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Young people and second chance schools in Spain: diversity of profiles, expectations and results

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ABSTRACT

Second Chance Schools were created for students without a secondary school certificate. These students are often seen as having similar social profiles and negative school experiences, but this study shows their diversity. A longitudinal study was conducted using two questionnaires at different times with students in Second Chance Schools in Spain. Due to high turnover, the samples partially overlapped: 1,577 students answered the first questionnaire, 1,335 the second, and 744 completed both. The study analyses trainee profiles, changes in expectations from the start to the end of the programme, and perceptions of learning outcomes. The findings reveal varied profiles and interpretations of educational vulnerability, with diverse social backgrounds. Overall, results are positive regarding students' learning and their evaluation of the training received.

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Introduction

Second-chance schools have a long-standing presence in Spain and Southern Europe, within the framework of policies aimed at reducing early school leaving and providing vocational training for young people at risk. However, they have received limited attention from the research community. This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of these schools, focusing specifically on the students who attend them – their backgrounds, expectations, and perceptions of their experience in the programmes.

The article opens with a comprehensive literature review that examines the historical and institutional foundations of the concept of second-chance schools. This is followed by a concise overview of the various models that have emerged, with particular attention to those developed in Southern Europe. The review also engages with existing scholarship on the demographic and social profiles of the young people who attend these institutions, as well as the often-fraught relationship between second-chance schools and mainstream, or 'first-chance,' schools.

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Following this conceptual framework, the research questions and hypotheses are outlined, along with the methodological strategy employed – a quantitative, longitudinal approach. The article then presents the main findings and discusses their implications. It concludes with a section highlighting practical recommendations for educational policy.

Literature review

The origin of the second chance concept

The second chance concept has a political-administrative origin. It appears in the White Paper 'Teaching and Learning. Towards the Learning Society', promoted by the General Directorate of Education, Training and Youth of the European Commission (Comisión Europea, 1995), to provide youth who are excluded from the educational system or are about to be excluded the best training and the necessary support to promote autonomy and self-confidence. Its purpose was to design a training scheme for young people who are not successful at the 'first' opportunity, that is, in the ordinary or mainstream school. There is a huge literature that has analysed the causes of school poor performance and school dropout (Lamb et al., 2011; Rumberger, 1987). Being a multi-causal phenomenon, in recent years emphasis has been placed on engagement, or lack of engagement, as one of the key factors for school success (Siddiq et al., 2020). Engagement has fundamentally three dimensions, cognitive, emotional and behavioural, and the acquisition of these forms of engagement in turn responds to multiple individual, family, cultural and social factors, as well as to factors intrinsic to schools, such as type of organization, teaching cultures and leadership of the governing body. As will be seen below, it is precisely second-chance schools that face the challenge of recovering the lost engagement of students, taking into account the negative factors that have led to this loss, and organizing the curriculum and the teaching staff in a radically different way to mainstream schools.

There is also a considerable literature on the negative consequences of underachievement and school drop-out, in particular in terms of difficulty in getting access to the labour market or finding low-skilled and precarious jobs (Rumberger & Lamb, 2003). But dropping out of school is also a predictor of antisocial behaviour and social integration problems in general (Bjerk, 2012). Again, the challenge for second-chance schools is to facilitate access to the labour market under better conditions and to reduce the risk of antisocial behaviour by young people in vulnerable situations (Corchuelo, 2016; Pasternáková et al., 2023). There are two contextual elements to consider. The first is the increase in schooling in previous decades, with a practical universalization of schooling rates up to the age of 16, which has generated tension between the egalitarian promotion of the school and the selective function of preparation for the labour market (González-Faraco et al., 2019) and, consequently, generated tensions in the definition of the curriculum of the lower secondary education stage, as will be discussed later. The second element is the change in the economy that took place in the 1990s, with the spread of new technologies that made information the basis of productivity. This paradigm shift takes different names, such as a knowledge society (Comisión Europea, 1995) or informational capitalism (Castells, 1990), and suggests that low-skilled jobs, specifically, jobs traditionally performed by people with poor initial training, tend to

disappear. These two contextual elements explain why from the beginning; the second chance programmes had a double objective: promoting the return to education and/or favouring access to the labour market of individuals with a minimum of vocational skills.

The second chance concept was successful, as shown by the adoption of the second chance school label in countries such as Spain, France, Portugal and the Czech Republic, with institutionalized networks that bring together self-named Second Chance Schools or SCS (E2O is the acronym for Spanish schools).¹ This success can be explained by funding from the European Union; however, efforts to combat what was called school failure had already emerged (Casal et al., 1998). Although the concept of school failure was gradually replaced with the term school abandonment due to its stigmatizing connotation (Fernández-Enguita et al., 2010), the fact is that the extension of compulsory school until the age of 16 and, in some countries, until the age of 18 is not completely effective because there is a fraction of young people who either leave school before that age or do not acquire the competencies necessary to obtain the degree or the possibility of continuing studies. This reality appeared in the 1960s and 1970s when comprehensive educational reforms were proposed in Europe (Green et al., 1999) to design a unified curriculum for all students. However, the differences in social origin and performance among students resulted in not all young people successfully completing compulsory school. In countries with Germanic tradition, practically no comprehensive reforms were applied, and an educational system with different paths was maintained, with a clear distinction between the academic path and the vocational path (Bol et al., 2014; Raffe, 1993). In the Nordic countries, a comprehensive curriculum was applied with a determined drive to reduce the translation of social inequalities into inequalities in educational performance (Husén, 1986). Between the Germanic model and the Nordic model, there were other countries with a formally comprehensive secondary education but a certain curricular diversification that channels the different levels of performance associated with social origin into different itineraries. This was the case for France, Spain and Portugal. These three models have remained despite continuous educational reforms (Blossfeld et al., 2016). Second chance systems have been most developed in these countries² in response to failure or non-completion of the first chance.

Diversity of models for the second chance

Although the objective of the second chance scheme is to reduce school dropouts and/or promote the acquisition of personal and work skills that cannot be acquired in ordinary schools, there is great diversity in how these mechanisms have been institutionalized in different countries and even within each country (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018). In Greece, the second chance system mimics traditional adult schools, in which 18-year-olds coexist in the same programmes with 50-year-old adults (Christodoulou et al., 2018; Koutlas & Papakitsos, 2025). In the Netherlands, this mechanism has also been incorporated into adult schools; in Denmark, it has been incorporated into the so-called Production Schools (Danish Production Schools); and in Finland, it has been incorporated into community schools (Folk High Schools), also with a focus on adult' schools (Bitsakos, 2021). In Germany, second chance schools are more closely related to vocational training centres (Schuchart et al., 2020). In France, a network of second chance schools for young people

has been created with a marked territorial character and a specific pedagogical model (Blagoeva, 2022; CEDEFOP, 2023).

In Spain, although there are also adult schools that function de facto as second chance schools because many young people study there to obtain a high school graduate degree or to access vocational training and even university courses, the concept of a second chance education has been developed relatively recently compared to other European countries, as a response to persistently high early school leaving rates. Spanish second chance schools target young people aged 16 to 25 who have dropped out of compulsory education without obtaining a secondary qualification.³ The causes of this school failure and the profile of the student who fails or does not obtain the lower secondary education certification have been widely studied in the literature (Martins et al., 2020). Aside from students with specific educational needs, one of the most analysed causes in recent years has been the lack of *engagement* in its three dimensions: cognitive, behavioural and emotional (Siddiq et al., 2020). Authors such as Espinoza, Gonzalez, and McGinn (Espinoza et al., 2022) have analysed different studies focused on school dropout and have found that participation in school activities, whether academic or social, is one of the most reliable predictor variables for preventing dropout. In this sense, Spanish second chance schools often promoted by third-sector organizations, offer flexible and personalized learning pathways that combine basic skills training, vocational education, and psychosocial support (Martínez-Morales et al., 2024; Pasternáková et al., 2023). The model emphasizes re-engagement through practical learning, emotional support, and career guidance. In 2016, the Spanish Second Chance Schools Association was established to promote a national framework for SCS, leading to the accreditation of 47 schools across nine regions by 2024, serving over 8,000 students annually. Despite their growing relevance, these schools remain outside the formal education system, facing challenges in funding and institutional recognition.

Profile of the demand and curricular aspects of the second chance

Regarding the profile, the greater probability of this lack of *engagement* has been analysed in depth in students of lower social origin, of migrant origin and of masculine gender (Siddiq et al., 2020), who are usually the students with the most family and economic problems and at risk of social exclusion (Kiprianos et al., 2022). Second chance programmes face the challenge of coping with this profile of young people, who have few socioeconomic resources (Van Den Berghe et al., 2024) and negative school experience (Aymá González et al., 2025). Thus, McGregor et al. (McGregor et al., 2015) suggest that students will achieve more meaningful learning and better *engagement* in contexts where their personal circumstances are taken into account and their training flexibly adapted based on these circumstances accordingly.

From the training point of view, these programmes focus on three types of competencies (Merino et al., 2022): basic, social and technical. The basic competencies are aimed at cognitive *re-engagement* to support students in acquiring the knowledge and instrumental skills that they did not acquire sufficiently in school. Social competencies refer to behavioural and emotional *re-engagement* sought through helping students have a positive learning experience and recover self-esteem. Technical competencies have a dual role: on the one hand, they are a stimulus for applied learning in a specific area

close to a work environment (gardening, cooking, maintenance, etc.), and on the other hand, they prepare the student for possible job placement under more favourable conditions. Studies also show that access to the job market is one of the causes of school dropout (Martínez García, 2016). However, such jobs are generally of low quality with few long-term prospects, and training is a way to prevent this premature entry into the labour market. Numerous studies have highlighted the success of these mechanisms, emphasizing how their characteristics differ from those that lead to failure in traditional school settings (Corchuelo, 2016; Marques et al., 2025). Such characteristics include a greater motivation for the training offered by the schools; teachers' concern for the emotional well-being of the students (Cullinane, 2015); a different student-teacher relationship that entails teachers' active listening, commitment and high expectations regarding students (Espinoza et al., 2022; Shefi, 2019; Van Den Berghe et al., 2024); a methodology based on projects more in line with the needs and capacities of the students (Koutrouba & Karageorgou, 2018); the individualization of the itineraries (Macedo et al., 2018); a holistic pedagogy (Amitay et al., 2018); or a proactive approach, in contrast to the reactive approach commonly adopted in secondary schools (Prieto Torano, 2015). All these factors promote the success of second chance mechanisms, as highlighted by educational research, considering the profile of the students and their previous school careers. However, these success factors do not prevent failure or abandonment of training. There is very little specific research on this dropout, but in some cases, it can reach 50% of the student body (Schuchart et al., 2020). In this vein of research, dropout is fundamentally attributed to the mismatch of expectations between students and teachers, but studies have not analysed whether this mismatch is related to the profile of the student body.

Tensions in the second chance model: its raison d'être

From the institutional point of view, there is a certain tension between internalization or externalization of these programmes. The trend detected a few years ago was towards externalization (Casal et al., 1998), which could be understood as an abandonment of the responsibility of the educational system. This is not a minor issue since institutional differentiation targeting only young people at risk has a high probability of yielding ghettoized spaces (González-Faraco et al., 2019). Internalization, but in different ways, is not exempt from this risk of differentiation with stigmatized ways. From a management point of view, externalization favours the role of third-sector entities or non-educational administrations, such as labour or local authorities. In Spain, this trend has been prevalent in successive educational reforms, and the third sector of social action, with a deep-rooted presence in the field of social and community education, has stimulated many of these programmes, such as it has been stated before the so-called Second Chance Schools, a brand created by a group of institutions to give visibility and unify quality criteria.

In the externalization model, the referral of young people to second chance programmes is a key issue. This is not a minor issue in the internal model, but the coordination between different actors makes this derivation more complex. Beyond the referral procedures, which are not the subject of this research, the issue of expectations about the training to be received at the second chance is very important for the success or failure of these programmes (Author et al., 2022). In general, expectations are related to the

objectives proposed, that is, the return to education, access to the job market and/or an improvement in the young psychosocial situation.

Although the profile of young people who access the second chance, as well as the objectives and expectations that could be achieved in these programmes, are relatively clear, there is little research that contrasts them with students' real experience in these schemes. A qualitative study carried out in Greece revealed that the student profile was diverse; students were usually of low social origin but not necessarily in a marginalized situation (Kiprianos et al., 2022). In this same study, three main reasons for enrolling in a second chance school were identified. The first was instrumental, obtaining a degree; the second was expressive, oriented to an activity or a general learning process; and the third was the orientation to a specific type of learning (whether be it a subject or a specialization).

Aims, research questions and hypotheses

The aims of this research are to analyse the profiles of students attending second-chance schools, their expectations at both the beginning and end of their training regarding re-entering the education system and/or accessing the labour market, and their perceptions of the learning outcomes achieved during their training.

Based on these objectives, the central research question is: to what extent does the students' profile influence their perception of learning outcomes and their expectations regarding their experience at the second-chance school?

To address this question, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1.** Students' backgrounds significantly shape their expectations. Those with experiences of social vulnerability and negative schooling tend to focus on labour market integration in second-chance programmes.
- H2.** Students' backgrounds also affect their outcomes. Lower social vulnerability and more positive schooling experiences are linked to better performance in second-chance programmes.
- H3.** Training outcomes have a stronger influence on expectations among students with higher educational and social vulnerability.

Methods

To meet the objectives of the research, 28 entities belonging to the Spanish Association of Second Chance Schools participated, representing a sample of the 47 accredited schools and allowing access to students enrolled in the 2022–23 academic year. The schools are distributed across eight Spanish Autonomous Communities. The Basque Country accounts for the largest share with 8 schools (28.6%), followed by Andalusia with 6 (21.4%), Aragón with 4 (14.3%), and Catalonia with 4 (14.3%). Castile and León and the Valencian Community each include 2 schools (7.1%), while Madrid and the Canary Islands are represented by 1 school

each (3.6%). This distribution reflects the geographical diversity of the Second Chance School network in Spain and the varying degrees of institutional presence across regions.

An ad hoc questionnaire was designed and distributed at the beginning of the course (October 2022) and another almost at the end of the course (May 2023). To ensure content validity and the instrument's suitability for the target population, a two-phase validation process was carried out. First, the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of four experts with complementary profiles: specialists with direct experience in educational intervention in SCS and researchers with methodological expertise. This review process enabled the refinement and optimization of the questionnaire's structure, ensuring its internal coherence. Subsequently, a pilot test was conducted with a sample of 25 young people enrolled in an SCS programme to assess the instrument's clarity and functionality. Based on this preliminary application, ambiguous items were identified and adjusted.

The questionnaire collected information on the students' social and school profiles, their expectations at the beginning of the year (first wave) and their results at the end of the year (second wave). Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the university ethics committee overseeing the research. Participating schools were then contacted to agree on the mode of questionnaire administration, which was either conducted directly by a member of the research team or facilitated by the school's own educational staff. The fieldwork was carried out using an online version of the questionnaire, hosted on the Typeform platform, which allowed the instrument to be gamified and made more engaging for participants.

The perspective was quantitative and longitudinal, and a sample of 1,577 students was obtained in the first wave and 1,335 in the second. As will be discussed in the limitations section of the study, it is not possible to determine to what extent the sample has bias concerning the population, since the only data we have about enrolment is what the Association of Second Chance Schools provides on its website. It reports that there were 7,855 young people enrolled in the 2021–22 academic year, but no information on the socio-demographic profile of these young people is provided. As in all longitudinal studies, the sample has a percentage of attrition; in the case of the study population, the level of attrition is high since only 744 of the students surveyed in the first wave answered the second questionnaire. The discrepancy in the number of respondents between the two waves of the questionnaire is due to the turnover in Second Chance Schools. This is because students often leave the school for various reasons (e.g. completing their training, entering the job market, or engaging in other personal projects), and new students enrolled in the meantime. As such, the two samples partially overlap but are not identical. Despite these limitations, the sample size can be considered optimal for following the analytical strategy adopted and testing the hypotheses.

The analytical strategy used is a preliminary descriptive analysis of all the variables used, an analysis via logistic regression models for the testing of H1 and H2, and a bivariate analysis for the testing of H3. The nature of the dependent variables (expectations and outcomes) allows us to dichotomize them, and the nature of the independent variables (all categorical, some ordinal) makes the logistic regression analysis appropriate. For H3, due to the attrition of the sample and the short period from the longitudinal perspective, we constructed a typology of continuity or change and performed a bivariate descriptive analysis.

Analysis and discussion of the results

First, the descriptive data of the sample are presented in relation to the students' socio-demographic and academic profiles.

As shown in Table 1, almost 61% of the students were under 18 years of age, which means that the transition between secondary school and Second Chance School (SCS) is very fast. The presence of 14- and 15-year-olds is controversial since, according to Spanish legislation, compulsory school lasts until individuals reach the age of 16, although young people aged 15 May be referred to an SCS when the school centre considers that it is the best option for the student. Some SCSs have cooperation mechanisms with secondary schools that allow shared schooling for 14- and 15-year-olds. In any case, this is an issue that will be reviewed in the application of the last education law approved in 2020, which designed the Basic Vocational Training for young people aged 14 and 15 years, a cycle that is integrated into secondary schools and which is being implemented in the 2023–24 academic year. On the other hand, 14% of participants are over 20 years old, which generates diversity in student groups and poses challenges for teams of educators to manage this diversity.

Regarding gender, almost 72% of the respondents were boys (the presence of non-binary people was not significant). This figure coincides with the fact of the masculinization of school dropouts (Borgna & Struffolino, 2017), although the SCS training offer may also have an impact, as there is a strong gender bias in the specialities they offer (welding, mechanics, etc.). One challenge of this type of programme is to precisely attract more girls who have disengaged from ordinary education and do not pursue training by offering programmes that interest girls with this profile, even if such efforts reproduce gender biases in the type of training.

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages of the social profile in the 1st wave and both waves.

Social profile		Descriptive 1 st wave		Panel respondents (1 st & 2 nd wave)	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Age	14–17 years	936	60.7%	496	66.8%
	18–20 years	382	24.8%	167	22.5%
	21–25 years	174	11.3%	66	8.9%
	26–30 years	49	3.2%	13	1.8%
	Total	1541	100%	742	100%
Gender	Male	1118	71.7%	545	74.0%
	Female	441	28.3%	191	26.0%
	Total	1559	100%	736	100%
Birth	Native	993	63.0%	481	64.7%
	Foreigner	582	37.0%	262	35.3%
	Total	1575	100%	743	100%
Family education	No studies or basic	319	20.2%	145	19.5%
	Medium or higher	876	55.5%	427	57.4%
	Does not know/Does not respond	382	24.2%	172	23.1%
	Total	1577	100%	744	100%
Economic situation	Without difficulties	725	46.5%	385	52.4%
	With difficulties	383	24.6%	172	23.4%
	Severe	339	21.7%	141	19.2%
	Very severe	113	7.2%	37	5.0%
	Total	1560	100%	735	100%

Note: Sample 1st wave = 1577. Sample from both waves = 744.

Regarding the place of birth, 37% of the participants were born abroad. Nationality was not asked about, so it is possible that some people born in Spain had foreign nationality. In any case, it is a group that is overrepresented in relation to the percentage it has in secondary education and at the young age group. It must also be said that this percentage varies depending on the SCS, as some schools have a higher concentration of students of immigrant origin, but this issue is not one of the objectives of this study.

Regarding the family situation, the data shows a much more diverse and complex scenario than expected since students from families with little cultural and economic capital do not represent the majority. Only 20% of the students came from families with little education, and almost 30% lived in homes with severe or very severe economic difficulties. These data provide a more complex view of students who disengage from ordinary education and who construct training pathways with difficulties and indicate greater heterogeneity in the social composition of the SCS.

The following table shows the students' academic profiles prior to schooling in the SCS (Table 2).

Regarding the school experience before entering the SCS, most of the students had a negative experience (Table 2) as mentioned in Aymá *et al* (Aymá González *et al.*, 2025). Three out of four repeated at least one grade, which confirms the accumulated knowledge in the literature that repetition is a powerful predictor of school dropout (Amitay *et al.*, 2018). Second, 70% of students experienced bullying, a high figure that reflects a very complex situation in secondary schools (Van Den Berghe *et al.*, 2024). Almost 44% of the students were expelled at least once from the institute, which is also a high figure and indicates a high level of behavioural disengagement. In addition to this negative view of the school experience, a high percentage of students did not perceive that they received educational support from the school (47%) or teachers (28% none and 31% only partially). It seems clear that this negative experience marked the itineraries of these

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of the academic profile in the 1st wave and both waves.

Academic profile		Descriptive 1 st wave		Panel respondents (1 st & 2 nd wave)	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Educational support	Yes	773	53.2%	377	54.3%
	No	681	46.8%	317	45.7%
	Total	1454	100%	694	100%
Suspension	Yes	671	43.9%	309	42.4%
	No	858	56.1%	419	57.6%
	Total	1529	100%	728	100%
Bullying	Yes	441	30.0%	211	29.7%
	No	1029	70.0%	499	70.3%
	Total	1470	100%	710	100%
Attention of teachers	Yes	615	40.6%	293	40.9%
	Partly	477	31.5%	234	32.7%
	No	421	27.8%	189	26.4%
	Total	1513	100%	716	100%
Repetition	Yes	1146	74.5%	566	77.5%
	No	392	25.5%	164	22.5%
	Total	1538	100%	730	100%
Absenteeism	Yes	404	27.8%	156	22.2%
	No	1051	72.2%	546	77.8%
	Total	1455	100%	702	100%

Note: Sample 1st wave = 1577. Sample from both waves = 744.

young people, which is why they sought in the SCS an environment that differed greatly from what they experienced in secondary schools (McGregor et al., 2015). Interestingly, this negative experience is not necessarily cumulative. That is, no student profile concentrates on all negative situations, probably due to the multiplicity of influencing factors. Family poverty, ethnic discrimination, bullying, teasing, and the lure of paid work are among the factors involved (Espinoza et al., 2022). At the methodological level, a principal component analysis was carried out as a preliminary step of a classification analysis, but the degree of inertia of the factors was very low, which generated considerable dispersion in the results. In other words, there is no significant group of students that concentrates on all negative situations.

The following table presents the descriptive results of the expectations that the students had at the beginning of the 2022–23 academic year and their perceptions of the skills they acquired over the 2022–23 academic year (Table 3).

The questionnaire asked about different objectives that young people had when enrolling in the SCS. For most of these young people, it was their first year at the school, so this question corresponds to their expectation prior to incorporation. To simplify the analysis, three types of situations were considered. The first situation emphasizes the return to education. The second situation combines this return to education with an interest in job placement in the short term. The third situation, representing a small minority, is that of young people who have no interest in either returning to training or entering the job market but who focus their expectations on improving their personal situation.

Fifty-six percent of the students had the main objective of returning to training, and 42% incorporated employment as an objective with respect to what they expected from SCS.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages of expectations at the beginning of the 2022–23 academic year and the perception of the skills acquired at the end of the 2022–23 academic year.

		Descriptive 1 st wave	
		Frequency	Percentage
Expectations of the SCS	Formative and personal	832	56.2%
	Labour, training and personal	625	42.2%
	Personal	24	1.6%
	Total	1481	100%
		Panel respondents (1 st & 2 nd wave)	
		Frequency	Percentage
Basic skills	Few or no skills	124	16.9%
	Enough or many skills	507	69.1%
	I already had these skills	103	14.0%
	Total	734	100%
Social or personal skills	Few or no skills	148	20.2%
	Enough or many skills	493	67.2%
	I already had these skills	93	12.7%
	Total	734	100%
Professional skills*	Few or no skills	58	10.4%
	Enough or many skills	477	85.8%
	I already had these skills	21	3.8%
	Total	556	100%

Note: N 1st wave = 1577. N of both waves = 744. *N of both waves with professional itinerary = 558.

Regarding the results of the training, the data in Table 3 show the different skills the students acquired in the SCS. 69% of the students considered their basic skills to have increased substantially, 67% considered their social or personal skills to have increased substantially, and 85% considered their professional skills to have increased substantially (for this question, only the students who had followed the training of a vocational nature were considered; hence the reduction in the sample). This notable success is undoubtedly due to the characteristics of the educational model of the schools and the profile of the teachers, who developed an educational environment very different from that experienced by young people in ordinary secondary schools (Van Den Berghe et al., 2024). For example, teachers in these schools often adopt a highly personalized approach, combining academic support with emotional guidance, flexible methodologies, and close, trusting relationships (Pasternáková et al., 2023; Van Den Berghe et al., 2024). However, the negative note is that 17% of the students stated that they learned few or no basic skills, and 20% learned few or no social or personal skills. It is also significant that 14% and 13% of the students declared that they have not improved in basic and sociopersonal skills because they already had them. This data generates a double reflection, in both the efficiency of the model and the student selection mechanism. Regarding efficiency, Table 5 provides some data on the profile of the students who reported acquiring the least skills. Regarding the selection, the profile of the students who already had competencies was not analysed, but it indicates a certain imbalance in the diagnosis of the candidates when they enter second chance schools.

The students' background significantly shapes their expectations

To test the first hypothesis, a logistic regression model was constructed with the sample from the first wave, as shown in the following table (Table 4).

From the *odd ratios* in Table 4, it can be deduced that there are few differences in the educational or work expectations of the students based on their sociodemographic and

Table 4. Odds ratios of expectations in accessing the SCS (work versus training) based on students' sociodemographic and academic profiles.

		No educational support (ref. educational support)	1.078
Age group (ref. 14 to 17)			
Age group (18–20)	1.128	Suspension (ref. No suspension)	.806 +
Age group (21–25)	1.311	Bullying (ref. No bullying)	.960
Age group (26–30)	1.683	Repetition (ref. No repetition)	.685 **
Gender (ref. Male)	.907	Absenteeism (ref. No absenteeism)	1.025
Origin (ref. Native)	1.792 ***	Without teacher attention (ref. Yes and in part)	.940
Family without education or with basic education (ref. Intermediate or higher studies)	1.334 *	Constant	1.007
Economic situation (ref. Without difficulties)			
Economic situation (with difficulties)	.935		
Economic situation (severe)	1.116		
Economic situation (very severe)	1.505		
Constant	.520		
Nagelkerke's R2	.053		.015

Note: + $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Odds ratios of improvement in basic, social and personal skills and professional skills (enough or many skills versus few or no skills) according to the sociodemographic profile of the SCS students.

	Basic skills	Social and personal skills	Professional skills
Age group (ref. 14 to 17)			
Age group (18–20)	1.888*	1.585	1.868
Age group (21–25)	4.429*	4.164*	1.817
Age group (26–30)	sm	2.281	sm
Gender (ref. Male)	.902	.878	.984
Origin (ref. Native)	1.571+	1.813*	2.000
Family without education or with basic education (ref. Intermediate or higher studies)	1.508	1.313	.815
Economic situation (ref. Without difficulties)			
Economic situation (With difficulties)	.422**	.817	.482+
Economic situation (Severe)	.466*	1.825+	.760
Economic situation (Very severe)	.579	.574	.349
Constant	4.033	5.415	9.902
Nagelkerke's R2	.096	.083	.057

Note: + $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, sm: insufficient observations.

academic profiles, and the percentage of total variance explained by the model is low. However, there are some interesting and significant facts. Students of immigrant origin are more likely to have a work goal than native students, and students from families with a low educational level are also more likely to have a work goal. Neither the student's age or gender nor the family's economic situation determines the type of expectation that students have when they enter SCS. Regarding the profile or previous school experience, repetition and suspension are predictors of a lower propensity for having a work objective and, therefore, of a greater propensity to return to training as a goal. These results, in relation to the first hypothesis, are contradictory. On the one hand, it seems contrasted that a more vulnerable social situation would increase the opportunity cost of continuing to study and therefore lead to a greater propensity for labour insertion. However, young people with poor experience in secondary school do not seem to give more priority to job placement. This could be understood as a clear strategy to take advantage of the second opportunity to redo a training itinerary with better expectations of success (Van Den Bergh et al., 2024).

The student's background also influences their outcomes

To test the second hypothesis, three logistic regression models were developed, one for each type of skill. The results are separated into two tables, one presenting the socio-demographic variables (Table 5) and the other presenting the academic profile variables (Table 6), both of which include the sample from both survey waves.

In this table, the profile that has the greatest impact on the acquisition of competencies is age; the older the student is, the greater the propensity to respond with 'enough or many skills' regarding the acquisition of basic skills and social and personal skills. The propensity of the oldest group is four times greater than that of the youngest group. It is likely that older young people are more aware of the importance of acquiring skills to improve their training itineraries and increase the probability of employment or that young people under 18 years of

Table 6. Odds ratios of improvement in basic, social, and personal skills and professional skills (enough or many versus few or no skills) according to the academic profile of the SCS students.

	Basic skills	Social and personal skills	Professional skills
No educational support (ref. educational support)	.647+	.695+	1.032
Suspension (ref. No suspension)	.744	.592**	.769
Bullying (ref. No bullying)	1.045	.697	.531
			+
Repetition (ref. No repetition)	.754	.735	.421
Absenteeism (ref. No absenteeism)	.694	1.428	.979
Without teacher attention (ref. Yes and in part)	1.542	1.263	1.177
Constant	7.290	6.298	23.982
Nagelkerke's R2	.031	.040	.035

Note: + $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, sm: insufficient observations.

age still have low learning inertia following their secondary education experience. Students of immigrant origin are also more likely to respond that they have acquired enough or many skills, although the coefficient has a low level of significance. The literature points to greater ambition regarding educational expectations and willingness to learn among students of immigrant origin and their families. Counterintuitively, the educational level of the family is not significant. The students with the most economic problems are the ones with the greatest propensity to choose the option of few or no basic skills acquired. However, they tend to acquire more social and personal skills, although with a very low level of significance. Regarding professional skills, there is practically no significant odds ratio, so the high degree of acquisition observed in the descriptive analysis is found in all profiles. In any case, these data reflect the importance of working beyond what is strictly educational background and considering the problems of families in a situation of poverty.

In general, the profile or school experience in the school where students attended compulsory secondary school has no effect on students' acquired skills (it should be remembered that it is the perception of skills acquisition) (Table 6). This means that the educational model of the SCS counteracts most of the negative situations' students experienced in relation to learning. However, there are two predictors of lower acquisition of skills, namely, lack of educational support and suspension (the latter only for social and personal skills). These aspects of negative school experience are predictors of negative effects in the medium term of bad school experience, effects that are more difficult to compensate for in an SCS.

The second hypothesis is partly confirmed in relation to the sociodemographic profile, especially with respect to the variable of economic difficulty. Students of immigrant origin, a priori with a more precarious situation, obtain more skills, as do older students. Regarding the academic profile, in general, the negative experience in school does not affect the degree of students' skills acquisition, with the important exception of students who did not have much educational support and who were expelled with some regularity.

The impact of training outcomes on students' expectations is greater among those facing higher levels of educational and social vulnerability

For the third hypothesis, a bivariate table was constructed in the first place to compare the initial situation and the final situation concerning the students' expectations or objectives (Table 7).

According to the data in Table 7, four different situations can be distinguished, which respond to four groups of students with different strategies. Two groups did not modify their expectations; that is, they maintained their expectations regarding a return to the educational system or labour insertion (it must be remembered that it is an expectation that does not exclude the return to training). In addition, two groups modified their expectations, namely, from training to job placement, and vice versa. In these two groups, it can be assumed that experience (life, learning, relationships with colleagues and educators) led to a change in their expectations. The greatest change is observed in the group whose expectation changed from labour insertion to a return to training; that is, these students postponed labour insertion in the interest of a more immediate return to education (most of these cases concern access to school-based vocational training). Almost half of those who started the course with job expectations changed their expectations to a focus on education. On the other hand, only 26% of those who started the course with educational expectations reoriented their strategy towards labour insertion.

To analyse whether this change was related to the profile of the students, a bivariate analysis was carried out with all the independent variables analysed in the previous models (Table 8). No significant differences were found in terms of either previous educational experience or, surprisingly, concerning the degree of skills acquired in the SCS training. Yet, there were some significant correlations with the sociodemographic profile, as shown in Table 8.

The most significant change was related to age. The youngest students were those with the greatest propensity to change from the initial work orientation to the final training orientation. On the other hand, older students present the opposite tendency, from an initial training orientation to a work orientation. With greater influence than previous school experience or the skills acquired in the SCS, age is a structural factor that determines the change in expectations: the youngest students understand that the best strategy is to accumulate training, and the young adults understand that this accumulation does not make as much sense because of the opportunity cost. On the other hand, given the permanence of expectations, it is significant to note that the most vulnerable students (families with low education and economic difficulties) are those who have greater continuity in their work expectations; that is, undergoing training has little impact on the possible change towards training continuity due to their initial disadvantage.

Table 7. Changes in expectations between the beginning and the end of the course ($V = 0.259$).

	Training objective (final)	Work goal (final)	
Training objective (start)	74%	26%	100% (331)
Work goal (start)	49%	51%	100% (244)

Table 8. Profile of SCS students according to the maintenance or change in expectations (percentage).

		Work continuity	Training continuity	From work to training	From training to work	Total
Age	14–17	16	48	23	13	100 (395)
	18–20	32	34	16	18	100 (126)
	21–25	37	22	13	28	100 (46)
	26–30	42	33	17	8	100 (12)
						100
Gender	Female	21	47	17	15	100 (150)
	Male	21	41	22	15	100 (429)
Birth	Foreigner	29	35	19	16	100 (209)
	Native	17	47	21	15	100 (371)
Family education level	Basic or no studies	31	32	17	20	100 (114)
	Medium or higher education	19	47	21	13	100 (339)
Family economic situation	Without difficulties	16	47	20	17	100 (309)
	With some difficulties	28	39	20	17	100 (137)
	With severe difficulties	24	40	20	16	100 (106)
	With very severe difficulties	36	28	28	8	100 (25)

Note: Shaded cells with standardized residuals ± 1.96 , $p < 0.05$.

In this sense, the third hypothesis is refuted since no impact of training on the change in expectations is observed, students with the most vulnerable profiles do not change their expectations, and when there is a change, it is attributed more to a structural variable (age) than to the purpose of the training received, at least in the terms that this training has been defined.

Conclusions

The study illustrates a little-known topic: the profile of second chance school students. Collaboration with Second Chance Schools has made it possible to obtain incomplete but significant data on this group of young people who have left the education system but entered a programme that promotes a return to education and/or vocational training to support better labour insertion.

The first relevant conclusion is that the profile of the students of these schools is more heterogeneous than it may seem a priori, given the definition of the target group of this type of training. The presence of students from families in a normalized situation, that is, with medium or high cultural and economic capital that allows them to live without too many difficulties, makes the real population served by these programmes more diverse. Although there may be different social compositions depending on the school, the global perspective indicates that this option is not exclusively for young people in situations of social exclusion or at risk of poverty

(Koutlas & Papakitsos, 2025). The research confirms that students' experiences in secondary schools are negative or very negative, which strengthens the second chance character of these schools and reaffirms the utility of the educational model that is far removed from the patterns of ordinary or standard schools (Van Den Berghe et al., 2024).

The second conclusion is that there is a certain correlation between a more vulnerable profile of the student body and their expectations aimed at job placement rather than continuity of training (Aymá González et al., 2025). In addition, a negative experience in secondary school does not imply a withdrawal from training but, on the contrary, a greater expectation of returning to ordinary training, in part to recover the lost opportunity.

The third conclusion is that the acquisition of basic, sociopersonal and professional competencies is very high, which undoubtedly represents the success of the SCS educational model. However, there are initial student profiles with more difficulties in acquiring these skills, such as younger and native-born youth. These difficulties are also observed in young people with the most negative school experience (without support and with suspension).

The fourth conclusion is that there is more permanence than changes in the definition of expectations, so the role that schools can play in this change is limited. Even so, it stands out that there is a significant change in young people who start their training with a job expectation but who reorient their strategy towards training continuity, particularly in the case of the youngest group. On the other hand, the oldest students are the ones with a greater probability of the inverse change. It is highlighted that social vulnerability is correlated with the persistence of job expectations concerning the training expected and received in the SCS.

The research findings have practical implications for education policy in general, and for second chance programmes in particular. The first, and perhaps the most obvious, is that there is a need to increase levels of engagement in mainstream schools to reduce the risk of dropout (Pasternáková et al., 2023). To what extent it is possible to transfer the experience, the methodology, the know-how of second chance schools to mainstream schools is beyond the scope of this article, but it is certainly one of the major challenges for education policy. Regarding second chance schools, the most direct implication is the need to recognize the different profiles of young people and to adapt their methodologies to these different profiles (Aymá González et al., 2025; Pasternáková et al., 2023). Other implications would be to improve student selection processes and follow-up processes during and after training to assess the impact of this training on the return to the education system or access to the labour market.

Finally, some limitations of the study must be considered for future research and practice, considering the possible application of the above conclusions. The main limitation of the study is the impossibility of extrapolating the results to the entire population enrolled in Second Chance Schools, and, much less, to all young people enrolled in all second chance programmes. The second limitation has to do with attrition, which is normal in longitudinal studies but greater when the study group is young people in vulnerable situations, as is the case here. Finally, a more exhaustive analysis with the incorporation of more variables would be necessary to establish more robust relationships between the training provided and the impact on young people.

Notes

1. <https://www.e2oespana.org/>; <https://reseau-e2c.fr/>; <https://e2oportugal.org/>; <https://educaops.eu/second-chance-school/>
2. https://e2c-europe.org/?page_id=541
3. In Spain, compulsory schooling covers primary school and lower secondary education up to the age of 16.

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