



## School Participation in Marginalization and School Dropout: The Case of Portugal

*Joaquim Azevedo*

Universidade Católica Portuguesa  
Portugal

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the analysis of school exclusion, which underlies and causes early school leaving, in 20 schools around Porto, Portugal. It is based on the qualitative and documental study of the personal school files of 25 youth, born between 1996 and 2003, who have left school and are now in a situation of social exclusion. We created a characterization grid for these “at-risk” students, and we have picked the following categories for the analysis of their schooling paths: early detection of misalignment processes between students and school; disruptive behaviour and corrective and punitive actions by schools; individual academic paths; main pedagogical recommendations devised by schools; and the articulation mode for these measures leading up to the exclusion from school. The study allows us to understand how these educational practices, through processes marked by humiliation and disqualification, create unteachable students, as well as make them solely accountable—together with their families—for their own academic failure, thus hiding the role of the schools as promoters of silent exclusion.

**Keywords:** early school leaving; students at risk; school dropout; school exclusion; learning pathways

### **A participação da escola na marginalização e no abandon escolar: O caso de Portugal**

**Resumo:** Este estudo está focado na análise do *modo de produção da exclusão escolar* que subjaz e provoca o abandono escolar precoce, em 20 escolas da região do Porto, em Portugal, tendo por

base o estudo qualitativo e documental dos “processos escolares individuais” de 25 jovens, nascidos entre 1996 e 2003, que abandonaram a escola e se encontram em situação de exclusão social. Foi construída uma grelha de caracterização destes alunos “em risco” e estabeleceram-se as seguintes categorias de análise dos percursos escolares realizados: deteção precoce dos processos de desajustamento entre os alunos e as escolas; comportamentos disruptivos e ações “corretivas e punitivas” das escolas; percursos escolares individuais realizados pelos alunos; principais recomendações pedagógicas elaboradas pelas escolas; modo de articulação das medidas tomadas e construção progressiva da exclusão dos alunos. O estudo permite perceber como é que as práticas educativas destas escolas, através de processos de desclassificação e de humilhação, não só vão construindo os alunos inensináveis, como os responsabilizam, juntamente com a suas famílias, pelo seu fracasso escolar, escondendo deste modo o seu rosto de instituições promotoras de uma exclusão silenciosa.

**Palavras-chave:** abandono escolar precoce; alunos em risco; abandono escolar; exclusão escolar; percursos escolares

### **La participación de la escuela en la marginalización y el abandono escolar: El caso de Portugal**

**Resumen:** Este estudio se centra en el análisis del modo de producción de la exclusión escolar que subyace y provoca el abandono escolar temprano, en 20 escuelas de la región de Oporto, Portugal, a partir del estudio cualitativo y documental de los “dossiers escolares individuales” de 25 jóvenes, nacidos entre 1996 y 2003, que abandonaron la escuela y se encuentran en situación de exclusión social. Se construyó una grilla para caracterizar a estos alumnos “en riesgo” y se establecieron las siguientes categorías de análisis de los itinerarios escolares: detección precoz de procesos de desajuste entre los alumnos y las escuelas; comportamientos disruptivos y acciones “correctivas y punitivas” de las escuelas; itinerarios escolares individuales que siguieron los alumnos; principales recomendaciones pedagógicas elaboradas por las escuelas; modo de articulación de las medidas tomadas y construcción progresiva de la exclusión de los alumnos. El estudio permite comprender cómo las prácticas educativas de estas escuelas, a través de procesos de desclasificación y humillación, no sólo construyen a los alumnos como inensinables, sino que también los responsabilizan a ellos y a sus familias de su fracaso escolar, ocultando así su rostro como instituciones promotoras de una exclusión silenciosa.

**Palabras-clave:** abandono escolar precoce; alumnos en riesgo; abandono escolar; exclusión escolar; trayectorias escolares

## **School Participation in Marginalisation and School Dropout: The Case of Portugal**

Early school leaving (ESL) has been the object of attention of policy makers, school administrators and social scientists in the European Union, particularly since the 2000 Lisbon Strategy<sup>1</sup> identified it as an educational and social problem that needed to be tackled. In 2011, the EU drew up a set of recommendations aimed at decreasing school leaving: from prevention measures to intervention and compensation measures (COM, 2014). In Portugal, ESL—measured as

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<sup>1</sup> The European Council held a special meeting on 23-24 March 2000 in Lisbon to approved a set of guidelines and recommendations, known as the “Lisbon Strategy” ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1\\_pt.htm](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_pt.htm)), which included guidelines concerning the “European social model” (24-34), including education and training.

the number of individuals aged between 18 and 24 who have not completed secondary education or an equivalent level of training (ISCED 3)<sup>2</sup> and who are not studying or in training—has been progressively and steadily decreasing for the past 30 years, having gone from very high levels—50% in 1992—to 8.9% in 2020. Four factors have contributed decisively to this positive evolution: social policies for the promotion of inclusion and social justice; the creation of alternative options, including alternative pathways for the completion of lower secondary education and professional courses at the upper secondary education level; positive discrimination and territorial education policies; and the extension of compulsory school attendance to 12 years<sup>3</sup>. In this paper we use the terms school dropout and ESL interchangeably, following a number of authors (De Witte et al., 2013; Nada et al., 2020).

As it is widely recognised by research in the field of education, ESL is not a sudden event that takes place at a particular moment. It is the result of a long process of disengagement from school on the part of students (Bridgeland et al., 2006; De Witte et al., 2013; Ecker-Lyster & Nüleksela, 2016; González, 2015; Jonker, 2006; Lamb & Markusen, 2011; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Jonker (2006) describes it as “an interactive and cumulative process of (self) exclusion that can take years” (p. 137). This process derives from a myriad of closely connected factors, in such a way that its complex and dynamic interactions need to be made explicit if one wishes to identify, in each context, the main factors driving school dropout.

The literature on the subject identifies the individual, family, community and school-related and sociocultural factors (De Witte et al., 2013; Ferrão et al., 2001; Oliveira, 2019; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Among the individual factors we find psychological (motivation, self-esteem), behavioural (absenteeism, disruptive behaviour, early pregnancy and drug abuse), physical (disease, disabilities) and school-related (academic performance, retention, commitment to learning) dimensions. Among the family-related factors are the relationships between parents and their children; families from a low socio-economic environment; the academic qualifications of parents; the families’ income and the parents’ employment situation. Among the school-related factors are the social composition of the students in each school; repeated retentions; the environment within the classroom; and the size of the classes. Among the sociocultural factors are living in low-income communities; living in poor social housing; and becoming part of marginal and violent groups.

A lot of research has been carried out in the past thirty years with the goal of identifying risk factors and predictors of ESL (Fortin & Picard, 1999; Martín, 2007; Montes & Lehmann, 2004; Potvin & Dimitri, 2012; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Some authors look into the profiles of students who are “at risk” or who could potentially leave (Fortin et al., 2006; Kronik & Hargis, 1990; Janosz, 2000; Potvin et al., 2007). It is true that this research has helped to identify and organise the reasons behind ESL which are related to the school. But it is also true that it indirectly contributes to the

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<sup>2</sup> ISCED is the reference international classification for organising education programmes and related qualifications by levels and fields. The model was first developed by UNESCO in the 1970s and its goal was to make it easier to compare education systems around the world. ISCED 2011 (levels of education) has been implemented in all EU data collections since 2014. ISCED-F 2013 (fields of education and training) has been implemented since 2016. “Primary education” is ISCED level 1, “lower secondary education is level 2, and “upper secondary education” is level 3 ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International\\_Standard\\_Classification\\_of\\_Education\\_\(ISCED\)#Background](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_(ISCED)#Background)).

<sup>3</sup> The 12-year compulsory education (students who have not completed secondary education must stay in school until they reach the age of 18) was defined by Act No. 85/2009 of 27 of August, and it applied to students who, in the 2009/2010 academic year, were enrolled in any grade between the Grade 2 and 7, including those who turned 6 until 15 September (and who were thus enrolled in Grade 1). For the students who enrolled in Grade 1 from 1987/88 onwards, compulsory schooling was 9 years and students were allowed to leave school once they turned 15.

strengthening of the idea of ESL as an individual problem, with a focus on the student and certain social groups, as Jonker (2006), Nada et al. (2020) and Smyth (2017) underline. Academic failure, for example, is considered to be the most important ESL predictor and it is explained by “risk factors”, such as low-income families; single parenthood; the lack of social and cultural capital; unemployment; negligence; and domestic violence, among others, which leads to the conclusion that the students’ exclusion derives mostly from their family situation and their schooling experience as students.

However, by focusing our analysis mainly on individual and family-related factors, we are contributing to a skewed understanding of the problem (De Witte et al., 2013; Nada et al., 2020; Tarabini et al., 2015; te Riele, 2006b), which means that education policy measures and school programs aimed at tackling ESL are predominantly based on data concerning the students and their family background (Swadener, 1995). Thus, by significantly reducing the scope of the analysis, we favour policies that tend not only to ignore reflexion and intervention regarding social situations of poverty and inequality, but also to disregard the structural dimension of the educational organization (De Witte et al., 2013), which serves to emphasize the blame attributed to the students for their lack of academic success and their dropout (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Jonker, 2006; te Riele, 2006b).

Consequently, the causes of ESL are externalized to the families and the students, frequently ignoring the role played by educational policies and schooling institutions, whose main priorities and actions (for example, pedagogical practices, curricula management practices, evaluation and certification templates, relationships between students and teachers) are left out of programs aimed at tackling ESL (Nada et al., 2020). By being placed in the shadow, these end up being considered as variables about which very little or nothing at all can be done. They remain outside the scope of planned actions (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016).

Jonker (2006) goes as far as arguing that instead of trying to understand what is not working within schools, these explanations concerning poor school performance and school leaving reproduce myths about the incompetency and the lack of ambition of lower income social groups with low cultural capital.

Notwithstanding, the evidence concerning the relevance of the schooling system and of schools as factors that help explain ESL is growing and it contributes to the greater complexity of the debate on school dropout causes. Regarding the schooling system, the “country effect” and the public education policies are mentioned by some authors as having had an impact on ESL (De Witte et al., 2013; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Lamb & Markussen, 2011; Nada et al., 2020; te Riele, 2006b). Among these we find the organization of the school system; curricular policies; referring students with a poor academic performance to training pathways; external examination policies; rankings and selection practices (De Witte et al., 2013; Sparkes, 1999).

Concerning the school, Potvin & Pinard (2012), for example, conclude that the environment at school is the dimension that exerts the greatest influence on leavers, and there are examples of schools that push students into negative spirals (Markussen et al., 2011) of decisions based on their lack of academic success. Students who end up leaving school are institutionally labelled as unsuccessful and unfit, as “students without” this or that or as students “at risk”, “labels that stick to them like glue” (Jonker, 2006, p. 136). What is usually emphasized is the students’ shortcomings and inadequacies as individuals. The schools’ institutional inadequacies in relation to these students are rarely examined. Authors such as Magen-Nagar & Shachar (2017), Nada et al. (2020) and Smyth & Hattam (2001) underscore the school’s crucial role, to the point where the latter call attention to the fact that schools ought to be considered as not just the solution to the problem, but also as “a major part of the problem” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 413).

This is a very serious issue, as it leads these students towards an “internal exclusion” (Millet & Thin, 2003, p.41), a progressive exclusion (Markussen et al. 2011), a silent (Lewin, 2007; Sparkes, 1999) or hidden (Fanoiki, 2014; Oliveira, 2019; Shimoni & Portnoy, n.d.; Sultana, 2006) process, which means that it leads them to a process of “continuous, gradual, imperceptible, unnoticed [exclusion], both by those who exert it and by those who suffer from it” (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1993, p. 73).

In this paper we have adopted this view, in particular the critical perspective that examines ESL as a process of marginalization and relegation (Janosz & Deniger, 2001; te Riele, 2006b) of the poor and neglected students, seen as “unteachable and creators of school disorder” (Millet & Thin, 2003, p. 34), that produces spaces of internal exclusion destined for those to whom school, instead of a promise (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995), has become an “inhospitable, alienating and unbearable experience” (Berridge et al., 2001, p. 312).

Studies with a focus on the institutional factors are not as common, but they are also not as rare as analyses that concentrate on the students, their stories, and academic paths, particularly those that give them a voice (De Witte et al., 2013; Smyth & Hattam, 2001). Bridgeland et al. (2006) and Smyth (2017) listened to students who have abandoned school talk about the reasons behind their decision and they concluded that the most significant factor, according to the youngsters, is the fact that classes are not interesting; te Riele (2006b) concludes that the school curriculum, for many of the students who leave school, is seen as “uninteresting, uninspiring and irrelevant to their own present and future life” (te Riele, 2006b, p. 135). When faced with an institution that hurts certain students, Jonker (2006) stresses the importance of listening to them, of “putting students’ voices first” (p. 123), something that Mills et al. (2016) also argue for.

Students’ disengagement with school constitutes a complex social phenomenon that requires a more holistic and politically informed view, within the context of a social commitment by a democratic and fair school that does not exclude those who it cannot or will not understand or accept, and those for whom it does not know how to care or has given up on caring.

This study focuses on the analysis of the *mode of production of school exclusion* that both follows from and that leads to school dropout. It is based on the analysis of the personal school files of 25 youth who left school after attending 20 schools in Porto. The goal of this study is to contribute to uncovering the role of schooling institutions in ESL.

## Methodology

We have adopted a predominantly qualitative and interpretative approach (Morgado, 2019), based on documental research. We looked at the students personal files (SPF), which are administrative files containing the academic history of pupils. These include quarterly and annual evaluation documents, absenteeism records, as well as every more or less irregular situation that might have taken place throughout their time in school, such as moves to different schools, retentions, disciplinary procedures, mobilization of special pedagogical support, technical reports, whether by teachers, psychologists or doctors, and notes about monitoring by the CPCJ<sup>4</sup>, the Commissions for the Protection of Children and Young People and the Courts.

This type of analysis is not very frequent, as these files usually linger unseen in the archives of schools. It allows us, however, to know in some detail the evolution of each child throughout

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<sup>4</sup> The CPCJ, the Commissions for the Protection of Children and Young People, are municipal, interdepartmental, and non-judiciary entities whose mission is to prevent and put an end to issues involving “at-risk students”, from security and protection concerns to health related, educational, and developmental problems. The Commissions apply the law in matters related to “supporting and protecting children at risk”.

their schooling and the actions taken by the schools, in the cases where there were clear and profound misalignments between the school and the student.

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of the examination of the SPF of 25 students who left school early and who later attended an alternative socio-educational project called Arco Maior between 2013 and 2019. This project welcomes young people who have dropped out of the school system early and who are in a situation of social exclusion. They are prevented from accessing the labour market, because they lack any basic education (equivalent to 6-9 years of schooling) certification. These young people are flagged by the CPCJ, the Social Security Services, the Courts and institutional shelters for children and young people and are then forwarded to Arco Maior. The project is recognised by the Ministry of Education, which allows the students to re-enroll in the public school system, through an alternative pedagogical model that aims at the social reintegration of young people. The project was created in 2013, in Porto, an area to which it is still confined, and it had been attended by 240 young people by the end of the 2018/2019 academic year. The project works with three public school clusters: two in Porto and one in Vila Nova de Gaia. During the 6 years under review, the first cluster welcomed 148 students (8 groups/class), the second welcomed 49 (4 groups/class) and the third 43 (3 groups/class)<sup>5</sup>.

### **Procedures**

Since these files contain confidential information, we asked the boards of the schools the students attended for permission to examine them. We were granted authorization after the researcher assured the schools that the anonymity of the files would always be preserved, by not revealing the identity of the students, the name of the schools or that of the people who intervened in the procedural decisions.

To select the personal files, a request for consultation was placed with the heads of the three School Clusters in which the students enrolled so that they could attend Arco Maior, with a view to obtaining a certificate of basic education of 9 or 12 years. After obtaining consent we requested the personal files that were available, since several files could not be found during the consultation period (June-November 2020) or were incomplete (consisting only of administrative data on transfers or grades). The sample was thus one of convenience, it was neither random nor a probability sample.

We made a final decision on the composition of the sample and stopped looking at personal files when we reached a saturation point in our analysis of data, which we started to notice after reviewing 21 files. We realized then that we were not gathering any new information, categories or themes, and that the data was repetitive and redundant, so we decided to stop after examining 25 SPF. When gathering the information into individual electronic files, a fictitious name was attributed to each case, and every reference to any data that could identify the students or their families was eliminated, along with references to the schools they attended and the teachers and staff involved, in order to guarantee the anonymity of the students and to make sure their identities could not be traced back.

### **Sample**

Of the 25 SPF examined, 14 came from the first cluster, 7 from the second and 4 from the third. They belonged to students born between 1996 and 2003, 16 boys and 9 girls, a proportion

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<sup>5</sup> The project has welcomed around 600 students until 2022 and a description can be found at [www.arcomaior.pt](http://www.arcomaior.pt).

which matches that of the indicators of ESL in Portugal (which affects 13.7% of boys and 7.4% of girls). These 25 young people arrived at Arco Maior after leaving school early. They had attended 20 different schools in Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia (22 cases) and in two neighbouring municipalities (3 cases).

As we can see in similar studies (Berridge et al., 2001; Dale, 2010; González, 2015; Hammond et al., 2007) these young people usually come from poor families, their parents frequently hold low paying jobs, such as cleaning staff, construction workers, masons, window washers, kitchen helpers, mechanics, locksmiths, waiters, and shop assistants. In the case of mothers, 6 defined their occupation as “staying at home”. In 12 of the 25 cases, there are reports of unemployment among the parents. The qualifications of the parents are very low: only three mothers have more than 6 years of schooling and 11 only completed the first 4 years of basic education.

The family units live predominantly in social housing and are often, in 19 of the 25 cases, involved in situations which make the poverty framework even worse: cases of early pregnancy (2 cases), drug consumption and drug trade (5 cases), alcoholic parents (5 cases), separated parents, either the mother or the father is absent (8 cases), domestic violence (5 cases) and death of the parents (4 cases).

All these students have been monitored by the CPCJ and in 14 of these cases the students have also been monitored by Social Security agents. Nine cases are still ongoing at the Family and Juvenile Court.

### **Analysis**

Following the “fluctuating reading” (Bardin, 2009) of the first three SPF, we defined the following analysis categories: (i) early detection of misalignment processes between students and school; (ii) disruptive behaviour and corrective and punitive actions by schools; (iii) academic paths (transitions, retentions, moves to different courses or schools, what grade students were attending when they left and the age deviation at that time); (iv) main pedagogical recommendations devised by schools; and (v) the articulation mode for these measures leading up to the exclusion from school.

At the same time, and taking into account similar surveys (Berridge et al. 2001; Hammond et al., 2007) and the analysis of the first files, we created an analysis grid that included, first, the collection of elements for characterizing the students: year of birth, the last school they attended, their parents’ academic qualifications, their professions, their occupational status, the student’s guardian, the identification of factors that might lead to the deterioration of the situation at home—such as the death of a parent, domestic violence, early pregnancy, detention, drug abuse, belonging to an ethnic minority, monitorization by the CPCJ, by Social Security and by the Courts, passes and retentions, the first instance of misalignment between the students and the schools, the beginning of absenteeism, acts of indiscipline—disrespect/disobedience, conflicts with classmates, verbal and physical offences, drug use, theft and vandalization of school premises, disciplinary measures adopted and their follow-up, pedagogical recommendations issued by the school bodies, pedagogical support and tutorial measures adopted, how old they were and in which year they left school and the age gap between these students and their classmates.

We underline the fact that this sample cannot be seen as being representative of the academic experiences of young people who have left school in Portugal. In fact, not every student who leaves school has had these experiences and not every student who comes from an environment with severe social problems will enter this type of pathway and leave school, as De Witte (2013) stresses.



## Results

Below, we list the main outcomes of the study, organized according to the five research categories.

### **Early Detection of Misalignment Processes**

Misalignment processes between these children and school are detected early on: a lack of interest in school work, difficulty concentrating and paying attention, absenteeism, serious delays in initial learning, and situations of verbal or physical conflict between students and their classmates, their teachers and the school staff. In most cases (20 out of 25), these misalignment processes are reported during the first four years of schooling: 11 in the first grade, 2 in the second, and 7 in the third and fourth grades (there is no information concerning pre-school education). Half of these issues take place during the first 2 years of schooling, which matches the findings of other studies (Dale, 2010; Justino et al., 2014).

We witness in almost every case a significant investment by the school in detecting, describing, and understanding situations of inadequacy and conflict between the student and the institution. The descriptions about what goes on are detailed and often accompanied by technical and specialized reports, prepared by psychologists or, sometimes, by a child psychiatrist. These frequently reinforce and deepen the difference between these students and their classmates, by diagnosing them with technically certified pathologies.

The chronological and sequential analysis of these descriptions and reports demonstrates not only that the investment in describing the problems remains in place for several years, leading to the constant accumulation of information, but also that there is a continuous increase of inadequacy and conflict processes, in escalations that happen sometimes over time and other times in a short period of time. In other words, a lack of careful and early detection was not what lead to the worsening of the problems and to the decision to drop out of school, after 8 or 9 years of a troubled presence.

This leads us to conclude two things: first, that early and careful detection of problems of inadequacy and conflict did not result in the promotion of an education capable of welcoming and including these children, in particular, and secondly, that the school investment in this identification and analysis of the issues must be based on other aims.

We believe that collecting so many “information forms” and “reports” is important to justify, before families and the decision bodies of the School Cluster and the education authorities, the adoption of special measures, which usually implies the allocation of further resources, such as “increased pedagogical support”, “curricular adaptations”, as well as of the potential enrolment of the child in “special education” (which has implications, such as the need to reduce the number of students per class), or the move towards other paths such as “vocational courses” (which takes place in 8 of the 25 cases).

In the cases under appreciation, however, these remedial interventions did not have positive results. Notwithstanding, there is an outcome that becomes ostensibly clear: from that point onwards, students are seen as being “at risk”, they are labelled and become part of a separated group. So, they have “the right” to be treated differently. The disqualifying assessments become a frequent occurrence. Creating this category of students avoids the more careful and mindful consideration of the particularity of each case and the development of rich teaching and learning proposals that fit each and every student. Moreover, this process disqualifies them and leads to situations whereby the home context and the physical, psychological and behavioural characteristics of students are to blame for their poor academic performance and their disruptive behaviour.



Through this process, each student is convinced that he or she is not good enough for the educational system, as te Riele (2006b) also highlights.

At the end of the first term of the first grade, Filipe's teacher writes an "individual report", in which she adds this description of a 6-year-old child who has just begun his 12-year schooling: the student is immature, he has trouble expressing himself, his vocabulary is very poor and it is very difficult to have a conversation with him; he barely participates in class, he hasn't improved his writing and reading skills, he shows a deep and continuous lack of interest for activities that demand reading, writing or simply paying attention and focusing, he is constantly getting up and distracting his peers, he reveals a significant lack of interest and unwillingness to learn, he has little autonomy; ...when it comes to artistic expression, he shows interest in the activities, he gets along well with his peers, he is a gentle child, caring, and reveals no signs of aggressiveness; ...he loves to play during recess...; he has trouble with assimilating and respecting the rules of the classroom and with performing the school work; ...he is disorganized and has yet to acquire any work practice...; above all he is very immature, lacks interest and willingness and has yet to acquire a sense of responsibility. For him, school remains "only" a playful space, in other words, a space where he can play, play, play.

The number of problems and inabilities that characterize Filipe, in an analysis performed after just one term, is extensive and it is once again clear that we are facing the early detection of an "at-risk" student, linking the child to a profoundly negative set of expectations. This student will be retained once in the second grade, twice in the fifth grade and once in the sixth grade, after which he will leave school following a troubling academic history. The positive aspects mentioned by his teacher were forgotten and his inabilities kept growing until they filled his whole profile as a student.

Schools create, from early on, a way of looking at these students that will determine their whole academic history, by focusing on the failings and weaknesses of students and their families. By behaving this way, schools might be contributing as much or even more than students and their families to the children's failure, while avoiding a critical examination of their own role in the cycle of creation-persistence-worsening of the problems that they so precociously identify.

### **Disruptive Behaviour and Corrective and Punitive Actions by Schools**

Let us begin with absenteeism: non-attendance constitutes a breach of a duty and it marks the student as "problematic", since this breach is seen as the result of failings concerning family support and protection. The SPF under review reveal that absenteeism has the following distribution: in the first cycle of studies (a 4-year period) there are four cases; in the second cycle (a 2-year period), there are 11 cases in the fifth grade and five cases in the sixth grade; in the third cycle (a 3-year period) there are two cases. This means that it is in the second cycle, particularly during the transition between the first and second cycles, when students go from having one teacher to having 11, that we witness the beginning of several cases of absenteeism. Several authors flag this transition between the first and second cycles, at ages 9 and 10, which often includes a transition between schools, between different models of the teacher-student relationship, and of pedagogical action as being highly problematic, especially for children without a safe and considerate family context, around which a misalignment regarding school is already visible (Berridge et al., 2001; Claro, 2017; CNE, 2015; Montes & Lehmann, 2004; Saragoça et al., 2013).

When faced with a situation of continuous absenteeism, schools trigger a process of dialogue with families and, if the dialogue is not viable or does not work, schools are forced to "flag" the

cases to the municipal CPCJ. Every student whose profile we examined had been “flagged” and was monitored by the CPCJ.

This and other types of interventions did not produce the desired result in any of these cases. Students kept on skipping classes, increasingly so, even when they were in the school premises. This absenteeism reveals a clear lack of interest in what the school has to offer, because students do not identify with what the school says and does.

However, it is the reports concerning disruptive behaviour in the classroom that better reveal the situations of tension and open conflict. These usually begin by being small problems, which then grow and worsen until they become huge tangles of aggressiveness and violence.

There are just three cases in our sample where there are no reports of this kind of conflict and the frequent launch of “disciplinary procedures”: a Roma student, a student who became pregnant at 13, and a student who is considered to be a typical passive or silent leaver (Janosz, 2000; Kronik & Hargis, 1990; Thibert, 2013), who is unmotivated and disconnected from school and classes.

Among these behaviours, the more relevant are: disobedience (23 cases), provoking and disrespecting teachers (22 cases), verbal offenses towards teachers and staff (21), conflicts with classmates (16 cases), physical offenses (in 13 cases involving classmates and in 1 case involving a teacher), drug use (10 cases), theft within the school premises (7 cases) and bullying (3 cases).

The implementation of disciplinary measures by the boards, that are legally established as having “pedagogical purposes”, is comprised of two levels: corrective measures and sanctioning measures. The latter may also include, according to the law, a “punitive purpose”<sup>6</sup>.

Among the corrective measures is “the order to abandon the classroom” and among the sanctioning measures we find “suspensions” (temporary suspensions can last between 1 and 12 days). Let us examine the evolution of each in the cases under review.

We find the first orders to abandon the classroom taking place from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade onwards (22 out of 25 cases). In 18 of these 22 cases, the first instance of this measure is registered as having occurred while the students were attending the fifth grade. Before then, during the 4-year “primary education” period, the practice does not seem to exist, but as soon as it becomes possible for a teacher to ask a student to leave the classroom and launch a “disciplinary procedure”, the practice becomes the norm in the cases we are analysing. The most serious sanctioning measure, suspensions, was used in 19 of 22 cases and the suspensions took place for the first time in the fifth grade (6 cases), sixth grade (11 cases) or seventh and eighth grades (2 cases). The fact that the most serious sanctions affect sixth graders more than fifth graders is the result of a progressive worsening of inadequacy situations that lead to increasingly serious conflicts. At first, students are repeatedly asked to leave the classroom and teachers launch disciplinary procedures, which then begin to pile up, leading to a suspension. In five of the cases, we witness an explosion of instances where this measure is used: the sanctions begin at 2- or 3-day suspensions and escalate towards 12-day suspensions, the maximum penalty.

Filipe—whose first cycle teacher, as we have seen, after just 3 months of classes, gives him an unfavourable diagnosis, writing that he behaves as if school were a place where he can just “play, play, play” —, who is retained in the second and fifth grades, after 6 years in school, has 87 pages of reports of inadequate behaviour and disciplinary procedures in his file by the time he repeats the fifth grade.

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<sup>6</sup> “Estatuto do aluno e ética escolar” Lei n.º 51/2012, de 5 de setembro. [The status of the student and school ethics, Act no. 51/2012, of 5 September.]

He gets suspended and is retained once more. In the following year, there are 42 extra pages of participations, incidents and proceedings, focused on disobedience, insolence and disrespectful behaviour. The prophecy is fulfilled.

We can conclude from the analysis of these 22 cases that the disciplinary measures that were implemented follow the same pattern: they begin as corrective measures and evolve, in a short period of time, into punitive measures.

The punishments become frequent, more intense, and more serious, in a *crescendo* that pushes the student, increasingly forcefully, towards leaving school, as it becomes an environment of open and profound hostility. The sanctioning logic comes to replace any corrective logic, as the school keeps hoping that the repeated punishment constitutes the more appropriate educational solution to the disruptive behaviour of students, when, in fact, it only becomes worse.

### **Academic Paths**

Retention constitutes a dramatic and constant shadow in the cases under review. Every student is held back at least twice.

Let us look at some examples: Pascoal fails in the fourth grade and then again four times in the fifth grade. Benjamin fails three times in the fifth grade and another three in the sixth. Isaías fails four times in the sixth grade.

In the 25 case-studies that include schooling paths that never go beyond the seventh grade, 2 of the students fail six times, 3 fail five times, 10 fail four times, 9 fail three times, and 1 of them fails twice.

Students end up leaving school at age 15, 16 or 17 (only one of them leaves at 14), after having completed at most the fifth grade (14 cases), which is usually completed by the age of 10, the sixth grade (6 cases) or the seventh grade (5 cases).

It is as if the school lacks other additional or alternative educational “resources” beyond failing students and serving them the “educational offer” of repeating the school year, during which they will be subjected to the exact same curriculum, once, twice, three, and even four times in a row, as in the case of Pascoal.

School failure never constituted an element of correction of schooling trajectories in the cases we studied, because the first failures are always associated with subsequent ones; the age gap between these students and those in the same classroom reaches 6 years (in 4 cases) and 5 years (in 12 cases), which means 14-year-olds attend classes with students aged 10 or 11, which tends to promote a lack of interest and feeling of repulsiveness for the atmosphere in the classroom (Lopes, 2013) and, consequently, it leads to a misalignment in relation to school, to permanent tensions and disruptive behaviours, and, ultimately, to them leaving school early. Every single one of these students benefited from measures of “increased pedagogical support”.

Those unwanted by schools are gradually convinced that they do not want to be in school, as Bourdieu & Champagne (1993) observed. Every sign points toward leaving school as the best and only path forward. This process of marginalization becomes even clearer when we analyze the advice and the recommendations issued by the schools’ pedagogical bodies.

### **Pedagogical Recommendations Issued by Schools**

In at least a quarterly basis, schools collect information on their students, not just concerning their academic progress, but also regarding their home and social context and their general personal development. Reports from psychologists and doctors are often added to the information produced by the school. The SPF are repositories of detailed and comprehensive information about these students “at risk of dropping out”. This information is not innocuous, it has very specific

characteristics and it feeds on a certain way of working and educating that reveals schools as profoundly unjust institutions towards the most vulnerable. Let us look at some examples.

Carmo started having trouble in school early on. She was retained in the third and fifth grades. She benefitted from several “curricular adaptations” and was referred to the special education program at the end of the first cycle. While she is repeating the fifth grade, her special education teacher calls her

a very immature student, she shows a relevant motor restlessness, especially in small groups. She is rude and used to threatening other classmates, saying she will hit them; she even threatens older students by saying she has (...) brothers and that they will be waiting for the other children outside of school. She is the (...) daughter of a divorced mother, (...) and there are no limits imposed on her behaviour. She is unmotivated, she skips school to play football with her brother’s friends.

The school “lightens” her curricular burden, allowing her to attend only some of the classes, but she enrolls in the sixth grade and fails again. She begins collecting disciplinary actions and suspensions. When Carmo is 14, her class head-teacher writes a report in which she traces the following profile:

Carmo continues to skip classes often; she does not perform the tasks that are part of the ARA—learning recovery activities, and which are offered for every subject, and which include simple activities; she has a bad relationship with her classmates, she is confrontational, there have been complaints of violence ... Her attitude towards teachers and staff has become worse ... She does not pay attention in class nor is she committed, she is constantly distracting her classmates, her behaviour remains disturbing, she reacts rudely to teachers and staff (in May 2015, she was suspended for having activated a fire extinguisher in a hallway); she reveals a complete lack of interest and commitment in school work, she does not overcome her learning and concentration difficulties..., the student does not study, nor does she do her homework, and she remains completely unmotivated (she has been telling her classmates, since the first term, that she is sure she will be retained), her mother has been called and shows up in school. When her mother is called and is presented with situations involving her daughter, she frequently says she has no idea what to do, “there’s nothing left to do but to kill her”.

The report stops here (what it says and does not say is very relevant). The school recommendation concerning the student is always the same: curricular adaptation (less subjects) and added pedagogical support (more classes for some of the subjects). The second time she is enrolled in the sixth grade, as a special education student, the school offers her some individual curricular adaptations and some changes to the enrolment process (Decree-Law 3/2008). She benefits from pedagogical support in Portuguese, English and Mathematics. Her class head-teacher registers:

Carmo does not show any interest in the activities of the different subjects and she has not paid attention since the beginning of the year. She goes on: since the beginning of October, the student has adopted an inappropriate behaviour in several classes, upsetting their regular operation, provoking and challenging the teachers’ authority. In three days, she registers five disciplinary actions.

The head-teacher met with the mother to suggest a referral to a vocational course, but the mother did not authorize. By the end of the first term, in January, the head-teacher registers 11 mentions of her being late, 24 mentions for lack of school materials, 72 unjustified absences and 17 disciplinary

procedures, for “aggressive attitudes towards adults, incorrect and unruly behaviour”. She has been the subject of a corrective measure and two sanctioning disciplinary measures, including a three-day suspension. She is monitored by a Social Security worker and she benefits from psychological support from the School Cluster. She is retained again and transfers to a new school. She enrolls in a PIEF<sup>7</sup> and is retained again, with nine fail grades, because she stops attending school.

Timóteo, by the end of the year in which he attends the fifth grade for the third time, receives these pedagogical recommendations:

Timóteo skips many classes and rarely comes on time. He must register what goes on in every class in his notebooks and he must always bring the necessary materials to school. He must comply with classroom rules and study. He needs to control his attitudes both in and outside of the classroom. Timóteo has acquired the necessary fifth grade skills. Next year, he must study, he must pay attention and concentrate, he must work harder and he must temper his behaviour. He will benefit from a Pedagogical Monitoring Plan.

The following year he is suspended, and the corresponding “corrective disciplinary measure” consists of copying the part of the Student’s Conduct Code that mentions the rules he has broken 72 times. He will not complete the school year.

After 5 years in the sixth grade, Isaías head-teacher writes the following global assessment at the end of the academic year:

Isaías does not take advantage of his abilities. He could perform much better and have an academic history that meets his real abilities. He has surpassed, without much effort, some of the difficulties posed by the curriculum. In the future, he MUST (sic) make a much bigger effort and be much more ambitious.

He finally completes the sixth grade and never sets foot in school again.

In other words, on the one hand, school makes sure that students do not take advantage of their abilities and that their families are unable to help them; on the other, school keeps offering more of the same (more classes in some subjects) and less of the same (subtracting some subjects each year). Adding to this, the school recommends to these families that they must recognize the positive traits in their children and that they must act accordingly, and tells students that they must change their view of school. Schools draw comprehensive profiles of the deficits and personal failings (and, less often, of the academic struggles) of their students, they issue multiple recommendations in which students and families are held accountable and they constantly produce plans and measures that students and their families do not take advantage of.

### **Articulation of the Measures Put in Place by Schools**

Following the analysis of the SPF of these 25 marginalized students who dropped out of school, we can conclude that the schools they attended are involved in a gradual, continuous, silent, hidden and unnoticed process of *production of school exclusion*, that usually includes the following twelve steps:

1. Early on, the school detects misalignment and conflict situations among certain students (in the first or second grades) and they identify these students as being “at risk”.

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<sup>7</sup> PIEF Integrated Programme for Education and Training. It is defined as an exceptional and temporary socio-educational measure, aimed at promoting the completion of mandatory schooling and social inclusion, intended for students who have experience failure during the first six years of schooling.

2. It produces several documents identifying and analyzing these situations, which are written by teachers (of general or special education) or by other professionals (psychologists and doctors), who point mainly to deficits and pathologies.
3. The school triggers a set of mechanisms to support the students, from the menu that the Ministry of Education authorizes, which is generally made up of a reinforcement of certain subjects (with an emphasis on Portuguese and Mathematics) and by “curricular adaptations”, which are mostly ways of offering more and less of the same (subjects).
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 behavioural misalignments: the “architecture of exclusion” that Flores writes about (2016, p. 4).
5. Beyond this systematic disqualification, students are often retained and forced to repeat the exact same year and curriculum, in the exact same way (which results in them sharing a class with much younger classmates).
6. The transition between the first and second cycles makes matters worse, and so we witness a profusion of orders to leave the classroom, disciplinary procedures and suspensions in the fifth and sixth grades.
7. Students (and their families) are systematically and individually blamed, in quarterly assessments, for their behaviours and academic results, because they always fail to take advantage of their abilities, in a way that builds up in time and relegates the school’s responsibility to the shadows.
8. When confronted with disruptive behaviour and attitudes by students, and whenever these recur, the school punishes ever more severely the faulty students, whose behaviour then becomes worse, due to a snowball effect, in a discouraging framework that is very far from the pedagogical purpose envisioned by the law.
9. The student, when faced with the school’s actions, disconnects from the institution, leading to an increasing lack of interest, absenteeism, refusal to attend classes, even when they’re in the premises, and a growing anger.
10. When confronted with the “negative spiral” they are placed in and blamed for (because they did not take advantage of their abilities and of the opportunities offered by the school) and seeing their individuality denied, the students embody the role attributed to them by the school, as incapable, “repeaters”, uncouth, rebels, the ones with nothing to lose.
11. After several attempts at adopting pedagogical support and “recovery” measures, the school sometimes refers the student towards “special modalities”, so that they can carry out their learning pathway (such as education and training courses, alternative curriculum pathways, and vocational courses).
12. Once created, the unteachable and uneducable students—who affirm their personality when acting against the institution and when they see themselves as standing in a stage of growing tension and conflict—break and begin to systematically skip school. They end up concluding that school “is definitely not the place for them” and so they drop out.

This is the description of a slow spiral, which can sometimes last for 9 or 10 years, of selective and humiliating practices that push these students out.

## Discussion and Conclusion

As te Riele (2006b) underlines, ESL risk factors must be seen as forming a “dense and complex web of interrelated, interacting, multidirectional forces” (p. 136). This study helps us to understand that school is part of this web and that it participates in the production of school exclusion. Schools have an institutional face that denies the students' individuality, making them feel like the only path available is to leave the institution that treats them.

As we have shown, schools engage in an extensive set of actions that make the students feel bad, that lead them to internalize that the institution was not made for people like them (Smyth, 2017) and that the best they can do is to resist for as long as possible and then to finally drop out. The results of this research show the existence of a mode of production of school exclusion that undermines the ethical and anthropological foundations of a fair and democratic education.

First, early detection and short-term actions lead to the subsequent segregation of these students. We agree with te Riele's (2006b) assertion that the diagnosis template tends to be based on those of the health sciences, used to identify a problem/disease and to look for an action/intervention.

If the early detection of misalignments between the school and the students can lead to timely actions (Blaya et al., 2011; Flores et al., 2013; Pagani et al., 2001), by focusing on the short term and by blaming families and students while not holding the school accountable (te Riele, 2006b) it can also contribute to creating a curtain that makes it harder to see each child's particular context, which reproduces the *status quo* concerning poverty and social inequality and that results in their segregation. The numerous reports and intervention plans are used to justify the exceptionality of the situations and all kinds of negative appreciations about the students. Their potential will go unnoticed from then on, the focus will be their weaknesses and inabilities, hence fulfilling the earlier prophecy.

Thus, the early detection of misalignment processes between students and schools, which could constitute an opportunity for an inclusive and qualifying educational action, is instead used to stigmatize and marginalize them, which reproduces and increases existing inequalities.

Early detection is followed by the amplification of inabilities and the labelling as “at-risk students”, and the increasingly disruptive behaviour, ever more violent and aggressive. Then come successive retentions, built under the aegis of the refusal to welcome these students and their social and cultural struggles and of the emphasis on their failings, in a framework of profound disqualification and personal humiliation.

Second, the relationships established between teachers and students are focused on the problems, the lack of discipline and the corresponding punishment and not, in a positive way (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016), on the solutions for the identified problems, whether in the context of social and community interventions or in school, where a careful relational path could transform, from its early detection, the educational relationship and the behaviour, as other studies stress (Bridgeland et al., 2006; De Witte et al., 2013; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Martins et al., 2020; Mills et al., 2016; Nada et al., 2020; Potvin & Pinard, 2012; Tarabini et al., 2015; te Riele, 2006b). Conversely, growing punishment and the gradual escalation of the disruptive behaviour make up the substance on which the misalignment and conflict snowball feeds; in other words, this process builds a snowball of blame and marginalization that is followed by students dropping out of school (Zyngier, 2017).

Students, carrying these labels, disqualified and punished, usually in pain, develop a “sub-culture of opposition to the system and to the image that it paints of them” (Blaya et al., 2011,



p.232). Students clash with their teachers, with “operational assistants” and classmates, and they adopt violent language, besides increasingly skipping classes.

As time goes by, without any careful plans for listening and for dialogue, after being publicly exposed as being incapable in front of their peers and the community, in a process of “institutional humiliation” (Piron, 2002, p.192), these unmotivated and unruly students increasingly embrace distrust, refusal and open conflict as a way of being in school. We must also see in the persistency with which these students endure the spiral of aggressiveness and conflict both the price of an unshakeable solidarity between children from the same neighbourhood against the school’s demands (Piron, 2002), as well as an individual resistance in the face of the school’s institutionalized violence and in the face of the stigmatization, the marginalization and the relegation to which these students are subjected (Esteban, 2008; Janosz & Deniger, 2001).

Third, the high levels of retention and repetition constitute institutionalized education practices that, in the cases under review, never contributed to the reintegration of students or to the improvement of their academic results. The severity of this procedure means that, as mentioned by Montes & Lehmann (2004), failure and repetition of the school year are the most relevant predictor of ESL. De Witte et al. (2013), in their critical review of the literature on school dropout, also conclude that retention is a powerful, “if not the most powerful”, predictor of ESL (p.18), among other reasons, because the student is stigmatized as being “unintelligent, having failed, and lagging behind” (ibidem). The literature is clear on the subject of the negative impact of school failure and successive retentions on 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 of education (Justino et al, 2014). Repeated academic failure weakens their bond with school (Tarabini et al., 2015) and promotes a tendency to interact with deviant peers (Simões et al. 2008), besides leading to the development of negative feelings, such as the “feeling of acquired incompetence” (De Ketele, 2016, p. 26), humiliation and shame (Piron, 2002), which seriously undermines future behaviour and the chances of immediate progression in school.

The permanent struggle with the same contents and curricular proposals, year after year, the result of an unsustainable curricular rigidity, is a permanent inducement to the lack of interest, the disengagement with the commitment to learning, and to revolt.

Stigmatization and marginalization are consolidated through the use of the academic curriculum as an instrument of punishment, as decisive as temporary suspensions, when not more, which worsens the problems it supposedly sought to solve. The process of institutional “erasure”, of “silencing heterogeneity” and “denial of the other” (Esteban, 2008, p. 15) becomes wider and deeper.

By cataloguing these children as being “unteachable” (Bernot-Caboche, 2016; Millet & Thin, 2003), schools dig a bigger gap, which gradually precludes any possibility of listening, dialogue and joint construction of a customized training and education pathway.

These measures, however, are part of a degraded inclusion (Esteban, 2008), with a triple damaging effect: on the one hand, they stress the labelling of these students as “at-risk students”, in an act of general and impersonal characterization of social relegation; on the other, they enhance the distance between students and learning (school), as they are offered more of the same (Jonker, 2006), instead of trying to co-create something different, positive and appropriate, with students, for students. Finally, by not taking advantage of these “bonuses”, students are yet again blamed for their troubled academic history, as they are seen as failing to enjoy the extra opportunities school offers them (Collares & Moysés, 1996; Martins et al., 2020; Zyngier, 2017;).

Lastly, being publicly exposed as being incapable of moving forward constitutes an invitation to act in accordance with the role assigned to them, that of the devil among the angels.

Fourth, by examining the pedagogical recommendations issued by schools, we understand that we are faced with a rhetorical device that serves mostly, due to its nature and complete inefficiency, to hide the true face of the institution: that of selectivity, humiliation and exclusion of those that it does not want, by making them feel that they are not good enough for school.

As always, it is not the mission of the democratic and fair school that is left unfulfilled, it is the student who must see the democratic and fair school mirrored in the “grim catalogue of misery” (Berridge et al., 2001, p.5) that he or she is forced to accept. It would be important to ask how, while standing on these ruins or on this “denied citizenship” (Redon et al., 2018), we can rebuild the students’ engagement and commitment in increasingly long academic paths, which demand permanent emotional well-being, stability, self-esteem, attention, protection and encouragement. The disqualifying considerations are characterised by a generic, repetitive, hermetic, impersonal, and humiliating language that denies the personal existence of these students, deepening their wounds (Jonker, 2006) and denying them their dignity and their right to be themselves.

This is done through denying these students their individuality, even when a name is invoked. The strength of the “meritocratic ideology” (Tarabini, 2015 p.358) omits the effect the relationships, identities and subjectivities of students from disadvantaged and discriminated environments have on their academic success and it thus creates a threefold effect: it avoids understanding the “cultural conflict” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 412) that underpins these personal histories and it holds students accountable for their own academic history and future; by labelling them as unsuccessful and by pathologizing (by means of the proper technical reports) their behaviour and failures, it outsources the possibility of any appropriate and effective educational action to the families, courts and prisons.

These students’ scapegoating and pathologisation has been extensively examined (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Collares & Moysés, 1996; Jonker, 2006; te Riele, 2006b; Tilleczek et al., 2011; Zyngier, 2011, 2017) and it goes hand in hand with the individualistic perspective of the student “at risk” (Nada et al., 2020; te Riele, 2006b; Zyngier, 2011 and 2017). By building an image of the student as a problem, whether within his or her family context or individually, they are unable to see marginalization as an institutional product of school (Swadener, 1995).

Indeed, the “school effect” exists and it is very clear in the context of ESL (Tarabini et al., 2015). It can lead to a culture where all are welcomed and cared for or to the development of a culture of selectivity and exclusion of the poorest and weaker.

Fifth, we looked at the educational practices of public schools that marginalize these students as a dense, interrelated, accepted, and generally overlooked set of actions that slowly promote exclusion from school. In the context of mandatory schooling, these students are excluded while being kept in school with a threefold assurance: students are allowed to remain in school because it is mandatory that they do, even if they lack interest and any sense of commitment, and they are relegated to the margins, as publicly exposed examples of what one should not do; parents are assured that their children are cared for and fed; school administrators are able to retain these students in school without adding to the numbers on ESL.

The political and technical labelling discourse that brands them as “at-risk students” conceals “the people that inhabit the students” (Azevedo, 1994) in three ways: it does not allow for the explanation of the processes that relate to that “risk”; it draws attention away from the real and concrete lives of children; and it encourages the permanent recourse to the “deficit logic”. To be at risk is to have a “flawed moral biography” (te Riele, 2006b, p. 138).

This threefold assurance does not have to be accepted nor should it become natural, since it serves a selective school that reproduces social inequalities and participates in the process that leads to juvenile delinquency (Bernot-Caboche, 2016); because it marginalizes and humiliates those who it cannot integrate, care for or educate. This excluding labelling and these successive punishments hide

and absolve, and therefore reveal, a “very poor education” (te Riele, 2006b, p.138, an opinion shared by Rochex & Crinon, 2011).

In conclusion, school creates an institutional ethos that does not offer these students the recognition of being “at-risk students”, as Swadener & Lubeck (1995) pointed out, which would be of the most elementary justice (Lynch, 2012; Mills et al., 2016) within a democratic and fair school, as it would force the school to get involved in the realization of “a caring community for young people and their families” (Swadener, 1995:42).

There is no other solution for these situations than to leave school (Tilleczek et al., 2011). In other words, the circumstances seal the “wait for exclusion” (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1993, p. 74), to go from an internal exclusion to an external exclusion.

After examining these cases, we are forced to agree with the need to go from considering “students at risk” to the concept of marginalized students (te Riele, 2006b) and from “school leaving” to “school marginalization”. This conceptual, political and pedagogical shift is crucial, because the persistence in identifying students “at risk” as people with deficits or failings helps to create “certain populations of young people in terms of deviancy, delinquency and deficit” (te Riele, 2006b, p. 132).

This (more or less) silent exclusion (Lewin, 2007; Millet & Thin, 2003; Sparkes, 1999) coexists with the schools’ assertions concerning the inclusion and quality rhetoric, since marginalization is itself “caught by the discourse on inclusion” (Esteban, 2008, p. 15). Thus, it is crucial that we look very carefully at the margins in order to shed light on what goes on at the center of schools, revealing the injustice of its practices.

### **Research Limits**

This sample excludes students who are “at risk of dropping out” or who are “hidden dropouts”, as well as those who have left school following a process of progressive “disengagement from school” (Tarabini et al., 2015), and who have taken advantage of the end of the legal requirement to attend school (age 18) to drop out. As mentioned and explained above, the sample cannot be understood as being representative of the school paths of young people who leave school in Portugal.

This study would benefit from the inclusion, following future research, of the voices of the students (Fielding, 2010; Zyngier, 2011). They have lived through their experiences in school in a particular way and understanding their experience would complete the analysis framework for school factors and for the type of schooling that influences ESL, as demonstrated by the studies of Smyth & Hattam (2001), te Riele (2006), Jonker (2006), Mills et al. (2016), Bridgeland et al. (2006), Macedo et al. (2018) and Martins et al. (2020). The final two already focus on the same type of population as the current analysis. The widening of the analysis framework could also include teachers, school administrators, families and other important community institutions.

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## About the Author

### Joaquim Azevedo

Portuguese Catholic University

[jazevedo@ucp.pt](mailto:jazevedo@ucp.pt)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4986-7153>

Joaquim Azevedo is a retired full professor at the Faculty of Education and Psychology of the Portuguese Catholic University and his current research focuses on marginalisation and school dropout, social and school justice and educational innovation.

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