

DROPOUT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A LITERATURE REVIEW ABOUT CONCEPTS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

EVASIÓN EN LA ENSEÑANZA SUPERIOR: UNA REVISIÓN DE LITERATURA SOBRE CONCEPTOS Y CLASIFICACIONES

EVASÃO NO ENSINO SUPERIOR: UMA REVISÃO DA LITERATURA SOBRE CONCEITOS E CLASSIFICAÇÕES

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Abstract

When researching student dropout, which is clearly one of the biggest problems diagnosed in national higher education, it is perceived that there are a number of controversies regarding the connotations that can be attributed to it and that influence the way in which the phenomenon is approached, which directs the engagement and perspective of investigations. Because of this, this exploratory study is proposed, with the objective of presenting in the literature review about the concepts and classifications of student dropout, using as sources documents and scientific productions found in some of the main databases of CAPES journals. It is hoped that the portfolio produced can contribute to a better understanding and discussion of dropout in higher education, as well in addition to trying to mitigate conflicts related to terminology and encourage new research.

Keywords: Dropout; Higher Education; Literature review.

Resumen

Al investigar la deserción estudiantil, que es claramente uno de los mayores problemas diagnosticados en la educación superior nacional, se evidencia que existe una serie de controversias respecto de las connotaciones que se le pueden atribuir y que influyen en la forma en que se aborda el fenómeno, que orienta el compromiso y la perspectiva de las investigaciones. Por ello, se propone este estudio, de carácter exploratorio, con el objetivo de presentar una revisión de literatura sobre los conceptos y clasificaciones de la evasión, utilizando como fuentes documentos y producciones científicas encontradas en algunas de las principales bases de datos de publicaciones periódicas de CAPES. Se espera que el contenido producido pueda contribuir a una mejor comprensión y discusión de las tasas de deserción en la educación superior, además de intentar reducir conflictos relacionados con la terminología y fomentar nuevas investigaciones.

Palabras clave: Evasión; Enseñanza Superior; Revisión de literatura.

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Resumo

Ao pesquisar acerca da evasão discente, que claramente é um dos maiores problemas diagnosticados no ensino superior nacional, percebe-se que há uma série de controvérsias em relação às conotações que lhe podem ser atribuídas e que influenciam na forma com que o fenômeno é abordado, o que direciona o engajamento e perspectiva das investigações. Em razão disto, propõe-se este estudo, de caráter exploratório, com o objetivo de apresentar uma revisão da literatura acerca dos conceitos e classificações da evasão, utilizando como fontes documentos e produções científicas encontrados em algumas das principais bases de dados dos periódicos da CAPES. Espera-se que o portfólio produzido possa contribuir para uma melhor compreensão e para a discussão da evasão no ensino superior, além de tentar atenuar os conflitos relacionados à terminologia e incentivar novas pesquisas.

Palavras-chave: Evasão; Ensino superior; Revisão de literatura.

Introduction

Student dropout is not a new problem, but an issue that originated decades ago and which inevitably continues to occur, whether at lower or higher rates, undoubtedly, in all higher education institutions in Brazil, generating a series of concerns and challenges. Veloso (2000, p. 14) agrees with this argument, and corroborates the existence of a “universality of the phenomenon” of dropout, in addition to the “homogeneity of its behavior in certain areas of knowledge despite the differences between educational institutions and the socio-economic-cultural peculiarities of each country”.

On the other hand, as the problem emerges, a solution must be given. In this way, this review brings together a series of studies, the number of which is clearly increasing, and brings with them various biases, such as demonstrating causal reasons, searching for sanitation alternatives or presenting predictive methods and measures, for example. However, in order to understand the topic and start a discussion, it is first necessary to answer at least two questions: “What can be considered truancy?” and “What kind of truancy is it?”

The discussion about student dropout in Higher Education has as its starting point the inherent difficulty in conceptualizing the term itself, since there seems to be, among the research carried out so far, a relative and not definitive consensus on it. Each new study presents peculiarities in the way this phenomenon is observed and analyzed,

consequently generating small and sometimes subtle changes in the way it is understood and approached. This aspect, added to the contemporaneity in which the studies are carried out and the measurement procedures, reflects what Palharini (2010) emphatically argues as major problems encountered while investigating student dropout in universities. According to the author (2010, p. 13-14), “the very concept of dropout makes it difficult to study or standardize this issue (...)”.

Thus, assuming that the lack of standardization can generate a methodological deficiency in research and, consequently, difficulties or errors in data interpretation, a brief exploration of the literary and documentary content is proposed, in the form of a literature review, related to the concept debated by the national scientific community that deals with student dropout in Higher Education, in an attempt to form a consistent theoretical framework regarding the subject, which makes it possible to reduce divergences on the subject, establish some consensus, however small it may be, and encourage critical discussion.

To clarify, the exploration is not intended to deconstruct the concept or to signal one option over another, but rather, in an organized way, to provide theoretical clarification on the subject that can serve as methodological and epistemological support for subsequent research.

Methodology

This article consists of an investigation of a theoretical and exploratory nature on the topic of dropout in Brazilian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), more specifically regarding the diverse and distinct conceptions linked to it. It is based on the literature review model which, according to Azevedo (2016, p. 2), “aims to provide an overview of the sources on a given topic and has characteristics of scientific investigation, that is, it must be systematic and embracing. Its purpose is to gather and systematize previous studies”. Furthermore, the review also presents a theoretical character, through which

examines the accumulated corpus of theory in relation to a theme, an issue, a concept, or a phenomenon. The review of theoretical literature helps to: establish which theories already exist about something, list different approaches to a theory and the relationship between them, discuss the extent to which existing theories have been investigated, highlight theoretical gaps to be explored and, therefore, can help develop hypotheses to be tested. Often, this form is used to help establish a lack of appropriate theories or reveal that current theories are insufficient to explain new or emerging research problems (Azevedo, 2016, p. 3).

To this end, articles, theses, and dissertations available in Brazilian databases were used, such as the periodical collection of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), the electronic library Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD), and the portals Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science, in addition to the use of previously known studies.

This process was performed between June and August 2023 through a search containing the keywords “dropout” and “higher education”, and, in the case of Google Scholar, which generates an extensive amount of results, the addition of the term “concept”, combined with Boolean operators “AND” or “E”. Furthermore, the chronological period of publication and the areas in which the works were published were considered in its entirety. There was only one refinement that aimed to filter the publications by the Portuguese language.

The search generated 519 publications, which were individually analyzed. Of these, duplicates, inaccessible studies, and those incompatible with the study proposal were removed, leaving 72 scientific studies that had conceptual propositions about student dropout in higher education. Added to 18 other documents from a personal archive, including documents and reports from educational institutions, special commissions, and national government bodies, such as the Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (NIES), the Special Commission for Dropout Studies, set up by the Ministry of Education (ME).

Through this material, it was possible to compile the theoretical assumptions of various authors and documents, which contribute to the construction of the framework in question which, in its conception, seeks to establish, not in a definitive or restrictive

way, an overview of the conceptualization and typification of the problem of student dropout in national Higher Education.

Revision

- Concept

A review of the available literature shows that there has been an increase in the number of studies addressing school dropout, a multifaceted and highly complex phenomenon that has been affecting HEIs in general for decades, generating a broad field for research, bringing together pedagogical, psychological, social, political, economic, and administrative issues, among others (Spady, 1970; Bean; Metzner, 1985; Kira, 2002; Gaioso, 2005; Silva Filho *et al.*, 2007; Baggi; Lopes, 2011; Pereira Junior, 2012; Vitelli, 2012; Dall Alba, 2018).

By analyzing the publications available on portals and virtual repositories, as well as a few physical contents, it is possible to identify that the emphasis of the researchers was essentially focused on demonstrating aspects related to the dropout of undergraduate courses at HEIs, such as those proposed by Biazus:

- a) Identify the characteristic type of dropout that occurs most frequently;
- b) Identify the period (year and semester) in which there were the highest student dropout rates in each degree course;
- c) Determine the number of students who drop out of these courses in relation to the number of students enrolled; Investigate the main reasons why students drop out or change courses;
- d) Identify marital status, age group, gender, family income, mode of entry to HEIs;
- e) Identify marital status, age group, gender, family income, mode of entry to HEIs;
- f) Identify the courses at the HEI with the highest dropout rates (Biazus, 2004, p. 67-68).

To confirm this panorama, it is worth mentioning, among many others, the studies by Braga, Miranda-Pinto, and Cardeal (1997), Cardoso (2008), Adachi (2009), Pereira, Zavala, and Santos (2011), Livramento (2011), Lima and Zago (2018), Kaneoya (2019), Monteiro (2019), Silva (2022), and Santos *et al.* (2023), which present in their

structures a systematic organization of works dealing with student dropout in Higher Education. Considering the current situation, however, it is possible to see that there is a considerable volume of publications that add aspects to the problem under discussion.

One of them was the process of identifying and applying strategies and public policies for permanence with a view to maintaining students in the student sphere (Santos, 2014; Dall Alba, 2018; Monteiro, 2019; Carvalho, 2020; Nierotka, 2021; Ramos Junior, 2021; Simon, 2022; Silva, 2022; Silva; Sampaio, 2022). Fonseca (2018), Ambiel, Cortez and Salvador (2021), and Martins (2022), on the other hand, bring up an approach that seeks to identify predictors of the reasons for potential dropout, so that it is possible to carry out an early and optimized intervention with the public in question. That said, the focus shifts to the specific issue, which is to scrutinize concepts related to dropout.

When talking about dropout, more specifically that which occurs in public HEIs, some of the first correlations that are made are with the lack of success or student failure or with something that can be considered a loss, on the institutional part, depending on the low of students increases its volume, status, and regular or satisfactory levels for maintaining activities or, less frequently, to other terms such as escape, diversion, avoidance, desertion, disengagement, non-completion, breaking of ties, etc. (Kira, 2002; Baggi; Lopes, 2011; Silva, 2011; Andrade, 2014; Cunha; Morosini, 2013; Simon, 2022).

Contemporary scientific literature tends to characterize it, primarily, in a broad and common way, within a generalist line, as the act of giving up or leaving school without completing the course. This view is a consensus among a series of scholars, as identified in Table 1, below.

Table 1 – Basic concepts about dropout.

Author	Description
Costa (1991, <i>apud</i> Biazus, 2004, p.86)	“a student leaves the university or one of its courses, permanently or temporarily, for any reason other than graduation”.
Pereira (1995, p.23)	“University dropout occurs when a student leaves the university without completing a course (...)”.
Brazil (1996, p.25)	“the definitive departure of the student from their course of origin, without completing it”.
Teles (1995, p.199)	“any and all forms of leaving the course, taking into account changes of course, abandonment, transfer, withdrawal, death, expiry of the maximum time, failures, and vacancies canceled due to irregular documentation in the entrance exam.”

Author	Description
Gaioso (2005, p.9)	It is “understood as an interruption in the study cycle (...) at whatever level of education.”
Maia and Meireles (2005, p.3)	“Dropouts consist of students who do not complete courses or programs of study, it can be considered as dropouts those students who enroll and drop out before even starting the course.”
Abbad; Oak; Zerbini (2006, p.2)	It is the “definitive withdrawal of the student at any stage of the course”.
Adachi (2009, p.94)	“students dismissed from courses both at the request of the institution and at the request of the student (...)”.
Baggi; Lopes (2011, p.370)	“student’s departure from the institution before completing their course.”

Source: Elaborated by the author.

What is not yet a consensus on this point is the fact that, although the connotations seem to be equitable, they carry attributes of the evader and the educational system, which unfold them, sometimes in new terminologies, sometimes only in the way in which they can be distinguished, which causes a theoretical difficulty in dealing with the issue empirically. According to Lima and Zago (2018, p. 132),

One of the greatest difficulties encountered in studying dropout in higher education is the conceptual diversity surrounding the subject. Because it is a polysemic term, *dropout* can be understood as abandonment, giving up, failure, leaving the course, the institution and/or the school system for good. In addition, it can be just a temporary suspension of studies, mobility, or a transfer of course and/or institution.

Because of this misalignment in the treatment of the concept of dropout, and with each investigation of the problem tending to flow with the researcher’s choice, it is soon possible to have studies that address similar situations, but which, by using different definitions, can produce content with reasonable inconsistencies or discrepancies. Thus, although the basic concept seems simple, the mere act of conceptualizing the term has become a complex, controversial, and even inconclusive task (Polydoro, 2000; Cislighi, 2008, Velloso; Cardoso, 2008; Fialho, 2014).

With the gradual improvement of the national education system and the expansion of studies, there was, however, an evolution in the relativized approach to the phenomenon, which came to acquire new contours and started to bring together complementary meanings based, fundamentally, on the peculiarities of each entity or researcher involved with the dropout process, their understanding of the subject and the different ways of evaluating it.

It can be seen that the use of the terminology dropout as “leaving” or “abandonment” (Teles, 1995; Brasil, 1996; Souza, 1999; Costa, 1991 *apud* Biazus, 2004; Livramento, 2011; Baggi; Lopes, 2011; Morosini *et al.*, 2012) carries with it nuances that are worth commenting on in order to broaden the view of the whole issue. First, that abandonment is a voluntary process that, although it may be influenced by external agents, arises exclusively from the student’s initiative; and, second, that it occurs without prior communication from the interested party or the need for consent from the educational institution. The choice to drop out, in this case, can have a number of motivations and is usually diagnosed by the lack of enrollment or re-enrollment in the course or by the simple fact of not attending classes.

On the other hand, following almost the same dynamics, dropout can acquire a connotation of “giving up” (Brazil, 1996; Souza, 1999; Abbad; Carvalho; Zerbini, 2006; Andriola; Andriola; Moura, 2006; Palharini, 2010; Livramento, 2011), which makes the bibliography commonly confuse it with abandonment and, at times, obscure the meanings that each one can highlight. Dropping out also refers to a student voluntarily leaving a course or institution. However, what differentiates them the most, and can therefore add a different meaning to the term, is the fact that withdrawal is associated with the need for official communication to the student body.

Livramento (2011, p. 39) summarizes this discussion very well when saying that “when dropping out, the student simply stops attending classes, without informing the institution that they are going to do so and why. If the student withdraws, they inform the institution that they will no longer be attending classes”. Enricone (2006, p. 418) agrees with this perspective when he mentions that student dropout “is a student who leaves the educational institution, ceasing to be part of the student body, by canceling their enrollment or dropping out”.

Another term that has a similar meaning is “disconnection”. In essence, the definition of dropout tends to be a situation more linked to a formal act of student withdrawal that is clearly part of the entity or the educational system, such as, for example, a dismissal, at any time, for not meeting entry requirements or permanence, violation of institutional norms, and, even, for legal or judicial reasons, which may, in

extreme cases, carry the character of expulsion (Brasil, 1996; Andriola; Andriola; Moura, 2006; Moraes; Theóphilo; Lopes, 2006; Silva Filho; Araújo, 2017; Coimbra; Silva; Costa, 2021; Simon, 2022).

Bueno (1993) refers to an interesting discussion on the distinction between dropout and another terminology, “exclusion”, clarifying, according to his point of view, the aspects that give each term its property.

Is this an dropout phenomenon or a case of student exclusion? The word dropout may mean an active stance on the part of the student who decides to leave on his own responsibility. The word exclusion implies the admission of responsibility on the part of the school and everything that surrounds it for not having mechanisms to take advantage of and guide teenagers who present themselves for vocational training. There are undoubtedly both in-school and out-of-school factors affecting the question of whether students stay at university (Bueno, 1993, p. 13).

This conformation is supported by Souza (1999), Veloso (2000), Braga, Peixoto, and Bogutchi (2003), and Palharini (2010), whose understanding is that, on the one hand, dropout comes from a student decision based on essentially personal reasons, faithfully identifying with the concept. On the other hand, it may be the result of a union of academic and socioeconomic factors, characterizing it, in this case, more as exclusion than as dropout.

The next way of analyzing the subject is with an approach that seems to be more settled among scholars. It relates dropout to the apparently equivalent terms “mobility”, “floating”, “transfer”, “internal dropout”, and “reoption” (Pereira, 1995; Brasil, 1996, Ristoff, 1999; Souza, 1999; Andriola; Andriola; Moura, 2006; Silva Filho *et al.* 2007; Cardoso, 2008; Cislighi, 2008; Lima; Zago, 2018). According to Pereira (1995, p. 23), from an institutional point of view,

When the student leaves the Course or Area, but remains at the University, a fifth type of “Dropout” arises, which is called “Floating” or “Mobility”. If this migration has taken place within the same subject area, it is a course dropout, but not a subject area dropout. If the student has migrated to a course in another subject area, they will have dropped out of the course and also dropped out of the subject area.

In this context, the expressions most commonly used in the available bibliography are “internal transfer” and “external transfer”, processes that result in the formal departure of the enrolled student, respectively, from one course to another within an educational institution and from one course at one educational institution to another, without generating breaks in studies or even substantial changes in the content to be studied (Costa, 1991 *apud* Biazus, 2004; Pereira, 1995; Teles, 1995; Brasil, 1996; Scali, 2009; Gillioti, 2016; INEP, 2017; Lima; Zago, 2018; Lima Junior *et al.*, 2019). The evidence suggests that, in the first case, there is dropout from the course, but not from the institution and the educational system, while in the second case there is dropout from the course and the institution, but not from the system. The surveys by Lima and Zago (2016) and Lima Junior *et al.* (2019), for example, point out that a significant number of the cases of leaving the institutions surveyed were not specifically about leaving the system, but had a much more appropriate correlation to mobility.

Ristoff (1999) and Ribeiro (2005) confirm this meaning of the term, by disregarding the student who perhaps re-enters another HEI, as a dropout student. Thus, the process of dropout is characterized as “leaving the higher education system, without external or internal transfer, marked by leaving one university and not entering another” (Ribeiro, 2005, p. 56). In this situation, therefore, dropout may not correspond exactly to abandonment of studies, but rather to a process of student migration from one course to another. It is therefore understood that mobility, among all the definitions of student dropout, is the aspect that best characterizes the divergence of understandings permeated in relation to the subject (Amaral, 2013; Vitteli; Fritsch, 2016; Lima; Zago, 2018). According to Amaral (2013, p. 30), “the issue that makes it difficult to establish a consensus among authors regarding the concept of student dropout concerns the temporary or definitive aspect of the interruption of the bond established between the student”.

There is also a way considered very tragic and irreversible through which dropout can manifest itself: “death”. It is an involuntary abandonment that, although presents small numbers (Veloso, 2000; Coimbra; Silva; Costa, 2021), is part of the dropout rate at HEIs, as it creates a vacancy that can hardly be filled. According to INEP (2017, p. 10), the

interruption of the program due to death is a ‘fortuitous case from which it cannot be assumed that the individual intended to interrupt the course, cease it, or that the individual was unable to remain in the educational program’.

Somewhat controversially, the “locking out” of the course, or “temporary dismissal”, or even “interruption of the study cycle” can also be cited as a likely act of dropout. According to the Ministry of Education (MEC, 2004, p. 4), withdrawal is a term “which means not continuing studies, temporarily, without losing the bond (enrollment) and the right to a vacancy, during a certain period postulated by the student, if so and in the manner approved by the institution (...).”

Some studies, such as Vitelli and Fritsch’s (2016) and Gomes and Hirata’s (2020), consider that if a student’s enrollment has been suspended, they should not be considered a dropout, nor should they be counted, as they can still return to the course. The majority (Gonçalves, 1997; Souza, 1999; Polydoro, 2000; Serpa; Pinto, 2000; Scali, 2009; Lobo, 2012; Silva Filho; Lobo, 2012; Dall Alba, 2018; Carvalho, 2020; Santos, 2022), on the other hand, relate the lockout, even if temporary, as a type of dropout. The investigation by Polydoro (2000), for example, diagnosed that, in general, the academics saw the enrollment lock as something transitory and related it to the possibility of maintaining the link with the HEI, through a possible re-entry. However, there are not always guarantees of returning to studies, and such a choice may end up being characterized as a pretext for the decision to drop out.

Another type of event that can be treated as dropout, with little room for divergence, is “dismissal”, “lapse of time”, or “over-completion”. It simply deals with the compulsory dismissal of students who exceed the maximum time allowed in the internal institutional rules for completing the course (Souza, 1999; Silva Filho *et al.*, 2007; Scali, 2009). There are only a few caveats regarding this process.

Some studies point to the possibility of extending the maximum time for completing the course. In the study by Koelln (2016), in addition to the maximum period for curriculum completion, the academic regulations of the investigated HEIs provide for an extension of up to two academic terms. Scali (2009, p. 73), on the other hand,

emphasizes in his research the possibility of dropout by projection, in which, after the course completion period, the HEI “checks whether the student is likely to finish the course on a new date pre-established by the institution. If not feasible, the enrollment is automatically canceled.” Based on this assumption and the context in which it is inserted, this type of case can even receive another name: “retention”, a phenomenon that deserves a lot of attention, since it can be directly linked to the dropout process.

In the midst of studies on dropout in higher education, studies on university retention have become quite common. This can be proven through the observation of Costa and Gouveia (2018), who comment that

Part of the theoretical models built over the last five decades were developed to analyze the dropout phenomenon, however their close relationship with student retention paved the way for their application to retention studies, through observations of the characteristics and restrictions of each theory. (Costa; Gouveia, 2018, p. 163).

First of all, there is a need to make a consideration regarding the terminology. A few studies, such as that by Dall Alba (2018), for example, contain a subject in which the topic is analyzed as a synonym for student retention, and its proposal is to develop a student retention/permanence program in order to combat the problem of dropout rates at HEIs, focus of his investigation (Dall Alba, 2018, p. 16-17).

A significant amount of content (Brasil, 1996; Souza, 1999; Adachi, 2009; Pereira; Zavala; Santos, 2011; Koelln, 2016; Costa; Gouveia, 2018; Kaneoya, 2019; Lima Junior et al., 2019; Santos, 2022) gives the term its broad meaning, that is, a “situation in which, despite the maximum period for curricular completion having passed and even not having completed the course, the student remains or is listed as enrolled at the University” (Brasil, 1996, p. 36). Due to a series of possible reasons, whether personal or related to the institutional system, external factors, or both, the student experiences failures that hold them back and end up prolonging their academic cycle and time to graduation. And if learning and academic progress are impaired, the decision to drop out may be inevitable. In the words of Pereira et al. (2015, p. 1016), “prolonged stay means a longer period of time than planned by the institution for completing the course,

which ends up compromising the success rate (...), but mainly contributing to the increase in student dropout rates”.

- Modalities

In order to further narrow down the concept to the context in which the dropout can fit in, other studies have stipulated particular classifications for dropouts, which are called “types”, “phases”, “modalities”, “dimensions”, or “categories”, depending on each author.

The research led by Costa (1991 *apud* Biazus), one of the pioneers in the country, established a form of distinction that structures the distribution of phases in order to involve criteria related to the period and the instance in which it occurs within the institution. The author characterized dropout rates at the HEI researched in three phases:

- a) DEFINITIVE DROPOUT: it is the definitive departure from the university, the student leaving the institution due to abandonment, definitive withdrawal from the course or transfer to another university;
- b) TEMPORARY DROPOUT: temporary departure from the institution; considering all types of withdrawal, i.e., the interruption of the course from one to ten semesters;
- c) COURSE DROPOUT: it can only be considered course dropout for those who move from one course to another at the institution, i.e., internal transfers (Costa, 1991 *apud* Biazus, 2004, p. 86-87).

Santos and Barros (1994) then determined a new order that subdivided the process in two ways: immediate and delayed dropout. The first is related with the student’s decision to leave studies early, while the second generally occurs after a certain period of study, as soon as there is no longer any possibility of progress or as soon as they no longer see the point or benefit of what they were trying to learn.

A few years later, the Ministry of Education (MEC), through the Special Commission for Studies on Dropout, with the aim, among many others, of clarifying the concept of dropout, considering its concrete dimensions, classified them as follows:

Course dropout: when the student leaves the higher education course in different situations, such as: abandonment (no longer enrolling), withdrawal (official), transfer or re-option (change of course), exclusion by institutional norm;

Leaving the institution: when the student leaves the institution in which they are enrolled;

Dropout from the system: when the student leaves higher education permanently or temporarily. (Brazil, 1996, p. 20).

It seems that this approach by the Special Commission is one of the most consistent with the literary census (FORGRAD, 2012; Lobo, 2012; Silva e Silva, 2012; Vitelli; Fritsch, 2016; Gillioli, 2016). Although the classification of dropping-out presented by Silva and Silva (2012), FORGRAD (2012), and Gillioli (2016) propose different nomenclatures, they are equivalent. Course dropout is called micro dropout, institution dropout is called meso dropout, and system dropout is called macro dropout. There are also those who go further, such as Lima and Zago (2018), who diagnosed what may be a new subspecies of dropout, which is not always evident, called nano dropout. It does not exactly correspond to the act of leaving a course, but to transfer “to another campus, shift, teaching modality (face-to-face or distance) or training (degree or bachelor’s degree)”, in which case the loss, related to dropout, would be for the original course (Lima; Zago, 2018, p. 371).

Polydoro (2000) also tries to delimit the different ways of understanding the phenomenon. In her work, the author proposed five possible interdependent classifications, namely:

- a) the instance from which the individual evades (course, institution, and system);
- b) the authorship of the decision (voluntary dropout and dismissal by the institution);
- c) the way in which the individual leaves (abandonment, cancellation by the student, cancellation by the institution, external transfer, internal transfer, withdrawal, among other possible names and different meanings observed in the various institutions);
- d) the period of time that the individual remains evaded (definite dropout and temporary dropout);
- e) the moment in which the dropout occurs (entering, intermediate, or graduating classes) (Polydoro, 2000, p. 61).

As can be seen, the news here is the introduction of the modalities “authorship of the decision” and “way in which the individual evades”, new perspectives through which the subject could be dealt with, while the other classifications are restated.

As for the modality “period of time that the individual remains evaded”, separated into definitive dropout and temporary dropout, it should be added that, according to Fialho (2014), it can also be seen from the perspective of reversibility, that is, temporary dropout is one that can be considered reversible, while definitive dropout cannot. According to the author (2014, p. 41),

the first case will depend on the institution preserving the student who intends to evade, looking for a way to keep him in the institution [meeting difficulties and needs] even if he intends to leave. (...) In the irreversible modality, the institution may even try, but cannot keep the student in its educational establishment, causing the dropping-out.

Silva Filho *et al.* (2007, p. 642) present two other aspects by which dropout can be measured and considered: the average annual dropout, which “measures what percentage of students enrolled in an education system, in an HEI, or in a course who, having not graduated, did not also enroll the following year (or the following semester, if the objective is to follow what happens in semester courses)”; and the total dropout, which “measures the number of students who, having entered a specific course, HEI or education system, did not obtain a diploma after a certain number of years”.

Cardoso (2008), provides the definitions of “real dropout” and “apparent dropout”. The first reflects the student’s simple and total withdrawal from pursuing higher education, while the second is one that can be characterized as mobility, whether by transfer of class, course, institution, or even system and, thus, consider (or not) as evaders the numbers who made this choice.

In relation to apparent dropout, Silva, Cabral, and Pacheco (2020) make a timely insertion by arguing about a fifth instance of dropout, linked to the international system. According to them (2020, p. 7), “in relation to system dropout, it is important to consider that a student who evades the national system can continue their education in another country, at the same level of education, and if they don’t, then they are evading the education system as a whole”.

Vitelli and Fritsch (2016) advanced this discussion even further and established two new concepts from which dropout could be understood. One of them is “granularity”, which encompasses the entire system for categorizing dropout as

postulated by Brasil (1996), i.e., that which is contextualized within the educational system, the institution, or the course. The other is “temporality”, which categorizes dropout as immediate, temporary, or definitive, also taking advantage of already pre-established reviews. Table 2 illustrates the concepts identified by the authors.

Table 2 – Conceptions that differentiate the use of the term dropout.

GRANULARITY	TEMPORALITY		
	IMMEDIATE	TEMPORARY	DEFINITIVE
EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM	When a student fails to enroll for a semester/year	When a student fails to enroll for two or more semesters/years	When a student does not enroll anymore
INSTITUTION	When a student fails to enroll for a semester/year at the institution	When a student fails to enroll for two or more semesters/years at the institution	When a student no longer enrolls at the institution
COURSE	When a student fails to enroll for a semester/year in the course	When a student fails to enroll for two or more semesters/years in the course	When a student no longer enrolls in the course anymore

Source: Vitelli and Fritschi (2016, p. 917).

In relation to this classification, however, the authors themselves make reservations mainly concerning the departure moment and the required time of absence for a student to be confirmed as a dropout since “without clarity about these aspects, any analyses comparing dropout outcomes at different times, whether of systems, institutions, or courses, are compromised” (Vitelli; Fritsch, 2016, p. 918).

Once these descriptions have been made, it is reiterated that defining a phenomenon as broad as dropout is as challenging as establishing, amidst a vast array of dispositions presented by the literature, parameters that allow for the determination of modalities or dimensions that classify it in a clear and objective manner.

Discussion

As we delve deeper into research on university student dropout at the national level, it is immediately noted that there is a certain confluence of ideas and thoughts found in the various studies analyzed, although there is a lack of standardization of the concept of the phenomenon and, therefore, an effective consensus formed about it,

according to the interpretation of most researchers (Polydoro, 2000; Scali, 2009; Fialho, 2014; Vitelli; Fritsch, 2016; Lima, Zago, 2018; Silva; Cabral; Pacheco, 2020).

What occurs is an overlapping of equivalent terminologies, which are not always well-founded in the works or are not parameterized in a way that facilitates the clarification of their definition, the complete understanding of the approaches or the feedback of the constructive process of research and related analyses. Polydoro (2000, p. 46) agrees with this view when asserting that

ambiguous definitions and imprecise data collection methodologies make it impossible to compare HEIs, to evaluate the same institution over time and to generalize the results of surveys and, consequently, to obtain general indicators of dropouts.

With this review, however, it was possible to establish a connection between the most cited or discussed terms, their possible connotative developments and their respective meanings, which are demonstrated in Table 3, below.

Table 3 - Meanings attributed to dropout.

TERMS	CONNOTATIONS	ATTRIBUTED MEANINGS
Abandonment	Informal departure;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No enrollment/enrolment renewal - Failure to attend classes; - No prior notification; - Voluntary shutdown;
Dropout	Cancellation of enrollment; Decline.	- Officially leaving the course or institution through explicit communication.
Shutdown	Withdrawal due to dismissal Exclusion by institutional rule; Expulsion	Unilateral withdrawal conducted by the HEI;
Death	Obit	- Involuntary abandonment.
Dismissal	Maximum time limit; Payment exceeded; Exceeded completion due to projection.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Act of exceeding the maximum period allowed for completion, incurring mandatory dismissal from the course; - Act of exceeding the maximum period designed for completion, considering only mandatory subjects.
Re-enrollment		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Official request to continue the course in a new semester/academic year; - Return to the course after a period of absence.
Retention	Permanence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Retention in a semester or grade, due to insufficient performance; - Maintenance of active enrollment, even if the maximum period for completing the course curriculum has passed.

TERMS	CONNOTATIONS	ATTRIBUTED MEANINGS
Transfer;	Internal transfer; External transfer; Reoption; Floating; Mobility; Internal dropout; Relocation; internal.	- Change of course and/or Campus (internal) or Institution (external) or regime or shift, upon official request.
Course withdrawal	Ex-officio withdrawal; Internal withdrawal; Exceeded withdrawals.	- Paralysis, suspension or interruption, upon official request, of attendance at the course; - Suspension of enrollment for exceeding the maximum limit of withdrawals.

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Among others, it is possible to investigate the different forms in which dropout takes place, inferring, for example, that abandonment is generally associated with an informal disconnection, unlike dropout and dismissal. Also, the temporary and definitive aspects of the interruption of ties, characterized essentially by the cases of transfers and withdrawals, are the points on which there seems to be the greatest divergence when it comes to the subject, despite the perspective of most authors being aligned with the interpretation of correspondence of these occurrences with the dropout itself. The proposed inventory therefore answers the first question posed at the beginning of this review about what can be considered dropout.

Regarding the second question, the approaches demonstrate a tendency to use, in most cases, the modality that classifies dropout according to the instances from which the individual evades, namely dropout from a course, institution and system, although the other modalities provide interesting perspectives through which cases can be investigated.

It was also possible to infer that most scholars, when not using concepts based on generic standards or institutional documents, end up taking into consideration those that best match their objectives. It can therefore be seen that, depending on each interest, vision or investigation, dropout can be correlated with other meanings, taking on other guises and therefore giving rise to different understandings and interpretations.

Final considerations

This study shows that dropout is a wide-ranging phenomenon that has been widely explored in scientific research, whether macro or microscopic; although, even after the intervention of various regulatory bodies and work with a systematization bias, doubts and divergences still persist.

Since there is no national standard regarding how to approach the problem, concepts and typifications have generally been defined based on institutional criteria, considering the locus of analysis, a specific perspective or even an expectation of answers.

This conceptual misalignment on the part of the HEIs therefore means that there is no standard in the systematization of data and its consequences, resulting, for example, in limitations regarding a deeper understanding of the full significance and scope of dropout for the educational institution, obstacles to comparing results among research on this phenomenon, difficulties in tracking students throughout their academic journey, hindrances in forming more appropriate strategies and policies for student retention within the system or combating their dropout, etc.

Therefore, it is essential to consider that the definition of dropout will depend on the level of analysis taken by the researcher or manager, and knowing how to differentiate and understand the types of dropout will be a necessary condition for studying their characteristics in higher education.

Furthermore, as much as worrying about the connotation, it is also necessary to know its causes and the conditions under which it occurs, information that will be able to contribute to the formulation of effective intervention methods and, consequently, to the reduction of the occurrence rates of the problem.

It is hoped that the portfolio produced here, by detailing the concepts and connotations, as well as the typifications to which dropout is related, will bring a contribution of significant value, serving as an auxiliary resource for a better understanding of the phenomenon and how to approach it, as well as to clarify doubts regarding some variables, in addition to encouraging and collaborating with new research in the area.

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