MAPPING OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN PORTUGAL, WITH A PARTICULAR FOCUS ON WHOLE-CHILD APPROACHES

SHORT VERSION

CATÓLICA
CEPCEP · CENTRO DE ESTUDOS DOS POVOS
E CULTURAS DE EXPRESSÃO PORTUGUESA

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Executive summary

The ESL rate in Portugal has decreased, from 44,3% in 2001 to 8,9% in 2020. But Portugal remains a very unequal society, with one-fifth of the total population living at risk of poverty (21.6%). Within this context, Porticus Iberia[1] commissioned CEPCEP and Fundação Manuel Leão a report to map the problem of Early School Leaving (ESL) in Portugal, in order to better understand, characterize and prevent it, with a particular focus on whole-child approaches. The research team has done a literature review, an analysis of micro-data from official statistical sources and publications, collected data from different institutions regarding their formation/training programs and conducted a qualitative analysis of the school paths of 25 youngsters who had dropped out of school and subsequently were introduced to a second chance school path at Arco Maior. The results are presented in two documents: the final report and a short version.

Early school leaving (ESL) has been the subject of intense and varied research around the world. Notwithstanding the geographical, historical, political and cultural differences of this phenomenon, there are several similar features, having to do with the global implementation of the modern model of school education and with the attempt to lay the foundations for open and democratic school systems that promote equality of opportunity. A common denominator in the literature from the past two decades on early school leaving is the idea that school leaving does not match a single moment in time, but is rather the result of a process. Schools create children they label as "unteachable" and creators of mayhem. These are children and youngsters who face retention, end up in classes with mismatched age groups, upset the regular functioning of classes with younger classmates and have a tendency not to respect the rules. Schools have difficulty in "getting them to do schoolwork" and so label them as "problematic". This "pedagogical outlook" and difficulties create an "inner exclusion", a slow process which discriminates, relegates to second place and pushes students out while they're still in school. This "silent exclusion" is often supported by administrative procedures embodied in the existing rules that make it socially accepted, legal and "standard". Once they're excluded, these children and youngster become part of the "invisibles"; young people who are not in education, training, or employment - and who are not in any

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[1] Porticus Iberia is the entity in charge of coordinating the philanthropic activities of the Brenninkmeijer family in Iberia; the philanthropic action of the Brenninkmeijer family dates back to 1841.

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way monitored. But some schools make a difference; they do everything to avoid their students getting into the "negative spiral" which pulls them out. There holistic approach – based on a whole child development perspective - seems to make a difference. This institutional "ethos" is a political decision and it translates into everyday micro-decisions. Finally, there is still another dimension that contributes to these children and youngsters leaving school. What we might call the "country effect" or the public policies put in place regarding education.

The qualitative data gathered in this research shows this conceptual framework in action. Schools detected early on situations labeled as of maladjustment between the child and the school. In every case, we witnessed social and family environments of poverty and low qualifications, coupled with other situations which worsen living conditions. Disciplinary procedures began at 6th grade. The corrective and sanctionary measures start by being small and infrequent but the tendency is, almost always for these measures to acquire a growing and exponential gravity. There is a snowball effect. Punishment constitutes the preferred educational procedure when schools are faced with persistent disruptive behaviors and conflict situations. Schools seem to choose to make children and adolescents feel worse in order to be able to feel better in the future, to study and to behave as they are supposed to. The execution of sanctions, in the cases under review, is very far from meeting any educational goals. Moreover, these students are usually referred to technical specialized monitoring, either by a psychologist or a doctor. This places them outside the field of a predominantly pedagogical intervention and helps justify successive retentions and generalized academic failure. If it were possible to highlight an outcome that exponentially increases the risk of school leaving, it would be the combination (the scissors effect) of low expectations on the part of schools and teachers and the low expectations that families and the students themselves have regarding school.

The main question regarding ESL is how we can rebuild the commitment towards a schooling pathway that is long, demanding, and which requires stability and self-esteem, attention, permanent encouragement and emotional well-being. What is in fact in question is a certain «mode of educational production», a certain rationality, that attacks and corrodes the anthropological foundations of education. By looking more attentively at the excluded, we can conclude that we must look more attentively at the modes of educational production, so that we can get to know them in detail or so that we can gradually eliminate them.

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In the third part of the research, we crossed the quantitative data on ESL with the employment data, trying to understand the relation between ESL and employment/unemployment. The conclusions are mixed. It is hard to determine, for the Portuguese case, a correlation between ESL and employment. To fully understand how ESL impacts youth employment situations, social integration and quality of life, it will be crucial to produce indicators and data to monitor youngsters in early leaving situation and young adults aged 18 in a situation of effective dropout. The existing indicator of ESL, created for the Employment Survey, fails to provide relevant information to understand the dropout phenomenon (when, how, what age and in what year of schooling) as it fails to deliver information on the reasons for dropping out and apprehend youngsters future goals.

Beyond the explanatory factors and the ESL predictors, beyond the individual, the school, the family and social network dimensions, there is still another factor that may promote or tackle ESL: the «country effect» - public policies that have an impact on education. Political priorities and instituted norms influence early school leaving, sometimes significantly. The way the formal curriculum is organized, more or less school based management or autonomy, educational priorities, evaluation and accountability systems, available learning pathways for the completion of mandatory schooling, all these dimensions of the school system contribute to or hinder ESL.

Policies adopted in Portugal follow the usual European typology in the field of ESL policies - prevention, intervention and compensation - and have been put in place in the past thirty years, beginning in 1989 with the creation of vocational education and ending with a great number of compensation measures implemented in the second decade of the 21st century. The persistence of these policies in time (the long duration of some policies, despite changes in governments) and the combination of multiple dimensions of political action (not only educational, but also social and territorial) constitute a structuring axis of the achieved success in reducing ELS in Portugal. Public policies implemented to hinder ESL had two important features: (i) they did not include solely the Ministry of Education, bringing together a set of actors who work in social policy, and (ii) they are prolonged in time, avoiding the stop-and-go that often affects measures of education policy.

One of these policies, TEIP, has undergone several adaptations but has been in place for the last 25 years. The same happened with the Choices Program, which is still active after 20 years. Vocational training has

grown since 1989 and in 2004 this alternative offer became available in every public secondary school in the country alongside with the private professional schools. Since 1999, alternative pathways within the schools were created. All aimed at adapting the curricula for young people. CEF, in particular, had a major impact in the number of students who stayed in school and completed basic education (9th grade). It is important to underline the extension of compulsory education to 12 years of schooling or 18 years of age in 2009/2010; this was an important factor in reduction of ESL. Public policies have been accompanied by private initiatives. These are focused on specific issues (i.e. learning to read, family mediation) and cater for small groups of young people in small sets of schools. The positive reduction in ESL is due to multidimensional and continuous pressure. In more general social terms, in addition to the public policy measures, the positive evolution of the parents' schooling deserves to be mentioned. They are part of a population of young adults whose qualification levels have increased at a fast pace and this has also certainly contributed to the promotion of the importance of staying in school within the family home. Finally, the «positive effect» on the Portuguese economy must also be considered: the main production model stopped being the recruitment of intensive, cheap and unqualified labor.

It is worth noting that the national programs had a strong focus on cognitive development measured through academic success (positive school grades at the end of the school year). Though schools might try a more holistic approach to teaching and learning, a whole child development approach was not center stage until 2017.

Considering the results of the research done, we suggest the following next steps: (i) developing more research on the life stories of youngsters that were ESL and have come back to formal education through second chance schools, (ii) do in-depth research on how different schools tackle children at risk of becoming early school leavers and (iii) support, develop and research "second chance schools" and their methodologies; with an eye at finding ways to integrate at least parts of these methodologies in regular schools and training teachers.

Introduction

Portugal remains a very unequal society, with one-fifth of the total population living at risk of poverty (21.6%)2. In the education system, such inequalities are very clearly expressed. For example, considering the level of education of mothers, there is a great disparity in academic success amongst students in the 5th and 6th grades: only 26% in the case of students whose mothers completed four years of primary education, versus 80% for students whose mothers have a graduate or bachelor diploma (higher education). Likewise, when families' incomes are considered (using school social support as an indicator) 63% of students without social support were able to successfully complete their schooling path until 6th grade, versus only 27% in the case of students receiving the highest level of school social support3. These social and educational inequalities tend to translate into high levels of failure and early school leaving amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While in the last fifteen years the percentage of 8 to 24-year-olds leaving school without completing upper secondary education (12th grade) has decreased - from 39.3% in 2004 to 11.8% in 2018 - dropout levels at age 18 (the age limit of compulsory school attendance) remain high: in SY 2016/2017, failure rate amongst 12th graders was 26.2%. Students remain in school for longer, but the quality of their educational pathways is not always positive. Concretely, there is a profile that correlates to absenteeism and early school leaving: students from very low-income families (mainly with

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2 Pordata.

3 DGEE, 2016.

parents who are unemployed and have low levels of education) and with situations of conflict and parental negligence, by at least one parent. Therefore, while the evolution of ESL rates was very positive, there are thousands of Portuguese youth who continue to be left behind, without education and professional qualifications.

Within this context, Porticus Iberia[4] commissioned CEPCEP and Fundação Manuel Leão a report to map the problem of Early School Leaving (ESL) in Portugal, in order to better understand, characterise and prevent it, with a particular focus on whole-child approaches. The mapping has four stages, with the following objectives defined by Porticus: (i) describe the characteristics of ESL in Portugal and its evolution in recent years, (ii) typify the population at risk, (iii) examining the consequences and effects of ESL and dropout on youth employment and social exclusion and (iv) identify existing policies and programmes of ESL prevention, with a particular focus on whole-child approaches. To do this, the research team has done a literature review, an analysis of micro-data from official statistical sources and publications, collected data from different institutions regarding their formation/training programmes and conducted a qualitative analysis of the school paths of 25 youngsters who had dropped out of school and subsequently were introduced to a second chance school path at Arco Maior.

The final report is presented in two documents. A more complete report and this shorter version. This short version is composed of five parts. The first one, "Concept of Early School Leaving", includes a review and analysis of existing literature and identification of risk factors and a statistical and data analysis including the evolution of ESL in the past 20 years in

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[4] Porticus Iberia is the entity in charge of coordinating the philanthropic activities of the Brenninkmeijer family in Iberia; the philanthropic action of the Brenninkmeijer family dates back to 1841.

Portugal. The second part, "What does ESL look like in school? A case study", presents the qualitative data gathered and it`s analysis, pointing to a profile of the early school leaver and his/her relation with school. The third part, "ESL and employment", addresses the effects of ESL on youth unemployment and social exclusion. And the fourth part, "Public education policies aiming at hindering ESL", maps programs and interventions aimed at preventing, intervening or compensating ESL. Finally, the fifth part contains challenges and suggestions for action.

1. Concept of Early School Leaving

Tackling early school leaving (ESL) emerges in the European Union, as well as in Portugal, as a substantiated political priority that is strongly conditioned and inspired by its positive impact on the promotion of employment and the competitiveness of the economy (Magalhães et al., 2014; Estevão& Álvares, 2013), as well as on social cohesion, cultural development and citizenship. This political determination appears increasingly as a fundamental area of action, when it comes to transforming mandatory schooling into success schooling for all. In the short term, a young person who has left school early is associated with unemployment, precarious and underpaid jobs, and obstacles in finding a place in the vocational training system. The economic and social costs of early school leaving are tremendous and the European Commission (COM, 2011) estimates that a reduction of one percentage point would provide the European economy with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees yearly.

Early school leaving (ESL) has been the subject of intense and varied research around the world. Notwithstanding the geographical, historical, political and cultural differences of this

phenomenon, there are several similar features, having to do with the global implementation of the modern model of school education (Azevedo, 2012), and with the attempt to lay the foundations for open and democratic school systems that promote equality of opportunity. In Portugal, this phenomenon has also been the focus of political and social concern and the country has witnessed the adoption of several measures. Though not attributable to one specific measure, the results have been very positive.

Starting in 2000, with the Lisbon Strategy, the European Union (EU) has stressed the need to address the social and educational problem of early school leaving. The "Europe 2020 Strategy" has adopted the name *Early Leaving from Education or Training*, which refers to someone "aged 18-24 with, at most, lower secondary education and who was not in further education or training during the last four weeks preceding the survey" (Eurostat, 2019). The EU has adopted this indicator, which is expressed as the percentage of the population aged 18-24 who meet these criteria, compared to the total population of the same age group.

Examining the literature from the past two decades, we find several studies on early school leaving. A common denominator in these studies is the idea that school leaving does not match a single moment in time, but is rather the result of a process (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Lamb & Markussen, 2011; González, 2015). This process is sometimes slow and extended over time; it can begin even before the student has entered school (Jimerson et al., 2000), and it is the result of growing frustration (Potvin et al., 2007). It is a process of gradual disengagement by the child or youngster, the result of the cumulative effect of multiple factors. It usually starts very early and it includes several variables (Blaya, 2010) which, combined, lead to an increasing disinvestment in school and a gradual investment in other dimensions or activities, such as work

(Azevedo e Fonseca, 2007; Dale, 2010; Lamb & Markussen, 2011). Numerous authors have approached the issue by focusing on its underlying factors and causes. They agree that the explanations for the phenomenon of ESL cannot reside in a single factor. According to Janosz and Deniger (2001), groups of students show the fundamental selectivity of the educational institution and the school processes of marginalisation and relegation. These pupils have in common the poverty of their origins and social status and the fact that they have experienced repetitive and early school failure (González, 2015). Schools create children they label as "unteachable" and creators of mayhem (Millet and Thin, 2003, p. 34). These are children and youngsters who face retention, who end up in classes with mismatched age groups, who upset the regular functioning of classes with younger classmates and have a tendency not to respect the rules. Schools, on the other hand, have difficulty in "getting them to do schoolwork" and so label them as "problematic" students instead. This "pedagogical outlook" and these difficulties create an "inner exclusion" (Millet & Thin, 2003, p. 41), a slow process which discriminates, relegates to second place and pushes students out while they're still in school. Lewin (2007) refers to this process as "silent exclusion" and links it to children at risk, who are poor, who attend less than 90% of classes, who are one or two years ahead of their classroom peers, who have been retained one or more years and who are a year or more behind in their mother tongue and mathematics. This silent exclusion – often supported by administrative procedures embodied in the existing rules, such as criteria for class placement, channelling of students towards special tracks and courses (some created for students with two or more years of poor academic performance during the first six years of schooling), an accumulation of retentions without any new or alternative teaching-learning plan, reducing evaluation to grades – is, for these same reasons, a socially accepted, legal and "standard" exclusion.

Sometimes, this exclusion constitutes a relief or an "escape" for serious situations of conflict between children and their teachers and headteachers, or even for situations when there's tension between the need to adapt curricula within the classroom and the rigidity imposed by national norms, which are controlled by school inspectors.

Thibert (2013) highlights the existence of "passive leavers", students who remain in school but who are detached from it and from schooling. Slowly, we witness the creation of "negative circles" (Markussen et al., 2011), in which students move and make choices on the basis of "because they can't", in other words, because they can't reach higher levels of academic success, they can't follow the noble academic tracks, because they can't attend school on a regular basis, because they can't keep pace with students of the same age, because they can't…

Once they're excluded, these children and youngster become part of the group that Bernot-Caboche referred to as the "invisibles", the young people who are not in education, training, who are not employed and who are not in any way monitored (Bernot-Caboche, 2016). Society does not care for nor speaks of them, it is as if they did not exist, pushed as they are into their poor neighbourhoods.

School institutions may make a difference. Some do everything to avoid their students getting into the "negative spiral" which pulls them out (concerning what is taught, how they teach and how students learn, in the space and time available, within and in collaboration with groups, in the relationship between teachers and students…). This holistic approach – based on a whole child development perspective - seems to make a difference. But others see those as natural processes triggered by students who do not wish to learn and who reject the institution. This institutional "ethos" is a political decision and it translates into everyday micro-decisions, by the

board or by every teacher in the classroom, who may (or may not) be aligned towards the promotion of all and every single one of their students, taking into account their differences and their situations.

Finally, there is still another dimension that contributes to these children and youngsters leaving school. What we might call the "country effect" or the public policies put in place regarding education (Lamb & Markussen, 2011). Indeed, public priorities and the current norms are linked to and influence early school leaving, sometimes in significant ways, whether in regards to the organisation of the school curricula, the autonomous management of the curricula and its adaptations, the priorities of the school's educational activity, or the evaluation and "accountability" systems, specially external exams.

To address ESL, an indicator was created. It refers to individuals aged between 18 and 24 who have stopped studying without having completed secondary education (ISCED3) and have not been in education and training in the last four weeks preceding the survey. This indicator is retrospective (as it questions individuals about their past educational and training path) and is carried out within the framework of the Employment Survey, thus not constituting one of the indicators collected by the Ministry of Education. However, the indicator still contains very different realities and fails to be very rigorous in terms of education and training.

The retrospective character of the indicator carries a great difficulty: it identifies problems many years after they occurred, making it difficult to assess more immediately the impact of school policies, models and practices. In addition, in Portugal, there is no statistical data regarding school drop-out produced by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, there is a gap between the moment the problem occurs and the moment we know it happened.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education only deals with "retention and desistance rates" (dropout rates) – relation between the number of students who do not proceed to the next school year and the number of students enrolled in that school year. But this indicator counts "false positive" (it includes students who move to a private school or who are absent from the country with their families) and "false negatives" (it does not consider the situation of repeated absenteeism or abandoning students that kept there enrolment active because they are still within compulsory education). In conclusion, the only indicator we have to work with is the percentage of youngsters who completed secondary. To understand school dropout, this is very little.

Additionally, the Ministry of Education`s collection and registration processes for this data do not rest on any uniform system of procedures, which allows for a clear distinction between situations when students dropout, when they are at risk of leaving and when they fail academically. This would be fundamental for the production of reliable and useful leaving indicators, for both the population aged between 6 and 18 and those who have prematurely left school at 18 years of age or older.

Considering these limitations, we nevertheless have seen a positive evolution of the rate of ESL. This rate has decreased overall in the European Union (28 countries). From 11,9% in 2013 to 10,2% in 2019. The countries with the highest decrease of ESL since 2011 (over 5 percentage points) in the European Union (28 countries) are Portugal, Spain, Greece, Malta and Ireland. Portugal, was the EU member country that registered the highest decrease of ESL rates since 2011 (over 12 percentage points). Gender disparity in early school leaving rates is unfavourable to males and ESL tends to affect more foreign-born than native-born.

Overall the ESL rate in Portugal has decreased, between 2001 to 2019, in the continental and autonomous regions, from 44.3% to 10.6%. In 2020, the ESL rate in Portugal has dropped further, to 8,9%. In the last 20 years, the highest decrease of ESL was registered in the North region. Madeira and Algarve are the regions which registered the lowest decreased for the ESL rates, between 2001 to 2019. Azores and Madeira are the current regions with the highest level of ESL followed, within continental Portugal, by Algarve.

From 2003/2004 to 2017/2018, the actual schooling rate in upper secondary education increased in all the Portuguese continental regions, the highest rate was registered in the North and the lowest in Algarve. This was supported, mainly, by the extension of compulsory education from 9 to 12 years of schooling in 2009.

Even though, for over two decades now, every EU recommendation directs countries towards the need to identify students «at risk of leaving», by studying the specific causes and acting locally on the issues, promoting more «customized» education and training[5], schools are not clearly guided towards establishing a barrier between the risk of leaving and the actual leaving. The immediate consequences of this are the existence of an enormous disparity in the criteria for measuring ESL and the actions taken to tackle it and the effective impossibility of truly knowing what the ESL reality is in Portugal.

This lack of consistency and reliability in the current data on ESL before the age of 18 and data on those who leave at 18 without having completed mandatory schooling, makes it difficult or impossible to compare these data nationally and which makes it harder to articulate policies

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[5] European Council (2015). «Council conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school» of 15 December 2015.

focused on identifying, characterizing and monitoring the situations, let alone arrange for a clear, integrated, focused and effective ESL preventive action.

Consequently, an early educational intervention is compromised, when it would be the most effective step in preventing repeated academic failure and early school leaving. Also compromised are compensatory interventions, since ESL situations that take place before and after students turn 18 are not properly identify or monitored.

2. What does ESL look like in school? A case study

In the qualitative part of this research, we analyzed the school paths of 25 youngsters who dropped out of school and are now trying to complete their formal education in a last chance school. We reached the following conclusions:

1. Schools often detect early on situations labeled as of maladjustment between the child and the school. This happens in the 1st or 2nd grades. This detection is usually extensively documented, with teachers' reports, later accompanied by reports from psychologists and, sometimes, even by doctors. The abundant data gathered by schools about these students serves four main purposes: (i) to support pedagogical and administrative decisions that can trigger extraordinary mechanisms of support to students in trouble, through a menu of predefined instruments (from study support to the inclusion in the «special education» category); (ii) to safeguard the justice and legality of the adopted actions, in face of the families and the Ministry of Education; (iii) to label children who exhibit learning and disruptive

behavior, placing them in a different group of unsuccessful and at-risk students, which gives them the «right» to be treated differently; (iv) in some cases, the technical reports by psychologists and doctors reinforce these students` segregation around a set of diagnosed and certified pathologies.

The early detection of the first signs of inadequacy, between the child and the school and between the child and the schooling processes offered by schools, which is considered to be decisive for the implementation of a timely educational action can also be seen as the establishment of a curtain that labels and abundantly justifies these students' exceptionality; a curtain that becomes thicker, as it rests more and more on their inabilities. The manifestation of disruptive behaviors, that usually takes place afterwards, will also contribute both to push the student away from the general and common educational offer and to gradually stop him from being seen as he is; in all his potential.

It is as if, as they look at them and as they build a more extensive understanding about these students' maladjustments, those eyes stop being able to see them, to see the real students; it is as if they become prisoners of the routine description of their faults, they become stuck by the numbing of their ability to see attentively. This way of looking also misses two very important things: maladjustments are two-faced and they are not just about the child's relationship with school. There are inadequacies in the way the school relates to these students and they must not be forgotten, since it does not allow the institution to see the complexity of these children, who are declared inappropriate, incapable and unsuccessful. This way of looking increasingly prevents proximity and attention, as well as awe. Gradually, individual students remain in the classroom, but not as they are, with their limits and potential, with family problems and an

ability to feel awe and wonder, with their capacity to grow; they are transformed into students who cannot read, write, do math, behave, comply with the rules, speak correctly and who are, therefore, slowly pushed away from the school's universe.

2. In every case we examined, we witnessed, in the social and family environment (in the social housing where most of them live) situations of poverty and low qualifications, coupled with other situations which worsen living conditions (in 19 of the 25 cases), such as teenager parents, domestic violence, negligence, absence of the father or of the mother, abuse, separation from the parents and siblings through institutionalization, parents' alcoholism, drug abuse and trafficking, parents in prison, the death of parents or grandparents. These help to contextualize the maladjustments detected early.

3. In order to understand the disruptive behavior of these students and of their schools, we have performed an analysis of the absenteeism, of the «orders to abandon the classroom» and of sanctions that are generally applied to disruptive behaviors. Absenteeism begins in the 5th grade (the first year after the one teacher per class model). Disciplinary procedures take place from the 6th grade onwards (from requests to leave the classroom up to suspensions). We can see that the corrective and sanctioning measures start by being small and infrequent, but the tendency is almost always for these measures to acquire a growing and exponential gravity. There is an effective snow ball effect.

Absenteeism and the disruptive behavior that follows must also be seen as external manifestations of the lack of interest and motivation of these children when faced with what the school has to offer. Whether it is the general and common curriculum or the set of special mechanisms for «increased pedagogical support». The constant acknowledgement that students

do not take advantage of these mechanisms that are made available to them proves this point and it becomes another "fault" they are responsible for.

4. We also conclude that punishment constitutes the preferred educational procedure, when schools are faced with persistent disruptive behaviors and conflict situations. It is crucial that we question the extent to which the systematic punishment is a pathway to implicate students in their learning process, to allow them to grow and to develop skills. Schools seem to choose to make children and adolescents feel worse in order to be able to feel better in the future, to study and to behave as they are supposed to (Nelsen, 2017). The execution of sanctions, in the cases under review, is very far from meeting any educational goals.

5. The transition between 4th and 5th grade, between the one teacher per class model and to the up to eleven teachers per class model is a point for worsening of disruptive behaviors. It is as if a dam of contention bursts and the inadequacy just overflows uncontrollably. Several studies flag this problematic transition (Montes & Lehmann, 2004; Saragoça et al, 2013; CNE, 2015; Claro, 2017).

6. Academic failure ends up affecting all these students, more than once and, in some cases, too many times. Failure begins in the 1st cycle (14 out of 25 cases). Retention almost always led to the complete repetition of the previous year, even in subjects where the student succeeded, and there are several cases of successive repetitions of the same grade.

The literature is clear on the subject of the negative impact of retention and successive repetitions for the self-esteem and the pleasure children derive from studying (Pagani et al. 2001; Rebelo, 2009, Flores et al., 2013), particularly when it affects students during the first cycle

(Justino et al, 2014), weakening their bond towards school and promoting a tendency to interact with deviant peers (Simões et al. 2008). Retention is usually associated with negative thoughts, such as humiliation and shame, that undermine future behaviors and the educational progression of students (Pagani et al. 2001; Rebelo, 2009).

Repeated academic failure has, in the cases we looked at, several consequences: (i) it never constituted and element of correction of schooling trajectories, because the first retentions are always associated with subsequent ones; (ii) the permanent struggle with the same contents and curricular proposals, year after year, is a permanent inducement to the lack of interest and the disengagement with the commitment to learning; (iii) the age gap between these students and those in the same classroom gradually increases, as the retentions pile up, which tends to promote a lack of interest and feeling of repulsiveness for the atmosphere in the classroom (Lopes, 2013) and, consequently, it also promotes disruptive behaviours. This may be the result of the provocation that being publicly exposed as being behind and being incapable of moving forward constitutes, which invites them to act out the part they are given, that of the devil among the angels.

7. We can conclude that, as inadequacies and conflicts emerge, the way of looking at these students is usually based on negative pedagogical appreciations, methodically built on an extensive set of weaknesses and inabilities, on what each of them is «unable to do». Before and beyond the school's actions and omissions, the language used hurts and mistreats.

Thus, when faced with the difficulties these children have when it comes to integration and the inappropriate behaviors that they generate, which are but the manifestation of a growing discomfort, schools tend to perform an analysis of the situations based on their disqualification

as students and as people. The emphasis placed in the weaknesses and inabilities is permanent, and it affects almost every case we looked at (except that of Maria, who had an early pregnancy). Berridge (2001:5) refers to a «dark catalogue of misery».

It would be important to ask how we can rebuild the commitment towards a schooling pathway that is long, demanding, and which requires stability and self-esteem, attention, permanent encouragement and emotional well-being. The disqualifying and humiliating descriptions constitute an institutional educational inability: schools have trouble dealing with these situations and they reveal serious limitations when it comes to integrating poorer students from socio-cultural contexts which are distant from the dominant school culture (Tarabini, 2015).

8. The pedagogical recommendations that schools issue are characterized by a generic, repetitive, hermetic and impersonal language. This language integrates them into an abstract collective of «at-risk and unsuccessful students», as being incapable, violent and lacking family support. These students' catalogue of weaknesses and miseries ends up denying their individual existence and the school that came up with it refers to its (administrative?) role of managing and framing those who are different, more than building appropriate pedagogical pathways with each of them (Millet & Thin, 2003).

It is easier to declare these students as «unteachable» than to pay attention to their faces and their wounds, to listen to them, to get to know their contexts and building, with each of them, the customized access to the knowledge socially valued by the school.

9. What we can see is that the «school of inclusion» includes the denial of some students, not only because the «inclusion strategy» generally includes depleting the curriculum (making it

shorter in the less demanding parts, without altering its configuration, in other words, its context and purpose, the school work proposals, the curriculum, the evaluation), but also because it includes reducing the «inclusion» and the academic justice effort to a few study support techniques and to practices of so-called «pedagogical differentiation».

All that is truly structuring, such as the blind adoption of the «program that was sent by the Ministry», the inflexible management of the curriculum, the hermetic way the subjects are organized and the inability to create interdisciplinary projects that promote significant learning for these students, the rigid organization of groups of students and classes, the normalization of pedagogical procedures, and the permanent competitiveness among students, the selective promotion of a small nucleus of human abilities, the lack of time for encouraging dialogue, for caring, for trusting and for attending to the interests and abilities of these students and for building other work habits alongside them, the abstract, general and guilt-apportioning «pedagogical» language: all these remain the same. The school does not abandon its educational standardized processes and the students are gradually placed in a position where they fall outside of school.

What is in fact in question is a certain «mode of educational production», a certain rationality, that attacks and corrodes the anthropological foundations of education. By looking more attentively at the excluded, we can conclude that we must look more attentively at the modes of educational production, so that we can get to know them in detail or so that we can gradually eliminate them.

10. Through the analysis of the decisions made by the schools' pedagogical bodies, we can see that the educational processes are never put into question; they are partly and slightly

reformulated and adapted, so that in essentials they can remain the same. It is always the students who don't study, don't do the work, who make no effort, who are not interested, who cannot change their attitudes and behaviors, who do not improve punctuality, who fail to take advantage of their abilities and... who do not change their view of school.

Class Councils recommend, impersonally and systematically, that students do this and that, next term, next year, during the holidays, as if these students weren't their students and weren't sticking around the following year. They assign these students «curricular adaptations», all sorts of pedagogical support and tutorials, paraphernalia of mechanisms that gives out the idea that schools are greatly concerned with them. However, this is done alongside a great ability to deny these students their individuality.

The conviction that students have every opportunity and that, besides not taking advantage of them, they are uncooperative and ungrateful, is thus cemented. The appeal, also common, to the fact that «the student is full of potential and is perfectly able to achieve good results» reinforces this mechanism that blames the student and pushes aside the need to question anything regarding the school's educational actions, i.e., to reinforce that potential.

Thus, the strength of the «meritocratic ideology» (Tarabini, 2015:358) tends to omit the effect that the relationships, identities and subjectivities of students from disadvantaged and discriminated environments have on the academic success or failure, and it puts the responsibility for their fates and their academic history solely on their shoulders.

11. Moreover, referring these students to technical specialized monitoring, either by a psychologist or a doctor, places them outside the field of a predominantly pedagogical

intervention, risking stigmatization, sometimes labelling them based on the diseases they are diagnosed as having. This helps justifies successive retentions and generalized academic failure. This «pathologisation» of the non-compliance with the expectations regarding behavior and performance on the part of some students also leads to a gradual externalization of the possibility of reverting the processes of inadequacy (Tarabini, 2015) and it partly «frees» schools from carrying on with the construction of concrete pedagogical responses when faced with the concrete problems these students exhibit.

12. Thus, these students' stigmatization is constructed by small decisions by the school bodies, who relegate them, while still in school, to the margin, where situations of lack of interest and conflict abound.

One the one hand, in an apparently benign way, the selection processes are hidden, which produces an effect of social legitimation. On the other hand, it generates a climate of aggression and punishment, which is sometimes violent, opening school-related wounds on top of the family-related and the abuse ones.

13. It turns out schools practice a model of selectivity that particularly affects the students who come from poorer environments, with low qualifications. These are accompanied, more often than not, by health issues, the absence of a tranquil and encouraging atmosphere at home, negligence problems, and domestic violence and addiction, as we have mentioned.

This selectivity is, in the words of Bordieu & Champagne (1993:73), «continuous, gradual, imperceptible, unnoticed, both by those who exert it and those who suffer from it. A school that is supposed to be open to all is banned for others, and the commitment towards the

equality of opportunity and equity is undervalued in favor of every other commitment, often to do with rhetoric of quality (Esteban, 2008). A democratic school that is open to all gives in to selectivity and social reproduction, so that we are faced with an attempt to reconcile that which can never be reconciled, through processes of dissimulation and various loopholes: the students' academic failure, blaming students for their own failures, punishing indiscipline, the relegation of some students to support systems and training pathways with special curricula or to vocational courses.

14. Some authors refer to these processes of educational action by schools as a silent exclusion (Lewin, 2007; Millet & Thin, 2003; Sparkes, 1999). Schools keep within themselves those that are being «internally excluded» (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1992: 74), by making sure that the students can complete mandatory schooling, whether they are submissive and hidden (Oliveira, 2019) or outraged and more or less violent.

This way, the school grants these internally excluded a triple assurance: to the students, who are allowed to attend school without any interest or sense of commitment, and who can be in school while not being really there; to the parents, who know that the children and adolescents are under someone's care; and to the school administrators, who are allowed to retain these students in school without contributing to the numbers on ESL.

We can conclude, then, that the silent exclusion becomes naturalized and is accepted, after many years and ways of practicing. Schools place a veil between their own responsibility in the students' flaws inventories, once again distancing themselves from students and from their own ability to create other educational responses, whereas the student grows further apart from the school, reacting against it and refusing it.

15. What is put into question is a certain model of schooling. These students' disqualification is continuous and deep. Florence Piron, invoking A. Margalit, speaks of an «institutional humiliation» (2002:192), carried out by an institution that was built by the community as an essential part of the common good, under the principles of the equality of opportunities and the promotion of all citizens.

The qualitative analysis carried out allowed us to trace school exclusion modes of production but also to highlight risk of leaving factors. Regarding the ESL risk factors, the survey helped to highlight the following:

1. Family setting: poor academic qualifications, poverty, unemployment, drug use/drug trafficking, negligence, domestic violence, early pregnancy, absent mother/father, parents and/or grandparents' death

2. Individual behavior: absenteeism, lack of interest and motivation, poor academic performance, retention and year repetition, early pregnancy, drug use, health problems, high levels of anxiety, indiscipline and violence

3. School setting: difficult relationships between students-teachers, systematic reports concerning the students' inabilities, negative expectations by teachers, retention and year repetition, referral to unwanted «alternative» pathways, «internal exclusion»

4. Community network: living in social housing, poverty atmosphere, proximity to peers who dismiss school, entry into pre-delinquency networks.

If it were possible to highlight an outcome that exponentially increases the risk, it would be the combination (the scissors effect) of low expectations on the part of schools and teachers and

the low expectations that families and the students themselves have regarding school. The risk is much higher among boys (as we could clearly see through the quantitative analysis).

Regarding the mode of production of school exclusion, we found it can be structured into a sequence of 14 steps.

1. Generally speaking, schools detect inadequacy situations among certain students early (during the 1st or 2nd grade).

2. It produces several documents with the identification and analysis of these situations, whether they come from teachers (of general or special education) or from other professionals (psychologists and doctors), who point to pathologies.

3. Schools trigger a set of mechanisms to support the students from among the menu that the Ministry of Education authorizes, which is generally made up of a reinforcement of subjects learning (with an emphasis on Portuguese and Mathematics).

4. That documentation works like an analytical architecture, whose foundations are personal weaknesses (and illnesses), family and contextual deficits (poverty, negligence, violence, etc.), school difficulties and disruptive behaviors.

5. The transition between the 1st and 2nd cycles makes matters worse, and so we witness a profusion of orders to leave the classroom, disciplinary procedures and suspension in the 5th and 6th grades.

6. Students begin to feel disqualified and humiliated, at a quarterly and annual rate, delegated to lists of personal inabilities (not learning ones), and they are labelled and discriminated within schools.

7. Beyond this systematic disqualification, they are retained and forced to repeat the exact same year and curriculum, in the exact same way, several times in a row (which results in them sharing a class with much younger classmates).

8. Schools produce very generic and abstract recommendations (quarterly and annually), which are written and communicated in a repetitive and impersonal way to the students and their families.

9. The student, when faced with the school's actions, disconnects from the institution, and reveals an increasing lack of interest, refusal and rebellion.

10. When confronted with disruptive behaviors and attitudes by students, and whenever these recur, the school punishes the faulty students ever more severely, in a discouraging framework that is very far from the pedagogical purpose envisioned by the Law.

11. The conflict between the school and the student is made worse by the accumulated retentions and sanctions, on top of the weaknesses that are systematically communicated to the families and the students, who are clearly pushed out.

12. When confronted with the «negative spiral» he or she is placed in and blamed for (because he or she did not take advantage of the opportunities offered by the school), the student embodies the role attributed to him or her by the school, as the incapable, the «repeater», the rebel, the one with nothing to lose.

13. After several attempts of adopting pedagogical support and «recovery» measures, the school sometimes refers the student to special modalities, so that they can carry out their learning pathway in a different way (CEF, PCA, PIEF, Vocational Courses).

14. Once unteachable and uneducable students, who affirm their personality when acting against the institution, are created, and when they see themselves in a growing conflict stage, they break and begin to systematically skip school, and will often end up leaving school for good.

In fact, there are descriptions that slowly cover long periods of time, usually somewhere between 9 to 10 years, a distorted cycle of «educational» practices that expel these students from school. This is, in conclusion, the mode of production of school exclusion.

Our analysis has some limits. The sample comprises teenagers from a single geographical setting and we only looked at situations of repeated academic failure who ended up leaving school: the most extreme cases of institutional inadequacy; there are, in fact, other students who linger in schools (those who are out while remaining inside), even with failed pathways and at-risk behaviors. Therefore, this sample ignores all the students that found themselves «at risk of leaving» but are still in school (hidden dropout).

3. ESL and employment

In the third part of the research, we crossed the quantitative data on ESL with the employment data, trying to understand the relation between ESL and employment/unemployment.

The conclusions are mixed. It is hard to determine, for the Portuguese case, a correlation between ESL and employment.

The youth unemployment rate is higher for those with lower levels of education (basic education-2nd cycle). The unemployed population with the lowest levels of education (none and basic education-1st cycle), has the largest share of long-term unemployment. The risk of poverty rate is higher for those with less education and, for these ones, has increased particularly with the economic recession.

For full understanding of how early school leaving impacts youth employment situations, social integration and quality of life, it will be crucial to produce indicators and data which allow to monitor youngster in early leaving situation and young adults aged 18 in a situation of effective dropout. The indicator of ESL created, conceived for the Employment Survey, as previously mentioned, fails to provide relevant information to understand the dropout phenomenon (when, how, what age and in what year of schooling) as it fails to deliver information on the reasons for dropping out and apprehend youngsters future goals.

Therefore, a system capable of monitoring early school leavers footpaths along their journey after dropout, could also contribute to formulate a more successful set of appropriate recovery measures[6]. The most recent report on ESL situation in the country highly recommends for the definition of a global strategy to fight ESL that integrates a monitoring and evaluation structure; for clear and unambiguous definition of the concepts of ESL and ESL risk and the respective indicators in the national education system; for mapping ESL at national, regional and local level; for the implementation of effective control systems for the fulfilment of registration and attendance duties in compulsory education; and for interoperability of information systems for

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[6] Tribunal de contas, Report nº10/2020 'Auditoria ao Abandono Escolar Precoce'

the collection of data from students in the national territory and in a timely manner (Tribunal de Contas, 2020).

4. Public education policies aiming at hindering ESL

Beyond the explanatory factors and the ESL predictors, beyond the individual, the school, the family and social network dimensions, there is still another factor that may promote or tackle ESL: the « country effect» - public policies that have an impact on education (Lamb & Markussen, 2011; Álvares et al. 2014). Political priorities and instituted norms influence early school leaving, sometimes significantly. The way the formal curriculum is organized, more or less school based management or autonomy, educational priorities, evaluation and accountability systems, available learning pathways for the completion of mandatory schooling, all these dimensions of the school system contribute to or hinder ESL.

Public policies are therefore important when it comes to defining the orientation for the promotion of academic success measures and the prevention of early school leaving. Even though there are educational inequalities in every country, with different historical configurations, the dimension and the severity of these inequalities can be heavily influenced by socio-economic structures, social policies (health, social security, justice) and public education policies. As well as, at the institutional level, by the type of measures schools adopt when faced with learning difficulties, sometimes very early on in a child's school life.

Policies adopted in Portugal follow the usual European typology in the field of ESL policies: prevention, intervention and compensation policies (European Commission, 2013). *Prevention* measures concern the set of strategies and mechanisms aimed at boosting academic perseverance and the success of each and every one, as well as the measures which ought to be taken to prevent risk situations, particularly in the case of disadvantaged backgrounds. These include the quality of pre-school education, the care with which local institutions manage the transition between cycles of study and schools, parental involvement in education, mechanisms for early detection, teachers' training and highly developed systems of educational guidance. *Intervention* measures are adopted as soon as difficulties related with absenteeism, repeated academic failure or even brief periods of non-attendance emerge. These actions are meant for students who are identified as being at risk of leaving, and recovery comes up as the action's main purpose. Their efficacy lies not only on the ability of the school staff to signal and act promptly at the first sign of risk, but also on the ability to keep in mind who the actions serve and how good they are (to avoid offering poor solutions to poor people). The measures involve different areas, including the individual support for students at-risk, the development of differentiated learning pathways or financial support to families and family mediation. *Compensation* or *remediation measures* focus on teenagers who have left school and who are encouraged to finish their education, to go back to school and to take advantage of second chances of education and training. These measures include curricular flexibility, tutorial support by teachers and the development of training schemes that facilitate access to the job market.

These measures have been put in place in the past thirty years, beginning in 1989 with the creation of vocational education and ending with a great number of compensation measures

implemented in the second decade of the 21ˢᵗ century. Its persistence in time (the long duration of some policies, despite changes in governments) and the combination of multiple dimensions of political action (not only educational, but also social and territorial) constitute a structuring axis of the achieved success in reducing ELS in Portugal (Álvares et al.2014).

Public policies implemented at the beginning of the current century to hinder ESL had two important features: (i) they did not include solely the Ministry of Education, bringing together a set of actors who work in social policy to promote inclusion and fight poverty (widening of the pre-school network, expansion of access to Social Integration Income, programs aimed at certifying competences and adult literacy); and (ii) they are prolonged in time, avoiding the stop-and-go that often affects measures of education policy (according to the political orientation of governments). Authors such as Álvares et al. (2014), in their study about ESL in Portugal, mention this type of political measures as «strategic level responses», distinguishing them from «preventive strategies».

One of these policies, TEIP, has undergone several adaptations but has been in place for the last 25 years. The same happened with the Choices Program, that is also still active after 20 years, and the measures related to the recognition and certification of competences and to adult literacy, which are also about to turn 20. The latter compensation measures were developed with the aim of educating and qualifying the adult population, since it has a known positive impact also in the schooling of children and young people.

The same happened with the strictly educational public policies. Vocational training has grown since 1989 and its impact in Portuguese society is very significant. In 1989, about 7% of young people (out of the population who continued their education past the 9ᵗʰ grade and into

secondary education), did so by choosing technical and professional courses; in 2018, they were 42%. In 2004, this alternative offer became available in every public secondary school in the country alongside with the private professional schools.

Since 1999, alternative pathways within the schools were created: PIEF – Programs of curricular adaptation of education and training (1999), CEF - Education and training courses (2002) and the Vocational Courses (in 2012). All aimed at adapting the curricula for young people, who kept failing academically before they could reach or complete the 3rd cycle of basic education. These also played an important role as a strategy for keeping these students in the schools.

CEF, in particular, had a major impact in the number of students who stayed in school and completed basic education (9th grade). In 2007/08, out of the total number of students who were enrolled in the regular basic education and who completed it, about 70% did so through the regular model and 30% chose these «special» courses. In fact, the curricular offer in basic education, as a general and common educational offer, has never truly existed, despite being claimed by political rhetoric. Only during the second decade of the 21st century did these alternative pathways lose some relevance, covering nearly 14% of 9th grade completions. Since 2005[7], there is a fragment of the population that is enrolled in mandatory basic education and who are only able to complete it through alternative pathways and, no matter what they are called (PIEF, PCA, CEF, Vocational), they have remained in the education system and have had a significant impact on the completion of mandatory schooling.

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[7] Between 2000 and 2005, this alternative learning pathways were only responsible for 3 to 4% of 9th grade completions (back-to-school education and the start of CEF).

It is important to underline as a crucial factor of diminishing ESL, the extension of compulsory education to 12 years of schooling or 18 years of age that occurred in 2009/2010. Students who enrolled in grades 1 to 7 in 2009/10, had to stay in school for three more years after 9th grade or until they became 18. This led to a high-pressure effect, politically, socially (especially in families) and in schools, in favor of students remaining in school. And it ended up happening.

The rate of ESL began to go down in 2003 (when it reached 41.2%), and it improved by 10 percentage points until 2009 (30.9%), but it was between 2010 and 2015 that ESL went down markedly, from 28.3% to 13.7%. There aren't many specific analyses that allow us to understand what measures have been more effective in causing this triple pressure and positive progress, but it is likely that it will always be difficult to isolate the effects of each measure on the decision made by students and their families to remain in school for an extra three years.

Public policies have been accompanied by private initiatives. These are focused on specific issues (i.e. learning to read, family mediation) and cater for small groups of young people in small sets of schools.

The compensation measures that had a greater impact were those aimed at the adult population, the RVCC – Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences and the Education and Training for Adults Courses (EFA). Between 2008 and 2012, these measures were strengthened under the «New Opportunities Initiative» policy. Portugal had kept «back-to-school education» measures available for people over the age of 18 who intended to complete basic and/or secondary education. But, after 2001, the «New Opportunities Initiative» policy was put into place with the RVCC program and EFA Courses, reaching hundreds of thousands of adults between 2001 and 2020, with a particular emphasis between 2008 and 2012.

Other compensation measures aimed ESL are two initiatives that emerged alongside the school system in articulation with public school, offering a second educational opportunity, beginning in 2010 (the Second Chance School of Matosinhos and Arco Maior). Even though these initiatives are yet to have reached a thousand citizens, in August 2019 they were integrated in the public policy «Program 20 – A Second Opportunity Program» and they are the first step of a new public policy that seeks to promote second opportunity education, which did not exist in the country up to this point.

A ISCTE research on ESL in Portugal, by de Álvares et al. (2014), the national report compiled for the European Commission on the adoption of the 2011 recommendation concerning the decrease in the rate of ESL (2019) and the Court of Auditors Audit Report on ESL (2020) all conclude that there is no common and coherent national policy on reducing ESL. The latter highlights that there «is no global strategy, with a vertical and horizontal coordination, that gathers and assesses the measures put in place to tackle early school leaving» (2020:45), while recognizing that there is an extensive set of measures having a positive impact in schools. The same could and should be said concerning the regional and municipal levels, where strategic cooperation settings for reducing ESL are almost non-existent[8]. The ISCTE study suggests that «the challenge of coordinating ESL policies, achieving a better relationship with other political

[8] Since 2017, some municipal and intermunicipal projects aimed at promoting academic success have been supported under the framework of a program called PIICIE – Integrated and Innovative Programs for Tackling Academic Failure. These plans include measures funded by the State and by EU funds and the expected outcomes are: reduction of the retention, dropout and negative grades rates; strengthening of the schools' ability to respond to problems with multidisciplinary teams that complement the schools' technical resources, in cooperation with local health services, social action, protection of children and young people, culture, etc.; better offer of curriculum enriching activities; appreciation of the contribution from guardians and parents' associations; encouraging the participation of young people and the development of their power of initiative.

spheres and developing a better articulation between interventions focused on increasing both the efficacy and the efficiency of the results has proved to be the hardest one, for Portugal as well as for the majority of Member States» (Álvares et al. 2014:28).

These conclusions suggest that ESL policy, besides comprising a set of measures that have been in place for a long time, has mostly consisted in a juxtaposition of measures that met somewhere in time and space, locally and in schools, and which have boosted its effects. The positive results will have been due to a multidimensional and continuous pressure, following the juxtaposition of an extensive set of measures, which were not previously coordinated or integrated, having never been a part of any coherent and consistent national plan.

The following chart tries to illustrate that, by showing on the same chronological bar the measures put in place, their particular emphasis (the years in which the policy reached the greatest number of people are highlighted in red) and the progress in the reduction of the ESL rate. We can observe that between 2008 and 2013 there have been a convergence in policy measures, a sort of «alignment of the stars», that leads to a decrease of about 17% of the ESL rate.

POLICY MEASURES ADOPTED AND REDUCTION OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN PORTUGAL (1984-2020)
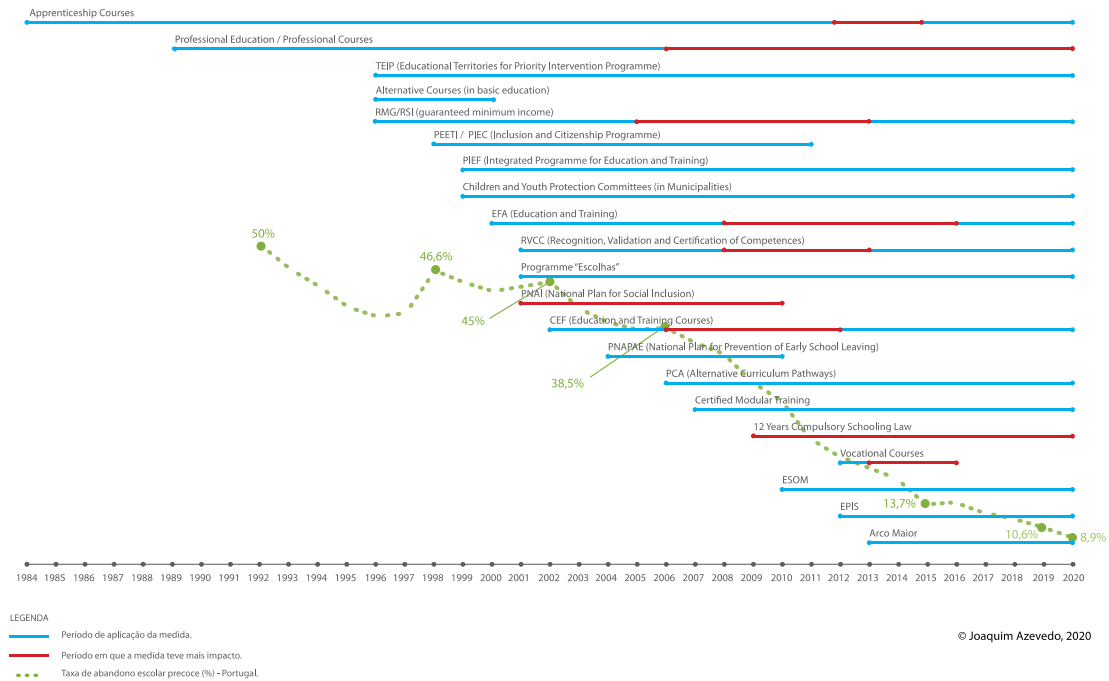
Source: Own elaboration

It is worth noting that these national programs had a strong focus on cognitive development measured through academic success (positive school grades at the end of the school year). Though schools might try a more holistic approach to teaching and learning, a whole child development approach was not center stage until 2017.

In more general social terms, in addition to the public policy measures, the positive evolution of the parents' schooling deserves to be mentioned. They are part of a population of young adults whose qualification levels have increased at a fast pace and this has also certainly contributed to the promotion of the importance of staying in school within the family home.

Moreover, the «positive effect» on the Portuguese economy must also be considered. Its main model stopped being the recruitment of an intensive, cheap and unqualified labor force, due to international competition and the country's position in the global economy. Small and medium-sized enterprises from the textile, clothing, shoe, construction and metalworking sectors, to name a few, do not «absorb», like they did 25 years ago, those who leave school early, which contributes to the increase in the number of young people who remain in school to complete mandatory education.

Finally, it is worth repeating that, despite the progresses made, the concept of early school leaving is not consolidated and the risk of leaving and the actual leaving are not properly monitored in any systematic, coordinated and global way. This makes it more difficult to understand and to monitor concrete situations, as well as to define measures focused on the school population who are at risk or who have already left and who frequently find themselves in a situation of social exclusion.

Notwithstanding the progresses made, at least one in every ten youngsters leaves school without a secondary education qualification.

From 2017 on, schools were granted much more curriculum autonomy. One of the cornerstones of this curriculum autonomy was the definition of a student profile at the end of secondary education (https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Curriculo/Projeto_Autonomia_e_Flexibilidade/perfil_dos_alunos.pdf). This profile, was adopted by decree of the Secretary of State for Education and recognized as a fundamental part of the national curriculum by Decree-Law n.º 55/2018. The Student profile adopts a whole child development perspective. Alongside the cognitive dimension of the student (saber científico), it recognizes 9 other areas of competencies such as aesthetic and artistic

sensibility, interpersonal relationships, critical, creative think or well-being, health and environment. The effects of this approach to the curriculum are still to be seen.

5. Challenges and suggestions for action

Some challenges remain. We would like to highlight three of them:

1. Knowing that schools implement a very diverse set of measures and resources to the promotion of academic success and the prevention of early school leaving, it would be paramount to know more about the measures and educational actions that have a more positive effect, as well as the situations in which it has proven to be harder to improve results, so that our future actions can be more effective, pertinent and efficient. This would allow the adoption of a WCD perspective that seems promising in tackling ESL.

2. The fact that an offer for «alternative pathways» (CEF, PIEF, Vocational courses) is still available, after many years, to the basic education students with the worst academic failure history, should allow this policy to come out of the shadows, so that it can be properly equated by the several political levels in the field of education and also by the social partners. It might be more appropriate, useful and fair to review the model that creates such cumulative failure, preventing it instead of compensating for it or using belated, and even discriminatory and stigmatizing, measures to remedy it.

3. Since the definition and application of the concept of ESL still lacks rigor, and given that we do not carry out a national or regional monitoring of the risk of leaving and of leaving, it would be timely and pertinent to undertake the conceptual clarification and a

rigorous monitoring of all existing situations, in every school and local community. That is the only way we can establish a global strategy for tackling ESL, with policies that are coordinated vertically and horizontally, and which involve the whole of society.

To end, we give some suggestions for future action in the field of ESL in Portugal. Despite the positive evolution of the ESL rate, a considerable number of students are still leaving school before completing secondary education or at risk of such. Furthermore, as we have shown in this report, ESL is a process that begins at a very young age and therefore has a strong impact on the well-being of children as they come into adolescence and become young adults. A negative impact on self-esteem and social inclusion. Therefore, action is needed until the rate of ESL is 0%.

In this context, we suggest:

1. Developing more research on the life stories of youngsters that were ESL and have come back to formal education through second chance schools. What changed in their lifes? What were the outcomes of finishing school? This could be done with qualitative studies.
2. Do in-depth research on how different schools tackle children at risk of becoming early school leavers. What makes schools that serve similar student populations have different rates of ESL?
3. Support, develop and research "second chance schools" and their methodologies; with an eye at finding ways to integrate at least parts of these methodologies in regular schools and teacher continuous training.

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