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Original article



High School Failure, a Systematic Review in the Social Sciences

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Introduction. This study aims to examine the issue of high school failure in social sciences through a systematic review. It aims to provide a critical assessment of research on this subject. It seeks to question the very construct of high school failure, its premises, and the possible consequences from this perspective.

Materials and Methods. The research published between 2010–2020, both in Spanish and English in the Scopus and Web of Science databases (Core collection), was considered. A total of 171 articles were identified. After initial screening, 37 papers were finally selected. Semantic maps were created with the Vosviewer. The literature was examined to determine where high school failure is being researched, what type of methodologies are most used and, finally, what impact the research has had on our understanding of this concept.

Results. It was found that most of the research on the topic is done in the field of education, and that the methodology used is predominantly quantitative. The different definitions of high school failure tended to attribute its cause to one or more of four reasons: student failure, multicausal phenomena, social exclusion, and finally, disability in the education system.

Discussion and Conclusion. It is possible to understand that high school failure is understood and defined as mostly involving students' responsibility for the academic outcome and achievement obtained. Although studies that cover such factors as a multicausal nature, social exclusion, and the education system's difficulty can be found, the responsibility for failure tends to be attributed to the individual student.

Keywords: school failure, school success, student, academic performance, educational psychology

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Оригинальная статья

Неуспеваемость в школе: систематический обзор публикаций в области социальных наук

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Введение. Целью исследования является изучение школьной неуспеваемости на основе обзора публикаций в области социальных наук. Авторы анализируют сложившуюся концепцию школьной неуспеваемости, ее предпосылки и возможные последствия.

Материалы и методы. Для изучения проблемы были отобраны исследования, опубликованные в период 2010–2020 гг. на испанском и английском языках в базах данных Scopus и Web of Science (основная коллекция). В общей сложности проанализирована 171 статья. С помощью программы Vosviewer созданы визуальные семантические карты.

Результаты исследования. Было установлено, что большинство исследований по данной теме проводится в области образования, используемая методология преимущественно количественная. Различные определения причин школьной неуспеваемости обусловлены следующими факторами: низкая мотивация самого учащегося, многофакторные явления, социальное отчуждение и недостатки в системе образования.

Обсуждение и заключение. Материалы статьи будут полезны специалистам системы школьного образования.

Ключевые слова: неуспеваемость в школе, успеваемость в школе, студент, академическая успеваемость, образовательная психология

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Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

Systematic reviews are an important resource for the development of a research topic. This methodological resource is based on the structured and methodical analysis of an adequate number of relevant and specialized publications [1]. A systematic review is defined as an integrative, observational, retrospective study in which the analysis of works that examine a particular topic and objective are combined¹.

Systematic reviews provide a rational synthesis of basic research. They overcome the limitations of narrative reviews by applying rigorous standards to secondary research

(where the unit of study is other research studies) as if they were being applied to primary research studies (original studies) [2]. This methodological approach has been used in various fields of study. In education and the social sciences, it has not been different; this is demonstrated by the growth in published systematic literature reviews over the last five years [3; 4].

In the particular case of school failure, systematic reviews have been carried out to address research questions that allow us to understand the possible causes of this phenomenon. Over the last year, we have seen systematic review studies that focus on such

¹ Egger M., Smith G.D., Altman D. Systematic Reviews in Health Care: Meta-Analysis in Context. Second Edition. London: BMJ Books; 2001. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9780470693926> (accessed 04.02.2021). (In Eng.)



topics as the role of classmates in the development of social anxiety in adolescents [5]; populations of students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [6]; the relationship between academic achievement and school discipline [7]; as well as academic programs and interventions to increase the interest and participation of children and youth with disabilities in education or STEM careers [8].

The diversity of these studies implies the possibility of integrating and grouping a vast amount of scientific research to facilitate an overview of information for decision-making and the development of future research on a specific topic [9].

Systematic reviews need to be carried out in an objective and rigorous manner and be meticulous, from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective [10]. To this end, such research includes the use of bibliometric tools to complement and strengthen the systematic review on school failure carried out here. Specifically, the use of co-occurrence and co-authorship analysis is employed to map representative concepts and indicators of collaboration in research on school failure. This approach has already been used to develop other systematic review studies [11].

The purpose of the present study is to review school failure as discussed within the field of the social sciences, and provide a critical overview of the development of research on school failure over the last decade. It seeks to question the very construct of school failure and the assumptions underlying research on this topic. The concept of school failure and other concepts related to this phenomenon are discussed, along with the causes and consequences that lead to failure.

Literature Review

Over the last decade, various studies have sought to clarify both the causes and factors influencing school failure [12; 13]. This demonstrates the relevance of research

to understand failure in different countries' educational systems and thus implement adequate educational policies to address this phenomenon, which is seen as a social problem [14] of significant impact on social and economic development.

Research that has addressed this phenomenon from a quantitative perspective has aimed to establish relationships between the factors that trigger school failure and the resulting variables that arise from this phenomenon [12; 15; 16]. The goal is to establish partnerships that allow the implementation of effective teaching strategies, improvement in educational policies, prevention and early detection.

Students living under poverty, marginality and social vulnerability tend to be associated with much of the repetition and situations considered as school failure² [17; 18]. In this context, school failure prevention is an important issue of relevance [19], not only in the field of education, but also in such areas as the economy and health, being understood as a multivariate phenomenon that affects not only the repeating individual, but also society and its development.

The causes of such failure are usually understood as being the student's exclusive responsibility, direct attributions to their intrinsic and personal qualities, which are considered deficient [16; 19] relative to the demands of the prevailing educational model. The concerns, causes and variables that affect school failure as an object of study and scientific interest arose in different educational research contexts in the seventies and eighties³. Within this context, research on academic failure or performance has been oriented in the first instance toward evaluating IQ. The second instance has incorporated socioeconomic risk factors and motivational factors of students as the main variables of academic performance [20].

More recent research has addressed aspects as diverse as factors associated with school performance and the effects of school

² Richards C. El desafío de aprender...el desafío de enseñar. Relatos para una educación más justa. LOM; 2017. Available at: <https://eldesafiodeaprender.cl/libro.pdf> (accessed 04.02.2021). (In Spa.)

³ Parker I. La psicología como ideología. Contra la disciplina. Los Libros de la Catarata; 2010. Available at: http://www.catedralibremartinbaro.org/pdfs/Parker_I_La_psicologia_como_ideologia.pdf (accessed 04.02.2021). (In Spa.)

failure on students [12; 21], seeking to promote prevention strategies to establish public policies for improving teaching in public education.

Research Questions. Conceptually defining the phenomenon of school failure has been considered an arduous task because it is a polysemic concept [22; 23]. Nevertheless, given the plurality of meanings of the idea of school failure, we seek to understand what is being considered as school failure in the social sciences by school failure. What are the main attributes that make up the concept of school failure? What are the causes and consequences of this assumed failure, and who is responsible for the failure itself?

The present article aims to systematize research evidence from the previous decade regarding school failure, determine the most commonly used methodological approaches, and analyze and understand how this phenomenon is defined.

Materials and Methods

Data collection. The data collected in this research were extracted from the Scopus and Web of Science databases (Core collection). We consider that the time range chosen allows us to have an organized overview of school failure's current research. The time range chosen allows us to have an organized overview of the current research on school failure. The search term used was school failure as used in the titles, abstracts and key-words within the social sciences and humanities. The data was extracted on October 5, 2020. Vosviewer software [24] has been used to create semantic maps that expose the most representative concepts within the studies of school failure. Likewise, co-authored country maps were employed for the purpose of annexing information for our systematic review analysis.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were research conducted in the last decade, 2010–2020, as a way to access the most current research on the subject. We have considered the research published in Spanish and English that addressed the phenomenon of school failure in the educational context. Both languages were chosen based on viability and relevance criteria:

a) from a practical perspective, they are the languages mastered by the research team and, b) English, as a lingua franca, allows us to access a wide spectrum of scientific publications, while Spanish allows us to report on what is happening with research on this topic in Latin America and Spain.

For this review's purposes, only articles were included, as it was important to collect all the necessary information in the coding of variables. No documents such as books, chapters, letters or other types of documents were included. As criteria for exclusion, we took into account a) research that does not focus on the phenomenon of school failure; b) studies of school failure in the context of higher education; c) studies that address the phenomenon of school failure as a phenomenon attributed to a condition of mental disability; d) school failure in the preschool context and e) school failure in the adult population.

Coding of variables. Once the selection criteria were established, a review of the documents was carried out according to the research method used, the objective synthesis of the research, and the definitions given to school failure. The documents extracted for the systematic review were grouped into general data and categorized into coded variables, to identify the various conceptions given to the phenomenon of school failure: 1) student non-achievement; 2) disability in the educational system; 3) social exclusion; and 4) multicausal.

Papers debugging. The debugging was carried out following the parameters developed by Urrutia and Bonfill [25]. The analysis of studies to select the final papers for the review was carried out first by examining the titles, then the abstracts and finally the full text (see Figure 1).

Results

In the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 171 articles were identified. Once the duplicates had been eliminated, a total of 150 were reviewed, and 37 were finally selected, corresponding to scientific publications that met the eligibility criteria for full-text review, among which the most important was to present a definition of the concept of school failure.

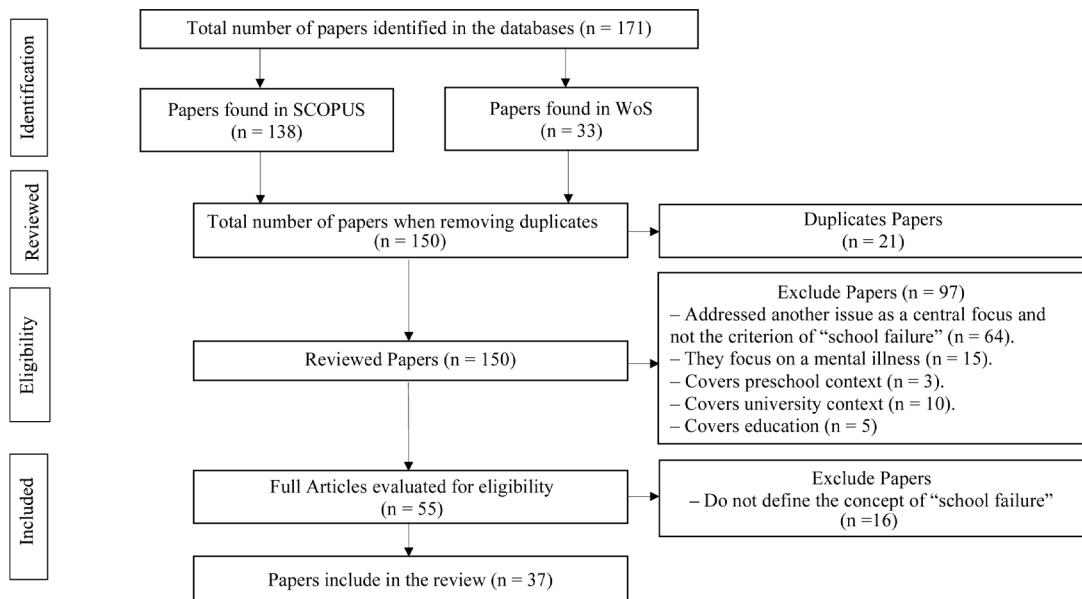


Fig. 1. Flow chart that summarizes the systematized bibliographic review and its results. It was adapted from the PRISMA Statement [25]

When researching the disciplines of origin of the main authors, it can be seen that the studies were carried out by scholars from different disciplines and specialities (see Figure 2), with the greatest number of contributions coming from the area of education

(n = 23), corresponding to almost half of the total number of areas of study. The other disciplines that contributed studies regarding school failure were psychology (n = 5), sociology (n = 3), economics (n = 2), philosophy (n = 2), health (n = 1) and law (n = 1).

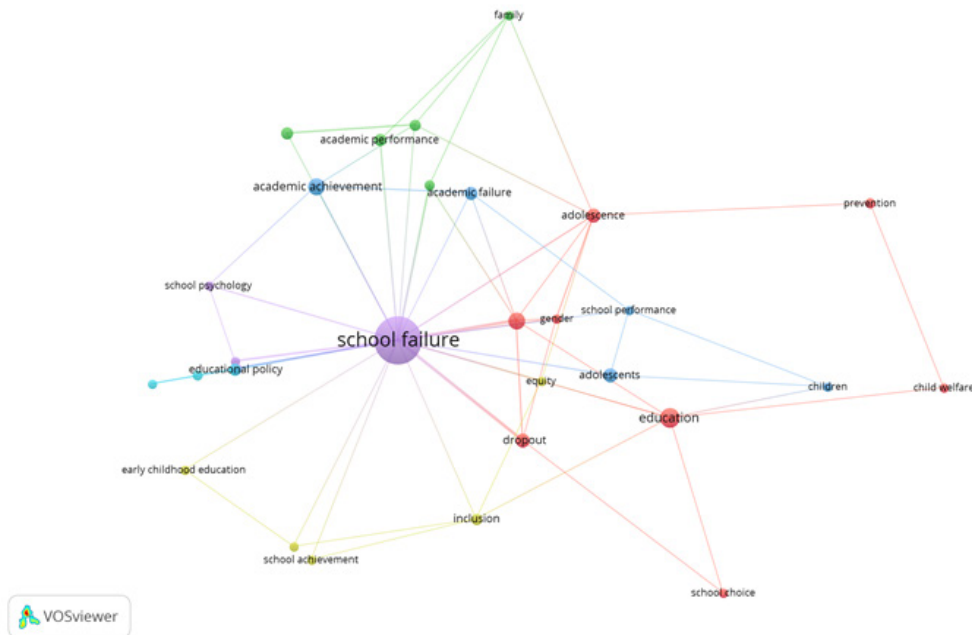


Fig. 2. Co-occurrence analysis of the most representative concepts associated with School Failure studies

As can be seen, the Figure allows us to decant the appearance of at least five thematic lines that group together different terms – through clusters – associated with the concept of school failure. The first cluster (red) includes terms that address the studies of failure from a perspective of prevention, to ensure the welfare of children and adolescents within educational settings.

The second cluster (green) includes important variables of analysis, such as the family, and school failure is approached from the perspective of motivations and achievements. The third cluster (blue) approaches school failure through the logic of student performance. The fourth cluster (yellow) incorporates two important variables for addressing school failure, introducing the concepts of inclusion and equity to discuss school success. Finally, the fifth cluster (light blue) approaches school failure by analysing public policies and educational reforms for a macro analysis of this phenomenon.

On the other hand, the country that published most of the research on school failure is Spain (n = 22), involving more than 50% of the total publications (see Figure 3). It was followed at a considerable distance by

Brazil (n = 3), Chile (n = 2), and Portugal (n = 2). The rest of the countries contributed with 1 unit each: Cyprus, Colombia, England, Peru, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States of America.

It is important to highlight some Latin American countries' contributions. Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico have made the study of school failure a current topic during the last two years.

Within the research methodologies used, there is not much difference between the qualitative methods (n = 20) and the quantitative method (n = 12) for the study of the phenomenon of school failure. However, there is an incipient development of mixed research (n = 5) in this subject.

A relevant aspect of the data obtained is the conception carried out by the research on school failure. Although it is described from different perspectives, it was possible to find four main categories: a) student failure (n = 24), b) multicausal phenomena (n = 5), c) social exclusion (n = 4) and, finally, the category of d) disability in the education system (n = 3). The analysis of the results obtained will be presented below, following the objective set out according to these parameters.

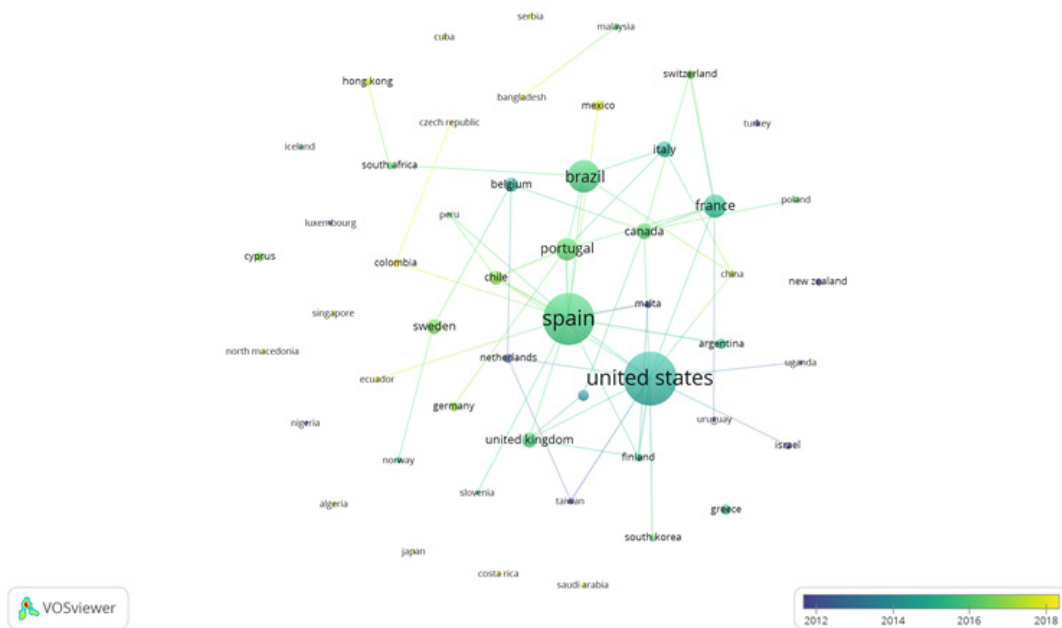


Fig. 3. Co-authorship between countries contributing to School Failure studies



a) The category of student non-achievement comprises school failure from the quantifiable and measurable academic performance of the student through partial assessments, in turn, it included subcategories covering non-graduation from school [25–29]; failure to obtain an academic qualification [30; 31], low scores on international learning assessment scales [23], low average academic performance [32]; failure to pass the school year [12; 33], failure to achieve academic goals [34–37], failure to perform learning achievements [38], or failure to complete compulsory education [39]. From this perspective, it is the student who has the primary responsibility for managing his or her learning. Therefore the cause of failure at school depends exclusively on personal abilities [40; 41]. Within non-achievement, there would also be considered deficiencies in the student's intrinsic skills and qualities [42], cataloguing them as abnormal [43]. The latter would cause a type of failure that would even be understood as affecting the student's life trajectory [44], proving an age gap [45; 46]; as well as a permanent need to legitimise himself in the eyes of others [47], as a result of this deficiency. This explanation proposes a deterministic focus, as it implies doubt about the student's capacity to succeed in life [48] and in any sphere of future performance.

b) The category of multicausal phenomena, portrays school failure as the product of a sum of situations, both: i) personal, such as teenage pregnancy [49], families, such as parental support [50], social, such as the relationships established by the student within the school [25; 51]; and ii) economic, such as the student's family financial situation [52], which would ultimately contribute to the student's failure.

c) The category of social exclusion, perceives school failure as a multi-causal phenomenon [25] which is subject to class, economic and family composition variables and the appropriate management by the child of his or her available resources, resulting in segregation by the student within his peer group, within the education system or within society, as a historical process of problematization [53], where it is perpetuated in the cycle of poverty, typical of vulnerable groups,

characteristics that are ultimately attributed as an intrinsic condition of the student, therefore, the responsibility again falls on the schoolchild.

d) The category of disability in the education system includes school failure, such as the impossibility of the education system to award the degree or graduation from compulsory education to all students and enable them to continue their education [54]. It is seen as a school's failure to provide adequate support and assistance to all students in achieving academic success [55]. Although this category recognizes for the first time the role of schools, teachers [56] and the education system itself, it confirms that a school's achievement or failure will be measured and defined by its academic performance. Therefore, although the school has the primary responsibility for the training and education of schoolchildren, it is ultimately school children who, once again, are the object of measurement and quantification of achievement or failure.

Discussion and Conclusion

It can be stated that the study of school failure is comprised of several different areas of research, from which a multidisciplinary task is carried out to tackle the phenomenon. However, the main contributions come from the educational sciences and, secondly, from sociology and psychology.

In the literature, we find that the concept of "school failure" does not clearly define an object of study; on the contrary, its polysemy is an obstacle to the various phenomena studied under that designation. Although the literature poses no unified definition of school failure, the articles reviewed coincide in describing the measure of failure: academic performance and/or the achievement of a specific objective or degree. Any academic performance considered insufficient, non-optimal or low according to the education system's standards will be classified as school failure, in any of its four categories:

- 1) student non-achievement,
- 2) multicausal phenomena,
- 3) social exclusion,
- 4) disability of the education system.

These four categories account for the possible causes of school failure; however,

the consequences of this type of study are problematic.

A first consequence is a certain reductionism with regard to what is understood as school education and its construction in the “failure-success” binomial, especially when this is limited to unsatisfactory academic performance. The problematization of what it is to be learned in school is minimised. The question of school failure involves asking about the aims of education and what is considered a successful school experience, and this is a subject for the theory of education. Instead, researchers are focusing on the quantified measurement parameters of school metrics. Such standardized measurements are usually established from the hegemonic structure of education; each country has agreed upon and shared in establishing international comparison and ranking areas, such as the well-known PISA tests.

A second consequence related to the conceptually imprecise definition is the resulting focus on who bears the responsibility for failure: the student. Although the literature has tried to cover the different contexts, factors, limitations and conditions under which failure is generated, everything seems to come down to the student as a person who fails – who is finally measured, evaluated and quantified in his or her personal condition and subjectivity, in a metric reduction of his or her evaluation, be it to achieve school promotion, a degree or graduation.

A third consequence, is the social exclusion component of the concept. Failure can be a catalyst for students’ social exclusion and marginalization, where studies are interrupted or cut short. There is little research that points to the educational system as responsible for school failure. Most research assumes that it is the learner who fails. This conception is problematic, because it does not only describe the difficulty in achieving a certain task, but also describes an unsuccessful trajectory. Nevertheless, the measurement of failure and success that a school has is based on evaluating the student’s academic performance, which is the basis on which its main guidelines are constructed. Therefore, when a school fails, the student who attends it fails.

Limitations and Suggestions. Although this review focused on criteria specific to the language in which the articles were published, we understand that the analysis and review of articles in languages other than English and Spanish may provide a different perspective on how the local scientific communities understand school failure. One question of interest is why research on school failure tends to concentrate on Iberoamerica, especially Spain. The question arises from research on the subject in the community of Portuguese-speaking countries, especially those with significant academic exchange with Iberoamerica. In the review of articles in English, few articles written outside Europe were found, but this should not be interpreted as a lack of research in non-European countries; rather, it was a language limitation in the search criteria used.

A limitation to bear in mind relates to the polysemy of the term and the lack of clear definitions of what is meant by school failure. In the articles reviewed, this construct was rarely defined. The latter is particularly serious, as the scientific community is naming school failure without the benefit of research being commonly shared by the various teams engaged in the study of the phenomenon. While reviewing articles that incorporate the concept in the title, abstract or keywords, theoretical weaknesses involving the concept itself can be observed, and this affects the definition of the object of study. Consistently, this review’s main limitation – but also its strongest conclusion – was the lack of consensus regarding what is understood to be school failure by the research community.

This gap in the definition has ethical consequences, for the generation of scientific knowledge, its dissemination and the educational policies that a knowledge-based on a polysemous or ambiguous object can generate. This ethical problem could be of interest for future research. We consider that the very notion of school failure needs to be duly discussed from the perspective of educational theory. It is necessary to examine its concept of learning reduced to a) cognitivist view and b) permeated by the idea of school effectiveness managerial ideas. Researchers



are invited to explore ethical implications when discussing students' performance at school. Of relevance to research is the construction of students' subjectivities whose schooling trajectories have been described as a failure.

Another reason to question this concept, is the way it intersects with local educational policies. The latter is particularly relevant when the discussion leaves aside considerations of structural and ideological elements. The concept of school failure, in its conceptual ambiguity, allows shifting the responsibilities of actors from a system that must ensure the right to education to a hyper-responsibilisation of individual students, when this system fails to address their struggles. As such, we suggest critical analysis of the use of this concept in the education policies of countries with different systems

of government as a way of ensuring epistemological and ethical vigilance over the use of a widely-used but poorly-delimited term could have negative implications for children and adolescents described as having failed.

We suggest that researchers revisit the notion of school failure by problematizing its a) theoretical implications: What concept of education is behind the notion?, b) research implications: What is the object of study? c) ethical-political: Who fails, the school system that fails to educate, or the child educated in that system?, and finally e) the ethical-social implications: What is the implication for people's lives of declaring them the object of school failure? We call upon researchers to ask whether school failure is the correct concept for the diversity of phenomena masked under such terms.

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