Conceptualizations of school dropout and retention from Chilean educational actors' perspectives

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In Chile, despite recognizing the role of schools in retention and dropout, research on the vision of educational actors regarding the conceptualizations attributed to these concepts is scant. Instead, research has focused more on understanding the causes and consequences of the aforementioned phenomena. Using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological scope, this study interviews teachers, school authorities, and support professionals in four schools in Valparaíso, Chile, to understand the meaning and importance they attribute to school retention and dropout. These educational establishments have the particularity of having a high rate of students at risk of dropping out; however, simultaneously, they manage to retain them, according to the indicators designed by the central government. Study shows that school dropout and retention are described as multidimensional phenomena linked to each other, against which schools play an important role. These findings coincide both with what has been described in the literature and what the Chilean Ministry of Education has tried to promote, thereby giving schools more accountability over these educational phenomena and their solution. Therefore, these ways of understanding such concepts could allow laying foundations for systematic action for ensuring successful educational trajectories for young people and adolescents.

Introduction

Research in recent years has shown that successful high school graduation promotes positive social and economic outcomes for individuals and at the national level (Chhaing, 2021;

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Murphy-Graham, Pacheco, Cohen & Valencia, 2021). Educational systems implement strategies to prevent students from interrupting or abandoning their school careers, focusing their resources on promoting school retention and preventing dropouts. From this perspective, both educational phenomena are conceived as part of a whole because the loss of students in an educational center inevitably leads to a drop in retention rates (Márquez et al., 2016), and strategies are designed and implemented to support students to finish their schooling (Rumberger, 2020).

School retention is regarded as "students' continued study until successful completion" (Fowler & Luna, 2009 p. 70) and, additionally, as a set of strategies that prevent the effects of dropping out in students' educational trajectories (Román, 2013). School dropout, although it does not have a univocal definition (Acevedo, 2021; González, Vieira & Vidal, 2019; Márquez et al., 2016; Xavier & Meneses, 2020) because each country attributes it to different years or stages of schooling (Momo, Cabus, De Witte & Groot, 2018), usually refers to "a person who is no longer in school and does not have an upper secondary educational qualification" (Lamb & Markussen, 2011, p. 5) and "a situation in which students voluntarily leave their studies and school before the expected age" (Symeou, Martínez & Álvarez, 2014, p. 115), etc.

Despite the diversity of conceptualizations, there is consensus in understanding school dropout as a phenomenon attributable to the interactions of multiple family, individual, school, and community factors (Gil, Antelm, Cacheiro & Pérez, 2019; González et al., 2019; Singh & Mukherjee, 2018). Among the explanatory theories to understand this phenomenon, an outstanding proposal is that of Singh and Mukherjee (2018), who based on the social-ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) recognize three factors that trigger dropout: push factors (push out), attraction (pull out), and option for exclusion (opting out). The first factor is found within the school system (i.e., lack of resources and academic support), the second one is outside it (i.e., need for paid work), and the last one corresponds to attitudes and behaviors of the students themselves that lead them to choose not to attend school (i.e., disinterest and lack of commitment to school).

Today, in the current political and educational discourse, the phenomenon of school dropout is addressed through an inclusive lens, acknowledging that the causes of school dropout are not exclusively individual, but rather the educational system as a whole (UN WOMEN, 2021). From this perspective, school dropout is the result of educational institutes not being able to interact adequately with the sometimes-difficult life experiences of students (Portales, Cortés & Peters, 2019), so the risk factors found in the characteristics of educational centers have been the focus of attention (Mac Iver, 2011). In this regard, various investigations agree that both the structure and resources of a school, as well as the quality of the teachers and the teaching and learning methods, are directly associated with school dropout (De Witte & Cabus, 2013; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Mughal, 2020; Wilkins & Loujeania, 2016). In the same way, the lack of orientation through the study plans and the presence of differentiated curricula that do not match the characteristics of the students can influence early school dropout (De Witte & Cabus, 2013; Lee & Burkam, 2003).

Furthermore, the literature reveals innumerable negative personal consequences in the long term for boys, girls, adolescents, and young people who drop out of the formal educational system, among which are unemployment, low-skilled jobs, lower income, and risk of incarceration (Dussaillant, 2017; Lee-St. John et al., 2018). Likewise, it entails important social costs, such as low economic growth rates, high unemployment and crime rates, and public health problems, among others (González et al., 2019; Marlow & Rehman, 2021; Mughal &

Aldridge, 2017). In this context, it is essential that countries, especially the ones from Latin America and the Caribbean, where the dropout rates have increased exponentially (UNESCO, 2020), activate effective policies and interventions (Contreras, González, Láscar & López, 2022) because the personal and social scope of school dropout is very wide (Rose & Bowen, 2021).

In this regard, although in the last 20 years Chile has implemented numerous actions to prevent students from leaving their establishments, highlighting—from 2004 to date—the School Retention Plan (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2017), the latest official data reveal a high percentage of adolescents and young people who have not completed compulsory schooling. Indeed, the National Socioeconomic Characterization Survey estimates that 12.3% of the population aged 18 years or above has not completed secondary education (Ministry of Social Development and Family, 2017), and "Indicators of Education 2019" (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2019a) reveals that the largest number of dropouts from the regular system is in the first year of secondary school. These indicators show that current Chilean educational policies are insufficient to meet the goals and challenges of the educational context; therefore, they should be studied not only in terms of their design and evaluation system but also in terms of their implementation (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012).

However, during the last five years, research on school retention and dropout in Chile has focused on investigating the causes and consequences of school dropout and characterizing schools based on their retention practices and levels (i.e., Arriagada et al., 2022; Carvajal & Cervantes, 2017; Contreras et al., 2022; Dussaillant, 2017; Ministry of Education of Chile, 2019b; Peña, Soto & Calderón, 2016; Valenzuela, Contreras & Ruiz, 2019), without delving into the conceptualizations of educational agents regarding these matters. The latter would prove valuable as it would contribute to a better understanding of not only how educational communities suffer dropout (Mughal, 2020) but also how they recognize and act upon it (Knesting-Lund, Reese & Boody, 2013). Indeed, they are responsible both for interpreting, implementing, and adapting educational policies to their own realities (Meo, 2014) and for managing them appropriately (Ministry of Education, 2016).

However, although the literature has investigated the factors that influence school dropout, it does not focus on understanding the processes that occur around the phenomenon based on the stories of the participants (Hunt, 2008), among which how they understand it should be a priority and even before how they deal with it. In this scenario, emphasizing the conceptualizations of school authorities, teachers, and school support professionals is essential because they provide a basis for promoting retention and preventing dropouts. In other words, knowing the meanings attributed by educational actors is important to further develop interventions developed by them (Knesting-Lundet et al., 2013) In particular, addressing education professionals' conceptualizations of these educational phenomena can contribute to a better understanding of how they understand and, subsequently, act on these problems (Cismaru & Ivan, 2016). In particular, this could be even more valuable if observed in schools that, even having factors that contribute to dropout, manage to retain their students. Thus, studying their conceptualizations constitutes the previous step to approaching practices, allowing us to know what lies at the base.

Therefore, this study seeks to understand in-depth the conceptualizations that school authorities, teachers, and support professionals attribute to retention and dropout in schools that, despite having considerable rates of students at risk of dropping out, achieve an average retention rate similar to or higher than the national average. The above is to characterize those

establishments that successfully protect the educational trajectories of their students, along with the challenges and needs they face to achieve this purpose.

Thus, this research study constitutes an important approach to the current reality of Chilean educational communities, as it provides relevant information for those responsible for educational policies and other professionals.

Materials and Methods

To achieve the study goal, a qualitative methodology was used (Maxwell, 2019) based on a phenomenological design because it allows studying subjectivities and the meaning that individuals give to the phenomenon under research (Fuster, 2019). The selection of the approach and research design is relevant due to the significance of the perspectives of educational players toward the conceptualization of school dropout and retention.

Both the question and design of the study were conceived from a participatory approach, that is, actively including the subjects in creating knowledge and research "*with* and not *on* or *about* or *for* individuals and communities" (Macaulay, 2017, p. 258). In particular, it seeks to reveal the conceptualizations associated with school dropout and retention so that, in future studies, we have relevant information to create and promote practices to avoid school abandonment.

Study setting and sample participants

This study corresponded to the first phase of the FONDECYT initiation project No. 11200537, financed by the National Research and Development Agency (ANID), Chile; therefore, the selection criteria for establishments and participants were the same as the project, as follows:

(1) Educational institutions that provide secondary education in any of the communes of the Valparaíso region because it ranks second at the national level (after the Metropolitan region) with regard to the number of dropouts from the regular system (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2019a),
(2) public and private subsidized dependency establishments because the highest number of school dropouts is reported in this type of center (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2019a),
(3) educational centers having a School Vulnerability Index of 75% or more because this index recognizes vulnerable students not only in terms of socioeconomic situation or performance but also based on the evidence of the risk of school dropout (National School Aid and Scholarship Board, n.d.); and
(4) educational establishments with a School Retention Score (another indicator measured by the central government) equal to or higher than the national average (Education Quality Agency, 2016).

From the above, 237 establishments met all the requirements. With this information, the Local Education Service of Valparaíso (Chile), a state body that administers public educational centers in the region, was contacted. The organization facilitated preliminary contact with five institutions, of which four ultimately agreed to participate in the research. These educational centers provided polyvalent—that is, both scientific-humanist and technical-professional—secondary education.

Within each establishment, a theoretical sampling of subjects was carried out until theoretical

saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), seeking to interview school authorities (i.e., school authorities, heads of the technical-pedagogical unit, and/or inspectors); teachers (i.e., of subjects and/or heads of course); and support professionals (i.e., psychologists, social workers, and/or counselors). In total, 47 people (10 men and 37 women) were interviewed, who had an average of 9.4 years of experience working in these educational centers. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of participants according to their role in the establishment.

Table 1. Number of interviewees according to role in the establishment.

	School authorities	Teachers	Professionals	Total
School 1	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	1 (17%)	6 (100%)
School 2	2 (13%)	9 (56%)	5 (31%)	16 (100%)
School 3	2 (20%)	5 (50%)	3 (30%)	10 (100%)
School 4	4 (27%)	5 (33%)	6 (40%)	15 (100%)

Data collection methods

Semi-structured in-depth individual interviews were conducted because this technique enables collecting a great wealth of information from the interviewees (Valles, 2007). Given the physical distancing recommendations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews with an approximate duration of 45–90 minutes were conducted through Zoom during the months of September and December 2021. Other studies with techniques and approaches similar to this research have used this platform during data collection (e.g. Ulutaş, Gündüz & Kirlioğlu, 2022), achieving their objectives despite concerns that may arise from the use of telematic tools in more participatory designs.

Data analysis methods

All the interviews were transcribed, and a qualitative content analysis was carried out (Gläser & Laudel, 2013) using the AtlasTi 9 software. Content analysis, which is an empirical, methodological, and controlled analysis of information within its communication context (Mayring, 2000), was carried out through an open coding process guided by the data in order not to have preconceived ideas (Gibbs, 2013) and to identify conceptualizations of both dropout and school retention from the same actors. At the beginning of the coding process, the codebook was adjusted during reflective instances, which allowed for not only a better fit of the book to the data content but also the determination of coding rules to ensure the internal reliability of the study through the agreement of several observers based on the reviewed material (Martínez, 2006). Further, this process was supported by memos that explained the idea behind each code and how it should be applied (Gibbs, 2013).

The study's reliability was ensured through constant dialogue between the researchers (Martínez, 2006) and a series of technical resources such as field notebooks and data triangulation (Valles, 2007).

Ethical considerations

The first contact was made with school directors to explain to them the objectives and scope of the study. Those who agreed to participate appointed a person in charge, who provided the researchers with the contacts of the educational actors to be interviewed. Through emails, they were informed of the purpose of the research and their rights as participants. It was also clarified that their participation was optional and voluntary, regardless of whether the facilitator had provided their contact. Finally, confidentiality and anonymity were assured; therefore, the participants are presented without mentioning their names or any identifying data. All this

information was also explained in an attached informed consent form, which had to be signed and returned to the researchers by those choosing to participate in the study.

These considerations follow the ethical principles listed by National Research and Development Agency (ANID), Chile, which is the funding entity for this research.

Results

Two major themes emerged through content analysis: "Dropout as forced abandonment: individual decision or collective failure?" and "Retention as a strategy to respond to difficulties and ensure a better future." Nine subtopics were identified (four of these refer to ways of understanding dropout and five to ways of understanding retention). First, the different conceptualizations of school dropout are introduced, followed by retention conceptualizations.

Dropout as forced abandonment: Individual decision or collective failure?

A hasty exit

As a first approximation, different actors of educational communities conceive school dropout as "giving up," where the one who drops out is the student and what they leave is the system as a whole and in an "indefinite" way.

> We understand dropout clearly when the child leaves the school system and not just our school. Deep down, they no longer enroll in any other establishment and are left without education (Principal, School 3).

For students, dropping out as giving up implies a change or leap from school life toward the beginning of another stage that is not necessarily better but that responds to an imperative objective to be conquered in the short term (survival).

> I understand dropout as any type of abandonment of studies—not just leaving school but also starting work or military life (School authority, School 4).

Consequently, the notion of dropout provides clues about reasons that interviewees identify for students dropping out—in other words, the urgent needs, or obligations that students face and that lead them to leave the educational system (i.e., paternity, maternity, need to generate income, etc.). This also accounts for actors' multicausal perspectives regarding dropout because they understand it as a problem that is triggered by both internal and external variables.

> Dropout, for me, is when a student, because of different difficulties, whether academic, socioeconomic, psycho-emotional, or all of the above, stops studying in the system, either in one establishment or another (Teacher, School 4).

In short, dropout is conceived as a cessation produced by pressures that the student is faced with. These pressures, at some point, reach their maximum tension, forcing students to make a decision.

The turning point: The student's decision

For the different internal and external factors to result in dropout, the final decision of the student is essential. This becomes an action that ends their participation in the formal

educational system. From this perspective, dropout is conceived as a matter in which students have the last word. However, there are different opinions about whether something can or cannot be done about this decision. This shows not only a particular way of viewing the phenomenon (as a reversible or irreversible decision, of individual or collective action, and that is influenceable or not) but also the margin of action of the different educational actors. In cases where dropout is understood as an irreversible, individual, and non-influenceable decision, the interviewees state that the actions of the establishment would not necessarily have an impact on students continuing their studies.

> Sometimes there is not much to do because they come with the decision made, and despite having made referrals to psychologists, counselors, or social workers—despite all that— there is not much else to do (Teacher, School 3).

Although these cases seem to be minimal, reversing the decision to leave the educational system is even more complex when students have their families' support because the possibility of intervention by the establishment is considerably reduced.

> We have come across cases of students who say "Teacher, I don't… I am not smart enough and I don't want to study." They say no again and again, and there is no way to make them understand, and their parents also support this. So, in such situations, one can no longer do anything (Teacher, School 4).

In the face of these less frequent cases, the accounts of interviewees show the recognition of the responsibility that falls to them because—as leaders of educational institutions—they should be able to intervene before the students decide to drop out, independently of whether they have their family's support.

> We cannot take responsibility away from ourselves. It also has to do with something that we are not doing, with something that we are, perhaps, leaving aside. That is why it seems to me that the previous aspect, that is, prevention, dissemination of good practices, and how to be prepared for it, is the best defense so that it does not happen (School authority, School 1).

From this perspective, the turning point that leads to dropout can be prevented, and if not, it can be considered the school's failure.

Failure of institutional management as a trigger for abandonment

Among the most frequent reports, understanding dropout as schools' failure was identified insofar as it is related to poor management. This view accounts for the meaning attributed to educational leadership, a transcendental element for the design and implementation of practices that prevent school dropout.

> If you ask me for a definition that goes beyond the theory or what the definition itself tells you, it makes me feel a bit like I'm not doing the job right. It is like saying: What else do I do with the tools we have to prevent students from dropping out? (School authority, School 2)

Understanding school dropout as a failure of educational centers not only applies to school authority teams but also to teachers, who—being in direct contact with the students—perceive that it is an indicator that reflects a failure in their work.

> So, when you arrive in class and notice that a student is not there, and a few days later, you find out that they already left high school, you really feel like you failed in the sense that, perhaps, some strategies could have been implemented or perhaps the need for another type of support—that is, other than academic, perhaps emotional, related to the student's feelings (Teacher, School 3).

However, there are also reports that demonstrate a transversal and collective perspective of dropout, understood as a failure of the educational system as a whole and not exclusive to educational establishments.

Failure of the educational system

With regard to dropout, beyond individual responsibilities, an entire country "fails" the student who is forced to make this decision. It is, therefore, a systemic view of the phenomenon, which forces all members of the educational system to be in charge of its causes and consequences.

> We also see it not only as a failure from the institution but as a failure of the system as a whole that, perhaps, is not responding to the particular need of each of the students who leave the system (Professional, School 1).

In short, it is a problem of multiple origins that cannot be reduced solely to the desire of the students because there are structural circumstances that determine it. These conditions are related to the socioeconomic limitations of the students, which—although they transcend the obligations of the educational system—account for the reality established by the general social system.

> I believe that dropout has to do with the socioeconomic level of our students, in terms of external circumstances. Many of them, because of their socioeconomic level, are almost forced to drop out because they need to generate resources, their parents have no resources, and they contribute something (Professional, School 2).

Although this systematic view could seem hopeless for educational communities, they recognize that they have a limited, but important, margin of action to work on this failure. In short, this systemic view does not take away their responsibility in the matter, and this is where school retention comes in.

Retention as a strategy to respond to difficulties and ensure a better future

The "other pole": Understanding retention as the opposite of dropout

Inevitably, some actors in educational communities explain retention as that which opposes dropout. These conceptualizations, then, reveal the intimate relationship that exists between these phenomena.

> I think they are terms that go hand in hand. In reality, dropout and retention go together […] Perhaps, conceptually they could be different, but I feel that they go hand in hand with each other (Teacher, School 2).

Furthermore, although the interviewees are able to arrive at their own notions of what retention means, their discourses are too intertwined with their conceptualizations of dropout. Thus,

dropout is usually described "in a negative" sense, linked to concepts such as "giving up," "withdrawing," or "stopping studies." Conversely, everything that happens to avoid it is what they recognize as retention, and establishments are considered as having a fundamental role in this.

A strategy to keep students in the system

Trying to understand retention itself (without alluding to the concept of dropout), the interviewees understand the phenomenon as a series of actions with the ultimate goal of keeping students in the Chilean educational system.

> For me, retention, as such, is a strategy to keep students in the system (Principal, School 1).

Faced with this description, the study participants usually used two key concepts: "strategies" and "system." The first refers to all the actions that the educational institution deploys to promote students' continued presence in the establishment. Ultimately, it is about resources and networks of different types used for the benefit of students and that are characterized by not being limited to the academic field.

> Retention consists of strategies, mainly pedagogical, although there are other types, such as psychosocial ones, as well. It is a cluster, a set of strategies that are part of the strategic plan of the establishment (Teacher, School 2).

With regard to the second concept, despite the fact that teachers usually link retention with students' continuation in educational centers, mainly because the amount of enrollment is useful for the institution to access state funds and benefits, at the school authority level, there is agreement that retention concerns the Chilean educational system as a whole. That is, even if a student has gone to another establishment, there is still retention as long as schooling has not been interrupted.

> I am going to give an example of a student who is Chinese. A viewpoint of the school could be that we retain him so that he does not go to another school, but I know that there are Chinese students in another school and that he could go there, and I can make a connection for him to go there. That would still be retention because he remains within the school system (Principal, School 1).

Despite the above, the school authorities recognize the existence of pressures from the educational system to maintain (and/or increase) the number of enrollments. Thus, school dropout has an impact not only on the careers of youth but also on educational centers, for which retention is configured as an obligation.

School retention as a moral responsibility of educational institutions

Although the phenomenon of school dropout depends on many factors, school retention is described as an ethical imperative of the establishment toward its students. This moral duty, therefore, is what dictates the guidelines that the institution establishes regarding the matter.

> Retention has to do with something that we can do and that we can visualize from the path of promotion and of prevention—that is, not expecting it to happen (Principal, School 1).

Faced with this ethical responsibility, establishments mobilize a series of actions, networks, and resources to support youth in the completion of their educational careers. These actions include but are not limited to monitoring class attendance, maintaining a warm and dignified relationship with students, and working collaboratively to retain the student body. When these actions yield results, they are experienced as an achievement of the institution because they have a direct impact on the well-being of the student.

> From an institutional point of view, retention marks the success of management within an establishment because—in one way or another—it is focused on the successful completion of the student's school career (Principal, School 2).

However, some interviewees recognize that these actions are not always enough because of the contexts of poverty and vulnerability that surround the lives of their students. In this sense, the interviewees assume a large part of this responsibility, but they also direct their criticism at the central government, insofar as it does not guarantee minimum conditions for learning to take place and, therefore, for students to remain and complete compulsory schooling.

> It should not exist—that is, the system itself should support the student because we are, as public schools, the ones who suffer from this, yet these issues are beyond the scope of our educational faculties (Principal, School 1).

From this perspective, the ethical imperative that school retention implies directly holds establishments responsible. However, the participants in this study recognize that the educational system, in general, must be a guarantor of the provision of basic resources for students to successfully complete their educational careers, despite the personal and social obstacles they may face.

Resilient ones: School retention as a struggle against adversity

Because of adverse conditions, school retention is understood as a challenge that requires a significant effort to come to fruition. Giving up is easy, because there is a whole context of vulnerability that surrounds youth and that pushes them to make the decision of dropping out. Retention, then, is swimming against the current, which requires high levels of commitment from the entire school community.

> It is difficult to work in retention when there is so much vulnerability involved and when you have a segment of students that is closely linked to crime, drug addiction, and drug trafficking. In short, it is very easy for them to take that route (Professional, School 2).

Retention, finally, is to break the cycle of poverty to opt for better living conditions. Therefore, in this understanding, retention can be understood as a hope for or an optimistic view of the future.

> This illusion motivates them to continue studying (Professional, School 4).

However, while some educational actors describe retention as being based on an "illusion" about a better future, others mention the difficulties that exist when leaving secondary education because obtaining a license and/or an intermediate level technical degree does not guarantee success. In this sense, interviewees point out that family nuclei tend to have a hopeless position regarding education, which ultimately impacts the expectations that students have about their schooling.

> Mainly, speaking of parents, education is not deemed as important. So, the children, in general, tend to continue replicating the same patterns. For us, it is already a super powerful subject and suddenly complex to break that gap (Professional, School 2).

Despite these concerns, there is general agreement that retention has a positive impact on the student's life cycle. Therefore, the concept of retention is closely linked to that of educational career.

Retention and educational career: Linking schooling to personal development

Finally, school retention is linked to the concept of a successful educational career although this view is presented mostly by those in managerial and professional roles. Teachers, although they recognize the importance of finishing school, generally describe it in their own terms, without referring to the concept of "educational career." A successful educational career, then, would be one that ends formally and with significant learning, which enables the correct development of the student as a future adult inserted in society.

> Well, in my case, retention is the whole school and all the actions we do as a school so that students have a successful educational path that is continuous (Professional, School 3).

However, there are certain differences with what is understood by the "formal end" of the period. Considering that the educational establishments studied also provide technical-professional training, many of the interviewees assign more importance to obtaining the medium-level technical degree than to the secondary education license, which, in their own words, would have less impact. Based on this distinction, questions arise about why finishing school is relevant.

> The issue of graduating, that is, completing fourth year, is a mere formality. It is a procedure; for me, it is something administrative that shows that the student is fulfilling a curriculum from first to fourth year, but the value of a technical high school is that they can obtain a degree (Principal, School 2).

Despite multiple viewpoints, there is consensus that the completion of schooling is related to a series of positive consequences. Thus, retention is understood not only from the results it causes in individual well-being but also in the relevance that schooling has in the formation of citizens for the country.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the conceptualizations of school dropout and retention in four educational establishments in the Valparaíso Region, Chile, which, despite having considerable rates of students at risk of dropping out, achieved an average retention rate similar to or higher than the national average. As a first finding, these educational establishments understood both concepts as closely related to each other, as described in the literature (Márquez et al., 2016; Rumberger, 2020), such that dropping out of school triggers strategies for educational continuity (retention).

Second, a common aspect of these concepts, according to the educational communities studied, is the notion that both are the responsibility of educational establishments. Thus, dropout is described as a "failure" of the educational center and retention as an "obligation" or

"achievement" of the same. Although the literature already shows the relevance of establishments in promoting successful educational trajectories (Al-Hroub, 2014; Gil et al., 2019; Doll, Eslami & Walters, 2013), and these conceptualizations are in tune with the inclusive approach that has been wanted to give to these concepts in recent years (UN WOMEN, 2021) the fact that educational community actors recognize it as their own responsibility is, to a certain extent, an unusual result. This is because the literature shows that schools, in general, tend not to believe that they have a role in students' dropout or their decision to remain in the system and tend to blame other actors for negative results such as dropout (Mughal & Aldridge, 2017; Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2017). If we consider that central government understands both school dropout and retention as responsibility of the educational institution, since it corresponds to an indicator that is calculated for each school and is attributable to the educational institution if the dropout meets certain conditions (Ministry of Education of Chile, n.d.), it could be hypothesized that schools that are successful in retaining students are those that are aware of their responsibility in reducing dropout and promoting retention, and maybe, because of that understanding, they could have another conceptualizations, such as, for example, what is the specific role they should fulfil and what actions they should perform (e.g. Mendoza, Ballesta, Muñoz & Covarrubias, 2022).

The interviews revealed that educational players, demonstrate a strong commitment to the educational trajectories of their students because they recognize the role they have in this area. However, despite having good notions about why dropout occurs, often lack the tools or sufficient knowledge to deal with situations involving school dropout; therefore, "they do what they can". In some cases, these good intentions translate into concrete actions that safeguard the educational paths of youth (for example, monitoring attendance and maintaining positive relations with students). In other cases, however, students are so vulnerable that good intentions are not enough, and they leave the educational system. In this sense, it can be affirmed that there is a school structure and resources (De Witte & Cabus, 2013; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Mughal, 2020; Wilkins & Loujeania, 2016) that depend too much on the passion and vocation of educational actors. This narrows the range of action of establishments (they can only manage certain kind of cases and only if school workers are highly motivated), making it impossible to protect the fundamental right of the youth to education no matter the circumstances. Consequently, the results of this study indicate that school may require greater support from the central government to be more accountable of school dropout and promote successful graduation from compulsory education.

Anyway, taking "responsibility" for dropout and retention should not be understood as the only perspective on the subject, because although the establishments recognize their role in both phenomena, they also identify that they are part of a network of factors. Thus, a strong term emerges behind the concepts of school dropout and retention: the notion of "system," a word that is repeated in similar studies in other Chilean educational communities (Arriagada et al., 2022). There is extensive literature on understanding dropout and retention as part of a system, which describes the factors that expel (push out) and attract (pull out) students from educational communities, understanding the phenomenon from a social-ecological perspective (Singh & Mukherjee, 2018). Some of these factors present in the scientific evidence were mentioned by interviewees when referring to their understandings of retention and dropout, such as family environment (Symeou et al., 2014), poverty (Chugh, 2011), and the need to work to generate income (Al-Hroub, 2014). In other words, it can be hypothesized that the schools studied tend to explain the reasons for these phenomena in a multidimensional way, similar to what happens in academia.

Speaking specifically of school dropouts, one idea that has come up strongly is the importance attributed to students' decision, not as an instantaneous and unjustified element but rather as a process that is produced by a set of factors that leads to this final act led by the student, who at times is supported by their family. This idea is consistent with the literature, which identifies dropout as a personal decision caused by multiple factors (Arriagada et al., 2022) and a complex process to the extent that it is a decision that has previous manifestations even when students are still in school (Tvedt, Bru & Idsoe, 2021). In turn, this decision is accompanied by a cost-benefit analysis that students make about staying in school or not, where the costs seem to be higher than the benefits of jumping into the world of work (Chhaing, 2021). This reinforces and contextualizes the idea raised by the interviewees regarding dropout as a jump from one life to another, that is, the change from the world of school to the world of work.

Although it was previously mentioned that dropout is perceived as a student's decision, which is supported by parents at times, an important nuance evidenced by the literature is associated with the transcendental role that families play in preventing or promoting school dropout of their pupils (Gibbs & Heaton, 2014; Mughal, Aldridge & Monaghan, 2019; Symeou et al., 2014) and should not be forgotten that understanding school dropout as something individual goes against the guidelines that some organizations (UN WOMEN, 2021) and authors (Portales, Cortés & Peters, 2019) have wanted to give to the concept. Thus, the educational communities studied, despite identifying families as a factor, run the risk of oversimplifying the dropout phenomenon by understanding it as an individual decision. This finding is extremely important as it shows that even successful schools have several basic conceptions that should be reviewed (particularly when thinking about effective strategies).

Regardless of the above, dropout of school seems to be perceived as "natural," considering the challenging contexts described above. If dropping out is an expected result and is related to surviving current conditions, retention is linked to the concept of resilience and the fight for a better future. To achieve these purposes, the participants recognize that students are required to have the capacity to stand firm in the face of circumstances. However, educational stakeholders go further and identify that this stance is required not only from students but also from educational establishments, which must provide support to students to move forward. In this regard, there is no doubt about the positive effect established by specific actors (e.g., teachers) on students' well-being and academic results (Krane, Ness, Holter-Sorensen, Karlsson & Binder, 2017).

The results of this study can contribute to the development of knowledge on the subject in the country, since the experiences of how the educational communities targeted by educational policies understand dropout and retention can help improve current initiatives in this area. In Chile, research has already been done on the factors responsible for school dropout and its consequences on the life trajectory of individuals. However, this study fills a knowledge gap that on how these concepts are understood by educational establishments, particularly the most successful ones in terms of school retention. However, neither it is enough that the conceptualizations of educational communities on school dropout and retention are shared only as good practice nor that other schools (practitioners) align their discourses depending on what other effective educational establishments do, but this information must be taken by the Chilean Ministry of Education to establish guidelines that consider the voices of the schools to which they are addressed, adopting more participatory approaches.

In turn, this study is extremely valuable for the global scientific community, as it opens up new research questions. In the international literature, there is ample experience of studies that

question the causes, consequences, or strategies to prevent dropout (Al-Hroub, 2014; Carr & Galassi, 2012; Chenge, Chenge & Maunganidze, 2017; Gil et al., 2019; Mughal & Aldridge, 2017; Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2017); however, fewer studies have addressed the conceptualizations of dropout or school retention per se that exist. Therefore, this study raises questions that are prior to why and how school dropout occurs, which can be transcendental in finding solutions that, ultimately, protect the educational trajectories of children and adolescents (UNESCO, 2016).

Thus, these results invite us to reflect on the importance of the design and implementation of established protocols in schools to prevent dropout and promote retention. Regarding the foregoing, the Chilean educational system only suggests—through various documents addressed to educational institutions—orientations and guidelines on this subject (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2020; 2021) but has not determined a specific policy, unlike, for example, the issue of school coexistence, for which schools have an obligation to develop specific protocols and manuals (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2015). The above suggests that the current efforts of the Chilean Ministry of Education in terms of access, permanence, and successful graduation from secondary education must be accompanied by specific policies and support that allow regulating the practices that educational institutions establish for school retention. However, the current educational system has focused on actions such as the creation of a School Retention Plan (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2017), whose primary purpose is the injection of economic resources for schools, students, and their families.

The results of this study allow for the recognition by the educational system that the meanings and significance that educational communities assign to these educational phenomena are essential for the creation and implementation of policies adjusted to the realities and needs of the country's schools. In other words, before thinking about concrete solutions, the prior step of giving the problem back to the community and having them reflect on it themselves is undoubtedly relevant and significant.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the schools analyzed conceptualize dropout and retention in line (although with some exceptions) with what is described in the literature and the guidelines of the Chilean Ministry of Education, as they perceive them as part of their responsibility and the educational system. In particular, dropout can be defined as the indefinite abandonment of the educational system and retention as everything that is done to prevent it and ensure a better future for youth. The systemic and multicausal view of educational actors regarding both phenomena stands out because dropout is understood as a result of conditions of poverty and inequality while retention symbolizes the fight against these conditions.

These conceptualizations cannot be understood outside the context in which they originate or without the factors that produce them. Thus, educational actors' perspectives is key to educational intervention, to the extent that "what is understood" gives clues to "what to do" and "how to do it," which is essential if positive results are expected for the public policies that are implemented in this regard.

Limitations

In the approach to conceptualizations, it is imperative to mention factors that, according to the educational communities, are related to both educational phenomena. However, considering this study's specific objective, the way in which actors of establishments

understand these common factors (i.e., the relationships between them, which ones are more relevant than others, and if these beliefs align with past research findings) was not addressed in this study. For this reason, future studies could specifically analyze how educational actors explain these problems to know the volume of academic research findings that permeate schools (especially in developing countries such as Chile). Finally, it is recommended that further research incorporate perspectives that could not be recorded during this study, such as those of students themselves and their families.

It should be mentioned that although this study can provide guidelines to improve current school retention policies at the national and international level, through direct knowledge of different educational realities, the research study presented certain limitations. One of them is related to the number of participants in each educational center. Even though theoretical sampling was carried out until theoretical saturation was reached, it was not possible to count on the participation of all the educational players of each school studied. As mentioned in the methodological section, participation in this research was voluntary, so not everyone was willing to collaborate.

In the future, it would be useful to carry out case studies with the complete commitment of directors, teachers, and support professionals to deeply understand how the phenomena of school retention and dropout are configured in their respective educational communities and propose strategies aligned to their intra and extracurricular characteristics.

Acknowledgments

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