

## La contención del abandono escolar temprano: una evaluación cualitativa del Programa para la Mejora del Aprendizaje y el Rendimiento en Asturias

### Tackling early school leaving: a qualitative evaluation of the Program for the Improvement of Learning and Performance in Asturias

Ángel Alonso-Domínguez\*<sup>1</sup> , Rosario González Arias<sup>1</sup> , Israel Escudero-Castillo<sup>2</sup>  & Francisco Javier Mato Díaz<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Departamento de Sociología de la Universidad de Oviedo, España.

<sup>2</sup>Departamento de Economía Aplicada de la Universidad de Oviedo, España.

\*Corresponding author: [alonsodangel@uniovi.es](mailto:alonsodangel@uniovi.es)

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#### Resumen

El artículo evalúa el Programa para la Mejora del Aprendizaje y Rendimiento (PMAR), que España viene utilizando contra el abandono escolar temprano desde la reforma educativa de 2013. Aunque existen trabajos sobre el proceso de implementación de este programa en sus primeras etapas, esta investigación ha servido para proporcionar resultados desde su implementación completa. La investigación se basa en treinta entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a directores de colegios, orientadores, profesorado y alumnado de Asturias. A pesar de la postura poco favorable a la reforma de 2013 entre la comunidad docente, y a pesar de los temores de que los cambios introducidos por el PMAR redujesen la graduación en la Enseñanza Secundaria Obligatoria (ESO), se recoge una percepción general positiva del programa. Al mismo tiempo, existen algunas reservas sobre el hecho de que el programa no se extienda a la finalización de la ESO. Además, la investigación revela algunas dificultades a la hora de definir la población objetivo del programa, y el riesgo de mezclar alumnado con dificultades y alumnado cuyo problema es más bien el desinterés por graduarse. A los centros también les preocupa la falta de personal cualificado para atender al alumnado con necesidades específicas, la excesiva rotación del personal docente interino y la desaparición de la figura del tutor específico, que formaba parte de la política contra el abandono temprano antes de la reforma (Programas de Diversificación Curricular). También es significativa la ausencia de módulos prácticos para el alumnado que los requiera. Finalmente, el absentismo aparece como uno de los problemas más extendidos en este tipo de programas, especialmente entre los alumnos más vulnerables. Los

problemas en el entorno familiar se identifican reiteradamente entre las causas del absentismo. Así, la investigación concluye que las familias deben ser informantes clave en el análisis del abandono escolar temprano en el futuro.

**Palabras clave:** prevención del abandono escolar temprano; política educativa; evaluación educativa; métodos de evaluación; enseñanza secundaria; absentismo escolar.

### Abstract

The article assesses the Program for the Improvement of Learning and Performance (PMAR, by its Spanish acronym), which Spain has used since the 2013 educational reform in the fight against premature school leaving. Although there is some work evaluating the implementation process of this program in its earliest stages, this study is the first to provide results since its full implementation. The research is based upon thirty semi-structured interviews carried out with principals, guidance counsellors, teachers and students in the Spanish region of Asturias. Despite the unsympathetic stance on the 2013 reform among the teaching community, and despite the fears that the changes in Early School Leaving (ESL) prevention would reduce graduation in compulsory education, the general perception of the PMAR seems to be a positive one. At the same time, there are some reservations regarding the fact that the program does not extend to secondary school-graduation. Additionally, the research reveals some difficulties in defining the target population of candidates for the program, with the risk of mixing those students with difficulties and those whose problem is more a lack of interest in graduating. Schools are also concerned about the lack of qualified staff to deal with groups with specific needs, the excessive turnover of temporary teaching staff, and the disappearance of the figure of the assigned tutor, who was part of the previous initiative (Curricular Diversification Programs) aimed at reducing ESL. Also significant is the absence of practical modules for students that require them. Finally, absenteeism was identified as one of the most widespread problems in this type of program, especially among the most vulnerable pupils. Problems in the family environment are repeatedly identified among the causes of absenteeism. Thus, the research concludes that families should appear as key informants for an understanding of the problem of ESL in future research.

**Keywords:** dropout prevention; politics of education; educational assessment; evaluation methods; secondary education; school truancy.

## INTRODUCTION

### The 2013 educational reform in Spain

The objective of this article is to offer a review based on thirty semi-structured interviews about the influence of the changes introduced in ESL prevention by the Law for Improving Educational Quality

(LOMCE, in the Spanish acronym) (MECD, 2013). This organic law, passed in 2013, was the result of a striking phenomenon in the legislative history of education in Spain: between 1970 and 2021 up to ten laws on education were enacted, not counting another three laws addressed to university reforms. The 2013 LOMCE was officially substantiated by the problems detected by the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, which highlighted the high rates of grade retention and dropout (Fuentes, 2009). Analysing the process and documents leading to this law, Engel (2015) concludes that the purpose of improving PISA results emerges as a driving force behind this reform. The 2013 reform mainly affected secondary education, which was considered a mistake by some analysts. These argue that the problems of the Spanish education system lie in primary education, where low achievement and high inequalities are already visible (Choi and Jerrim, 2016). This observation is consistent with the fact that family-related variables show much more influence on achievement than school-related ones (Cordero Ferrera *et al.*, 2014). In addition, there is evidence on the negative opinion on the LOMCE among a large majority of teachers in public and subsidized-private schools in Spain (Monarca *et al.*, 2016). These criticisms show that this was a top-down reform, which means there was something of a double paradox, given that one of the objectives of the LOMCE was increasing the autonomy of schools (MECD, 2013; Engel, 2015). The double paradox lies in the objective of this reform to improve the autonomy of schools, and in the need to count on unsympathetic teachers for fulfilling the objectives of the reform.

In sum, the 2013 reform was unpopular among political parties -other than the governmental majority-, among experts, and among professionals. Furthermore, it shared with other educational reforms the lack of previous evaluation of the existing policies, other than PISA. Thus, evaluating the policies that the reform involved becomes, in the context of the ever-changing educational context in Spain, a matter of academic and public policy interest, to which this article is oriented.<sup>9</sup> The reform introduced the new Program for the Improvement of Learning and Performance (PMAR for its acronym in Spanish, which stands for Programa de Mejora del Aprendizaje y del Rendimiento) with the aim of reducing ESL. The implementation of the new program began in the academic year 2016–2017. Its main aims are to recognise diversity through specially created paths for students in the 2nd and 3rd years of ESO (compulsory secondary education, 13–15-year-olds), and enabling a “soft” transition to the 4th year of ESO (age 16), to maintain students’ ties to the school and continuity in their studies.

Although there have been previous studies evaluating the initial functioning of the PMAR (Amer and Mir, 2017), the novelty of this research lies in the fact that it is the first analysis of the results of this

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, the 2021 educational reform foresees the disappearance of the PMAR starting in 2023.

program after it became fully implemented. In addition, this work shows how the PMAR has operated, based on the perceptions and experiences of the educational community, evidence that is essential to improve policy effectiveness in tackling the problem of ESL. The article therefore begins with a survey of the latest thinking in the field, presenting current theoretical debates on the subject, including a brief description of the program under analysis. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology used and the qualitative exploration carried out. Finally, the most significant conclusions of the research are presented.

### **ESL in the context of the 2013 reform**

One of the symptoms of the educational problems in Spain during the past decades has been the high rate of early school leavers. Using the operational concept of the European Commission (2020), early school leavers are young people between 18 and 24 with, at most, lower secondary educational attainment, and who are not receiving any formal education or training. ESL is different from dropout because the latter refers to parting from an on-going course, although some authors used these terms interchangeably (Nada *et al.*, 2018). In Spain, throughout the 2000s decade, the ESL rate was above 30 per cent, which explains why the EU's Education and Training 2020 Strategy objective was set higher than the EU one (15 per cent vs. 10 per cent) (European Commission, 2018). This was an explicit recognition of ESL being a social problem (Macías *et al.*, 2013). In fact, the 2020 Spanish ESL rate was 16 per cent, thus failing to meet the EU objective.

The ramifications of ESL as a social problem go beyond the Spanish case and have been widely studied. There is research available on the factors associated to ESL reviewing student-related (Fernández-Enguita, 2011), family-related (Lozano Pérez and Trinidad Requena, 2019), school-related (Escudero *et al.*, 2009), and community-related factors (De Witte *et al.*, 2013). Regarding the role of the community, there is evidence that contextual factors are one of the strongest predictors of engagement, together with ethnicity, gender, and country of origin.

### **The prevention of ESL**

Alongside the research already outlined, there are studies that focus their attention on how the different institutions involved should act to prevent ESL, proposing alternative approaches that make it possible to improve institutional interventions. A substantial number of studies argue that the education system needs to be self-critical, to improve its practices and programs from within. Others, taking a behavioural approach rather than an institutional one, focus on intervention with students. In general, however, and regardless of the approach chosen, they all agree on the need to stimulate commitment to school as a key to guaranteeing continuation in education.

Tarabini *et al.* (2018) agree that emotional attachment and a sense of belonging are the best antidote to dropping out of school. Their research highlights how the “school effect” operates through the three most significant variables: social composition, mechanisms of attention to diversity and teacher expectations. All of these are central elements in understanding the role that schools play in their students’ chances of educational success, but the perception of encouragement and support from teachers is undoubtedly crucial, given that it plays a key role in generating opportunities for young people to succeed at school.

Christenson and Thurlow (2004), for their part, consider that it is not enough to predict or identify dropout indicators, since, unless something else is done, young people will end up dropping out of school, hence the importance of addressing the causes and intervening directly here. According to them, it is not enough to get students to graduate; it is necessary to stimulate and encourage their sense of belonging, making them understand the relevance of school to their lives. Among the tools for achieving this, they propose developing alternative educational pathways and timelines; encouraging emotional learning, along with academic learning, to increase commitment to and enthusiasm for school; and, especially, having rigorous and effective program evaluations.

This dichotomy between an institutional approach centred on the school effect, on the one hand, and a behavioural approach that focuses on direct interventions that address the causes of students’ commitments, on the other, compares with the evidence obtained by empirical research on ESL. This literature shows that successful prevention of ESL cannot be based upon single measures but requires using a comprehensive approach that focuses on the whole aggregate of factors at the level of students, families, schools, and the environment (De Witte *et al.*, 2013; González-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2019).

In the research context just described the potential improvements on ESL prevention coming from a program that was part of an unpopular educational law become a questionable matter. A reform opposed by the rest of the Parliament, other than the governmental majority, and, most of all, contested by the majority of teachers, could be compromised by a clash of perspectives between those who design the measures, those who implement them, and the target groups (Nada *et al.*, 2018). If engagement is key to ESL prevention, a logical process would require that teachers, counsellors, and educational authorities are the first in line. Evidence shows that counsellors particularly are supposed to be at the core of both preventive and reactive strategies, being able to develop skills among the other actors and supporting students and parents especially (White and Kelly, 2010).

## The Program for Improvement of Learning and Performance

The PMAR was a program addressed to the mainstream part of the national education system. This must be highlighted, because the inclusion of the program in an organic law meant that the PMAR had a nation-wide implementation. Other measures in ESL prevention included in active labour market policies or addressed to the vocational education and training system are bound to have smaller scale or to vary among autonomous communities, which have the competence on these fields.

In operational terms, the program's students are distributed into groups, with a minimum of eight (six in rural areas) and a maximum of fifteen students (although groups of other sizes may be authorised upon request and in special circumstances). The students participating in the program take different study areas grouped into Language and Social Studies, Scientific and Mathematical Studies, and Foreign Languages, but the rest of the common subjects are taught with the general group.

At their respective schools, the teaching teams oversee proposing to families that their children are included in the program. Prior to this, the pupils undergo two evaluations (academic and psycho-pedagogical) by the teaching teams and the guidance departments of the schools; the pupils themselves and their families are informed of the outcome, and they are the ones who make the final decision, whether or not, to join the program.

One very important change compared to this program's predecessors, the Curricular Diversification programs (CDP), with which it shares the same philosophy to a large degree (Amer and Pascual, 2015), is that the PMAR does not take students all the way to graduation, as the possibility of graduating without leaving the program has been eliminated. On the contrary, it enables pupils to make a "soft" transition to the 4th year of ESO (age 16), as they are already taking classes with the mainstream group, through the option of courses that guide them towards vocational training. Ultimately, the objective is to make routes more flexible and to develop the potential of students in the second and third years of ESO (13–15), reserving a "propaedeutic" character for the fourth year, with two paths available to students and guidance towards the one that best suits their profile, needs and expectations.

In general, the few studies that have analysed the PMAR refer to the initial stages of its sequential implementation, which was finally completed in 2018. Some studies report students' behavioural dimensions and their learning difficulties (Amer and Mir, 2017), also indirectly recognising the impact of the institutional dimension in the PMAR, through the role played by teachers in keeping students connected to the school.

Thus, following the distinction made by Prevatt and Kelly (2003), the PMAR could fall under a strategy that addresses risk factors (academic instruction and mostly academic support: increasing pupil-teacher ratios, reducing grade retention), rather than under a strategy that cares for protective factors

(social support, parent involvement and the like). In a country with grade retention figures that almost tripled the average of the OECD (36% vs. 13% in 2009), the changes introduced could reduce grade retention, on the one hand, since the intervention would begin at 13 years old. However, on the other hand, the program could also reduce compulsory education graduation, given the return to the ordinary path at age 15, and this would put PMAR at odds with ESL prevention programs in other countries (Wilkerson *et al.*, 2015). As we shall see, the results of the analysis confirm the educational community's positive assessment of the changes introduced by the PMAR, although there are also some question marks in comparison with the previous model.

### **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

For the purposes of this research, thirty semi-structured interviews were designed and conducted in six schools in the Autonomous Community of Asturias, selected for the greatest possible diversity in terms of sector (public or private), location (urban or rural) and socio-economic characteristics. In total we interviewed six members of the schools' management teams, six guidance counsellors, six teachers from the different areas of the PMAR program, ten students who were in the 2nd or 3rd year of ESO on the alternative pathway provided by PMAR and two students who were in the 4th year of ESO after having attended PMAR in previous years. This methodology allowed both the interviewees and the evaluation team to introduce as many nuances and clarifications as necessary. All interviews were carried out in the respective schools. Data collection was carried out by means of full recording and subsequent transcription and anonymisation of the conversations. Prior to this, the participants were asked for authorisation to record the interviews and, in the case of the pupils, as minors, the families were asked to sign an informed consent form. As this is a qualitative methodology, the results presented below do not aspire to be statistically representative nor can they be generalized. Although the analysis is based on the impressions of the educational community, this does not guarantee that all the agents involved share the same opinion, as previous research on other educational topics under debate has shown (Feito, 2021).

### **RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION**

The results of the analysis are grouped around three main areas of focus: the assessment and influence of the program, the characteristics of the PMAR pupils, and the predictors of dropping out of school and corrective action. As will be seen, the positive evaluations are limited to the impact of the program in terms of keeping students in the system. However, there are also negative aspects to be taken into account, basically related to the transition between the PMAR and the mainstream school timetable/course. With regard to the characteristics of pupils, the guidance and administrative



teams and the teaching staff point to the problem of defining the target population for this type of program. In general, no differences are observed between students on the PMAR course and students on the ordinary course. Finally, absenteeism is indicated as an essential predictor of dropping out of education, although there is a trend towards stabilisation. Closely associated with absenteeism, and by extension with dropping out of school, are conflicts in the family at home. Table 1 provides an overview of the topics covered in the research.

**Table 1**

*Areas and main topics covered in the research*

| <b>Assessment and influence of the program</b>  | <b>Characteristics of PMAR pupils</b>  | <b>Predictors of dropping out of school and corrective action</b>  |
|---|--|--|
| Contribution to keeping students in schools and bonding.  | Risks associated to mixing students with difficulties, but eager to graduate, with others lacking interest | Absenteeism and risk of dropping out   |
| Timing of the program<br>- Early start, as compared to the previous program (CDP).<br>- Return to mainstream group at program end.<br>- Group size differences. | Conflicts generated by students.   | Additional risks for some ethnic groups, especially Roma   |
| Motivation for performance improvement  | Perception of stigma linked to the program   | The role of the family<br><br>Rural / urban differences and farming families<br><br>The role of teachers and assigned tutors.<br>- Teachers available with specific training.<br>- Teacher motivation. |

Source: own elaboration.

### **Assessment and influence of the program**

The PMAR program has had a positive impact on the target group, as the interviewees underlined, with no significant differences being found by gender. The guidance and administrative teams emphasize that it keeps young people in the system, and even places them in a position to obtain a qualification:



*If there wasn't an exit of this kind, in most cases they'd have dropped out as early as 2nd ESO [...] so yes, I think it's worth the effort (Administrator, school 4).*

It would not be too much to relate this positive impact to the emotional bond that students establish with the school and which, as we have seen within the theoretical framework, could be key in the fight against dropping out of school (Tarabini *et al.* 2018). Students are even more emphatic when talking about the effectiveness of the program:

*I think I'd have done it [drop out] or wouldn't have come to class more—I was going to leave at 16, and now I'm 17 and I'm here (Female student, school 1).*

*Yes, being in a smaller group, I focus more [...] and I'm quite a lot happier. Before I was going home with really bad marks, they'd scold me and all. Now I go home happy, with good marks and all (Male student, school 6).*

Opinions are not so unanimous on the advisability of starting the program in 2nd ESO and not in 3rd ESO, as was the case with CDP. Some interviewees consider that it enables problems to be tackled earlier, while others think that it is too early to make this type of adjustment:

*It's not the same if you take a child who is 14 as if you take them at 16; at 16 it is difficult to reverse a dynamic, at 14 you might be able to reverse it (Teacher, school 1).*

*Well, I think that especially in 3rd and 4th years, I think that you find students with a maturity that students in 2nd ESO don't have, and, for me, the Diversification program was better (Administrator, school 3).*

Despite the positive assessment, the people interviewed also found aspects that were negative or could be improved. The main one is that it is not a program that takes students to the end of their schooling. On this issue, the comparison between CDP and PMAR usually favours the former. This is not because the programs are very different but because, as mentioned earlier, Diversification offered the possibility of obtaining a leaving qualification without leaving the program, unlike PMAR, something that appears in all the accounts:

*I think that in Diversification, being in 3rd and 4th years, so going directly into the last year, there was no 4th year that you had to pass, as you were in the program in the 4th year and you could get a leaving certificate, that helped the student a lot, there was no barrier in between (Administrator, school 2).*

The existence of a practical area in Diversification was also mentioned, which motivated students a lot and made them feel that they were doing something different from the more academic subjects. This is no longer there in the case with the PMAR, and it is an absence mentioned by several of those

interviewed, together with the larger sizes of the groups in relation to the previous model:

*... I prefer 'Diver' as it was before, which was the 3rd and 4th year, which turned into PMAR. And now, I was used to being in a class of five or nine, and I've moved into a group of twenty people, you don't get the same attention....* (Female student, school 4).

Furthermore, it is considered too big a leap for students to go from a 3rd year in small groups and at a slower pace, as is made possible by the PMAR, to the ordinary 4th year in which they will have to study the last year of ESO.

*...the leap from 3rd year in PMAR to 4th year of ESO—careful. Let's see what happens as well [...] I don't go at the pace I want in the classroom; I go at the pace that they more or less let me. At the beginning, in order to keep them and support them and engage them, the steps are very small* (Teacher, school 5).

*... when we go on to 4th year, they are going to turn us loose there and we are not going to know the ... going from the easy PMAR course to ordinary 4th year there is a lot of change, because they put more things in [...] in this it's going to change a lot* (Male student, school 4).

In relation to the difficulty of the transition from 3rd year to 4th year, the students' responses differ from those of the various professionals. While the majority of administrative, guidance and teaching staff believe that students are not aware of the difficulties they will have when they join the mainstream group, despite their warnings, students are very realistic about the problems they may encounter:

*No, I don't think so, I don't think there is any pressure on them, I think they are more concerned about getting through the current course and then we'll see, I don't think it worries them* (Administrator, school 4).

*Okay, it does worry me, it worries me that I won't be able to do it because from being in PMAR every year to moving on to an ordinary 4th year, well that worries me quite a lot, to be honest* (Female student, school 2).

In many of the interviews (especially with students), the motivation of having a long-term objective, or at least thinking about a profession they would like to develop, is one of the keys to the improvement in the performance of a large proportion of the students in PMAR. After the family environment, it is certainly the factor that is most frequently mentioned in the interviews conducted with the various people involved.

*Okay, having little motivation, you'd say, can make a candidate [for dropping out], because the difficulties are already going to come from that lack of motivation, they don't work at all (Guidance counsellor, school 4).*

*Well, it's important. Today without studies there's not much of a future, that is, if you don't have studies... Yes, I was thinking of doing a degree in Primary Education... I always knew I wanted to do something related to small children (Female student, school 6).*

### Characteristics of PMAR students

One of the most discussed issues is the ambiguity of the program when it comes to profiling the candidates to enter the program. Guidance counsellors, teachers and administrative teams are very hesitant about the prior selection process. The effort involved and difficulty of adapting it to the characteristics of each school is acknowledged, but positions diverge between those who call for greater flexibility in establishing suitability criteria for candidates for the program, and those who call for greater specificity. The program risks mixing students with difficulties, but eager to graduate, with others lacking academic interest:

*The profile is open, because the government guideline says that they are students with difficulties in learning, preferably without study problems, and—I don't know how it says it, it uses another word— [...] but 'with problems learning' can be anyone, very ambiguous (Guidance counsellor, school 3).*

*...on the one hand, we get those with generalised special difficulties, who are more academic, and then there are those who came into the educational system late, and then those with personal history, it is all related (Guidance counsellor, school 6).*

*If you focus on students who are dropping out, or who are absent, who do not work in the classroom and you put them together with other students whose problem is to do with ability and who make an effort but don't succeed, then you are creating a group of students who are so different, so that sometimes the programme doesn't work (Guidance counsellor, school 3).*

As far as the school climate is concerned, all those interviewed agree that it is good, and they only refer to some exceptional problems in which the Social Services or the police have had to intervene. Serious problems are mentioned tangentially, and, in any case, they are referred to as isolated and normal occurrences in any secondary school. There is no mention of cases of violence, or at least the

schools are not aware of them. In any case, it was not possible to contrast the influence of the family environment directly, since, at the time of designing the interviews, families were not included as informants. Differences are certainly observed in terms of the profile of pupils attending public and private schools, as well as in terms of whether the schools are located centrally or on the periphery and the socio-economic level of the families, which ultimately could have a strong influence on the reproduction of social classes and would cast doubt on the function of the school as a social elevator. This contrast translates into less family conflict and a lower incidence of dropping out early at private schools, as some of the interviewees tell us:

*We have conflicts and some of them are serious, some are now at the public prosecutor's office; I mean there are conflicts, it's to be expected. Specifically, in the PMAR, there has been some very serious conflict, but otherwise it wouldn't be a secondary school (Guidance counsellor, school 3).*

*We attach a lot of importance to conflicts, but we must also recognise that because of the area we are in, because of the socio-economic level of the parents, I think there is a good atmosphere in that sense (Teacher, school 1).*

Nor do they point to any significant differences in behavior between PMAR students and the rest:

*I think that, well, there aren't any major problems like that [...] it reflects what's out in society [...] that all of this has repercussions... and there's one who generates conflicts, but it is nothing new, nothing that they don't do in the street or that doesn't happen in other schools (Administrator, school 2).*

In general terms—and in contrast to CDP and other similar programs (Merino *et al.*, 2006)—students in PMAR do not feel different from the rest or stigmatized by attending this special program. Although it seems to be an obstacle to graduation, it is possible that the fact that the PMAR does not go through to graduation helps in this case, by integrating students into the mainstream group in the 4th year and on an equal footing with the rest. PMAR students do not have a low self-perception, and teachers and other staff from the guidance and administrative teams even believe that they can exercise a certain degree of leadership, both because of their age and because they are considered special students. No differences are mentioned between boys and girls in this respect.

*No, really not, I feel good where I am [...] the truth is that I don't feel looked down on, far from it [...] and with PMAR, I really don't have any problem being in it (Female student, school 2).*

*I don't want it to be like with Diversification, that it's what people will remark on, you know, you're marked [...] because I've never been treated differently [...] it never affected me because they never said that to me (Female student, school 1).*

*It's always said they could be marginalised. No, because afterwards perhaps they compensate for their academic difficulties with their personal maturity [...] even more, within their group they tend to be sort of, let's say, leaders, in inverted commas, because they are the oldest in the class (Teacher, school 2).*

### **Predictors of ESL and corrective action**

The most common marker in PMAR is absenteeism, which is a widespread problem in urban public schools and a very strong indicator of future dropping out. However, dropping out is not perceived to be common or increasing, so it can be said that the program succeeds in keeping students, who would otherwise be liable to dropping out, within the system and thus improving their likelihood of graduation.

*Dropping out at this school? Very little right now. We don't have the problems we had 10 years ago or 12 years ago, we don't have them now [...] so for me it has been better (Guidance counsellor, school 1).*

The trend is towards stabilizing or reduction, especially in private schools, where there is less intercultural diversity, as absenteeism and dropping out are concentrated in certain ethnic groups, especially Roma and Romanians (Gamella, 2011) and, to a lesser extent, in immigrant students who enter when the school year has already started and are highly likely to move residence and school again. In the case of the Roma community, it is very common to start missing classes regularly before the age of 16 and to drop out once they reach this age. This is particularly marked in the case of girls, many of whom are even forced into early marriage, as these testimonies show:

*Even people who have studied at a bilingual school and end up leaving it, it's their world that pushes them [...] a lot, because they are women, of course, because they get married very early. Yes, they carry on with that. So, look, I have a student who was in PMAR for a year and right now she hasn't enrolled in basic vocational training, which is what I suggested, because her boyfriend, who was also in PMAR, her future husband won't let her, and they are 15, 16 years old (Guidance counsellor, school 2).*

*I have two who are Roma, a girl who turned 16 this month and when they turn 16, they drop out, they go to the market or something like that, but the others are all doing superbly [...] I also have migrants, especially from South America (Teacher, school 6).*

The interviews also showed that there is a very close relationship between difficulties in the family environment and absenteeism, dropping out of education, conflict, and low performance in the classroom. Family instability increases the risk of students' exclusion, placing them in a more vulnerable position and increasing their probability of dropping out of school. This places the person in a vicious circle that begins and ends with exclusion and where there are concomitant factors such as school failure, in the first place, and unemployment as an effect and consequence of all of the factors mentioned. In this context, what are repeatedly mentioned are the lack of interest shown by families, along with the absence or poor use of tools to redirect situations. This problem is constant in the reports of teachers, counsellors, and administrative teams:

*Of course, above all it's the problems of the family itself. Normally, with the pupils who want to drop out, it's because of that, because the families no longer have any kind of follow-up with them, or the families themselves don't want to come to the school, and they don't pick up the phone (Guidance counsellor, school 4).*

*No, I think that the only factor that influences dropping out is the lack of control at home, basically that. We sometimes have problems perhaps even getting to talk to parents, as we usually do a lot of interviews throughout the year and the tutors keep on at them and they don't come (Administrator, school 5).*

In the profiles of students and families, the differences between rural and urban areas are notable. This translates into different difficulties in ensuring that students continue in the system and achieve a qualification. Most significant are, essentially, the problems of accessibility for students in mountain areas and the lack of motivation of those whose parents farm livestock, as they see (or feel) themselves obliged to continue with the family business:

*In rural areas that also happens quite a lot or at least that's what I see, of kids who go to work with their parents' farm animals, and then they're already in 1st ESO, for example, without any kind of motivation. We have to be here until 16 by law; they don't want to do anything (Guidance counsellor, school 4).*

*Some of them, especially one of them this year has asked for basic vocational training, then he saw that it was difficult and said: I'm going to stay sitting here and I'm not going*

*to take the exam [...] because what he expects from life is perhaps to work with animals on the farm with his parents, there certainly are things like that (Administrator, school 5).*

Since it seems difficult to intervene with/in families, the interviews raise issues related to the academic sphere as a way of overcoming difficulties. The personal accounts particularly mention adaptations to make the transition from the PMAR to the mainstream group, such as improving guidance, flexible groupings, or splitting pupils in the 4th year of ESO so that those coming from the program can continue to have more personalized follow-up. Especially relevant is the mention in some schools (both public and private) of the assigned tutor, a figure who was part of CDP, but is not there in the PMAR:

*No, we don't have any of those measures, like grouping [...] One year we had some support for those in applied [mathematics] for some topics, but of course, always depending on that, on the teachers having hours available (Administrator, school 4).*

*So, what happens is that it's one thing to ask for them and another to actually get them. For example, last year we did ask for flexible grouping in 4th year, but they didn't give it to us (Administrator, school 5).*

*And what they really need is an assigned tutor because they are different; they need more handholding, more guidance, talking to them all the time about vocational training, taking them to enrol. They need someone with them, the others have their families, and there's also their character and their autonomy—these ones don't have that, they're less autonomous (Guidance counsellor, school 2).*

The accounts also stress the need for teachers with specialized training to deal with groups with special characteristics, which makes it necessary to stabilize staffing. Several people interviewed mentioned that many of the teachers trained to meet these needs are temporary teachers, and that many of the teachers who have retired in recent years have not been replaced. This poses a serious problem, as teachers without appropriate training are teaching classes in certain areas and the success of the PMAR groups is largely dependent on the luck of qualified staff arriving and staying at their schools:

*[We need] to have more stable staffing, because now they didn't fill the position of that person who retired, and this is happening in all the schools, these posts are being eliminated [...] so that teacher needs the right preparation, to know, also to want, to have chosen the position, so for me a stable teaching staff, and if only they hadn't got rid of those posts (Guidance counsellor, school 2).*



Finally, and following on from this issue, it is significant that none of the students interviewed referred to a lack of training, ability, or motivation on the part of the teaching staff, a positive finding that differs from the situations identified in other research—set out in the theoretical framework—in which the low quality of the teaching staff was a factor in students' disengagement from the education system.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research contributes to assessing the Program for the Improvement of Learning and Achievement (PMAR), offering empirical evidence on its influence on reducing ESL. Based on thirty semi-structured interviews conducted in the Spanish region of Asturias, the research shows how all those involved, and especially the students, evaluate the impact of the PMAR positively, since it allows students who would have dropped out if they did not have personalized learning paths and methodologies to continue in the educational system. However, some weaknesses are also noted, such as the program's non-targeted nature and the difficulties that integrating PMAR students into the 4th year of ESO could have on subsequent rates of repeating a year or even possibly dropping out. Also significant is the absence of practical modules for students that require them. In both cases, the old CDP is taken as a reference, and perhaps judged as better.

Furthermore, this article has highlighted the difficulties encountered by the teaching teams at the schools when selecting those to take part in the program. Thus, when transferring the formal requirements for access to the actual reality of the school, doubts arise about whether to give priority to flexibility in the selection criteria or to focus on more targeted selection to avoid mixing those students with difficulties and those whose problem is more a lack of interest in graduating. Schools are also concerned about the lack of qualified staff to deal with groups with specific needs, the excessive turnover of temporary teaching staff, and the disappearance of the figure of the assigned tutor, who was part of the previous initiative.

However, it is worth noting that PMAR pupils do not perceive themselves, either individually or as a group, as having characteristics that are different from those of ordinary groups, in terms of intellectual abilities or other skills. There are also no gender differences in terms of labelling. In general, this positive perception is explained by the fact that, unlike the previous program, here students are put back into the 4th year of ESO, facilitating their subsequent achievement of the standard qualification, in contrast to the previous model.

In reference to the third focus, the research has found a strong relationship between the probability of absenteeism and ESL, especially among some easily recognisable groups. The members of guidance teams, teaching staff and administrators who took part in the qualitative analysis expressed the

perception that the risk of ESL is not increasing in their schools, but also a clear concern about the increase in absenteeism, which could lead to students dropping out. From their point of view, dropping out is not quantitatively significant, but it is concentrated in a clearly identified part of the student body which, moreover, coincides with people in a situation at risk of social exclusion, or with difficulties in joining the labour market: vulnerable families in all schools—whether public or private—and especially Roma students (almost always female) and/or those of Romanian nationality in the case of public schools. A specific mention should also be made of rural schools, where demographic difficulties, territorial cohesion and productive peculiarities are creating different dropout-risk profiles.

Problems in the family environment are repeatedly identified among the causes of absenteeism, whether due to the parents lacking the tools to remedy situations or using them poorly, or to the disintegration of the home. All of these are overwhelmingly indicated by institutional and teaching staff (but not by students) as risk factors for dropping out of school and, therefore, for the profile of PMAR pupils. In this regard, the fact that students do not report situations of violence in the family environment is significant and seldom perceived or mentioned by the other people interviewed.

In this context, it is notable how the discourse positions the family as the entity on which the blame for the early school departure of their sons and daughters seems to lie. While families are evidently implicated in the academic outcomes of their children, the presence of such discourses poses the risk of “exonerating teachers and schools from the responsibility of fostering opportunities for success for all students” (Tarabini, 2016: 6).

Families appear, therefore, as key informants for an understanding of the problem of ESL. However, in the previous design of the research, they were not included in the interviews. This is the main limitation of the present study, as having their testimonies could help to complete future research on the subject. Likewise, more evaluations are necessary in the rest of the country.

An additional conclusion worth mentioning is the rather optimistic perception of the program by the actors involved in the research. Despite the unsympathetic stance on the 2013 reform among the teaching community, and despite the fears that the specific changes in ESL prevention would reduce graduation in compulsory education, the general perception of the PMAR seems to be a positive one. The top-down approach of the reform is in fact revealed by the doubts among teachers and guidance counsellors regarding students’ participation in the program. But there seems to be a general positive attitude towards preventing ESL and, thus, towards engagement in the implementation of the PMAR. Finally, the educational impact of the crisis caused by Covid19 cannot be ignored. The increase in social vulnerability generated has shown up some of the shortcomings of the education system (Cabrera, 2020). The risk of exclusion experienced by many young students and their families during the

pandemic highlighted the importance of continuing to work to ensure that schools act as a shield against social inequality. Developing public policies and specific programs in this direction is essential to achieve this objective, hence the importance of continuing to research their implementation, especially in the post-pandemic context.

#### **AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS**

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

We confirm that this work has not been published previously nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

#### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

All aspects of this manuscript were co-created in co-equal fashion from conceptualization to writing to editing and beyond by Á.A-D., R.G.A., I.E-C and F.J.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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