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Effects of compulsory schooling up to age 18 in Portugal: An analysis from the teachers' perspective

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ABSTRACT

Compulsory schooling has been a topic of debate among countries, seeking to better prepare their citizens for work and personal life, while also addressing early school dropout rates. In this case, the Portuguese educational model is examined. In 2012, compulsory education was extended from six to 18 years of age, making Portugal the first country on the Iberian Peninsula to implement this reform. After 13 years, it is now appropriate to conduct a study that analyzes the current situation and evaluates the impact of this change. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyse and understand the influence of this extension of compulsory schooling on Portuguese pupils through the teachers' perception. For this purpose, a quantitative methodology was carried out by designing a digital questionnaire adapted to a Likert scale so that Secondary Education teachers could give their views according to their teaching experience over time, with a total of 200 responses with teachers ranging from 20 to 69 years of age. For the analysis of the results, reliability, validity, descriptive, and differential studies were conducted. The results show a highly reliable and valid instrument, yielding two factors: Educational and social benefits of extending compulsory schooling; and Challenges and professional implications of extending compulsory schooling. In accordance with the study's objective, a set of various items were analysed. It is concluded that the initiative to extend compulsory education is generally positive; however, this would benefit from being accompanied by greater material and non-material resources, continuous teacher training, and lower student-teacher ratios to support more individualized attention and improve educational quality.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on Portugal, where compulsory schooling was extended from 6 to 18 years of age in 2012. Therefore, the authors' objective in this study is to evaluate secondary school teachers' perceived effectiveness of the effects of extending compulsory schooling in the country. The extension of compulsory schooling to 18-19 years of age in European education systems has been and continues to be a topic of debate in order to improve students' professional qualifications and prevent early school leaving.

In this sense, the European Parliament, in its 2011's resolution,

suggested that families with disadvantaged socioeconomic and socio-cultural backgrounds, students with special needs, or non-trained adults should be the priority for the EU countries in order to avoid early leaving before the completion of secondary education ([Recomendacao do Conselho de 28 de junho de 2011 sobre as políticas de redução do abandono escolar precoce](#)). It is also necessary to highlight the importance of communication between schools and families to support their inclusion in the educational system. Such needs make it necessary to reopen the debate on extending compulsory education until their completion of secondary education studies.

The Eurostat (2024) indicates that Romania has the highest early

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school-dropout rate among 18–24-year-olds at 16.6%, followed by Spain at 13.3%, a gap of just over three percentage points. Portugal, the case study, records 8%, remaining below the EU target of 9% and showing a 5.3-percentage-point difference compared with Spain. Historically, Portugal reduced early school leaving from 20% in 2012 to 6.3% in 2022, rising slightly to 8% in 2023. Overall, this represents a 12.4-percentage-point decrease since 2012, despite a 1.8-point increase since 2022 (Pordata, 2024; Eurostat, 2024). One key factor behind the long-term decline could have been extending compulsory education to age 18, keeping students in the education system longer and helping prevent premature dropout.

However, beyond early school leaving, society demands much more due to the complexity of jobs and, therefore, the requirement that the training received be of high quality in order to meet the challenges of the productive market in a constantly changing globalised market (Marczuk, 2024). In this regard, professions that are currently unknown to us—many of them linked to the advancement of digital technologies and artificial intelligence—will reshape the future professional careers of the workers (Azpiazu & Bayón, 2022; Perez, 2023).

In other words, the main intention of this extension is to seek higher qualifications for access to higher education. However, amid such economic turmoil, the question arises as to how the education system would behave, what kind of school we want to go to, what kind of school we want to send the future citizens of tomorrow to. However, bearing in mind that these educational policies can be beneficial for improving human capital (Harmon, 2017), the extension of compulsory schooling geared towards the productive market should not dilute critical thinking, so that young people learn to think and be independent.

Therefore, the debate on compulsory schooling until the age of majority can be approached from several perspectives. The first is that compulsory schooling will be beneficial to students because they are receiving training that is appropriate to their personal and professional interests, given that this extension of compulsory schooling goes far beyond the basic schooling that should be common to all citizens. This means that secondary education must be strengthened through active educational practices and student-centered strategies that promote more meaningful and constructive learning. Such an approach can help reinforce curricular competencies, increase student motivation, reduce premature school dropout rates, and encourage students to continue their educational pathways (Sagardia et al., 2017). However, we must also focus on possible obstacles such as a lack of interest in the curriculum, low student motivation, or an unfavourable socio-family context (Rojon et al., 2023).

The second perspective is that government-driven policies are implemented within educational institutions, or, conversely, that the discourse used to legitimise the norm generates high expectations that cannot then be met by the desired academic results. In this regard, the work of Álvarez-Álvarez and Triana-Teherán (2026), who, through a systematic review of articles collected in journals indexed in WOS or Scopus, concluded that students at risk of social exclusion, with a focus on students in rural areas or from more disadvantaged social classes, are the ones who benefit most from the extension to 18 years of age.

However, the authors cited reflect that these policies do not directly lead to a more equitable or higher quality education system; to achieve this, complementary policies aimed at teacher training or curriculum innovation are needed. Along the same lines is the study by Fontán de Bedout et al. (2026), which, through the quantitative and qualitative analysis of 660 documents, highlights that compulsory schooling policies alone do not guarantee educational success. Rather, alternative measures must be proposed that focus on students' educational processes and needs, seeking to ensure equal opportunities.

Following on from the above argument, interest in this type of study is relevant. Teachers are the agents on the front line, attending to the

academic needs of students in order to achieve educational quality. It is therefore necessary to understand their perceptions as an appropriate and significant element in evaluating compulsory schooling. Their perceptions will enable us to understand the application of these policies within school contexts, providing an innovative perspective on the issue under study, given that we are not aware of any previous empirical research on this issue in Portugal conducted with teachers. What we have been able to find is the study by Câmara (2024), which focuses on the evolution or stagnation of the student body based on school enrolment, highlighting that the norm has a positive influence on students from more disadvantaged classes, enabling them to graduate, but that this reform does not influence the educational quality of the institution itself.

1.1. Compulsory schooling in Portugal

At the end of the dictatorship, which lasted almost 50 years, compulsory education in Portugal was established under Law 5/73 (Lei n.º 5/73 de 25 de julho), passed in July 1973, which established “the foundations for the reform of the educational system (Lei n.º 5/73, de 25 de julho). The Minister of National Education was Veiga Simão, named in 1970, and who held the position until the Carnation Revolution, which took place on 25th April 1974. He promoted the democratisation of teaching despite the country being under an anti-democratic and closed regime.

The law stipulated that basic education was compulsory and lasted 8 years, and that all Portuguese citizens had the right to it. However, just as the system was being implemented, the Estado Novo regime collapsed, which gave place to the Carnation Revolution.

In 1974, although schooling was available for all children aged 7–11, the country had an illiteracy rate of 21% among the population over age 15, and significant inequalities in access to different levels of education, as well as between regions (Rochette & Alcoforado, 2018).

For several years, Portugal experienced periods of political and social instability, as the democratisation of both schools and society required successive reforms. This was the case between April 1974 and October 1986. This period led to a new legal framework after April 1974, with the enactment of the Basic Law of the Educational System (BLES) (a Portuguese Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo, LBSE). This was Law No. 46/86, published on 14th October 1986, organised in several sections, chapters and articles. Notably, Article 2 (General Principles) established, in paraphrased terms, the obligation of the State to ensure all citizens' right to access to education, thereby guaranteeing equal opportunities both for access to education and for achieving academic success.

This law framed the Portuguese education system, since legislation was dispersed across different documents as a consequence of the country's political and economic circumstances. Such circumstances were shaped by the democratisation and the consolidation of universal access to education that began after April 1974. Furthermore, the law emphasised that education should ensure that students leaving the system would develop a sense of commitment and responsibility towards society, cultivate independent thinking, engage in the exchange of ideas, and respect others' contributions—thereby adopting a democratic stance (Lei n.º 46/86, de 14 de outubro de 1986). Consequently, education should foster a connection between citizens and society, encouraging them to contribute their potential in addressing the arising challenges.

As for compulsory schooling, Article 6 paragraph 1 (Universality) established that education must be equal, compulsory, free, and last 9 years (Lei n.º 46/86, de 14 de outubro de 1986).

After time, and with the constant social changes from the society of information, the legislative power and political leaders have introduced and published several changes aiming at dealing with the emerging

demands.

The BLES was modified by Laws 115/97 of 19th September (Lei n.º 115/97, de 19 de setembro), 49/2005, of 30th August (Lei n.º 49/2005, de 30 de agosto), and 85/2009, of 27th August (Lei n.º 85/2009, de 27 de agosto), and in the terms of the Constitution's Article 198.1c) (Lei Constitucional n.º 1/2005, de 12 de agosto).

In 2009, Law 85/2009 of 27th August extended compulsory education to the age of 18, which enshrined pre-school universality for children over 5. Article 2, paragraph 1 (*Scope of Implementation of compulsory Schooling*) establishes that "children and young people aged 6-18 are considered to be of school age" (Lei n.º 85/2009, de 27 de agosto, p. 5635).

The principle of compulsory schooling is a central measure in the structuring of worldwide education systems, aiming at progressively extending the duration of schooling and to more people. European Commission (Eurydice) (2018) presented a study in which, from the 43 European education systems analysed, only 8 have a compulsory education system of at least 12 years (Belgium, Luxembourg, Portugal, Northern Ireland, Turkey, Hungary, and Germany).

The extension of compulsory education to 12 years and up to the age of 18 has introduced new challenges and aims to provide a stronger education for young Portuguese citizens, considering that social demands are increasingly intense and that lifelong and life-wide learning is a hallmark of contemporary times. In this regard, the National Council of Education (Conselho Nacional de Educação CNE, 2017) issued several opinions and organised seminars and colloquia with education experts, resulting in various publications reflecting on this issue. These publications recommended that:

Learning should be reinforced by the early identification of difficulties and different strategies according to the students' needs, without implying early tracking into professional pathways. In this regard,

it fostered diversification, flexibility and quality of educational pathways, and the definition of a policy of school and career guidance, which is also highlighted in recent Council documents as measures for the universalisation of 12-year compulsory education and for fulfilling the objectives Portugal has committed at the European Level (Conselho Nacional de Educação CNE, 2017, p. 8).

However, it should be highlighted that, even though the extension of schooling is ambitious and it "ensures equitable access in a relatively fast and efficient way, if there is not general success in education, equity is not realised, and the objectives associated with this principle are seriously damaged" (Conselho Nacional de Educação CNE, 2017, p. 18).

When political leaders decided in 2009 to extend compulsory schooling from 9 to 12 years, they relied on the Portuguese reality and on the indications from international institutions (Conselho Nacional de Educação CNE, 2009). They believed that the qualification of Portuguese would have a positive impact in social, cultural, and economic development of all Portuguese citizenship. By the same token, there was the necessary consensus between political forces to guarantee the fostering of a high-quality education, which intended to be more inclusive and to promote everyone's development, regardless of their particular characteristics.

1.2. Objectives

The main objective of this study is to analyse the effectiveness of extending compulsory schooling based on the perceptions of secondary school teachers in Portugal. This general objective is divided into four specific objectives related to the assessment of the extension of compulsory education in various aspects. The first is to analyse its influence on the consolidation of curricular competences, the second is to

study school dropout rates, the third is to examine its impact on students' academic performance, and finally, the fourth is to evaluate the effect of extending schooling on entry into higher education. It also aims to analyse possible differences between assessments according to various socio-demographic variables of teachers, such as gender, age, geographical area and level of education.

2. Method

Regarding the method, we used a quantitative methodology because we considered it a strategy that would allow us to answer the question guiding this study, namely: Which are the education and social implications of extending compulsory schooling from 9 to 12?

On the other hand, the researchers were interested in adopting a scientific, objective, distant and neutral attitude, based on the collected and statistically processed data, with the aim of increasing the knowledge of the emerging reality (Coutinho, 2022).

The statistical programme SPSS version 21 was used for data processing. The data analysis included reliability analysis, psychometric tests to verify construct validity, descriptive and differential analyses using Student's t-test and one-way ANOVA.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Directorate-General for Education of the Government of Portugal with approval number: n.º 0719100001, dated 14th October 2024. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study.

2.1. Instrument

An online questionnaire with a total of 19 items was used as the instrument and made available online via Google Forms to secondary school teachers. A 5-point Likert scale was used, where 1 meant 'Very dissatisfied', 2 'Partially dissatisfied', 3 'Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied', 4 'Partially satisfied' and 5 'Very satisfied'.

The questionnaire was first administered to a group of six teachers who were not part of the study sample in order to validate its content through expert judgement. Teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire and report any ambiguities or doubts that arose during the process, as well as to provide suggestions for improving the instrument. The teachers' responses were carefully analysed, and it was decided not to reformulate the items because the respondents had understood them correctly. Before distributing the questionnaires to the teachers, authorisation was requested from the Portuguese Ministry of Education by sending the questionnaire and the informed consent form, which was included in the same form, to the respective platform for 'Follow-up Surveys in School Environments' of the Directorate-General for Studies of the Portuguese Government, together with a request for authorisation to approve the study from an ethical point of view. Following approval, an invitation was sent to school principals, explaining the objectives of the research and requesting their cooperation in forwarding the questionnaire to all secondary school teachers, given that they have access to the email addresses of all these teachers. The survey was conducted from 1 November 2024 to 31 March 2025.

After organising and categorising the data, the study is structured into nineteen items, which may be consulted with the authors. However, this paper focuses specifically on those related to the extension of compulsory schooling, in accordance with the issues addressed in the state of the art.

The sample size was initially guided by Arkin and Colton table for finite populations (1962, p. 147), which indicates that for populations below 100,000 individuals a minimum of 100 respondents ensures a 95% confidence level with a $\pm 10\%$ margin of error.

Table 1
Study Sample by age group.

Age Group	n	%
20–29	3	1.5
30–39	4	2.0
40–49	72	36.0
50–59	89	44.5
60–69	32	16.0

Note. Prepared by the authors.

In 2023, Portugal had 78,134 teachers in the 3rd Cycle and Secondary Education levels, of whom 55,922 were women and 22,212 were men (Pordata, 2024). Of these teachers, 15,716 were aged 60 or older, 14,797 were aged 55–59, 15,984 were aged 50–54, and only 1309 were between 25 and 29.

The final sample consisted of $N = 200$ teachers. Based on standard sample size formulas for proportions and assuming a 95% confidence level and maximum variance ($p = .5$), this sample corresponds to an approximate margin of error of $\pm 6.9\%$ for the target population.

Given that the target population comprised 78,134 teachers, this criterion was met. However, this margin of error corresponds to an exploratory level of precision, and results should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Furthermore, according to Hair's recommendations (2004), a ratio of between 5 and 10 subjects per item on the instrument administered is recommended. In this case, given that the questionnaire consists of 19 items, the sample exceeds the necessary cohort (95–190), as a total of 200 participants were obtained for this research.

Thus, one of the positive aspects of the questionnaire survey is the significant number of people who can be surveyed at the same time, as well as “the interest in understanding the meaning that actors attribute to their behaviour and the actions they perform” (Morgado, 2012, p. 78).

Therefore, the sampling in this study was intentional (purposive). As previously mentioned, the final sample consisted of 200 teachers, of whom 47 were men (23.5%) and 153 were women (76.5%). The sample was distributed across the following age groups (see Table 1).

The data indicate that the most represented age group is that of participants aged 50–59, followed by those aged 40–49. Together, these groups account for approximately 80.5% of the sample, indicating that the majority of participants are between 40 and 59 years old. The youngest participants, aged 20–29, constitute only 1.5% of the total sample, thus representing a marginal proportion.

Following the research, it will focus on the data referring to the reliability of the tool and the analysis.

2.2. Reliability

The reliability results are excellent for the entire tool, following the recommendations of George and Mallery (2003), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.940. By the same token, a high reliability index for the indexes is obtained for those items linked to the compulsory education (items 9, 10, 11, and 12, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.827).

2.3. Construct validity

The suitability of the correlation matrix was evaluated before the Exploratory Factor Analysis. The data showed a coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.000002561$), indicating that the model explains a negligible proportion of variance; $KMO = 0.949$, an excellent value in terms of sample suitability; and significance in the correlation of the

items in the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2 = 2469.886$; $gl = 171$; $p < .001$). As the results are suitable and significant, the tool's underlying factors are examined (Hair et al., 2019).

The Principal Component Analysis extraction method (PCA) was used to do the Exploratory Factorial Analysis, which explains a total variance of 59.788%, justified by the recommended range by Hair (2004), Henson and Roberts (2006) and Malhotra (2019). The type of rotation was Varimax with Kaiser normalisation, although similar matrices were obtained for Promax and Oblimin. Two main factors with significant charges and with values higher than 0.40 are shown:

- Factor 1. Social and educational benefits from extending compulsory schooling, consisting of items 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19.
- Factor 2. Challenges and professional implications in extending compulsory schooling age, consisting of items 1, 3, and 8.

2.4. Descriptive analysis

Results obtained show a widely positive perception with respect to the impact of the extension of compulsory schooling, but with significant variations between the evaluated aspects (see Table 2). The participants agree that this measure contributes to the consolidation of the curricular competences, especially the reduction of school drop-out, as reflected in the higher averages in the items 9 ($M = 3.77$) and 10 ($M = 3.95$), with relatively moderate standard deviations. Nevertheless, the assessment of the increase in academic success derived from this extension is ambiguous, falling close to neutrality ($M = 2.89$) and exhibiting greater differences of opinions, although it shows the highest variability among the items. Similarly, the notion that students enter higher education better qualified gets a moderate level of agreement ($M = 3.32$), although extended compulsory education is seen as beneficial in certain areas, doubts persist regarding its effectiveness in enhancing students' performance and academic background.

Most participants (63.5%) believe that extending compulsory schooling has a positive impact on the consolidation of curricular competences, and many of them give higher answers falling within levels 4 and 5. The notable number of neutral answers (24.5%) shows an important part of the participants are indifferent or do not have a firm opinion on the matter. Only 12% feel partially or very dissatisfied.

Most teachers seem satisfied or very satisfied with the impact of extending compulsory schooling to prevent school dropouts (item 10). Specifically, 73.5% believe that the measure has helped to reduce dropouts. The neutral category also has a significant weight (17.5%), which may indicate that some teachers do not perceive clear changes in the impact of this extension. In addition, a significant minority are dissatisfied or partially dissatisfied and consider that the measure has not prevented school dropout.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics on the extension of compulsory schooling.

Items	M	SD
9. The extension of compulsory education is positive to consolidate curricular competences.	3.77	1.05
10. The extension of compulsory schooling can prevent dropping out of school.	3.95	0.99
11. Students' academic success increased with the extension of compulsory schooling.	2.89	1.12
12. With the extension of mandatory schooling, students are better prepared for higher education.	3.32	1.27

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Prepared by the authors.

Furthermore, it should be considered that some teachers do not have a strong opinion to support the effectiveness of this measure, and some others do not agree at all that the extension of compulsory schooling has had an impact on this issue.

Within this logic, the measure seems to have influenced positively in preventing school dropout. However, this does not mean the measure will necessarily improve students' results, and for teachers, here lies the debate on determining how it has influenced their academic performance.

The data indicate that, if we combine the very satisfied and satisfied responses, less than half of those surveyed, 46%, believe that the extension of compulsory schooling has had a positive influence on preparation for access to higher education. Therefore, a significant percentage takes a neutral stance on this issue, which means that there is no clear position on this influence.

By the same token, the extension of compulsory education in the preparation of students for higher education is addressed, considering the current demands of the labour market in terms of technical and socioemotional skills, adaptability to future uncertainty and preparation for society's exigencies.

Thus, 46% of teachers have a positive perception (22% are very satisfied and 24% are satisfied), although some of them adopt a neutral stance on the influence of extending compulsory schooling in the preparation of students for higher education. A significant number of teachers consider that extending schooling is beneficial in the students' preparation for higher education.

On the other hand, some teachers show a neutral position, which may indicate insufficient critical evaluation of the effects of this education policy and the need of a greater time gap to evaluate this implementation.

2.5. Differential analysis

As for the possible differences between the average ratings of the participants on compulsory schooling according to different socio-demographic variables, the following results have been obtained (see Table 3).

Male participants consider that extending schooling improves preparation for higher education to a greater extent than female ones. The average scores among men are high, whereas the women's ones are medium. Thus, gender explains about 2% of the variability of responses, which suggests that the effect is small, in accordance with the recommendations of Pardo and Ruiz (2005).

Such variations were also analysed with the geographical variant, which refers to participants' location. Subregions and islands (NUTSII) were used as a reference.

The ANOVA results of a factor show significant statistical differences among regions, with $p < .05$ (item 10, sig. Inter-group = 0.033; item 11, sig. Inter-group = 0.001). However, the Scheffé post hoc test revealed no statistically significant differences between pairs of regions ($p > .05$). This suggests that the observed differences between groups were only marginal and may reflect insufficient statistical power within some subgroups, possibly due to the small sample sizes in certain regions (e.g., Setúbal, $n = 5$).

Likewise, no significant statistical differences according to participants' age or academic level are found.

Table 3
Differential analysis according to gender.

Item	Gender	M	SD	p	η^2
12. With the extension of mandatory schooling, students are better prepared for higher education.	Male	3.65	1.27	0.03*	0.021
	Female	3.21	1.25		

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; η^2 = eta squared. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01$. Prepared by the authors.

3. Discussion and conclusions

Analysis of the data obtained from the 200 participants in this study highlights teachers' perceptions of the extension of compulsory schooling to 12 years in Portugal, using a highly reliable and validated ad hoc instrument. It should be noted that, although teachers and school administrators agreed to collaborate in this research, we observed that there were regions where we obtained fewer responses than others, which means that the results cannot be generalised but only focused on the sample obtained. However, this does not prevent the data obtained from being valuable in strengthening this study and maintaining its focus, which helps to open up new avenues of research.

The results suggest that extending compulsory schooling, according to participants, generally has a positive effect on reducing school dropout rates; however, they also highlight the existence of factors that may limit its effectiveness. This is logical, since legal obligation administratively curbs dropout rates. Among these, teachers point to possible difficulties, which would indicate that the legal measure alone does not guarantee the educational success of students without the accompaniment of other pedagogical and support strategies (Álvarez-Álvarez & Triana-Teherán, 2026; Fontán de Bedout et al., 2026).

The results suggest that, although extended compulsory schooling is seen as beneficial in certain areas, doubts remain about its effectiveness in improving pupils' academic performance and preparation.

On the one hand, this may indicate that there has not yet been a sufficiently critical evaluation of the effects of this educational policy, as well as the need for more time to allow for a more objective assessment of its actual implementation. On the other hand, responses that reveal a neutral or dissatisfied stance may indicate a need for education policies that are connected to the real needs of schools, which translates into improving teacher training or making the curriculum more flexible so that compulsory education is useful in preparing students for university entrance.

Furthermore, enhancing teacher training can respond to the educational needs of schools, as it provides strategies and dynamics to deal with the constant social and educational changes that arise in everyday classroom life (Álvarez-Álvarez & Triana-Teherán, 2026).

For its part, the competency-based model can be reinforced by extending compulsory schooling, but students must be motivated to consolidate their skills through active methodologies and meaningful learning (Sagardia et al., 2017).

Furthermore, in these times of uncertainty and continuous social change, it is interesting that the extension of compulsory schooling is useful for strengthening skills and knowing how to apply them in the face of any unforeseen event.

On the other hand, the competency-based model tends to disregard humanistic knowledge, which should be valued and no longer considered useless, because focusing education primarily on professionalising students for the labour market means losing sight of the internalisation of a system of values and ethical codes for living together in society (Ordine, 2023). In this sense, no type of work can be carried out if technical skills are not related to broader scientific and cultural training, which means moving away from any type of pragmatism. In this sense, it will be difficult in the future to conceive of sensible individuals, free from any kind of selfishness, who are committed to social causes and have acquired values such as tolerance, respect for nature, and support for just causes (Ordine, 2023).

Furthermore, this educational change to extend schooling to age 18 could be an opportunity to introduce pedagogical and curricular innovations geared towards a humanistic perspective, as outlined in the Profile of students leaving compulsory schooling (Martins et al., 2017).

This finding is in line with an educational measure launched in Portugal in 2017, the Profile of Students Leaving Compulsory Education (Martins et al., 2017), which is a structuring document on what students are expected to achieve by the end of compulsory education, through a

commitment from all educational stakeholders. In this way, teachers take on a central role as agents of change, mobilising a curriculum focused on “values and skills that enable them to intervene in the lives and histories of individuals and societies, make free and informed decisions about natural problems, social and ethical issues, and have the capacity for active, conscious and responsible civic participation” (Martins et al., 2017, p. 10).

On the other hand, we emphasise that extending compulsory schooling can reduce early school leaving, since increasing the number of years in the system can help students to consolidate their knowledge more effectively, thereby improving their prospects of accessing university (Jamila et al., 2023; Leme, 2024).

The extension of compulsory schooling has brought significant benefits, such as higher professional qualifications for students and better access to university studies, reducing school dropout rates. However, in order for these strengths to become a reality, it is necessary to overcome a number of weaknesses, such as the mismatch between the training offered in schools and the real needs of the labour market, as well as to address the overload of physical, human, and material resources in the education system.

Therefore, it is crucial that legislators and the educational community consistently accompany social changes in order to ensure that the benefits promote social and labour development and that threats and weaknesses are mitigated so that the extension of compulsory schooling becomes an opportunity to provide effective responses to human, social, labour and educational development needs through networking between institutions at the global level.

Among the limitations of the study is that only teachers were given a voice, whereas other social partners (families, students, pedagogues, social educators, etc.) are also involved in the educational process, which limits the generalisability of the results to the population studied. Furthermore, it should be noted that the data refer to the opinions of teachers, mainly from northern Portugal. Similarly, the findings are the result of the participants' subjectivities, and it is possible that the responses are linked to professional experience, attitudes towards reform, or the institutional context.

Thus, although the sample size allows for basic statistical analysis, a margin of error of approximately $\pm 6.9\%$ corresponds to an exploratory level of precision, and the results should therefore be interpreted with caution. Since the sample is only partially representative, it is proposed that objective and longitudinal tests be carried out on larger and random samples in order to complete these results.

Apart from that, the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.000002561$) indicates that the model explains a negligible proportion of variance, which should be considered a limitation. Future research should refine the measurement instrument and reconsider the underlying construct structure.

Another limitation is that no studies were found that addressed this issue from the angle from which this research was constructed and developed. An online search was conducted in databases such as *Scopus*, *Web of Sciences*, and *Dialnet* based on the following idea/premise: impacts of 12 years of schooling in Portugal, but nothing relevant was found. This highlights the highly original nature of the study in addressing a political issue in Portugal that has been little studied.

However, there are studies in neighbouring countries on compulsory schooling. Proof of this is the extension to 18 years of age in Finland, which analyses equity, grades, and educational objectives among students (Jussola, 2023). In the aforementioned study, secondary school students focused their needs on strengthening educational guidance programmes to help them choose the right academic or professional path and work on their emotional skills as they progress through the education system (Jussola, 2023).

Thus, studies are still needed to confirm the need to extend the number of years spent in school in order to improve skills, prevent early school leaving and better qualify students for access to academic or vocational pathways. Therefore, another limitation is that no empirical

studies of this nature were found in Portugal. Only one chapter by the proponent of the measure, former Conservative Minister Nuno Crato (2020), justifies the need to reform curricula and extend compulsory schooling to improve teaching and learning processes and support the most disadvantaged students.

In addition, more local research should be promoted to obtain information on aspects such as academic performance, the socio-economic level of families, school organisation, but also accountability and resources to ascertain the state of education in a country with the aim of better educating its citizens (Clark, 2023).

The study sought to review this measure after 13 years in force in order to analyse its impact on Portuguese society. It is important to understand the perception of Portuguese teachers, especially those who have taught before and during the introduction of the measure into the education system. A measure that should not be based exclusively on providing more resources, whether human or material, to school clusters, but also a measure that influences, as is the case, the academic progress of students in order to stop early school leaving and ensure that they leave with the appropriate preparation for higher education.

This is a study in its infancy, which needs to be read and reflected upon, and which may be followed by further research, but this time giving a voice to the students to find out whether the measure has helped them to improve their academic performance, or also in terms of their preparation and acquisition of skills for life and the world of work. It is important that they internalise the importance of ethical and civic behaviour, which can only be learned through humanistic education, so that they feel identified with society and help it to progress. Therefore, it could be useful to know whether students find the training they receive useful for their professional and personal interests, and to assess their maturity after completing their education at the age of 18.

Finally, this study provides insight into the issue of extending compulsory schooling in Portugal, highlighting challenges and opening up new educational, research and social debates.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Evangelina Bonifácio: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Álvaro Nieto Ratero:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Cristiana Madureira:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Investigation. **Sandra Gómez-del-Pulgar Cinque:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis.

Data availability statement

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions, but are available exclusively for consultation by reviewers.

Declaration of the use of AI assisted technologies

The authors declare that no AI-assisted technologies were used at any stage in the preparation of this article.

Ethical approval statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the Directorate-General for Education of the Government of Portugal with approval number: n.º0719100001, dated 14th October 2024. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no financial interests or personal relationships that could influence the work described in this article.

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