
‘You Want to Eat Pizza with your Feet on the Table’: Dropping Out of School in Spain in the Context of the Financial Crisis¹

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Early school-leaving is a hot topic in Spain due to the high level of early abandonment. Using mostly a quantitative approach, existing research on this issue focuses on identifying social factors such as social class, family structure and resources and parents’ educational level. These approaches usually consider dropping out as a one-time action and a wrong decision for which the victims themselves are held accountable. Moreover, informed by two implicit ideas, current research in Spain maintains that the economic crisis has made people come back to school; it is assumed that the former economic prosperity has influenced the high percentage of dropouts and that higher education leads to more and better job opportunities as people who drop out of school have limited access to the labour market and get more precarious and lower-paid jobs. Drawing on our ethnographic evidence, in this article we discuss these problematic assumptions and introduce a different idea. We argue that people see a more complex link between education and employment and that this is influencing dropout processes. We develop a critique of deterministic arguments and defy the ‘blaming the victim’ view.

Key words: Early school leaving, Spain, ethnography, economic crisis

The Council of Europe defines early school leaving as ‘the percentage of young adults between 18 and 24 years old who have not finish Secondary Compulsory Education at least and do not carry on with further studies or training’ (de Medrano Ureta and De Paz Higuera 2010: 19). This subject is a hot topic in Spain due to the high percentage of early abandonment (among the three highest in the European Union, close to 23 per cent in 2014), and the fact that the country failed to achieve the dropout target of 10 per cent that the European Union set for 2010 in Lisbon.²

Existing research on the topic of school dropouts, mostly using a quantitative approach, both at national and international levels, mainly focuses on identifying social factors (individual and institutional) frequently associated with this phenomenon, such as social class, family structure and resources, parents’ educational level (more specifically, the mother’s level), gender, family mobility, type of school, and the students’ grade of school affection or disaffection, and retention (Rumberger 2010).

At the same time, these quantitative approaches usually considered dropping out as a one-time action and a terribly wrong decision, for which the victims themselves were held accountable. Their voices have been scarcely taken into account in prior research. Due to this

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² www.oecd.org/document/55/0,3746,en_2649_37455_46349815_1_1_1_37455,00.html (home page), accessed 17 February 2016.

lack of attention by researchers, we know very little about their circumstances and their reasons for dropping out of school. We hope to address this neglected issue in our work.

Our current research aims at analysing school dropout as a process, instead of a one-time action, by doing ethnographic fieldwork. Our goal is to gather narratives from those who have lived through the process of dropping out. These narratives will allow us to delve more deeply into the discourse elaborated by dropouts to identify the reasons for and the consequences of their decision from their own perspectives.

Our focus on narratives has a two-fold purpose: first, to analyse the social values that channel and legitimize behaviour patterns and attitudes in relation to the schooling process; and second, to describe the agency exercised by individuals in relation to their school and family circumstances that influenced their decision to drop out.

We understand agency as the possibility to make decisions in any situation, which is conditioned by structural circumstances. We understand that this situation involves a process through which people are governed by social norms and values, combining reproduction and resistance strategies to manage conflictive situations. We expect to identify these types of complex responses to conflicts within narratives and demonstrate how people make sense of their own lives retrospectively.

We believe that our approach to the topic of dropouts will better highlight issues that have been absent in the scholarly literature. At the same time, our approach will reveal the complexity of the processes that are embedded in the agency of individuals and thereby problematize the causal relationship that emerges from quantitative studies. The ethnographic approach will also better provide us with access to the social context.

We are locating our subjects in our fieldwork using two different approaches. The first one leads us to institutions and organizations that aim to provide adult students with programs to return to school, such as Schools for Adults run by the government or NGOs. Our second approach involves a more difficult path to follow, because we try to find young adults who have dropped out and not returned to the education system and, therefore, cannot be found in any specific place. We have two strategies to locate these people. First, we explore public spaces such as parks or community centres, taking advantage of our previous experience in these types of fields. Second, we use the ‘snowball’ technique to contact people through our personal networks.

The preliminary results we are going to discuss in this paper come mainly, but not exclusively, from our fieldwork developed in a Centre for Adult Education regulated by and depending on the Board of Education of the Community of Madrid, Spain. However, we have also included testimonies from youths who have not returned to the education system in any way and who do not intend to in the near future, located from our personal networks.

We want to highlight the importance of exploring gender to better understand a higher dropout ratio among men. With few exceptions (Whitmire 2010, Casquero Tomas and Navarro Gomez 2010), little progress has been made in understanding the relationship between gender and school dropout. In this sense, the fieldwork considered here has addressed mainly — but not exclusively — male subjects. Nevertheless, we take a gendered

approach in our analysis, and one member of our team is focusing her fieldwork specifically on locating female subjects.

Research on dropouts in Spain argues that the current economic crisis has made people come back to school. Behind this assumption, we find two implicit ideas. The first one is that the former economic prosperity has influenced the high percentage of dropouts. The second implicit idea is that higher education leads to more and better job opportunities, that a person who drops out of school has limited access to the labour market and gets more precarious and lower paying jobs.

We try to problematize both assumptions from our ethnographic evidence, which enables us to introduce a different idea: people's perception of a more complex link between education and employment is having an influence in dropout processes. We intend to make the former simpler and deterministic arguments more complex as well as to defy the 'blaming the victim' conclusion (Ryan 1972).

Adrian,³ a 25-year-old young male who left school early and never returned, was one of the first people who decided to tell us about his dropout experience. He told us:

'Since you are 15 and living in your parent's home, no matter how well you get along with them, they are your parents, and you want to be independent and free, you want to do whatever you want. You don't like to have a curfew to come home at night..., or you want to eat pizza with your feet on the table'.⁴

Living in a little village, two hours away from Madrid, he left school at 15 and immediately began working in construction at a small company owned by his father. That was a time of economic prosperity, and he earned enough money to buy a car, rent his own apartment and live independently. He claimed that by 18 he was making more than 2,000 euros per month,⁵ a salary similar to that of a tenured professor with some experience.

When the crisis started, his father lost the company, and Adrian had to look for a new job. He found work in a factory, hacking pork on a conveyor belt. Later on, this company offered him a better position as a waiter in a restaurant they were going to open in Madrid. When we met him, he had been just promoted to lead waiter after only working there for one year. He never came back to school and did not finish compulsory education,⁶ nevertheless, this fact did not prevent him from finding a new job and even getting a job promotion.

Samuel, one of Adrian's closest friends, who did not continue studying after finishing compulsory education at 16 and has had a series of unskilled jobs since then, reasoned as follows: 'If it wouldn't be so easy for us to say: Let's go! I don't want to study, I'm going to

³ All names are pseudonyms.

⁴ Interview conducted in Madrid on 27 November 2014.

⁵ Interview conducted in Madrid on 27 November 2014.

⁶ Unlike most European countries where education is compulsory until 18 years of age, in Spain it is finished at 16.

get a job. If we would have no other choice but studying to make a life, maybe then we had to do it (keep studying)?⁷

These and other similar experiences allow us to argue that the labour market in Spain has been acting as a trigger for many youths to leave school and start making independent lives. Our evidence highlights that a large demand for unskilled workers is related to the high rate of dropouts. Before the crisis, Spanish economic growth was mainly based on sectors requiring a low skilled work force, such as building construction and tourism, which seemed to have acted as a pull factor to leave school. This idea is also supported by the fact that these jobs are usually occupied by men, and men leave education in higher proportions. We believe that women's narratives may give us a more complex insight on this issue.

In addition, during the period of economic growth, nobody asked these youths for any type of qualifications to get an unskilled but high paying job. Sometimes recruiters even actively search for teens and young people to offer them these types of jobs.

Edgar,⁸ a Colombian male now 28 years old, came to Spain when he was just 15. His father had arrived in Spain two years before him and, after finding a job and a house in a little village, he brought Edgar and his four siblings with him. The day after his arrival, Edgar started to work in a construction company. He recalled his experience as follows:

‘Edgar: ... When I started, I was earning 800 € but I did not like that job, so I did not want to stay there.

Q: And, for how long were you working there?

Edgar: Working in construction? More or less two years.

Q: And that happened just when you arrived? That is to say: you arrived and immediately began to work.

Edgar: Yes, yes, I started to work the day after my arrival. And how amazing! I couldn't believe that there were so many vacancies!

Q: And how did you find the job?

Edgar: They went to my home to look for me.’⁹

It is a requirement to have parental permission and to be at least 16 years old to get a job as a minor in Spain.¹⁰ However, the informal economy has been, and still is, an important source of unreported employment. Just like Edgar, Antonio¹¹ found a job at 14 in a bar. His parents had recently divorced, and his mother neither had a job nor enough money to live independently. When his father refused to help her in any way, Antonio decided to leave

⁷ Interview conducted in Madrid on 27 November 2014.

⁸ Interview conducted in Madrid on 17 March 2015.

⁹ Interview conducted in Madrid on 17 March 2015.

¹⁰ The coming of age in Spain is 18.

¹¹ Interview conducted in Madrid on 10 February 2015.

school in spite of his good results at high school, and he found a job that allowed him to pay her bills. He told us the following about how he got that job:

‘Q: How could you get a job being 14? Didn’t they ask you for...?’

Antonio: Yes, I got the job thanks to my aunt; she had been the owner of a bar...

Q: Aha.

Antonio: And then she left the bar and the new owner asked her [for somebody to work there]... She told him a little bit about my situation and... [he gave me the job] without any kind of contract, of course!

Q: Aha. That is what I was going to ask you about, because it is not allowed to get a job at that age.

Antonio: No, it is not allowed.

Virtually, all job offers require proof of Secondary Education completion, which is compulsory for everybody. However, it seems to be rather easy for most of our informants not to comply with this demand. Most of them acknowledge having lied about it by simply telling their employers they have earned the Certificate. One of the youths we interviewed, when we asked if the Certificate of Compulsory Education was required to get his job in a burger franchise, told us:¹²

Well..., I... I said I got it. I answered as if I already had it but in fact, in fact I think... I think it is required. I didn’t have any problem so far. I cannot do anything about it! [...]But, of course it is a requirement, anywhere! To do any kind of work, even to have a job in delivery. They ask you for it everywhere. [...] I just say I got it anywhere I go to look for a job [...] In some places, they check, and I just don’t get the job.’

Antonio is even more eloquent in this regard. When we asked if his current job requires a Certificate of completion, he told us:¹³

‘Yes, it was required in every single job I have had. In one occasion I lied about it, I just said I had finished Compulsory Education. And in my current job, they are waiting for me to get it, but in fact they ask not only for Compulsory Education but also for Baccalaureate’.¹⁴

Some of our interviewees told us that sometimes employers turn a blind eye in order to take advantage of the lack of certificates, imposing worse working conditions and having the possibility to fire them easily in the context of an informal or semi-informal economy. This is what Antonio told us about his current job as a waiter in a fancy restaurant located in one of the richest neighbourhoods of Madrid City. He said his employers pay half of his salary under the table due to a lack of certification. The following exchange is indicative:

¹² Interview conducted in Madrid on 3 February 2015.

¹³ Interview conducted in Madrid on 19 February 2015.

¹⁴ In Spain, after Compulsory Education, students should enroll in a 2-year Baccalaureate course to get direct access to University.

‘Antonio: They are waiting for me to get the certificate in order to sign up for a full-time contract, because right now, I have a full time job but with a part-time contract.

Q: But...

Antonio: ... [I work] more, even more than full time, fifteen hours more [than the maximum 40 hours established by law per week].

Q: And... but, are you paid for all the time you work?

A: Of course, but I get half the money legally and half under the table. [...] But, right now, telling from the people I know, 80 per cent of the jobs have the same conditions.’

Another youth told us a similar experience when he started working:¹⁵

‘One of the older guys in my neighbourhood had a painting business, a family venture, and he told me: Why don’t you come to work for me? And I took the job and remained in it until now. Well, in fact I quitted that company because he didn’t give me a contract. I worked two years without one, and I said: This is it. I went to work for another company with a contract, and that is where I am right now [...] But I do not have still the kind of contract I should have.’

All these experiences support our idea that the current labour market is linked to a giant economic bubble and acts as a powerful trigger for these youths to leave school. However, most of the young people do not seem to believe anymore in a promise of a better life through education. In our conversation with Adrian and Samuel, they told us the following about this matter:

‘Adrian: How many people are unemployed with a...?’

Samuel: Yes.

Adrian: With the hell of an education! With the hell of a degree and a brilliant CV, to finally get a job in the corner supermarket, or as a waiter...’

People feel that having a higher education does not always lead directly to more and better jobs. A recent report on employment perspectives by the OECD allows us to argue that this perception is not wrong, because it concurs with the evolution of the labour market as described in this report. There are indications of a trend towards a greater polarization of the work market: highly skilled workers are needed for technology-related jobs; low-skilled workers are hired for services that cannot be automated or digitized (such as caregivers); but mid-level skills are being replaced by smart robotics (OECD 2012: 21). Statistical evidence shows that the idea that a higher education does not always lead directly to more and better jobs is also supported by gender differences; despite the fact that the dropout rate is lower

¹⁵ Interview conducted in Madrid on 30 November 2014.

among women, they usually have lower salaries, a higher rate of unemployment and more part-time jobs.

The issues explored in this paper lead us to conclude that an unregulated, wild and greedy labour market is behind the high dropout rate in Spain, one that pulls students out of school. In addition, this is something that is not usually considered or mentioned in studies on this topic. We will continue exploring ethnographically this disguised relationship between the process of dropping out of school and the type of jobs the labour market demands. We expect that our ethnographic fieldwork will contribute to unearthing the complexity behind this relationship, defying hypocritical political discourses that almost exclusively blame the victims, their families and their demographics.

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