies.

Numbers that govern

Indicators proliferate across national and supranational agencies becoming instruments of educational governance rather than merely descriptive measures.

Apparently neutral categories

Although they appear self-evident, dropout and grade retention may refer to very different educational realities.

Statistical objects are social constructions. (Desrosières, 1993)

How are grade retention and school dropout legally framed in Portugal?

Grade Retention

- Retention is an exceptional measure
- Progression follows a cycle-based logic
- Retention only when learning gaps compromise progression

School Dropout

- Compulsory education until age 18 (or completion of upper secondary education)
- School attendance is a legal obligation
- Monitoring and intervention mechanisms for prolonged absenteeism

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How are school dropout and grade retention defined, measured and interpreted?

How are educational trajectories recorded?

Identifying what statistical instruments effectively capture and what they leave unmeasured in students' educational trajectories.

How are these categories understood in practice?

Exploring how teachers and specialists understand and experience dropout and grade retention in everyday educational practice.

Where do categories and educational realities diverge?

Mapping the points of friction between formal statistical categories and the educational realities lived by actors in the field.

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual and Statistical Mapping

- Review of national and international educational indicators
- Examination of measurement criteria and classification procedures

Qualitative interview analysis

25 semi-structured interviews with:

- 18 primary and secondary teachers; public and private school
- 7 opinion-makers in the field of education

Analytical approach: Thematic analysis of interview data

What Do Statistical Indicators Measure?

Four indicators, four different definitions. Each one observes a distinct population, at a different moment in the educational trajectory.

1

Early leavers from education and training

Produced by Eurostat. Observes young people between 18 and 24 years old. Counts as dropout the low educational attainment associated with the absence of participation in education or training.

2

School Dropout

Produced by the Instituto Nacional de Estatísticas, through the Census every 10 years. Observes children aged 10–15.. Counts as dropout the non-attendance of school.

3

Out-of-school rate

Produced by Eurostat and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). Observes children and young people of school age. Counts as dropout the absence of enrolment in the education system.

4

Retention and Dropout

Produced by the Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência. Observes enrolled students in compulsory education. Counts as students who do not progress to the following school year (retention or dropout).

School Dropout and Grade Retention do not constitute unambiguous statistical objects. Different indicators make visible different dimensions of school trajectories, producing partial and sometimes divergent representations of the phenomenon.

What Emerges from the Interviews?

Grade Retention

Interpreting declining retention rates

Participants offered competing explanations for declining retention rates, ranging from educational improvements with legislative and administrative changes.

"Some of the problems were solved through professional pathways, but another part of the decline was artificial, resulting from the retention becoming an exceptional measure." (Public school teacher 1)

Institutional pressure and performance targets

Participants described how institutional expectations and accountability pressures may shape decisions about student progression.

"There is huge pressure to produce these success rates." (Opinion-maker 1)

School Dropout

Dropout hidden by administrative categories

Participants described situations in which students remained formally enrolled despite prolonged absenteeism, resulting in dropout trajectories being recorded as grade retention due to absences.

"Dropout is effectively hidden; statistically, it no longer exists." (Public teacher school 10)

Disengagement beyond formal enrolment

Participants distinguished formal school enrolment from actual educational engagement, describing situations in which students remained enrolled despite having effectively disengaged from school.

"Official statistics show less school dropout, yet a form of symbolic dropout still exists." (Opinion-maker 5)

From Counting to Understanding



Definition precedes measurement

Statistical indicators depend on prior conceptual definitions that determine how educational phenomena are identified and classified.



Distinct indicators, different representations

Different institutions produce different representations of the same educational phenomenon because they rely on different definitions, populations, and data sources.



Statistical categories only partially capture educational trajectories

The way grade retention and school dropout are classified barely captures the continuum between full school integration and disengagement; very diverse trajectories may be subsumed under a single indicator.



Indicators that transform what they describe

When indicators become targets to be met, they no longer merely describe reality; they begin to operate on it, transforming evaluative practices and institutional decisions.

Synthesis

01

Educational phenomena are measured through multiple statistical representations

The mapping of official indicators shows that school dropout and grade retention are not measured through a single statistical definition, but through different indicators built for different institutional purposes.

02

The indicators that become dominant also shape how phenomena are understood

In Portugal, the official indicator combines grade retention and school dropout into a shared statistical measure, making the interpretation of both phenomena dependent on the classifications through which they are produced.

03

Statistical categories do not fully coincide with educational trajectories

The interviews show that educational trajectories may cross administrative boundaries, revealing tensions between institutional classifications and school realities.

04

Indicators do not only describe educational reality—they also participate in governing it

As indicators become institutional targets, they influence organisational priorities, progression decisions and the ways schools respond to educational problems.



Thank you!

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For more information about the project, visit the project website.

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