

Social inequality intensifies amongst low-scoring pupils

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Children's marks at school influence the likelihood of them abandoning their studies, but the effect varies according to their social background: among students with poor marks, those from a higher social class have more opportunities to raise their marks than children of low-skilled workers. This is according to a study carried out by researchers from the National University of Distance Learning (UNED) and the European University Institute.

"The study deals with dissociating the effect of the marks (considered the 'primary source' of educational results) from other processes which, linked to the socio-economic status of the parents, determine the [educational opportunities](#) of individuals. This is the first time such a study has been carried out in Spain, a country where the scarcity of educational statistics is very serious compared to others in the European Union," Héctor Cebolla Boado, UNED researcher and co-author of the research reports, explains to SINC.

According to its results, school performance is not interpreted in the same way for individuals from different social backgrounds. There is an offsetting effect by which students from a higher social class are more likely to go on to further education than those from a lower social class, even though their marks are low.

"Inequality stemming from [social background](#) is greatest among students who gain lower marks. Higher social classes find strategies to offset their [children's](#) performance problems and, when things go badly at school,

get second chances that children of the less fortunate do not have. We call this an offsetting effect," states the scientist.

This means that the higher [social class](#) of the parents offsets the fact that they are poor students. "They fail, in short, but they do so less than would be expected if they were children of parents with less resources. This implies that not everything comes down to [school performance](#). There are family processes which are not usually dealt with by public policies which have a significant impact," Cebolla points out. This inequality gradually decreases as the students' scoring ability increases.

"The likelihood that a student continues with their studies after 16 years of age if they come from a more privileged class when their marks are low is 56%, compared to 20% for children from homes where the main breadwinner is an unskilled worker," the study claims.

Of the over 4,000 students included in the survey, 88% of children of managers and professionals continue on to further education, whereas 70% of labourers and 44% of those born into families of unskilled workers leave school at the age of 16.

On the other hand, 61% of students from labourers' families and 48% of those from the unskilled working class stated that their marks were sufficient or poor. Among the children of managers and professionals only 29% identified their marks as such.

Statistical underdevelopment in education

Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that Spain is one of the countries with the highest rates of school dropout in Europe, yet educational statistics allowing the causes of this phenomenon to be known are few and far between. "We suffer some sort of statistical underdevelopment in

education. There are no longitudinal or cohort studies like there are in other countries," states the researcher.

The Autonomous Regions produce some data of this kind but it is not usually published for "open and unlimited analysis." The expert believes that this is due in part to "a lack of tradition which links policies and scientific evidence."

In this sense, it is worth noting that the National Institute for Educational Assessment has started to apply a completely new policy of openness and transparency. Now, the researcher states, it just needs the Autonomous Regions to follow suit and for all administrations to work together to produce a longitudinal study which follows students through from the start of their primary education to the end of their secondary education at the very least.

"School dropout rates are the result of very complex processes, some of which are very subtle, which make it very difficult to deal with through current public policies. What seems to gather most consensus is that pre-school education (involving a blanket stimulus for the abilities of the children) is the most efficient tool in terms of cost and benefits for educational opportunities to be the same between children of the most and least advantaged. All in all it is unthinkable that this measure may even eradicate the disadvantage of the less privileged," concludes Cebolla.

More information: Fabrizio Bernardi y Héctor Cebolla. "Social Class and School Performance as Predictors of Educational Paths in Spain" REIS 146: 3-22. [DOI: 10.5477/cis/reis.146.3](https://doi.org/10.5477/cis/reis.146.3)

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