Factors that hinder access to and persistence in post-compulsory education: A challenge for vulnerable groups in Spain

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Factors that hinder access to and persistence in post-compulsory education: A challenge for vulnerable groups in Spain

Post-compulsory education constitutes a stage of heightened vulnerability for some young people who face conditions of inequality for various reasons. Young people with disabilities or from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, immigrants, Romani, and women compose the primary vulnerable groups in Spain. In addition, other circumstances may present a challenge to gaining admission to, persisting in and successfully graduating from the post-compulsory stage of education. Although belonging to one of these groups does not present an obstacle for some young people in the continuation of their studies, for others being a member of a vulnerable group poses a challenge on a daily basis. This article seeks to identify the factors that render it difficult for young people belonging to vulnerable groups to continue their post-compulsory studies in Spain. The study has identified familial, personal, institutional and systemic factors that may explain why some young people do not have access to post-compulsory schooling or drop out before completing their studies.

Keywords: access; drop out; post-compulsory education; retention; vulnerability

Introduction

The school dropout rate among Spanish youth between the ages of 18 and 24 is among the highest in Europe. Although the dropout rate for the European Union as a whole is 10%, the rate is nearly double that in Spain, approaching 20% (Eurostat 2015). Although some of these youths end up continuing beyond compulsory secondary education (ages 12-16), many do not continue with post-compulsory studies (16-18 years), which correspond to Level 4 classification according to the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2013).

Post-compulsory studies in Spain can be grouped into three types. The first comprises vocational training programmes that combine the supply of intermediate-level educational courses designed to train students in the knowledge and skills required

to enter the workforce. The second type comprises academic studies that cover the three types of high school degrees (science, humanities and social sciences, and the arts). Students who select this route are generally preparing for higher education. Finally, there are compensatory programmes offering basic training to young people without degrees to improve their chances of obtaining skilled employment.

Commenting on the findings of the Key Data on Education in Europe 2012 study conducted by the European Network for Education Information (Eurydice), Valle and de la Loma (2014) noted that the rate of participation of Spanish young people decreases significantly at the end of compulsory secondary education in comparison with other countries.

According to the data, the biggest challenge facing the Spanish education system is to identify manners in which to reduce the early dropout rate at the end of compulsory education, rendering it easier for all citizens to raise their level of education and improve their prospects of entering the labour market.

According to the Council of the European Union (2015), ensuring that all young people can obtain access to and complete post-compulsory education on an equal footing is key to preventing marginalization and social exclusion. A high school or professional training degree tends to be considered the minimum qualifications required for a successful transition to the labour market as well as access to higher education. The Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO 2015, 2016) emphasize that educational efforts should focus on vulnerable children and young people at all levels of education, including access to professional and technical education and training.

This study focuses on young people belonging to vulnerable groups. By the nature of the group or the particular circumstances of the individuals, these young

people tend to be the most affected by early school dropout and lack of participation in post-compulsory secondary education.

Vulnerable groups in Spain

Vulnerability is a concept with multiple meanings, and there are several manners in which to approach its definition. Various authors (Jurado, Olmos, and Perez 2015; Lange 2012) define vulnerability as related to the characteristics or situations that diminish a person's and/or group's capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from situations of risk or critical events. Among these characteristics, Valeria and Mainardi (2013) identified age, gender, ethnicity, economic status, physical characteristics, health status, disability, and cultural or political circumstances as factors that can place individuals or groups at greater risk of having their fundamental rights and freedoms violated, restricted or abolished.

Considering that vulnerability is contextual rather than static, this phenomenon assumes a different form in the academic life of each young person. In general, persons or groups are said to be vulnerable when their opportunities for educational advancement are limited, increasing their risk of academic failure (Furlong, Stalder, and Azzopardi 2000). These children and young people are at greater risk of being excluded from education and training.

Furlong, Stalder, and Azzopardi (2000) and Schuetze and Slowey (2002) identified young people from low-income families, ethnic minorities, immigrants and women as being vulnerable. Thomas (2001) included young people with disabilities and low academic performance in this category. More recently, The Council of the European Union (2015) concluded that groups with low socioeconomic status are most likely to drop out of school and fail to continue their studies to later stages, with the

situation being particularly alarming for children and young people of immigrant origin, the Romani and children and teenagers with special educational needs.

Considering the classifications and the particular characteristics of the Spanish context, five groups were identified as most vulnerable in terms of their access to, persistence in and graduation from post-compulsory education.

- *Socio-economic disadvantages*. The 2013 Spanish Goals Report 'European Educational Goals and Spaniards: Education and Training Strategy 2020' (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport 2013) reported an inverse relation between family economic capacity, understood as the household per capita income or the household's ability to make ends meet, and early school leaving. The family's economic conditions affect its ability to educate its children (Bonal 2015).

- *Immigrants*. First- and second-generation immigrant students face educational disadvantages that in some cases result in late entry into the education system, low academic performance, early school dropout or lack of access to post-compulsory education (Forum for the Social Integration of Immigrants 2016). Fernández, Mena, and Riviere (2010) concluded that immigrant students achieve lower academic results than students of non-immigrant (native Spanish) origin, even when those students face identical hurdles of exclusion or self-exclusion. Serra and Palaudàrias (2010) observed that young immigrants express an intention to pursue their studies less frequently than native Spanish students.

- *Romani population*. The Romani comprise the largest ethnic minority in Europe and have historically suffered from exclusion, marginalization and social discrimination at various levels (Keen 2015). A total of 36.7% of this group is affected by situations of exclusion in education, and the group's rate of academic

failure is nearly five times higher than the rate for the population as a whole (Lorenzo 2014). The education gap reduces Romani youths' chances to complete compulsory education and, thus, to gain access to post-compulsory education.

- *Young people with disabilities*. Young people with physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments face various difficulties in following the standard instruction process and using standard educational facilities and resources normally (López-Torrijo, 2009). In an independent report prepared for the European Union, Riddell (2012) noted that children with special needs and adults with disabilities remain at a disadvantage in education.

- *Gender*. Gender inequalities remain present in education, appearing in different patterns, sometimes to the detriment of men and sometimes to the detriment of women. Although it is true that early school dropout rates are higher for men than for women (24.3% compared with 16.1%, respectively) (INE 2015), young immigrants, Romani and people with family responsibilities are at greater risk of dropping out at the end of compulsory education. Conversely, there is a tendency towards horizontal segregation: men tend to enter job-training programmes whereas women are better represented in academically oriented programmes (European Council 2009).

In light of the backgrounds and groups, this study proposes to identify the vulnerability factors that affect young people's access to and persistence in post-compulsory education in Spain, helping to fill the gap in studies dedicated to analysing the phenomenon of school dropouts in post-compulsory education. Although the study concentrates on the situation of young Spaniards, the findings may be of interest to other countries.

Method

Given its nature, this study utilizes an interpretive paradigm, adopting a qualitative approach. Data were collected by in-depth interviews and discussion groups.

The investigation assumes the structure of a sequential study in two stages: (a) the first phase comprised data collection by interviews conducted between January and April 2015 with young people who were contacted through the institutes or associations to which they belonged; (b) the second stage comprised three discussion groups that met between July and September 2015 to discuss the results of the interviews.

Study participants - or their legal guardians in the case of minors - signed an informed consent document describing the purpose of the study and assuring participants that information would be confidential. For this reason, any identifying information or specific data regarding participants has been omitted from the text.

Instruments

The in-depth interviews were designed to identify factors that hinder access to, persistence in and graduation from post-compulsory education. The interviews explored the process that brought students to post-compulsory studies, their transition from secondary to post-compulsory education, how they addressed their current educational stage and their expectations and plans for the future.

The discussion groups rendered it possible to deepen the understanding and enhance the interpretation of the interview results. The topics that guided the discussion were (a) causes, (b) manifestations, (c) consequences, and (d) indicators of vulnerability, although the discussions also touched on additional themes not initially planned.

Participants

Participants included a total of 27 youths currently enrolled in post-compulsory education who belonged to at least one of the groups identified as vulnerable. The sample was selected using criteria of intentionality and accessibility, seeking to include all profiles that arose from crossing the 'group' and 'course enrolment' variables (see Table 1).

[Table 1 near here]

Intentional selection of the sample yielded information regarding all of the vulnerable groups under consideration, guaranteed that all educational levels and situations were represented, and ensured regional diversity.

The majority of the young people and adults interviewed were between 16 and 29 years of age at the time of the interview. Fifteen of the respondents were men and 12 were women. For 23 of the 27 young people interviewed, Graduate of Compulsory Secondary Education was the highest degree earned, in some cases by alternative educational routes.

The discussion groups comprised 19 experts: six professionals from the socio-community field, eight teachers and five scholars in this field with ties to the university community. Experts were selected based on their expertise, career achievements and links to vulnerable groups and/or to students in the compulsory and post-compulsory stages of education.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the four-stage process proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994): collection, organization, reduction and conclusion/verification of data. Simultaneously, inductive and deductive coding approaches yielded a total of 20 codes that were

grouped into four analytical categories (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 near here]

The interviews guided the data analysis process, seeking to identify which factors hinder access to, persistence in and completion of post-compulsory education.

Results

Ongoing cross-sectional and comparative analysis of the interviews renders it possible to identify vulnerability factors for access to and persistence in the post-compulsory education of young people belonging to vulnerable groups, which were confirmed and expanded upon by the experts participating in the discussion groups.

The presented results are grouped according to the four factors that correspond to categories arising from the process of analysis: familial, personal, institutional and systemic.

Familial factors

Familial context is perceived as shaping and affecting every moment of a student's academic life. A family environment marked by instability and economic or other challenges to integration negatively influences the student's social and academic integration.

> With the problems I've had with my stepmother, I've been a little out of it. These emotional things don't help you study. When your stepmother wants to kick you out of the house and you're only 17, what you think is, 'I have to get a job', but I also thought 'I have to stay in school'. I lost my focus a bit and that's why I failed in 3 subjects *(Male, age 17, vocational training).*

Young immigrant families lack knowledge regarding the organization of the education system and the various access routes to post-compulsory education. In

addition, immigrants who come from non-Spanish-speaking countries have difficulty accessing and understanding academic and professional orientation information. The interviews revealed that these orientation campaigns are particularly important for these young people and their families.

> I had this paper. My tutor told me, 'You have to see this, because you can't study for a high school degree, because that's too hard for you'. And there was something about health, but I didn't know what it was, and later Alba and Xavi [monitors of an association] explained. 'There are three options: emergency, pharmacy and nursing assistant' *(Female, age 17, vocational training).*

In the case of young people of Romani origin, the student is often the only Romani, or one of a few, in that environment to attend school and may thus face the scepticism of some members of the community who see education as a waste of time or a disregard for family obligations. Professionals believe that the Romani community considers schooling unnecessary and foreign to their culture and perceives the school as something alien. Experts believe it is necessary to engage at the family and community levels during the compulsory education stage so that 'education is seen as something necessary and effective in daily life' *(expert in the socio-community field),* and young Romani are encouraged to continue their studies in post-compulsory education.

> My brother is in vocational training, I'm in high school, and my sister is also studying; but in most cases, parents don't consider it important. One day the boy says, 'Mom, I don't want to go to school; I have a stomach ache', and his mother agrees with him: 'So don't go, stay at home; it's cold and you're okay here' *(Male, age 18).*

The situation of young immigrants under state guardianship is particularly difficult. In addition to facing emotional, self-esteem, motivational and other problems that adversely affect their academic performance, wards of the state also run the risk of

having to quit school when they reach the age of 18 because these young people lose their state support, rendering it necessary to earn an income to cover their living costs and educational expenses.

> I'm considering it. I want to stay in school, but if I eventually turn 18 and can't stay in school, what do I do? Get a job or stay in school? I have to work, because how am I going to pay for school? How am I going to get around? How do I pay for an apartment? I'm not going to steal; I prefer to work. I'm looking for a part-time job that will let me also stay in school and let me afford to graduate *(Male, age 17, vocational training).*

A family's limited ability to invest resources in children's schooling is another important barrier to educational access and persistence. Most parents have low-paying jobs or are unemployed, and many young people resort to asking for help from siblings, extended family members or friends to cover part of their educational costs: tuition, transportation, supplies, and so forth.

> [The economic situation] now makes it a little hard. My mother is doing everything possible to keep paying for school *(Male, age 19, academic course).*

Economic barriers influence decisions regarding which educational route to follow. Young people in vulnerable circumstances tend towards public schools and vocational training. These students consider these courses to be more affordable and job-oriented than academic high school courses and thus improve their chances of finding employment and being able to help support their families. Graduating from an academic high school and continuing to higher education is subject to the availability of economic resources although such a course is considered to be the best path to social, economic and cultural advancement.

> [My parents] felt bad about not being able to pay for my college and kept feeling bad. I told them it was no problem, that later, when I started working and earning some money, I'd go back to college *(Female, age 20)*.

In addition to school fees and supplies, young people who live far from the educational institution must include the cost of travel and/or lodging, limiting their choice of a course of study to opportunities offered near the family home.

> I wanted to do basic culinary vocational training, but only forestry was offered here, so I did forestry *(Male, age 15, alternative compensatory programme)*.

Personal factors

In addition to the family context, personal characteristics are one of the areas most emphasized by the respondents. These aspects are associated with their academic performance and profile, working conditions and influence exerted by the social environment.

Academic performance and learning difficulties experienced during the compulsory stage of education may hinder access to further education. Young people with low academic performance have less chance of participating in post-compulsory education. If such students do not drop out, they tend towards vocational training, believing that academic high school is more difficult and that their chances of graduation are lower. Students who enrol in an academic high school do so with the goal of gaining access to higher education.

Professionals and experts agree that low expectations of success are the product of the system 'that tells them they can't succeed' *(Expert, teacher)*. Students' expectations of success are undermined from an early age by stereotypes and predictions that society, and particularly teachers, have assumed and projected onto these potential students.

Students who leave secondary school and later re-enter through alternative vocational training courses reveal that many of the causes that led them to leave originated in primary education and increased with the move to secondary school. Experts recommend monitoring the academic progress of students belonging to vulnerable groups and offering them ongoing guidance and support from the time these students enter the education system.

> At 16, you have to already have found a path, or else you're out. By the time you reach 16, if it hasn't already happened earlier, you are channelled to drop out entirely or else into basic vocational training, because the students who have taken the route of academic high school have already achieved it. That die is already cast *(Expert, socio-community field).*

In addition to low expectations of success, poor educational experiences, a limited capacity for academic work, difficulty concentrating, lack of study habits, and personal characteristics also contribute to poor academic performance and adversely affect motivation and interest in post-compulsory education. This influence is so great that all young people have gone through periods of feeling discouraged that caused them to consider dropping out. Experts warn that this generally occurs during the first exams or course, rendering ongoing support activities particularly important for young people in vulnerable circumstances, even more so for those who do not receive support from their surroundings or need to balance studies with work or family responsibilities.

> When I got my grades, I said, 'I'm not cut out for this; I can't see myself installing wires and being an electrician… I only passed in electrical techniques, and I dropped the other 4 classes because the practices were suspended. I hadn't studied FOL and hadn't attended electrical techniques because it's first thing in the morning and I have to drop my sister at school and sometimes I can't come *(Male, age 17).*

Beyond questions of a personal nature, support from their social surroundings, particularly family, teachers and friends, is a determining factor for access to, persistence in and graduation from post-compulsory education. Within the family, it is generally mothers and siblings who provide encouragement and emotional support.

> On more than one night it crossed my mind: 'This is too big for me'… Probably it was my brother at home who told me, 'But you're good at studying. You're smart; with work and effort you can get through anything' *(Male, age 18, vocational training program).*

For young people who lack a stable family environment and support from their families, the influence of teachers and their peer group becomes all the more important. It may be noted that peer pressure becomes less important with age as the individual's decision-making power and central role in post-compulsory education moves to the forefront.

> It was my friends who pushed me to choose the academic high school, because I was going to do a vocational course, and my best friend told me he thought I had the ability to do the academic high school. I followed his advice *(Male, age 17, academic course).*

Several young immigrants and Romani who graduated successfully from compulsory education and are now enrolled in post-compulsory education participated in an academic support programme that taught study skills and helped students develop good study habits. All of the students indicated that this academic and emotional support from educators acted as a buffer against dropping out. Indeed, some young people continued to attend even when they were no longer part of the target group.

Institutional factors

Characteristics of the educational institutions themselves may contribute to failure and

dropping out. Lack of institutional sensitivity towards young people's personal and family situations in addition to the prejudice, stereotypes and expectations that teachers project onto students are factors that influence their learning experience.

Interviews with the young people frequently include accounts of a teacher who is insensitive to their circumstances, fails to support vulnerable students or even makes fun of such students. This phenomenon can be a decisive factor for young people who lack a stable nuclear family and/or have low self-esteem. Some students believe that if their efforts at improvement had been encouraged and recognized, they would have achieved better academic performance.

> If they say to me, 'Come on, Sergio, do your homework; it's not hard'. Or [if they] lend me a hand: 'I'll help you on this first exercise; then you do the second one yourself'. If a teacher pulls me aside, talks to me, encourages me, that makes me say, 'This teacher trusts me and wants me to succeed. He knows I have a problem and doesn't want me to be left behind, wants me to make something of myself in the future' *(Male, age 19, vocational training course)*.

Some young people express the view that teachers of post-compulsory education are difficult to approach and less willing to help them with their academic difficulties.

> In the fourth year of compulsory education, teachers always helped more. If I had questions, they would come over to me or help me after class, but not here. They say, 'If you don't understand, it's your problem' *(Female, age 17)*.

Experts participating in the focus groups specify that education professionals 'have to believe in their students' ability and have to know how to lend a hand' *(Expert, scholar of the subject)* and believe that it is necessary to undertake 'humane, one-on-one mentoring of the student' *(Expert, teacher)*. These experts believe that teachers are not fully aware of their influence on students and urge teacher preparation programmes to

introduce a special focus on serving vulnerable groups, with the goal of overcoming preconceived notions and offering teachers tools for intervention.

Another factor that determines access to post-compulsory education is the guidance students receive during the compulsory education stage. Young people belonging to vulnerable groups receive the same guidance as the rest of their classmates. This guidance is generally limited to developing some group activity during the final year of compulsory education. At a moment when many young people face strong pressure from their surroundings and must make an important decision, often without the support of their families, the guidance these students receive can be decisive.

However, the young people reported that their career and professional training options were not well explained during compulsory education and that sometimes the teachers favoured some courses over others (academic compared with vocational courses) or emphasized some routes or specialties (such as areas considered to provide more employment opportunities).

> In high school, both my guidance counsellor and my teacher told me that fashion design and art wouldn't pay the bills, that if I worked in the art field, I'd end up starving and it wasn't worth it *(Male, age 19, academic course)*.

Professionals and experts question the academic guidance currently being provided at the secondary level of education. These experts believe that academic guidance should (a) begin much earlier to avert the difficulties facing young people; (b) be guided by high expectations, overcoming stereotypes and preconceptions; and (c) combine support groups with one-on-one mentoring.

> The role the school assigns to these kids and the opportunities they are offered are important factors in whether young people from vulnerable groups continue their education *(Expert, socio-community field)*.

Another determining factor is whether the institutions have sufficient resources, such as support staff and resources for students with special educational needs. Recognizing differences and paying attention to diversity should be a component of the institution's educational project. Developing mentoring programmes and forming support networks are also fundamental pillars.

Systemic factors

The structure of the education system and public policies regarding post-compulsory education are considered factors of the highest importance in fostering students' access to, persistence in and graduation from post-compulsory education. The implementation of policies for compensatory education and academic support, the distribution of educational services throughout Spain's territory and the articulation of less rigid standards for addressing diversity are elements that can contribute to providing better opportunities for young people in vulnerable circumstances. Such policies must address the forces that work against their access and persistence, intervening to counter those factors of vulnerability to break the vicious circle that perpetuates inequalities.

Spain is currently undertaking compensatory actions such as social guarantee programmes, curriculum diversification and initial vocational training, which offer young people who leave the system a way to re-engage. Experts believe that 'although these programmes have a therapeutic effect in raising young people's self-esteem and allowing them to demonstrate their competence, they label young people' *(Expert, teacher)*. Many students feel different when participating in such programmes.

Experts also believe that the principle of equity is violated in the process of assigning students to schools, particularly in compulsory education. Students belonging to vulnerable groups are generally concentrated in public school centres, which do not always have sufficient resources to address these students' areas of need.

The availability of resources is a decisive factor both to support the activities of the centres and to support students financially while these vulnerable young people pursue their studies. Lack of resources is jeopardizing the continuity of many actions that foster access to post-compulsory education.

> [In times of crisis] they start by cutting this type of programme [so that] we find that this type of population has fewer resources and services than it needs *(Expert, scholar in the subject).*

For many young people, continuing in the system depends on the availability of resources; thus, experts believe that measures such as credits for study are required. Students who received financial aid reported that their aid often did not arrive on time or that the aid was only awarded at the end of the course; students had to assume the costs initially without knowing whether reimbursement was coming. Some students, particularly immigrants, were not even aware that financial aid existed, revealing a lack of information that would not have occurred if the guidance and mentoring had been truly effective.

In particular, students with disabilities complain that although spots are reserved for this group in all courses of study, the level of support services these students receive is drastically reduced at the post-compulsory stage. The students also perceive that the teachers lack the knowledge and preparation necessary to understand their situation and help them in their academic progress.

> In this cycle, there's no supporting teacher, no special assistance; there's nothing like that. The teacher treats me like just another student. I don't have anything specifically for me. I'm just like the rest of the class *(Male, age 18, vocational training course).*

Discussion

The findings suggest that the obstacles facing vulnerable groups' access to and persistence in post-compulsory education are associated with familial, personal, institutional and systemic factors. The grouping of vulnerability factors coincides with classifications provided by authors who have studied the phenomenon of dropping out of school early (de Witte et al. 2013; Johansson and Höjer 2012), dropping out of vocational training (Tas et al. 2013; Yi et al. 2015) and dropping out of higher education (Castro, D. Rodriguez-Gomez, and Gairin, 2016; Ferreira and Ferrandes 2015). All of the studies are consistent in identifying factors related to the individual and his surroundings, the institution, the education system and the community.

Among *familial factors*, the type of family, availability of economic resources, educational level and support for education shown by the family are sub-factors that mediate the student's academic and social integration into post-compulsory education. Studies on the influence of familial factors on the processes of dropping out of school corroborate our findings (Bonal and Tarabini 2014; Cebolla, 2011; Tas et al. 2013; Whiteford, Shah, and Nair 2013). The majority of studies identify the family environment, ethnicity and socioeconomic status as important predictors of dropping out. According to Johansson and Höjer (2012), young people who continue their education remain dependent on their families' socio-economic conditions. There is a veiled screening process that allows only vulnerable youth with a certain economic stability to continue their studies (Yi et al. 2015). Table 2 summarizes the familial factors identified, specifying indicators of the analysis of vulnerability for each sub-factor.

[Table 2 near here]

The second dimension combines the *personal factors* associated with academic performance, personal psychological-educational variables, working conditions and the influence of the immediate social surroundings on a student's decisions. It appears that the sub-factors associated with academic performance and social surroundings have the greatest effect on a decision to drop out of school. Young people with learning difficulties and/or poor performance during the compulsory education stage often have trouble facing the demands of post-compulsory education (Falch and Strøm 2013; Markussen, Frøseth, and Sandberg 2011; Yi et al. 2015); without the necessary academic support, these students are likely to drop out of school. That is why the network of family, social and community relationships is essential for young people to successfully face academic challenges (Aspelin 2012; Heers et al. 2014; Ingholt et al. 2015; Lukosius, Pennington, and Olorunniwo 2013). By contrast to the findings of von Simson (2015), the desire to work appears to be a secondary concern in the decision to drop out, given Spain's unemployment crisis. However, as Bonal (2015) noted, public scholarship cutbacks and increasing prices can limit access to post-compulsory education, maintaining the current levels of unequal participation. A summary of personal factors and indicators for the analysis of each sub-factor is presented in Table 3.

[Table 3 near here]

Among *institutional factors*, teachers have the most significant influence on a student's decision to stay in school or drop out. The academic and, to a lesser extent, emotional support offered by teachers in the final years of compulsory education and the initial months of post-compulsory education can reinforce a student's persistence to remain in school (Johansson and Höjer 2012; Studsrød and Bru 2011). Given their influence, teachers should know how to guide and support the most vulnerable students

(Alhassan and Bawa 2012). Consistent with the study by de Witte et al. (2013), this study observed that in addition to teachers, it is possible to identify other factors related to the educational institution that help explain dropout rates: institutional resources, the educational project, counselling activities and economic measures to finance specific activities. Table 4 presents the summary of sub-factors and indicators for the institutional aspect.

[Table 4 near here]

Finally, *the systemic factors* combine sub-factors associated with the implementation of compensatory policies, reservation of spaces, regulations, the existence of funding and resources, and the organization of the educational path. A scarcity of resources and lack of support measures focused specifically on the most vulnerable populations is the primary challenge facing the Spanish education system. To avoid excluding young people from post-compulsory education, it is necessary to develop mechanisms to address the external causes of school dropouts along the lines proposed by Casquero, Sanjuán, and Antunez (2012) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2016): ensuring equal opportunities for participation, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender or other differences. Table 5 summarizes the sub-factors and indicators associated with the system.

[Table 5 near here]

Conclusions

Dropping out from post-compulsory education is a complex phenomenon, and there are numerous and varied reasons why students fail to continue or drop out. The decision to drop out is not the result of a single factor but rather a process that results from a combination and accumulation of familial, personal, institutional and social factors (de

Witte et al. 2013; Heers et al. 2014; Ingholt et al. 2015; OECD 2016). This conflation suggests that belonging to a vulnerable group and the presence of certain vulnerability factors can place young people at greater risk of dropping out or absenteeism, endangering the student's chances of staying in school. Conversely, belonging to one of the identified vulnerable groups need not necessarily coincide with social and educational exclusion.

To ensure that a greater number of young people facing personal and familial difficulties continue with post-compulsory education, it will be necessary to design processes that can identify vulnerability and implement mechanisms to reinforce factors that encourage students to stay in school. Considering that vulnerability is not a static condition but a dynamic, ongoing process, interventions should include the young person, the family, the educational institution and the community, beginning during the compulsory education stage.

The study has some limitations. The results should be interpreted as a first approach to the study of vulnerability factors in post-compulsory education. This study interviewed a small group of young people living in Spain who continued their education despite difficult personal and familial circumstances. Future studies should include young people who have continued their studies and young people who have dropped out of the education system for various reasons.

Disclosure statement
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Tables

Table 1. Distribution of the sample of young people interviewed by the 'group' and 'course' variables.

Course / Group	Vocational training course	Academic course	Other compensatory courses	Total
Socio-economically disadvantaged	4	3	0	7
Young people with disabilities	2	2	1	5
Immigrants	1	3	5	9
Romani	0	2	1	3
Gender	1	1	1	3
TOTAL	8	11	8	27

Table 2. Familial factors: Sub-factors and indicators.

(A) FAMILIAL FACTORS	
SUB-FACTOR	**INDICATOR**
(1) Familial typology	Non-traditional nuclear family (e.g., one-parent family, parents separated, one of the parents not biological, adoption, living together with other members of the family)
	Extended nuclear family
	Without a nuclear family (e.g., wards of the state)
	Participation in the migratory process
	Lack of legal documents or status
	Young person belongs to a cultural or ethnic minority
(2) Socio-economic situation	Low-income
	Family home distant from the educational institution
	Under-privileged family (e.g., lower class, socially excluded family)
(3) Employment situation	One or both parents hold a low-paying job
	One or both parents unemployed
(4) Educational level	Mother has little education or training
	Father has little education or training
	Older siblings or close family members have not continued beyond compulsory education
	No first-, second- or third-degree relation currently in school
(5) Dependents	Dependent parents, children or other close family member
	Domestic responsibilities
(6) Educational support	Lack of knowledge regarding how the education system is organized
	Minimal family investment in education
	Minimal family participation and commitment to education

Table 3. Personal factors: Sub-factors and indicators.

(B) PERSONAL FACTORS	
SUB-FACTOR	INDICATORS
(7) Academic performance	Learning difficulties
	Lack of knowledge of the language
	Problems passing the class
	Incomplete schooling
	Low academic performance
(8) Profile	Lack of interest, unmotivated, tired of studying
	Low expectations of success
	Female
	Older or younger than most classmates
	Perception of being discriminated
	Bad experiences with school
	Dissatisfaction with choice of course of studies
	Lacking in work ability or study habits
	Studying not a priority
	Difficulty concentrating
	Difficulty adapting to new situations
	Problems accepting standards and discipline
(9) Employment conditions	Wage-earning at an early age leads to dropping out of school
	Precarious working conditions render it necessary to seek other employment, leaving little time for study
	Long work hours leave little time for study
(10) Influence of the environment	Low level of education of those around the student
	Little family support for continuing education
	Little support from peers at school
	Little support from peers outside of school
	Little involvement in support groups or projects

Table 4. Institutional factors: Sub-factors and indicators.

(C) INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS	
SUB-FACTOR	**INDICATORS**
(11) **Resources**	Problems of accessibility, structures and services
	Lack of teachers and specialized support staff
	Lack of an institutional culture that fosters collaboration among professionals
	Organization that fosters segregation
	Difficulty accessing ICT
	Available hours incompatible with other activities
	Failure to adapt to different learning styles
	Large class sizes
	Lack of organizational measures that support the community dimension of educational activity
(12) **Educational project**	Lack of services and activities targeted at reaching vulnerable students
	No recognition of the differences among different groups
	No design of curriculum adaptations
	Little or no connection between the school and the community, families and students
(13) **Guidance**	Lack of guidance regarding post-compulsory educational opportunities
	Lack of guidance during post-compulsory education regarding admission to higher education
	Lack of mechanisms for coordinating among centres and professionals at the beginning of post-compulsory education
	Lack of tutoring, mentoring and support for vulnerable students
	Guidance based on stereotypes or biases
(14) **Funding**	Lack of public, private or personal funds to pay for specific activities
(15) **Personal relations with teachers**	Teachers have no previous personal experience serving vulnerable groups
	Teachers receive no training or coaching in how to serve vulnerable groups
	Teachers are insensitive or unmotivated to serve vulnerable groups
	Prejudiced or discriminatory attitudes among teaching staff
	Teaching methodologies that do not take diversity into account
	Faulty communication among teachers, students and families

Table 5. Systemic factors: Sub-factors and indicators.

(D) SYSTEMIC FACTORS	
SUB-FACTORS	**INDICATORS**
(16) Implementation of compensatory policies	Lack of policies or activities focused on academic improvement
	Absence of compensatory or support policies
	Absence of after-school support measures
	No campaigns to fight absenteeism
	Lack of coordination among cultural and educational policies
(17) Reservation of spaces	Excessive concentration of vulnerable students in public education centres
	Lack of a system for allocating reserved spaces
(18) Standards	Rigid standards that offer no options, different routes or bridges
	Lack of standards that foster diversity
	Lack of coherence among the policies and standards implemented
(19) Funding and resources	Minimal public financial support
	Funds not allocated to the development of activities to support vulnerable groups
	Lack of financial aid for students
(20) School map	Educational services not equitably distributed throughout the country

Figure legend

Figure 1. Categories and analysis codes.

Familial typology (1)
Socio-economic situation (2)
Employment situation (3)
Educational level (4)
Dependents (5)
Educational support (6)

(A) FAMILIAL

(7) Academic performance
(8) Profile
(9) Employment conditions
(10) Influence of the environment

(B) PERSONAL

CATEGORIES AND ANALYSIS CODES

(C) INSTITUCIONAL

Resources (11)
Educational Project (12)
Guidance (13)
Funding (14)
Personal relations with teachers (15)

(D) SYSTEMIC

(16) Implementation of compensatory policies
(17) Reservation of spaces
(18) Standards
(19) Funding and resources
(20) School map