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3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

PROCEEDINGS

01

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance

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Vol. 1
**Inequality,
Inclusion,
and Governance**

Organizers and partners



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Stream A

**EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

DROPOUT²: THE DROPOUT ON SCHOOL DATA DROPOUT

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The paper underscores the complexity of school dropout as a research topic, emphasising the challenges of comparison of data from various sources, crucial for policy and practical interventions. Despite extensive research, there is no universally accepted definition of school dropout, and national and international documents often conflate early school leaving (ESL, ELET) with dropout, leading to inconsistencies in data collection and reporting. This overlap obscures certain groups, such as repeaters and students in “educational mortality”, who, while not formally classified as dropouts, should be included in the discussion. These definitional ambiguities result in incompatible data collection methods and hinder coordination among educational agencies, complicating the development of cohesive intervention strategies. The paper reviews key definitions from various documents, illustrating how this umbrella effect complicates understanding the issue. Additionally, it discusses findings from the doctoral project “School Dropout and Dropout Data”, which systematically analysed 2,078 scientific articles on the subject. The study highlights the need for shared data systems to accurately monitor the phenomenon and develop effective strategies. A reliable understanding of school dropout is crucial to avoid misinterpretation and to guide targeted interventions, particularly at the local level.

dropout; data; systematic review

INTRODUCTION – WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DROPOUT

UNESCO¹ defines “dropout” as

(...) the proportion of children and young people in the official age range who are not enrolled in pre-primary, primary, secondary, or higher levels of education. It is designed to show how many children or youth in each country or region should be enrolled in school but are not.

Similarly, EACEA (2020) identifies the phenomenon as

Students leaving education and training before completing the upper secondary level and obtaining a corresponding school leaving certificate. This broad definition encompasses the young people who, according to their own country’s definition, are considered to be early leavers. (Cfr. ELET).

In Italy, AGIA (2022) adopts a definition that highlights “non-use, incomplete or irregular use of education and training services by young people of school age”.

There is no globally shared definition of the concept of school dropout (Selda, 2014), nor a standardised method for its measurement (Lindhardt et al., 2022).

In the first phase of this research, a document analysis of the definitions and indicators used for the study of school dropout, both locally and globally, (Beri, forthcoming) was conducted. This highlighted the existence of different categories of definitions of school dropout: a. overlap of the terms “early school leaving” and “dropout” (Marina and Senthilrajan, 2024); b. dropout understood in more “inclusive” terms, including, in addition to abandonment, phenomena such as poor academic performance, repetition, frequent absences, temporary withdrawal, and dropping out of school (Besozzi, 2017); c. analysis of the phenomenon through attendance rates or comparison rates, in a positive light (Gansaonrè et al., 2023).

In addition, the parameters used to identify students considered as dropouts vary from country to country (and sometimes within the same country), highlighting: a. criteria based on age or academic delay in relation to norms (Hysing et al., 2023); b. criteria based on absence (Rodriguez et al., 2023); c. criteria based on possession of a diploma or other institutional qualification (Dekkers and Claassen, 2001).

This confusion leads to variations in “dropout rates” (Paguero et al., 2021) and, consequently, a lack of accurate assessment of the severity and extent of the

¹ <https://education-estimates.org/out-of-school/> last access 22/11/2024.

phenomenon, which is a major obstacle to the development of effective educational policies (Belfanz et al., 2020).

1. A PHD PROJECT

This study is part of a PhD project (started in the 2023/24 academic year) at the University of Bergamo, within the doctoral course in “Human Sciences and New Welfare”, titled “School Dropout: the Dispersion of School Dropout Data”. The project’s main objectives are articulated in three phases corresponding to the different years of the doctorate:

In the first year, the project will analyze theoretical constructs and data collection methods regarding school dropout by reviewing national and international literature, with a focus on Italian, European, and global contexts. The second year will involve an empirical study of local realities, utilizing data from the Municipality and Province of Bergamo in collaboration with the University of Salamanca. Finally, the third year will focus on developing synthesis models to enhance the understanding and management of the phenomenon.

Although school dropout has been studied for a long time (Fuller, 1927), most research focuses primarily on causes and effects, overlooking two critical aspects: the precise definition of the concept and the in-depth analysis of measurement and quantification methods.

Early identification of students at risk of dropping out is essential for developing targeted prevention strategies (Pereira et al., 2024). Furthermore, the use of integrated data from various sources provides a stronger basis for policy makers than fragmented studies conducted in specific areas (Sileshi, Jemal, Feyisa, 2024). Based on these considerations, this research project aims to investigate these gaps.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

2.1. Aim

This study initiates a systematic review of the literature on data related to school dropout (Pellegrini and Vivanet, 2018). It focuses on analysing sources, methodologies, and criteria used, extending on previous research (Beri, Agrati, Lazzari, forthcoming) that excluded grey literature.

The research questions that guided the review, based on PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), are as follows:

What are the data sources and methodologies used internationally to collect data on school dropout?

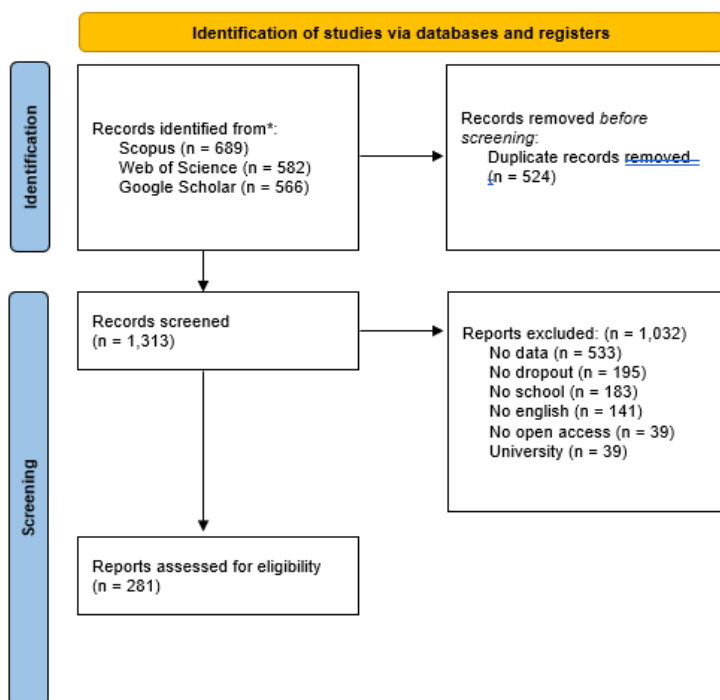
2.2. Eligibility criteria

The selected studies meet the following eligibility criteria (Cooper and Hedges, 2019): students up to upper secondary school; focus on school dropout, excluding other types of dropout (e.g., university); published between 2021 and 10 July 2024, in English and open access.

2.3. Research strategy

The search was conducted in SCOPUS, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using the search string: ‘dropout’, ‘school’, ‘data’. Limits were applied regarding publication year and language. Selected studies were exported to Rayyan² to remove duplicates. The initial screening assessed titles and abstracts, excluding articles that did not address school dropout or referred to non-educational contexts.

Figure 1 – Study selection process. Adapted from Page et al. (2021)



² Rayyan is an online software used to organise, manage, and accelerate the literature review process. <https://www.rayyan.ai/>.

A total of 1,837 records were identified by searching electronic databases. After removing duplicates (n = 524), 1,313 records were subjected to an initial evaluation based on title and abstract. Of these, 1,032 were excluded, progressing to the next stage of more detailed screening of 281 studies (Fig. 1).

3. RESULTS

The initial screening and reading of articles yielded significant preliminary results. The large number of identified studies can be explained by the fact that many of them, while analysing related phenomena (depression, alcoholism, sleep quality, health, etc.), use data on school dropouts. However, there is a lack of studies that explicitly analyse the methodology, collection, and analysis of such data.

Key aspects include the variety of indicators and definitions of “dropout” from broad interpretations (Zanoni et al., 2023) to specific measures like the difference between enrolments and dropouts (Ronak and Rashimi, 2021), with significant methodological consequences.

Another issue is the lack of specific tools to measure school dropout. Many studies use adapted tools (Cho et al., 2023) or rely on a single question (Mbebi, 2023), compromising the reliability of results (Andersen et al., 2021).

Additionally, incomplete or erroneous data can distort the phenomenon (Cho and Bae, 2024). For example, student mobility, can lead to over- or underestimation of dropout rates (Galvis-Restrepo, 2022).

Furthermore, homogenising data from different agencies (Jiménez-Gutiérrez et al., 2024) is a complex process that requires greater initial sharing of meanings (Entwisle et al., 2004).

These aspects highlight the need for accurate longitudinal data, capable of not only to follow student movements (Galvis-Restrepo, 2022) but also to gather useful information for predicting the phenomenon (Balfanz et al., 2020). Indeed, dropout is not a sudden event, but the result of a gradual process of disengagement (Haimovich et al., 2021).

In this regard, data should not be collected exclusively at the end of the school year or study cycles but should also include crucial phenomena such as absenteeism and repetition. Indeed, many studies highlight a significant correlation between these factors and dropout, considering them predictive (Cho and Bae, 2024).

Consequently, the urgency of adopting predictive tools, not just descriptive

ones, emerges, such as those offered by Educational Data Mining (EDM), defined as “the use of data mining techniques to analyse and extract hidden knowledge from the context of educational data” (Oppong, 2023).

In the context of dropout, these techniques would allow the creation of early warning systems (Sandeep et al., 2014). Such systems, based on student data and the risk variables identified in the literature, produce “risk scores” that estimate the likelihood of dropping out for each individual. Students with scores above certain thresholds are identified as at risk, enabling policymakers to undertake targeted support actions (Xu et al., 2021).

Several states in the US and Europe have already implemented early warning systems to identify at-risk students using rich administrative data (Sara et al., 2015). The goal is to maximise the identification of at-risk students while minimising false positives.

CONCLUSION

Despite the extensive literature, school dropout remains complex and under-explored in key aspects such as the definition of the construct and the systematic collection of data. This study highlights the need for international standardisation of criteria and indicators and for integrated and longitudinal approaches for their analysis.

In particular, the importance of predictive analysis tools, such as Educational Data Mining, emerges for the early identification of risk factors and for supporting targeted interventions. These systems, which have already been tested in some international contexts, represent a crucial opportunity to optimise the management of the phenomenon, facilitating personalised interventions and a more efficient use of educational resources.

Cooperation between educational and governmental agencies in defining and sharing of constructs and indicators seems fundamental to a more accurate and inclusive measurement of school dropout, capable of considering even less evident forms of educational difficulties. A coordinated approach based on reliable data could significantly improve the effectiveness of interventions, allowing for more informed and targeted decisions. However, the success of such policies depends on the clarity of the definitions adopted and the accuracy of the reference rates. Errors in these aspects not only risk wasting resources but can also compromise the ability of programmes to achieve their objectives. It is therefore essential to develop well-structured policies to effectively address the global challenge of school dropout.

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