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# Irregular School Attendance in Elementary Schools in Spain during the First Third of the Twentieth Century: A Local or Structural Educational Issue?

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## Abstract

The article examines the challenges that urban teachers faced in unitary systems, where students of different ages and educational levels shared the same classroom and were taught by a single teacher. It aims to compare these challenges across several cities including Alicante, Badajoz, Cádiz, Canary Islands, Málaga, and Zaragoza to determine common issues within Spain. The study is based on sixteen technical reports from 1916 to 1926 and uses qualitative methods to analyze teachers' narratives for deeper insights. Additionally, a literature review and quantitative analysis of Spanish statistical sources were conducted. Key findings highlight parental disinterest as a significant cause of school absenteeism. The article concludes by stressing the importance of understanding historical educational contexts in informing current educational policies and practices.

**Keywords:** primary schooling; school absenteeism; child labor; teachers' narratives; parental awareness

## Introduction

The turn of the twentieth century was associated with the transformation of educational models around the world. The liberal revolutions of the early nineteenth century had prompted changes in all organizational spheres, and education was not exempt. However, despite various countries developing legislative frameworks to enhance education, the economic and social systems did not grow in parallel, and

consequently, children were placed in an intermediate position between education and work. This situation reflected a mismatch between political intentions and socio-economic realities, which led to the emergence of the terms *irregular attendance* and *dropout*.<sup>1</sup>

Within the realm of scholarly literature, various concepts and definitions have been employed to delineate the phenomenon of school absenteeism. One frequently utilized definition pertains to the categorization of absences as either *justified* or *unjustified*.<sup>2</sup> Justified absences, benign in nature, emanate from causes deemed acceptable, such as illness or medical incapacitation, religious observances, and funerary obligations. Conversely, unjustified absences are problematic and engender harmful repercussions. The etiology of *unjustified* absenteeism is multifaceted, encompassing environmental, social, and psychological factors and encapsulating terminologies related to issues such as feelings of alienation from school, refusal to attend school, and school phobia.<sup>3</sup> This definition contrasts significantly with the prevailing educational and legislative frameworks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where irregular attendance was often linked to socioeconomic dynamics, such as child labor, rather than being strictly classified as justified or unjustified. In this inquiry, we will use terms such as *irregular attendance* and *dropout* to refer to phenomena precipitated by an array of socioeconomic conflicts and exacerbated by the absence of legislative provisions ensuring obligatory attendance.

An examination of the global educational landscape reveals common attendance patterns during the emergence of the first public schooling networks.<sup>4</sup> The issue of attendance irregularity, traditionally addressed from a global perspective, often overlooked the teacher's viewpoint, which provides a direct account of classroom realities as documented in reports and diaries sent to the relevant authorities.<sup>5</sup> These firsthand accounts help us to better understand the challenges faced in implementing educational policies. Rather than being a direct cause of absenteeism, educational policy changes sought to address the issue through legislation mandating compulsory schooling. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the underlying socioeconomic factors that influenced these policies, particularly

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Cohen, "Reconsidering Schools and the American Welfare State," *History of Education Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2005), 511-37; Carole Shamma, "The Extent and Duration of Primary Schooling in Eighteenth-Century America," *History of Education Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (Aug. 2023), 313-35; W. B. Stephens, "Schooling and Literacy in Rural England, 1800-1914," review of *Education in Rural England, 1800-1914*, by Pamela Horn, *History of Education Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1982), 73-82.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher A. Kearney, *School Refusal Behavior in Youth: A Functional Approach to Assessment and Treatment* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Sallyanne A. Marlow and Neelofar Rehman, "The Relationship between Family Processes and School Absenteeism and Dropout: A Meta-analysis," *Educational and Developmental Psychologist* 38, no. 1 (2021), 3-23.

<sup>4</sup> Sonia Nieto, "Public Education in the Twentieth Century and Beyond: High Hopes, Broken Promises, and an Uncertain Future," *Harvard Educational Review* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2005), 43-64.

<sup>5</sup> Jocelyne Murray, "La scolarisation élémentaire en Maurice (1850-1900): Esquisse de la population scolaire et des résultats de ses apprentissages," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique Française* 55, no. 4 (Spring 2002), 573-601.

those related to the integration of child labor in industrialized or transitioning societies.<sup>6</sup>

Previous research on educational issues, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has embraced theoretical and critical approaches.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, research on the history of education in Spain has undergone a transition from a predominance of quantitative methods to a growing interest in qualitative approaches.<sup>8</sup> However, there is still much progress to make in the effective implementation of these methods, particularly in the analysis of narratives extracted from educational documents in historical archives.<sup>9</sup> Historical narrative remains essential for constructing in-depth studies on the history of education and for gaining a better understanding of the perspectives of the involved agents. This investigation aims to explore empirical evidence of school irregularity from a qualitative standpoint, analyzing the voices of participants for a more enriched understanding.

Within this framework of considerations, the objectives of the article are twofold: (1) to address the human-centric challenges confronted by educators in the unitary and graded school system of Spanish cities, particularly in the city of Alicante, and (2) to comparatively analyze these issues to identify common difficulties across different regions of early twentieth-century Spain.

The article commences with a review of existing literature, followed by a quantitative analysis of Spanish statistical sources. After that, we examine the narratives of teachers to provide insights into the material conditions of the period, with the aim of determining whether these accounts contradict, affirm, or provide nuance on the literature review and the quantitative analysis. Our approach required employing a range of secondary and primary sources, including the economically active population statistics for 1900, which record employment rates and workforce participation, the annual statistics on the number of schools and average attendance for 1908, and the technical reports

<sup>6</sup>Kearney, *School Refusal Behavior*; Marlow and Rehman, "The Relationship between Family Processes and School Absenteeism."

<sup>7</sup>Michael A. Gottfried, "Chronic Absenteeism and Its Effects on Students' Academic and Socioemotional Outcomes," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* 19, no. 2 (2014), 53-75; Jeremy Singer et al., "Advancing an Ecological Approach to Chronic Absenteeism: Evidence from Detroit," *Teachers College Record* 123, no. 4 (2021), 1-36.

<sup>8</sup>José Romero Delgado, "Presupuestos básicos para la investigación histórico-educativa," *Revista de Educación* 7 (2005), 215, Universidad de Huelva; Antonio Viñao Frago, "La Historia de la Educación como disciplina y campo de investigación: Viejas y nuevas cuestiones," *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación* 3, no. 1 (2016), 27; Arturo Alexander Sánchez Molina y Angélica Murillo Garza, "Enfoques metodológicos en la investigación histórica: Cuantitativa, cualitativa y comparativa," *Debates por la Historia* 9, no. 2 (2021), 153; M<sup>a</sup> Cruz Sánchez Gómez, "La dicotomía cualitativo-cuantitativo: Posibilidades de integración y diseños mixtos," *Campo Abierto*, vol. monográfico (2015), 11-30.

<sup>9</sup>Gabriel Villalón-Gálvez, "Conocimiento histórico y formación ciudadana. Inclusión de otras narrativas históricas para una Nueva Historia Escolar," *Revista de Investigación en Didáctica de las Ciencias Sociales* 8 (2021), 91-92; Delfín Ortega-Sánchez y Davinia Heras-Sevilla, "Diseño Exploratorio Secuencial (DEXPLOS), procedimiento e instrumento para el análisis de narrativas históricas escolares desde la perspectiva de género," *Revista Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado* 35, no. 96 (2021), 248.

prepared by the teaching profession in the city of Alicante (located in the Municipal Archive of Alicante) during the years 1916 to 1926.<sup>10</sup>

For this research endeavor, we have endeavored to obtain the necessary information to demonstrate that, beyond the significance of economic causes and the influence of child labor, as well as the profound changes that occurred in the educational system and its associated infrastructure, there were other factors that can aid us in comprehending why school absenteeism and irregularities in school attendance occurred during the so-called Second Industrial Revolution.<sup>11</sup>

The findings and conclusions of the research, especially about the school statistics of that period, should be approached with caution. Although they constitute an essential historical source showing the irregularity of school attendance, there is reason to doubt their full accuracy.

### Influential Factors of School Absenteeism at the Turn of the Century

Previous scholarship has highlighted several factors influencing school absenteeism, among them the economic necessity that children work in factories or in mines to contribute to their families' livelihood.<sup>12</sup> During the industrial era, cities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France witnessed significant industrial growth, leading to increased labor demand and high rates of child school absenteeism.<sup>13</sup> In Brazil, as in Europe, irregular school attendance was related to labor demands on children, particularly in the mining sector.<sup>14</sup> In the eighteenth century in North America, the scarcity of schools and low educational quality were issues, as was the economic need to work at home or in agriculture, which influenced school attendance.<sup>15</sup> Variability in agricultural wages and the demand for child labor elicited

<sup>10</sup>Instituto Nacional de Estadística (hereafter INE), *Censo de 1900. Clasificación de los habitantes por su profesión. Estados relativos a las provincias, capitales de provincia y a la Nación*, vol. IV (Madrid, 1900), <https://www.ine.es/inebaseweb/treeNavigation.do?tn=72728>; INE, *Estadística escolar de España en 1908*, vol. II (Madrid: Dirección General de Asuntos Geográficos y Estadísticos, 1912), <https://www.ine.es/inebaseweb/treeNavigation.do?tn=29307>.

<sup>11</sup>Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

<sup>12</sup>Hugh Cunningham and Pier Paolo Viazzo, "Some Issues in the Historical Study of Child Labour," in *Child Labour in Historical Perspective, 1800-1985: Case Studies from Europe, Japan, and Colombia*, ed. Hugh Cunningham and Pier Paolo Viazzo (Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre 1996), 11-22; Marlow and Rehman, "The Relationship between Family Processes and School Absenteeism."

<sup>13</sup>J. L. Rury, *Education and Social Change: Contours in the History of American Schooling* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Katrina Honeyman, *Child Workers in England, 1780-1820: Parish Apprentices and the Making of the Early Industrial Labour Force* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007); Pierre Rosanvallon, *La Société Des Égaux* (Paris: Seuil, 2011).

<sup>14</sup>S. J. Alves and F. R. Santana, "Os grupos escolares mineiros como lugar de disciplina e higienização dos corpos," *Cadernos Da Casa de Oswaldo Cruz* 7 (2008), 303-21.

<sup>15</sup>Shammas, "Extent and Duration of Primary Schooling"; Stephens, "Schooling and Literacy in Rural England, 1800-1914."

different responses among parents in different localities.<sup>16</sup> Non-compulsory schooling, poverty, and family responsibilities such as agricultural duties also affected school attendance in places such as the Mauricie region in Quebec<sup>17</sup> as well as Toulouse, France,<sup>18</sup> and Portugal.<sup>19</sup>

The implementation of compulsory schooling laws and child labor regulations had a positive impact on reducing school absenteeism, as observed in Illinois in the first decades of the twentieth century<sup>20</sup> and in the country as a whole during the American Great Depression.<sup>21</sup> It is worth emphasizing that various countries adopted legislation to mitigate child labor and promote school attendance.<sup>22</sup> England, with the Factory Act of 1833, and the United States, with the Massachusetts Factory Act in 1832, were pioneers in these regulations. France, Spain, Belgium, and Germany implemented similar measures.<sup>23</sup>

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several countries enacted laws aimed at ensuring school attendance and prohibiting child labor. Pivotal examples included the Education Act of Prussia (1717), the aforementioned Factory Act in England (1833), and the Law on the Protection of Child Labor in Germany (1839). In Spain, the Moyano Law (1857) established compulsory primary education for children aged six to nine, and the Law on the Protection of Child Labor, first enacted in 1900 and revised in 1908, restricted child employment in certain sectors.<sup>24</sup> During the first third of the twentieth century, the minimum age for compulsory schooling in Spain was raised to ten years in 1901, and later to twelve years in 1923. However, despite the Moyano Law of 1857, which had already established a framework for mandatory primary education, non-compliance with compulsory schooling laws persisted.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Stephens, "Schooling and Literacy in Rural England, 1800-1914."

<sup>17</sup>Murray, "La scolarisation elementaire en Maurice."

<sup>18</sup>Marie-Bernadette Bédry, "L'instruction primaire dans l'arrondissement de Toulouse sous Le Second Empire," *Annales Du Midi: Revue Archéologique, Historique et Philologique de La France Méridionale* 91, no. 144 (1979), 467-90.

<sup>19</sup>Justino Magalhães, "Vila Nova de Famalicão entre la revolución liberal y la primera república-cultura, alfabetización/escolarización, sociedad," in *História de Vila Nova de Famalicão* (Lisbon, Portugal: Quasi Editions, 2005), 409-41.

<sup>20</sup>Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Preston Breckinridge, *Truancy and Non-attendance in the Chicago Schools: A Study of the Social Aspects of the Compulsory Education and Child Labor Legislation of Illinois* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917).

<sup>21</sup>Cohen, "Reconsidering Schools and the American Welfare State."

<sup>22</sup>Clark Nardinelli, *Child Labor and the Industrial Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>23</sup>Dieter Fleck, ed., *The Handbook of International Humanitarian Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Baban Hasnat, "International Trade and Child Labor," *Journal of Economic Issues* 29, no. 2 (June 1995), 419-26; Thomas I. Palley, "The Child Labor Problem and the Need for International Labor Standards," *Journal of Economic Issues* 36, no. 3 (Sept. 2002), 601-15; Cathryne L. Schmitz, Elizabeth KimJin Traver, and Desi Larson, *Child Labor: A Global View* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004).

<sup>24</sup>Jean-François Chanut, *L'école républicaine et les petites patries* (Paris: Aubier-Histoires, 1996), 199; Robert Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England, 1830-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Hugh D. Hindman, *Child Labor: An American History* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>25</sup>José María Borrás Llop, *Historia de la infancia en la España contemporánea, 1834-1936* (Madrid: Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, 1996); Alvaro López Núñez, *La protección a la Infancia en España*

Legislation that restricted child labor and ensured compulsory primary education contributed to the reduction of child labor and an increase in school enrollment in many countries, although the laws were not able to eradicate school absenteeism completely. The quality of education also influenced attendance, as observed in an economic depression beginning in 1857 in Ontario, Canada, where school enrollment declined due to emigration and adverse economic conditions.<sup>26</sup>

In conclusion, the various factors that contributed to school absenteeism include the economic necessity for children to work at home, on farms, or in factories or mines; the lack of schools; poor educational quality; and the absence of compulsory schooling and child labor regulation. These factors varied based on geographical and temporal contexts, but all of them exerted a significant impact on school attendance.

### Schooling in Spain at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: A Quantitative Study

In Spain, enrollment stood at 40.6 percent of five-to fourteen-year-olds in schools in 1855.<sup>27</sup> By 1885, it reached 42 percent in primary schools, and for all schools, it was at 50 percent.<sup>28</sup> Enrollment reached 58.4 percent by 1905.<sup>29</sup> The increasing enrollment rates had a direct but limited impact on literacy levels. In 1900, the illiteracy rate was 59.35 percent. It modestly decreased to 52.23 percent by 1920, reflecting limited progress in literacy during that period.<sup>30</sup> Data from the 1910 census corroborate these trends, revealing a significant percentage of school-aged children unable to read, as shown in Figure 1.

Because of the correlation between literacy and school attendance, historical data indicate that attendance minimally improved between 1885 and 1910, and that absenteeism remained high. Nearly 50 percent of the population was illiterate, as corroborated by the data in Figure 1 for 1910. Using data from the 1900 economically active population census, which recorded employment distribution and workforce participation, and the attendance index of 1908, researchers at the time gathered data, organized by province, regarding the relationship between economic activities and child labor.<sup>31</sup> Admittedly, the analysis of the historical census reveals a limited picture of child labor in Spain in 1900. A key reason for this limitation is a substantial omission in the data

(Madrid: Imprenta de Eduardo Arias, 1908); Alejandro Tiana Ferrer, "Educación obligatoria, asistencia escolar y trabajo infantil en España en el primer tercio del siglo XX," *Historia de la Educación* 6 (1987), 43-60; Antonio Viñao, *Tiempos escolares, tiempos sociales: La distribución del tiempo y del trabajo en la enseñanza primaria en España (1838-1936)* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Murray, "La scolarisation élémentaire"; M. J. Murphy, "Unmaking and Remaking the 'One Best System': London, Ontario, 1852-1860," *History of Education Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (Autumn 1997), 291-310.

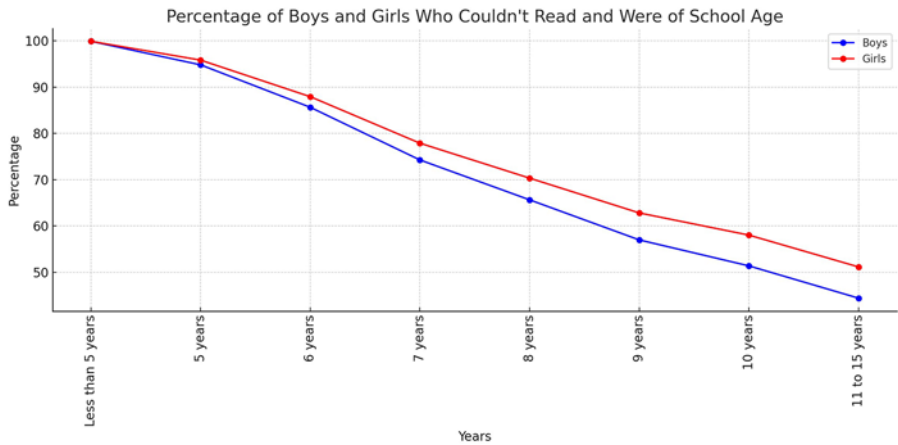
<sup>27</sup> Antonio Viñao Frago, "The History of Literacy in Spain: Evolution, Traits, and Questions," *History of Education Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1990), 573-99.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Carreras and Xavier Tafunell, *Estadísticas históricas de España: Siglos XIX-XX* (Bilbao: Fundacion BBVA, 2005), 208, Table 3.3.

<sup>29</sup> Viñao Frago, "The History of Literacy in Spain."

<sup>30</sup> Lorenzo Luzuriaga, *El analfabetismo en España* (Madrid: J. Cosano, 1919); Tiana Ferrer, "Educación obligatoria."

<sup>31</sup> INE, *Censo de 1900*, vol. IV, 1900; INE, *Estadística escolar de España en 1908*.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of School-Age Students in Spain in 1910 Who Couldn't Read.

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Censo de población de España 1910. Clasificación de la Población Real por Sexo, Estado Civil y Educación Elemental*, vol. II (Madrid, 1916), 449-51.

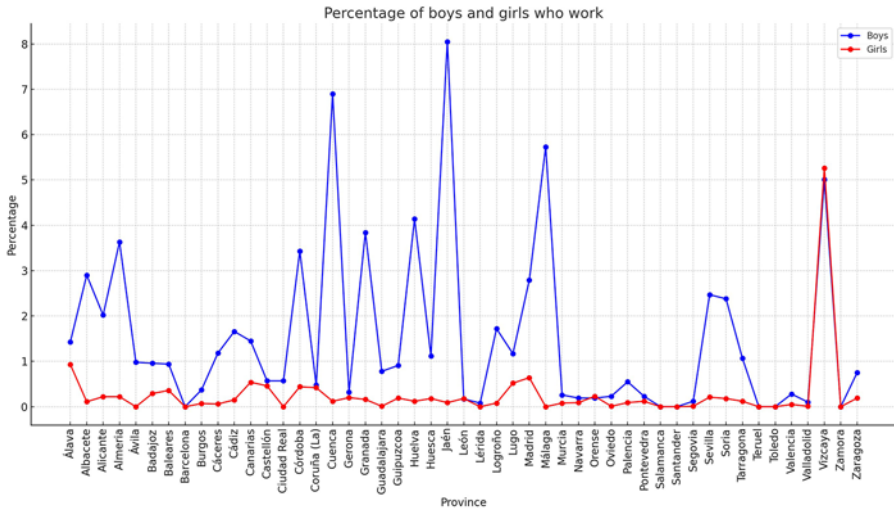
due to the exclusion of “children without profession due to age,” a category representing a considerable percentage of minors under twelve years old. Excluding this group of children from the census could have significantly underestimated minors’ labor participation.<sup>32</sup>

The data from the research is still worth examining for assessing school-aged children’s labor participation, even given the exclusion of “children without profession due to age,” as well as the analytical reliance on the professions listed in the 1900 census, encompassing various occupations from agriculture to transportation, commerce, public administration, and personal and domestic services. The goal was to provide a comprehensive view of occupations affecting the school attendance and education of that age group, in line with the professional categories defined in the 1900 census. Figure 2 presents this information, illustrating the dynamics between the regional economy, child labor, and school attendance in Spain during that period.

Child labor participation was higher in areas with intense economic activity, including provinces such as Álava and Albacete, among others, as illustrated in Figure 2. Jaén, Vizcaya, and Almería stand out for having the highest number of children working in the sectors of agriculture and fishing. Vizcaya also stands out for having a significant number of working girls, followed by La Coruña and Álava. Guipúzcoa and Alicante had the highest number of boys and girls, respectively, involved in “mines, quarries,

<sup>32</sup>Jean-Louis Guereña and Antonio Viñao, “Poder, información y control: La estadística escolar y el sistema educativo español (Siglo XIX y Primer Tercio Del Siglo XX),” *Revista Europea de Investigación En Educación* 12, no. 1 (2013), 70-80; José Guereña, Alejandro Tiana, and Julio Ruiz, *Historia de la educación en la España contemporánea. Diez años de investigación*, vol. 92 (Madrid: Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, C.I.D.E. Dirección General de Renovación Pedagógica Secretaría de Estado de Educación, 2013), <https://sede.educacion.gob.es/publiventa/detalle.action?cod=1334>; David Van Holtby, *Society and Primary Schools in Spain, 1898-1936* (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 1978), <https://search.proquest.com/openview/09ec8d4e201d79b592d2d7cc01a0da07/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.





**Figure 2.** Percentage of Boys and Girls Under Twelve Years Old Registered in the 1900 INE Census as Workers Relative to the Total Number of Children Under Twelve.

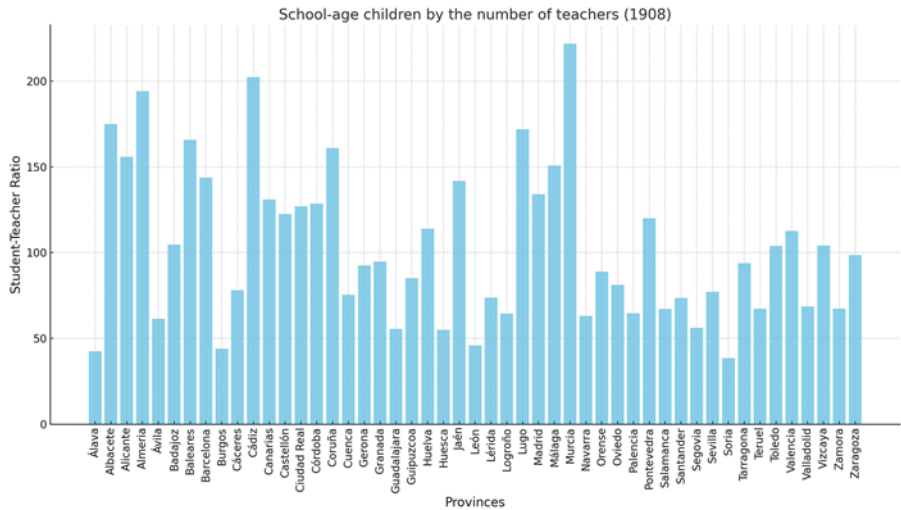
Source: INE, Censo de 1900. Clasificación de los habitantes por su profesión. Estados relativos a las provincias, capitales de provincia y a la Nación, vol. IV (Madrid, 1900).

and saltworks,” while the Balearic Islands and Barcelona led in industries classified “by the nature used,” referring to sectors organized by the type of raw materials employed, such as textiles, leather, wood, metallurgy, ceramics, and chemical products. Across the provinces, the data reflect high numbers of child workers in some places and low numbers in others; compared with the typical province, Jaén and Vizcaya showed significantly higher numbers.

Regarding educational institutions, there is considerable variability in the number of primary education schools across the analyzed provinces, suggesting a significant disparity in the availability of these educational institutions among different regions.

In Spain in 1908, the degree of overcrowding or lack of schooling varied significantly among provinces, reflecting disparities in access to education, as illustrated in Figure 3. The ratio of school-age children to teachers, a key indicator of resource availability, reveals that some provinces, like Cádiz, with a ratio of approximately 202 children per teacher, faced significant challenges in terms of overcrowding and limited educational resources. Provinces with comparatively low ratios included Álava, which had approximately 42 students per teacher, and Soria, showing the lowest ratio with 38.48 students per teacher. At the other end of the spectrum, Murcia experienced the highest overcrowding with 221.77 students per teacher, followed closely by Cádiz and Almería with 202.18 and 194.18 students per teacher, respectively. These disparities reflect inconsistencies in educational resources and infrastructure, which likely affected educational quality and access to schooling at the time. Data indicate that some provinces experienced higher levels of school overcrowding, while others had a more





**Figure 3.** School-Age Children by the Number of Teachers per Province in 1908.

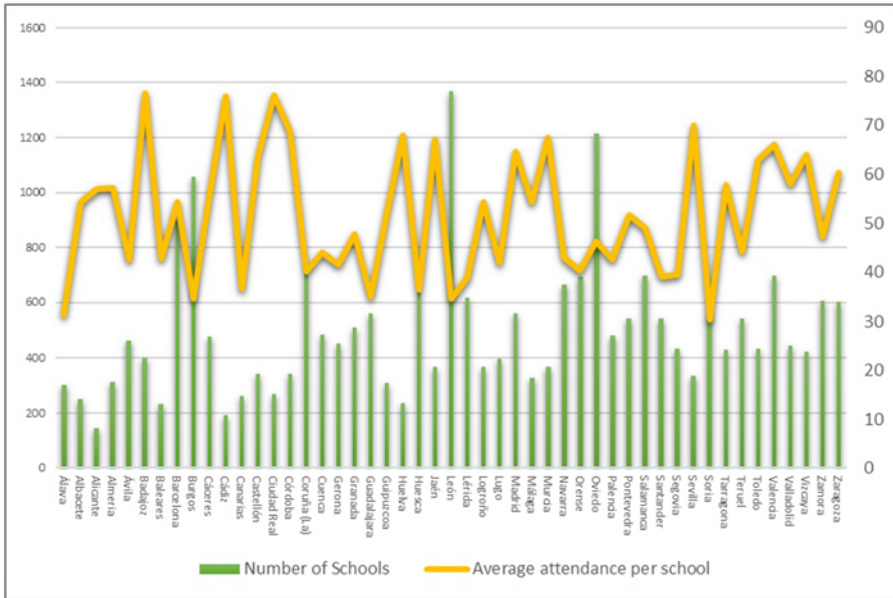
Source: INE, *Estadística Escolar de España en 1908*, vol. II, pp. 54-55, and vol. III, pp. 392-93.

favorable student-to-teacher ratio. However, further research is needed to determine its impact on learning outcomes.

Similarly, the average attendance figures per school also show significant variability among the various provinces, with significantly lower attendance reported in rural and agricultural regions compared with urbanized areas, as inferred from Figure 4.

The relationship between the economy and schooling reveals that industrialized provinces such as Barcelona and Madrid exhibited relatively high primary education enrollment rates (above 94%), based on official data compiled by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE) in its *Anuario Estadístico de España* for 1908 and 1916, as well as literacy censuses from 1900 and 1910. Enrollment rates were calculated by dividing the number of enrolled students in each province by the estimated school-age population and multiplying the result by 100. In the case of Barcelona, 73,875 students were enrolled out of an estimated 78,000 school-age children, resulting in an enrollment rate of 94.7%. Similarly, agricultural provinces such as Córdoba and Jaén displayed somewhat lower enrollment rates (around 88–92%), calculated using the same method.

These differences reflect variations in school enrollment patterns across regions with different economic contexts. From an educational perspective, the availability of schools within a community could enhance access to education and reduce absenteeism. However, attendance records from the same sources show relatively low average attendance, with most values falling below 60%, suggesting the presence of additional factors influencing attendance beyond the mere availability of educational institutions. The relationship between the economy and schooling reveals that industrialized provinces like Barcelona and Madrid had relatively high primary education enrollment rates (above 94 percent). Conversely, agricultural provinces such as Córdoba and Jaén exhibited slightly lower rates (around 88 percent).



**Figure 4.** Number of Schools in Each Province and Average School Attendance in 1908.

Source: INE, *Estadística Escolar de España en 1908*, vol. II, pp. 54-55, and vol. III, pp. 392-93.

### Conclusions Drawn from Quantitative Analysis

Statistical analysis of the data regarding the relationship between enrollment, school attendance, and child labor using SPSS Statistics software, version 29.0.1.0, reveals several relevant conclusions that clarify the information presented above and that address some uncertainties.

The Pearson correlation between the number of schools and enrollments adjusted for the total population of each province demonstrates a moderately strong positive relationship in 1900, with a value of 0.66 (table 1). This suggests that as the number of schools per capita increased, so did the number of enrollments in proportion to that population. However, further research is needed to determine that the number of schools had a definitive impact on this trend, or whether other specific factors also had an influence.

The significance value is less than 0.001 for both years, which is extremely low and indicates high statistical significance. The sum of squares and cross products (SSCP) for 1900 is 0.008138, reflecting the total sum of the products of deviations of each observation from the mean for the number of schools and enrollments adjusted by population. For 1916, the SSCP is slightly higher, at 0.008304, which reflects a combined variability and a trend in the data that is a bit stronger in this year.

The covariance in 1900 is 0.000022, showing how the two variables tend to vary together, with a positive value indicating that, generally, as the number of schools per capita increased, so did the enrollments per capita. In 1916, the covariance increased to 0.000025, reinforcing the notion of a stronger and more consistent relationship between the variables in this year. The number of observations is robust,

**Table 1.** Relationship between Schools and Enrollments in 1900 and 1916 based on the Total Population by Province

Correlations	Enrolled in 1900	Enrolled in 1916
Pearson Correlation	0.66	0.83
Sig. (Two-tailed)	<0.001	<0.001
Sum of Squares and Cross Products	0.008138	0.008304
Covariance	0.000022	0.000025
Number of observations (N)	49	48

Note: Compiled from data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Anuario Estadístico de España 1901*, (Madrid: Instituto Geográfico y Estadístico, 1901); and Censo de población de España 1910, *Clasificación de la Población Real por Sexo, Estado Civil y Educación Elemental*, vol. II (Madrid: Imprenta del Instituto Geográfico y Estadístico, 1916), 449–51.

**Table 2.** Relationship between the Average Student-Teacher Ratio and School Attendance in 1908 and 1916

Metrics	Average Attendance 1908	Average Attendance 1916
Pearson Correlation	0.518	−0.125
Significance (Two-tailed)	<i>not calculated</i>	<i>not calculated</i>
Number of Observations (N)	49	49

Note: Compiled from official data provided by INE, *Censo de 1900*, vol. IV, 1900, pp. 10–107; and INE, *Estadística escolar de España en 1908, 1912*.

with forty-nine for 1900 and forty-eight for 1916, providing a solid foundation for the reliability of the results. These results deepen our understanding of how educational infrastructure and participation in education were related and how this relationship strengthened over time in the various provinces.

The results of the Pearson correlation between the average student-teacher ratio and school attendance in 1908 and 1916 (table 2) reveal interesting patterns. In 1908, a moderate positive correlation of 0.518 was observed, suggesting that a lower number of students per teacher might be associated with higher school attendance. This could indicate that provinces with better student-teacher ratios, possibly seeing a higher quality of education as a result, tended to have higher attendance rates.

In contrast, the correlation in 1916 is slightly negative, albeit very weak, with a value of −0.125. This could suggest that in 1916, the relationship between the number of students per teacher and school attendance was not as direct as in 1908, or that other external factors played a more significant role in attendance rates. The variation in correlations over time could reflect changes in educational policies, differences in school infrastructure effectiveness, regional socioeconomic disparities, or a combination of factors that require further study.

These results underscore the complexity of assessing educational provision solely through the raw number of schools. While a deeper historiographical discussion of regional disparities would provide further context, this study primarily focuses on quantitative data trends. Provinces with a high number of single-room schools, often found in rural or less developed areas, tended to have fewer resources and infrastructure compared with urban multi-class schools. The average student-teacher ratio emerges as a more revealing indicator of educational quality than a simple tally of the

**Table 3.** Pearson Correlations Calculated between the Average School Attendance for 1908 and 1916 and the PQLI (Physical Quality of Life Index) from 1900

Metrics	Average Attendance 1908	Average Attendance 1916
Pearson Correlation	0.029	-0.012
Number of Observations (N)	49	49

number of schools, suggesting the need for a more nuanced approach that considers both the quantity and the quality and accessibility of education to better understand their impact on school attendance. These findings reinforce the idea that improving educational quality was perhaps not just about increasing the number of schools but also ensuring they were adequately equipped to meet student needs (table 3).

As explained by Escudero and Simón, the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI) are composite indicators that measure various aspects of human development and quality of life, such as life expectancy, education, and income level, offering a broader view of well-being than merely looking at per capita income.<sup>33</sup> This methodology enables a deeper understanding of living standards over time and how certain provinces have progressed or regressed relative to others.

The difference in correlations between the average school attendance in 1908 and 1916 and that measured by the PQLI is subtle. However, it presents a change in the direction of the correlation. In 1908, the correlation was positive, albeit very low (0.029), indicating a minimally positive relationship between the PQLI and school attendance. This suggests that in provinces with a better PQLI, there was a slight tendency toward higher school attendance. In 1916, the correlation was negative (-0.012), although even weaker, indicating that, slightly, as the PQLI improves, school attendance tends to decrease, although this change is so minor that it essentially implies there is no significant relationship.

The difference in correlations between average school attendance in 1908 and 1916 and the PQLI might be influenced by the historical context, particularly regarding the effects of World War I on Spain.<sup>34</sup> Although Spain did not participate directly in the war from 1914 to 1918, the conflict had a significant economic impact on the country, especially in the demand for raw materials and basic goods. This led to price inflation that disproportionately affected the most vulnerable populations.<sup>35</sup> In 1908, the correlation between school attendance and the PQLI is positive, though very low (0.029), suggesting a minimal positive relationship between better living conditions and higher school attendance. However, by 1916, the correlation turns negative (-0.012). This change may reflect how the economic strains exacerbated by the war affected Spanish

<sup>33</sup>Antonio Escudero and Hipólito Simón, "Diferencias provinciales de bienestar en la España del siglo XX," *Revista de Historia Industrial* 21, no. 49 (2012), 17-54.

<sup>34</sup>Peter M. E. Bruno, "Incidencia socioeconómica de la Primera Guerra Mundial sobre Orihuela y la comarca alicantina de la Vega Baja, 1914-1918," *Anales de Historia Contemporánea* 4 (1985), 121-60; Peter M. E. Bruno, *El distrito minero de Cartagena en torno a la Primera Guerra Mundial (1909-1923)* (Murcia: EDITUM, 1986); Peter M. E. Bruno, "Neutralidad, comercio y relaciones internacionales de España durante la Primera Guerra Mundial: Su incidencia sobre la agricultura murciana de exportación y sobre el movimiento del puerto de Cartagena (1914-1918)," *Anales de Historia Contemporánea* 25 (2009), 349-72.

<sup>35</sup>Bruno, *Neutralidad, comercio y relaciones internacionales de España*

**Table 4.** Relationship between School Attendance and Child Labor

Correlaciones			
		Schools	Working Children
School Attendance	Pearson Correlation	1	0.269
	Sig. (Two-Tailed)		0.061
	Sum of Squares and Cross-Products	7859.394	310.293
	Covariance	163.737	6.464
	N	49	49
Working Children	Pearson Correlation	0.269	1
	Sig. (Two-Tailed)	0.061	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-Products	310.293	168.685
	Covariance	6.464	3.514
	N	49	49

families, possibly making child labor more necessary as families struggled with rising living costs and economic instability. This economic necessity could have influenced many children to leave school to contribute to the family income, despite potential improvements in the PQLI, such as rising literacy rates or declining infant mortality, even amid rising living costs and economic instability. The effects of the war could have significantly altered socioeconomic conditions and, consequently, the correlation between the PQLI and school attendance. The evidence of price inflation and other economic hardships during the war underscores the importance of considering external economic factors and their impact on education.<sup>36</sup>

In any case, regarding the relationship between schools and children’s work, the data support the idea that a higher number of schools per province correlates with a decrease in the number of working children. Regarding the relationship between school attendance and child labor, there is a general trend in the year 1908 where, again surprisingly, higher average attendance per school correlates with a higher percentage of working children. However, it is important to note that, according to the results of the statistical analysis, this relationship ( $p = 0.061$ ) does not reach a level of statistical significance at a 95 percent confidence level, as is evident in [table 4](#).

The analysis suggests that, contrary to expectations, higher school attendance did not necessarily result in a decrease in child labor, which could have been influenced by socioeconomic and cultural factors or the quality of education. This trend may have played out, for instance, in communities where child labor was an economic or cultural

<sup>36</sup>Francisco T. Pérez, *Los trabajadores gaditanos en la coyuntura de la Primera Guerra Mundial (1914-1923)* (Cádiz: Servicio de Publicaciones, Universidad de Cádiz, 2001); Dolores Ortí Alivert, “Alicante durante la Primera Guerra Mundial (1914-1918),” *Saitabi* 15 (1965), 103-28.

**Table 5.** Relationship between Child Labor and Girls' Labor

Correlations			
		Girls in Labor	Boys in Labor
Girls in Labor	Pearson Correlation	1	0.292*
	Sig. (Two-Tailed)		0.042
	Sum of Squares and Cross-Products	27.174	19.779
	Covariance	0.566	0.412
	N	49	49
Boys in Labor	Pearson Correlation	0.292*	1
	Sig. (Two-Tailed)	0.042	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-Products	19.779	168.685
	Covariance	0.412	3.514
	N	49	49

\*The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

necessity. Furthermore, if education failed to meet the needs of children, they might have opted to work instead of attending school.

In the case of girls' school attendance and work, no significant correlation was found, indicating that within the studied context, girls' school attendance does not exhibit a clear linear relationship with the number of girls engaged in labor.

Finally, a statistical relationship was identified between the labor of girls and the labor of boys: in provinces where a higher percentage of girls worked, there was also a higher percentage of boys engaged in labor, supported by the chi-square test, as shown in [table 5](#). This finding could reflect similar socioeconomic or cultural conditions affecting both genders in the analyzed provinces.

The research reveals a complex and variable interaction between schooling and child labor in the analyzed provinces, underscoring the need for a multifaceted and contextual approach to understand these issues, considering factors such as education investment, school attendance, and child labor. The findings also indicate the need to conduct further qualitative research to explore their underlying dynamics and implications within the regional educational and labor context. Including perspectives from teachers, as key witnesses during the period 1916-1926, in a qualitative analysis may provide valuable insights into the factors influencing children's participation in economic activity and its relationship with schooling.

### School Absenteeism in the Classroom from the Perspective of Teachers: A Qualitative Study

This study aims to analyze the opinions of the stakeholders involved to better understand the human challenges faced by teaching staff working in Spanish one-room and graded school systems and to compare these findings with those recorded in other

Spanish cities in order to identify common issues. The analysis, part of a broader study, was based on sixteen technical reports prepared by teachers in Alicante between 1916 and 1926, located in the Municipal Archives of Alicante (AMA).<sup>37</sup> These reports, drafted in accordance with the Royal Decree of May 5, 1913, provide a detailed qualitative perspective on schoolwork, outcomes achieved, and the challenges faced by the teaching profession, all of which complement the quantitative analysis above.<sup>38</sup>

Analysis of these reports allowed for the identification of factors influencing irregular student attendance in the city of Alicante. The category showing predominant influence was Irregular Attendance (1.1), with an 80.36 percent cumulative frequency (CF), followed by Dropout (1.2), with 12.50 percent CF, and Health Problems (1.4) and School Change (1.3), with 5.36 percent and 1.79 percent CF, respectively. Given the predominant influence shown by Irregular Attendance, a more in-depth analysis was conducted for that factor.

The narratives confirm these findings, alluding to the fact that, according to teachers' accounts, "they have not encountered other obstacles apart from those inherent to irregular attendance."<sup>39</sup> To monitor attendance, teachers used daily attendance lists. These records enabled them to check the average monthly fluctuations. For example, one such list reads:

September 88 girls, October 119 girls, November 120 girls, December 74 girls, January 91 girls, February 88, March 94, April 81, May 76, June 94, and July 48, with an average attendance throughout the year of 87 girls.<sup>40</sup>

The monthly attendance data show clear fluctuations. Attendance peaked in November, January, February, and June, while lower levels were recorded in December, March, April, and July. Another teacher noted, "In May, attendance remained stable compared to the previous month."<sup>41</sup> Attendance variations may reflect seasonal patterns, external factors, or school-related circumstances, but further evidence would be needed to determine specific causes.<sup>42</sup>

At times, teachers attributed the problem of attendance fluctuations to various forms of parental irresponsibility:

In most cases, parents are satisfied with sending their children to school, without concern for the time or whether they come clean or dirty. It's even more fortunate if they send them regularly because the sad reality is that, more often than not, the children don't attend for a whole week, spending their time roaming the streets and setting a bad example for the few who attend regularly.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Seila Soler, "La Educación durante el primer tercio del siglo XX: Las memorias técnicas como objeto de un periodo de transición hacia la graduación escolar" (unpublished PhD diss., ua, 2023).

<sup>38</sup> *Gaceta de Madrid*, May 13, no. 133 (May 13, 1913), 455e.

<sup>39</sup> Hilario Beltrán, "Memoria técnica" (1916), AMA 1903-11/10, Archivo Municipal de Alicante (hereafter AMA), Alicante, Spain.

<sup>40</sup> Victoria Marín, "Memoria técnica" (1916), AMA 1903-11/09, AMA.

<sup>41</sup> Juan Fideo, "Memoria técnica" (1926), AMA 1903-12/35, AMA.

<sup>42</sup> Adrian Palacios-Mateo, "Education and Household Decision-Making in Spanish Mining Communities, 1877-1924," *Cliometrica* 17, no. 301-340 (2023), 320.

<sup>43</sup> Sabina Huertas, "Memoria técnica" (1917), AMA 1903-11/11, AMA.



The exact cause of these parental attitudes reported by the teachers, whether it be conflicting schedules, negligence, or a lack of parental responsibility, is unknown. When focusing exclusively on girls, teachers claimed that the situation was no better:

And the girls who persist for some time do not offer any more advantages than the previous ones because they not only attend classes intermittently but also do so without punctuality. Almost always, when the school is opened, only 6 or 8 girls show up. The others arrive when they please, just minutes before the end of the school day.<sup>44</sup>

This irregularity in student attendance led to problems for teachers concerning their educational objectives. One teacher reported:

The most significant obstacle lies in the enrollment and the daily average attendance. An enrollment of one hundred and seventy girls and a daily average attendance of more than eighty, with great heterogeneity among them, prevents the results obtained from being fruitful.<sup>45</sup>

Teachers responded to the spotty attendance in several ways. Sometimes they had to alter session plans, “hindering the delivery of planned lectures, reducing hands-on work, and limiting school outings,”<sup>46</sup> with weak educational results. Sometimes they altered teaching methods, essentially creating “one-on-one lessons from the teacher to the student due to not keeping up with the pace of the others.”<sup>47</sup>

Faced with this issue, some teachers suggested potential solutions:

What means can be employed to facilitate consistent and uniform school attendance? Providing the necessary number of facilities in the community to establish schools, ensuring that they have sufficient capacity and hygienic conditions; and once this is achieved, that the authorities enforce the obligations of compulsory education on parents.<sup>48</sup>

The large number of narratives preserved and analyzed allowed us to delve into the underlying issues related to irregular school attendance. The following subcodes emerged from an inductive analysis: 1.1.1 Adult supervision (13.04 percent CF), 1.1.2 Temporary entry into the labor market (8.70 percent CF), 1.1.3 Delayed Arrival (13.04 percent CF), 1.1.4 Household Assistance (8.70 percent CF), 1.1.5 Lack of interest from parents (34.78 percent CF), 1.1.6 Interest in attending only a few hours (8.70 percent CF), and 1.1.7 Distance from School (13.04 percent CF). The CF data from the narratives can be seen in [Figure 5](#).

### *Subcode 1.1.1. Adult supervision*

Children from the poorest families were permitted or required by circumstances to travel to school unaccompanied, and they often fell prey to the enticing distractions

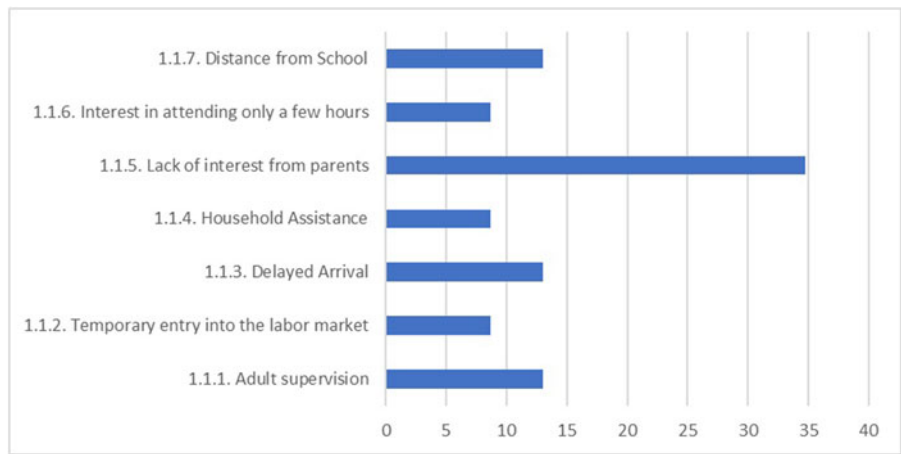
<sup>44</sup>Regina Pérez, “Memoria técnica” (1926), AMA 1903-12/34, AMA.

<sup>45</sup>Marín, “Memoria técnica.”

<sup>46</sup>Victoriano Masía, “Memoria técnica” (1916), AMA 1903-11/14, AMA.

<sup>47</sup>Huertas, “Memoria técnica.”

<sup>48</sup>Masía, “Memoria técnica.”



**Figure 5.** Subcodes for Code 1.1. Irregularity in Attendance by Percentage of Cumulative Frequency.  
*Note:* These results are based on the data provided by the technical reports preserved in the AMA.

on the city streets that could tempt the students to skip class. One teacher reported, “Those who attended this school did so alone, and if the teaching is not made attractive to them, they end up playing in the streets instead of entering the school.”<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, families with higher economic incomes often had access to home assistance services. Indeed, girls from middle-class families went to school accompanied by their maids and thus had to go wherever they were taken, whether they liked it or not.

#### *Subcode 1.1.2. Temporary entry into the labor market*

As pointed out by the teachers, on many occasions irregular attendance occurred due to temporary entry into the labor force, especially in rural areas or near agricultural operations. One teacher noted:

The fluctuations are due to the needs of farm work, which was the usual occupation of families in this locality. To illustrate these fluctuations, I provided the average monthly attendance for different months of the school year.<sup>50</sup>

Another suggested a remedy to this problem:

And when the lack of school attendance is recognized as a result of parents needing their children to work prematurely due to a lack of resources, and furthermore, education cannot be fully graduated, it would be advisable to alter the organization of unitary schools. By dividing the children into sections, they could attend one of them either in the morning or in the afternoon, without

<sup>49</sup> Ricardo Vilar (1916), AMA 1903-11/08, AMA.

<sup>50</sup> Fideo, “Memoria técnica.”

breaking the unity of their education and without depriving parents of their children's labor.<sup>51</sup>

### *Subcode 1.1.3. Delayed arrival*

Teachers referred to the fact that some girls arrived late to school due to household chores and the need to take food to their working parents, which affected classroom discipline and the overall progress of the class.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, they reported that girls who attended school intermittently and failed to be punctual did not obtain any additional advantages compared with those who were completely absent.

### *Subcode 1.1.4. Household assistance*

In this case, the teachers indicated that non-attendance at school was owed to girls having to provide care for siblings and assistance with household chores at home. For example, one teacher recorded:

The delay with which some girls attend school due to household chores before going to school, and the early departures to bring food to their parents are reasons that disrupt the discipline and overall progress of the class.<sup>53</sup>

### *Subcode 1.1.5. Lack of interest from parents*

The teaching staff noted that parents lacked an awareness of the importance of sending their children to school as a means of social progress. This perspective reflects the *regeneracionista* mindset among teachers and highlights their concern about the lack of parental engagement in their children's education. Several teachers commented on this theme. One teacher blamed parental neglect, emphasizing how apathy and excessive tolerance hindered the school's efforts:

This apathy of the parents, allowing children to roam the streets, perhaps due to not taking the trouble to clean them or due to excessive tolerance, greatly hinders the tasks of the school and considerably delays the education of the students; it is well known that the educational work of a long time is destroyed in a very short time if it is interrupted.<sup>54</sup>

That same teacher stressed the importance of fostering parental appreciation for education:

The love for teaching in parents, making them understand the advantages of taking their children to school instead of leaving them exposed to the many dangers they face in the streets, would make teaching easier due to increased regularity in attendance.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Masía, "Memoria técnica."

<sup>52</sup> Rita Beneyto, "Memoria técnica" (1926), AMA 1903-12/34, AMA.

<sup>53</sup> Beneyto, "Memoria técnica."

<sup>54</sup> Huertas, "Memoria técnica."

<sup>55</sup> Huertas, "Memoria técnica."

Some attributed the lack of parental involvement to economic difficulties, arguing that many families prioritized survival over education:

The precarious situation of the Spanish people leads them to only think about satisfying their material needs and to dedicate all their attention to this purpose, leaving the school with the time they cannot dedicate to anything else.<sup>56</sup>

Another teacher highlighted how both family environments and societal influences shaped school attendance patterns:

The only obstacle that has been observed consists of the irregularity in daily attendance and the contrasting education that most students receive is their families and the society to which they belong.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, one teacher explicitly stated:

It's sad to see how distant families are from the school; they don't feel any affection or enthusiasm for it. Due to this phenomenon, families themselves create a series of obstacles that hinder the solution to the school attendance problem. As a result, there is a significant disproportion between the number of enrolled students and the average number of attendees, as can be seen in the previously presented data.<sup>58</sup>

#### *Subcode 1.1.6. Interest in attending only a few hours*

At times, irregular attendance was seen to have a positive aspect, as some students who were already working used their free time to continue or resume their elementary studies. One teacher explained, "Sometimes, during recess, the teacher teaches a fourteen-year-old maid who takes advantage of her free time to learn how to read."<sup>59</sup>

#### *Subcode 1.1.7. Distance from school*

The distance between home and school could be a problem for some families, as not all communities had access to schools. Sometimes, students could not attend school because there were none in their area or because the distance to the closest available school was too great.

### **Comparative Discussion of the Underlying Issues**

It is also interesting to analyze the narratives with regard to points of difference and commonality among underlying issues. Out of the total narratives, the graded school system is only mentioned in narratives related to parental disinterest (1.1.5).

Regarding gender, narratives dealing with adult accompaniment (1.1.1), delay in arrival (1.1.3), assistance with housework (1.1.4), interest in attending for a few hours

<sup>56</sup> Pérez, "Memoria técnica."

<sup>57</sup> Cándido Solbes, "Memoria técnica" (1916), AMA 1903-11/08, AMA.

<sup>58</sup> Marín, "Memoria técnica."

<sup>59</sup> Pérez, "Memoria técnica."

(1.1.6), and distance from the school (1.1.7) were only found in schools where the teaching or leadership staff was predominantly female. Meanwhile, temporary entry into the workforce (1.1.2) was only present in schools where the teaching or leadership staff was predominantly male.

In both types of schools, common narratives were found related to parental disinterest (1.1.5), with a higher prevalence in narratives from female teachers than from male teachers, and school distance (1.1.7), with a higher prevalence in narratives from male teachers than female teachers.

In conclusion, parental disinterest has been confirmed as one of the most relevant causes of school absenteeism in the region. Comparative historical analyses suggest that school structuring by grade level may have been considered as a potential solution to mitigate some of the issues outlined in the narratives, particularly concerning parental apathy. The results regarding gender seem to confirm that boys were more involved in the workforce, while girls did not appear to have as significant a need for education, according to their parents.

### School Absenteeism in Spain during the First Third of the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Approach

After examining the recurring issues in Alicante, the second objective of the study of the narratives was to conduct a comparative investigation that included other regions of the country. For this purpose, only studies that used qualitative methods, which allow for a deeper exploration of the perceptions of the teaching staff of that era, were utilized. Based on this premise, studies on what are known as student “practice reports” from Badajoz,<sup>60</sup> Cádiz,<sup>61</sup> Canary Islands,<sup>62</sup> Málaga,<sup>63</sup> and Zaragoza<sup>64</sup> were analyzed.

The regulations justifying the production of these practice reports were determined by the Teaching Plan of Minister Bergamín García, approved by the Royal Decree of August 30, 1914. The decree established that to improve the efficiency of teaching practices, students should submit a practice report demonstrating their capacity for

<sup>60</sup>María José Mateos Carreras and Luis Gonzalo Córdoba Caro, “Escuelas, higiene y educación física. La educación física en las memorias de prácticas de las alumnas de la Escuela Normal de Badajoz (1919-1926),” *Campo Abierto. Revista de Educació* 31, no. 1 (2012), 149-66.

<sup>61</sup>Teresa Ruiz Mozo, “La escuela pública en Cádiz a través de las memorias de prácticas de enseñanza (1914-1936),” *Cuadernos De Investigación De Fondos Del Archivo UCA*, no. 5 (2023), 151-206.

<sup>62</sup>Teresa González Pérez, “Etnografía de la escuela a través de las memorias de prácticas de enseñanza en Canarias (España),” *História da Educação* 25 (2021), 1-30.

<sup>63</sup>Carmen Sanchidrián Blanco, “El absentismo en las escuelas públicas de primera enseñanza de Málaga y medidas propuestas para reducirlo a comienzos del siglo XX,” in *Matériaux pour une Histoire de la Scolarisation en Espagne et en Amérique Latine (XVIIIe-XXe Siècles)*, ed. Jean-René Aymes, Ève-Marie Fell, and Jean-Luis Guereña (Tours, France: Publications de l’Université de Tours, 1990), 49-62; Pedro Jose Jiménez Calvo and Maria del Carmen Sanchidrián-Blanco, “Las memorias de prácticas de las escuelas normales de Málaga como fuente para la historia de la educación,” in *La Práctica Educativa. Historia, Memoria y Patrimonio*, ed. Sara González et al. (Salamanca: FahrenHouse Ediciones, 2018), 385-94.

<sup>64</sup>María Rosa Domínguez Cabrejas, “La percepción de la escuela y la actividad escolar a través de las memorias de prácticas de los alumnos aspirantes a maestros,” in *La educación en España a examen (1898-1998): Jornadas nacionales en conmemoración del centenario del noventa y ocho*, ed. Julio Ruiz et al. (Montevideo: Ministerio de Educación y Cultura Uruguay, 1999), 479-99.

reflection and observation. Students also had to complete the report to be eligible for the revalidation exams, as outlined in Articles 25, 27, 28, 29, and 32 of the decree.<sup>65</sup>

Both the technical reports completed by teachers and the practice reports by students were created by order of educational institutions through various legislative decrees. These reports were authored by different individuals; however, what they fundamentally shared in common was that they portrayed the reality of the educational process during this era.

In the analysis of participant narratives, the following subcodes related to Irregular Attendance (1.1) emerged to facilitate this comparative analysis across cities: accompaniment by adults (1.1.1), temporary entry into the labor market (1.1.2), late arrival (1.1.3), assistance with household tasks (1.1.4), parental indifference (1.1.5), a desire to attend for a few hours (1.1.6), and proximity to the school (1.1.7).

In relation to the first and sixth subcodes (1.1.1. and 1.1.6), adult accompaniment (1.1.1) and the interest in attending for a few hours (1.1.6), the studies conducted on practice reports revealed no information running parallel to these narratives. However, for the second and fourth subcodes, temporary entry into the labor market (1.1.2) and help at home (1.1.4), analysis uncovered noteworthy information for the cities of Badajoz, Cádiz, and the Canary Islands.

In Badajoz, students' temporary entry into the labor market was influenced by socioeconomic conditions. This led to school absenteeism, as children were needed to assist in supporting the family by working in agricultural tasks or performing domestic chores. Specifically, the narrative of Marcelina F. F. in 1920 mentions the practice of "removing their daughters from school prematurely as soon as they can be of some use at home by helping with domestic work."<sup>66</sup>

Ruiz observes that children in Cádiz also ended their education early to work. As was the case in Alicante, in Cadiz the reports mention that nine years old was the optimal age for entering the labor market:

In the upper group, many children leave school. Due to their parents' lack of resources, they need their children to help with their work or take care of other younger siblings at an age of fewer than 9 years while the parents seek a meager income in homes or workshops for their household.<sup>67</sup>

Regarding the need to assist in supporting the family, the report mentioned that parents required their sons and daughters to help with their tasks or take care of younger siblings at home while the parents sought means to provide for their household. For example, one narrative explained parents removed children from school "because they had to take care of younger siblings or attend to domestic chores."<sup>68</sup>

In the case of the Canary Islands, while there is a slight deviation in terms of the years covered, the records still indicate that, despite having a significant number of girls enrolled in national schools, regular attendance was not universal. School absenteeism was a common problem in both urban and rural areas, and the records mention that

<sup>65</sup> Jiménez y Sanchidrián, "Las memorias de prácticas."

<sup>66</sup> Mateos y Córdoba, "Escuelas, higiene y educación física," 161.

<sup>67</sup> Ruiz, "La escuela pública en Cádiz," 171.

<sup>68</sup> Ruiz, "La escuela pública en Cádiz," 171.

low and irregular school attendance owed to poverty and child labor. In rural areas, attendance was more irregular during agricultural harvest periods. Furthermore, child labor hindered school attendance and resulted in sporadic learning. Gonzales-Pérez, in her studies of narratives from practice reports, concluded that “girls helped with household chores or other work, also serving in other private homes to earn sustenance, food, and clothing.”<sup>69</sup> This shows that this practice persisted over time, as evidenced by the practice reports of some female students for 1937, 1943, 1946, 1947, and 1948.<sup>70</sup>

Like Alicante, in the Canary Islands school dropouts in many cases were temporary, often associated with periods of high agricultural activity. One scholar noted that “in rural areas, greater irregularity in attendance was observed during agricultural harvesting periods.”<sup>71</sup>

The main finding from the studies of the reports from the city of Alicante—that parental disinterest (1.1.5) was the most relevant narrative—was observed in other Spanish cities as well. In Cádiz, the reports found that one of the causes was parents’ indifference, as well as their limited involvement in school-related tasks. Furthermore, they noted that families preferred any occupation for their children that could provide some means of support. Additionally, parents showed little interest in their daughters’ education and simply wished them to be in school to avoid causing disruptions at home. Ruiz highlighted a specific narrative that pointed to parents’ indifference regarding their children’s education and their minimal involvement in school-related tasks: “In humble households, parents did not worry about sending their children to school; they preferred them to work and contribute to the family’s economy.”<sup>72</sup>

Regarding the seventh subcode, distance to the school (1.1.7), there were similarities between Alicante and the schools in the Canary Islands, where students cited various reasons for exemption from attending school, including “age, distance, lack of economic resources, being married with young children, etc.”<sup>73</sup>

There are several documented reasons in other cities that have not been included in this list of underlying issues, such as the insufficient availability of school spaces, which led to denied enrollment for students. For example, Ruiz contends that “children did not attend school due to the limited number of available slots in public schools. Many underprivileged children were vying for the limited spots in these tuition-free schools.”<sup>74</sup> Scarcity of resources and dedicated school infrastructure to accommodate girls was clearly another factor in low attendance rates.

Based on the available data, deficiencies in materials, as observed in the cities mentioned, do not appear to be directly associated with irregular attendance but rather with other factors. However, further research is necessary to confirm this relationship. It is worth noting that Domínguez found a connection between these two factors, observing that “serious issues with school attendance continuity [and] severe

<sup>69</sup> Esther Contreras, “Memoria de prácticas,” in *Escuela n. 3* (Tenerife: Garachico, 1946).

<sup>70</sup> González Pérez, “Etnografía de la escuela,”

<sup>71</sup> González Pérez, “Etnografía de la escuela,” 16.

<sup>72</sup> Ruiz, “La Escuela pública en Cádiz,” 173.

<sup>73</sup> González Pérez, “Etnografía de la Escuela,” 8.

<sup>74</sup> Ruiz, “La escuela pública en Cádiz,” 172.



infrastructure deficiencies—in this case, there were only enough desks for 25% of the female students—are some of the major flaws that were reported.”<sup>75</sup>

Through a comparative examination of the factors driving school absenteeism in various Spanish cities during the first third of the twentieth century, we have demonstrated that absenteeism persisted. Additionally, we have shown that the causes of school absenteeism vary depending on the region and the social and educational context of each city. Although teachers from different Spanish cities identified parental disinterest as one of the most significant causes of school absenteeism, further analysis is needed to delve into the causes of school absenteeism in each specific context.

## Discussion

It's no surprise that the results from the qualitative analysis have revealed a widespread lack of a culture of attendance in public schools during the first third of the twentieth century, which no doubt hindered children's literacy: despite efforts to enhance education during this period, the illiteracy rate, recorded at 59.35 percent in 1900, fell only to 52.23 percent by 1920, indicating limited progress.<sup>76</sup>

The issues related to irregular attendance are diverse and are somewhat linked, to a greater or lesser extent, to gender. Additionally, there were other underlying problems, such as family or economic difficulties, lack of student motivation or interest, and health issues. It is interesting to note that problems related to health issues do not appear to be associated with school dropout, as that issue has a low cumulative frequency.

Among the various reasons provided by teachers to determine irregular attendance, notable factors include lack of adult accompaniment, early entry into the workforce, delays due to household chores, parental disinterest, the need to attend for only a few hours, and distance from school. Attempting to address some of these issues, the Royal Decree of October 26, 1901, mandated compulsory school attendance for children aged six to twelve. However, its impact was minimal. As already evidenced by 1900, before the decree, the enrollment rate remained around 47 percent, and student attendance was highly irregular.<sup>77</sup> Tiana argued that the leading cause of non-attendance at school was the maintenance of a child labor market since, for working-class families, children's wages were an indispensable supplement to family earnings at a time when the cost of living was high.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Viñao stressed that the causes of non-attendance in rural and urban areas must be distinguished.<sup>79</sup> In the rural context, the child went to school only when he or she had no tasks to complete, which was not typical as agricultural tasks were usually daily chores. In the urban context, boys stopped going to school

<sup>75</sup> Domínguez, “La percepción de la escuela,” 491.

<sup>76</sup> Alejandro Tiana Ferrer, “Educación obligatoria, asistencia escolar y trabajo infantil en España en el primer tercio del siglo XX,” *Historia De La Educación* 6 (1987), 43.

<sup>77</sup> Antonio Viñao, *Escuela para todos: Educación y modernidad en la España del siglo XX* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2004).

<sup>78</sup> Tiana Ferrer, “Educación obligatoria.”

<sup>79</sup> Antonio Viñao Frago, “La distribución del tiempo y del trabajo en la enseñanza primaria en España,” *Historia de La Educación: Revista Interuniversitaria*, 1997, [https://redined.educacion.gob.es/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11162/22738/1997\\_HistoriaEducaci%C3%B3n\\_16\\_7\\_VI%C3%91AO.pdf?sequence=1](https://redined.educacion.gob.es/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11162/22738/1997_HistoriaEducaci%C3%B3n_16_7_VI%C3%91AO.pdf?sequence=1).

when they found a trade as an apprentice or laborer. On the other hand, girls, both in rural and urban areas, always attended irregularly and were usually less punctual, especially when mothers were engaged in house cleaning, laundry, and shopping, tasks in which girls also had to participate. Borderies-Guereña's study shows that schooling often took place in not only poor pedagogical conditions but also very precarious hygienic and sanitary ones.<sup>80</sup> Hygiene in schools was a matter of concern, as parents worried about schooling's impacts on pupils' health and the risk of children contracting diseases. In short, although in theory the Moyano Law proclaimed primary education to be compulsory, this was not the Spanish educational reality at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Teachers ascribed the complexity and difficulty of their work to various factors, related primarily not to students but to parents. Along these lines, studies conducted in Spanish locations like Teruel have documented that some teachers emphasized the significance of educational tasks in Sunday lectures and in the press, aiming to convince parents about the importance of quality education and aiming to eradicate illiteracy.<sup>81</sup>

The implementation of the graded school system may have contributed to changes in school attendance and student progression. The movement toward graded schooling in Spain reflected broader psychological and pedagogical currents that sought to rationalize education through scientific classification, academic leveling, and standardized educational practices, aligning education with contemporary ideals of modernization and social progress.<sup>82</sup> At that time, the goal was to ensure that all students advanced at the same pace, reinforcing the importance of regular attendance. This system sought to achieve a standardized model of education through various criteria and corresponding tests or exams, which incentivized a more structured and consistent participation in schooling.<sup>83</sup> Children were classified on the basis of not only their level of intelligence but also their school progress, labeling them as struggling, advanced, or normal students. Furthermore, the first special classrooms for students with academic learning delays were created.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusions

In the quantitative analysis conducted on the relationship between the number of schools in Spain and the reduction of child labor in a given community, we found

<sup>80</sup>Josette Borderies-Guereña, "Niños y niñas en familia," in *Historia de la infancia en la España contemporánea, 1834-1936*, dir. José María Borrás Llop (Madrid: Ministerio de Trabajo e inmigración, Subdirección General de Publicaciones, Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez, 1996), 21-66.

<sup>81</sup>María Lourdes Alcalá Ibáñez, "Analfabetismo y escolarización en la provincia de Teruel en el primer tercio del siglo XX," *Educa Nova: Colección de Artículos Técnicos de Educación* 7 (Sept. 2017), 43-56.

<sup>82</sup>Agustín Escolano Benito, "The School in the City: School Architecture as Discourse and as Text," *Paedagogica Historica* 39, no. 1-2 (2003): 53-64.

<sup>83</sup>Antonio Viñao, *Innovación pedagógica y racionalidad científica* (Ediciones AKAL, 1990).

<sup>84</sup>Ministerio de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes, "Real decreto aprobando el reglamento de régimen interior de las escuelas graduadas, reglamento de escuelas graduadas de 1918," *Gaceta de Madrid*, no. 274 (Oct. 1, 1918), 11-13; Javier Rujas Martínez-Novillo, "La construcción del 'fracaso escolar' en España. Génesis y cristalización de un problema social," *Revista de Sociología* 102, no. 3 (2017), 477-507; Viñao Frago, "The History of Literacy."

that having more schools did not necessarily result in a direct decrease in children's involvement in economic activities.

Further investigation revealed that there was no significant relationship between the number of schools and economic activity in terms of enrollment. This suggests that merely having more schools in a community did not guarantee higher school attendance. Other influencing factors need to be considered, such as the quality of education offered, family environment, and socioeconomic conditions of the students.

Moreover, a regression analysis was conducted to assess whether the average attendance per school had any relation to economic activity. However, the results did not show a significant correlation between these two aspects. This reinforces the idea that other factors, such as parental disinterest, may have had a more significant impact on student attendance.

After analyzing the narratives of teachers, we confirmed that parental disinterest was one of the most relevant causes of school absenteeism. Additionally, this analysis confirms the thesis previously established by Viñao that the graded school system functioned as a solution to reduce absenteeism.<sup>85</sup> In the specific case of Alicante and other cities such as Cádiz, Málaga, and Zaragoza, while efforts to implement graded school structures were evident, the extent of their adoption varied and was often limited by local socioeconomic conditions and resource availability. Indeed, these results indicate an association between type of school organization and irregular attendance in schools. Given the local focus of the analysis, however, a definitive conclusion about the graded school system would require conducting more extensive studies across other cities that analyze the differences between the use of a unitary organizational method and a graded one. This could potentially demonstrate, or not, the improvements in literacy gained from the graded schooling system in Spain, despite the implementation challenges it faced.

Regarding differences based on gender, the findings suggest that there were no significant differences in the challenges faced by students and teachers based on their gender. While a small group of female teachers mentioned health issues as a hindrance to conducting classes, the results indicate that the real impediment affecting both male and female teachers was irregularity in student attendance.

Regarding the second objective, identifying common issues across the rest of the studied cities to determine the existence of widespread patterns in Spain, we can conclude that irregular attendance was a common problem across all schools in Spain. Among the reasons commonly cited for attendance irregularity across different cities, parental disinterest, household responsibilities, and partial or complete engagement in the workforce stood out.

Furthermore, concerning parental disinterest, narratives indicate that both male and female teachers were aware of the limited value parents attributed to education, compared to the significant emphasis they placed on children's contribution to the family's material or economic support. This indicates a problem that transcended local boundaries and evolved into a broader regional issue, particularly in the context of the severe economic crisis that Spain experienced during the early twentieth century.

<sup>85</sup> Viñao, *Innovación pedagógica y racionalidad científica*.

Finally, while other studies have identified narratives that associate hygienic-pedagogical and structural conditions of the school building with irregular attendance, this study has instead focused on aspects directly related to teachers, students, and families.<sup>86</sup>

In conclusion, this study finds that absenteeism in Spain was a more extensive and intricate issue than it appears, with adverse consequences on academic performance and students' lives. The evidence from teachers' reports highlights widespread concerns about irregular attendance, indicating that the reasons for school non-attendance were deeply rooted in Spanish society. These factors included poverty, the necessity of child labor to support the family, and a limited perception of the social and professional mobility associated with education. Additionally, teachers frequently pointed to parental disinterest and persistent attendance issues as significant obstacles to children's education in Spain.

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<sup>86</sup>Soler, "La educación en Alicante."

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