Dropping out and returning to the education system in the Balearic Islands: life stories of students in continuing adult education

This study aims to create new knowledge about the processes of dropping out and returning to the education system as concerns the young population in the Balearic Islands (Spain).

With this purpose, biographical interviews were conducted with thirty young people who had dropped out from secondary education without earning a diploma and later decided to resume and continue their studies.

The analysis of the processes of dropping out and returning to the education system through life stories offers us a privilege and unique window into how and why young people leave school and later return. Their stories give a different perspective that complements and enriches others, mainly based on quantitative data and the contributions of other stakeholders. On the basis of this view, this study calls into question some of the dominant discourse on the subject, while reflecting on the inadequacies of actions taken by the different social stakeholders.

The sometimes bleak portrait young people have of adults and themselves is also an accurate mirror of our reflections and a stimulus to ponder the situation differently. This involves shifting, e.g., from "what do others do wrong?" to "what can I do and how I can contribute with others to improve the situation?".

The research we present was conducted by the Education and Citizenship Research Group at the University of the Balearic Islands (UIB), with support from the Directorate General of Vocational Training and Lifelong Learning attached to the Balearic Government's Department of Culture and Education and the following Adult Education Centres: La Balanguera, Son Canals and S'Arenal (Palma); Llevant (Manacor); Alcúdia (Alcúdia); Joan Mir i Mir (Mahon) and Pitiuses (Ibiza).

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Conclusions

1. On the process of dropping out

• The main features of dropping out are confirmed: multidimensional, character of the process and difficulties in establishing cause-effect relationships.

• New elements are provided in relation to the dominant discourse on the causes of dropping out in the Balearic Islands. Above all, they revolve around the ease of finding jobs, families' scant interest and the behaviours and values of young people that are hardly compatible with school requirements, and do not entail educational practices.

  - The ease of finding work is not enough to cause students to drop out, yet it is closely associated with poor academic results. It is the interrelationship between these two elements, in a stage of personalised development characterised by a pressing need for self-affirmation and personal success in a context in which the values of consumption and money prevail, which favours a quick and "dignified" exit from the education system for young people whose academic records reflect numerous suspensions and repeated courses.

  - Although parents want their children to study, several factors encourage dropping out: lack of control, misconceptions about education, conflict between parents' personal plans and children's dedication to education, changes in the school and traumatic family circumstances.

  - The process of alienation from school (dropping in) that leads to dropping out is reflected in attitudes of passivity, misconduct and/ or absenteeism. It is associated with the period of secondary education, the last years of primary education and above all, the transition between primary and secondary education. The absence of educational practices to prevent dropping out and overcome it stands out.

• This documents the coherence between the high rates of dropping out in the Balearic

Islands, the characteristics of the region's economy, dominant social values, family education and educational practices. Only from a simplifying perspective could it be thought that if jobs were hard to find, this would automatically revert to a considerable increase in the number of compulsory education graduates. What does seem clear is that it would have an impact on two aspects: major social pressure on the education system to develop more favourable conditions for larger numbers of young people to leave and rising situations of marginality that affect young people who, in addition to failing at school, would not be able to find an alternative space in which they can be valued by society.

- Given the insufficient intervention by families and school, we must first consider the pressing need to act and then come to an agreement on how to act. A few priorities: (a) family education should become a natural part of the maternal and paternal process in the same way that examinations are part of pregnancy and paediatrician visits; (b) the education system must improve procedures to prevent dropping out while preventing and addressing dropping in situations from the start.

2. On contributions to the process of returning to the education system

- There are many different kinds of situations. Along with the trajectories in which paid work becomes young people's main activity in the period immediately after dropping out, there are also many young people who continue their education in other ways: Social Guarantee Programmes (SGP) or SAE.

- When SAE means reinitiating school after an interim period, the functions attributed to it range from the purely instrumental in relation to jobs to the most expressive, particularly as regards personal development: there are students who are enrolled in SAE for the sake of learning. There are also students who are not very sure of its usefulness, but have "nothing better to do".

- The analysis of these reasons reflects how young people attempt to use existing resources in their transition to adult life, a process with very different characteristics than the original reasons for creating adult education mechanisms. The common thread in these situations is the SAE's capacity to accompany young people during their personal paths, in which obtaining a diploma in compulsory secondary education has a meaning and feasibility that it lacked when they were enrolled in secondary school. The risk of dropping out again and the inability to attract a part of young people without qualifications are some of the major challenges facing SAE and second-choice education mechanisms in general.

3. On the process of returning to school and the accompanying actions of the young people who dropped out and wish to continue studying

- The general evaluation of the SAE is positive, not only by students who pass, but also by those who fail and must repeat. This does not mean an idealized view at all, but rather reflects a degree of personal maturity and development that leads students to consider SAE so meaningful in their lives that they are devoting the efforts needed to be successful.

- The elements considered most positive in the evaluation of SAE are frequently contrasted with school. mainly with the period of compulsory secondary education: The most important are: timetables that allow free time for other activities; basic and useful contents; voluntary nature of participation; the teaching staff; change in students' attitudes toward education; the discovery or rediscovery of the capacity for and pleasure of learning.

- The individualisation of career paths in today's transitio-

nal processes requires the development of a second-chance education system that enables multiple, flexible paths to achieving qualifications and success. This process must take place alongside the construction of more inclusive schools that reproduce social inequalities to a lesser degree. Innovative educational practices are key elements in both cases and must play a central role in the professional development of teaching staff and education research.

- Within the context of the knowledge society and given the Balearic Islands' current social, education and economic situation, the strategic value of second-chance education must be recognized. This recognition involves taking second-chance education from the periphery and bringing it to the centre of the training and education system, which must be reconceptualised and reorganised as a result.

- Making progress towards overcoming all these challenges involves assuming that dropping out is not a personal problem, but rather a social one; institutional policies play a very important role in solving this problem. Returning to school is a privileged tool for helping young people advance in the long and complex process of childhood and adolescence; therefore, we must work to open up opportunities for them and help them construct, together with other people, a freer, more creative future with greater social justice. And in this sense, in the same way as other second-chance education mechanisms, SAE must become a political, economic and social priority in all countries, especially those with high percentages of drop-outs.