




THE CANARY PLATFORM FOR THE REDUCTION OF SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM

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ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 3 December 2019

Revised: 16 January 2020

Accepted: 21 February 2020

Published: 27 March 2020

Keywords

School absenteeism

Social inequality

Student assessment

School insertion

School failure.

In 2012, the Canaries School Council (CSC) and the Canary Federation of Municipalities (FECAM) decided to investigate the level of school absenteeism in the Canary Islands. They therefore with the Ministry of Education Canary Islands Government about holding a conference for municipal technical teams on addressing this problem, which is particularly worrying in the Canary Islands. Following a needs analysis, the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism was developed, comprising three web pages: i) a social network, for communication and cooperation between municipal technical teams; ii) a repository, for resources, such as protocols, documents, articles, communications, available to download; and iii) Moodle, for offering a 125-hour university course for the technical teams. The Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism operated between March 2013 and September 2018, beginning with 292 technicians from all the Canarian municipalities and, subsequently extending to other institutions, such as island councils, secondary school teachers, educational and psycho-pedagogical guidance teams, and local police. The level of use of, number of visits to, and number of downloads from the website during the first stage were much higher than the second, when despite not being updated, demand continued, especially for the standardized protocol for school absenteeism. These results proved that municipal teams need technical support, supervision, and guidance.

Contribution/Originality: The article reviews the most significant conceptualizations of school absenteeism in the research literature. In addition, a systematic review of the laws in the 17 Autonomous Communities and 2 Autonomous Cities in Spain, taking into account different indicators, was conducted. The resulting proposal for controlling school absenteeism has proved to be relevant and of interest to all social and educational stakeholders.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Industrial Revolution, countries have introduced mandatory formal education for all minors, as an illiterate citizenry cannot be involved in the economic and productive model.

Each country has developed an educational system according to its particular requirements and determined the number of years for which compulsory education should be provided; however, different teaching and learning methodologies have been implemented and levels of economic and human resources allocated in each country. In spite of such differences, specific and general behaviors exist in all educational contexts, one of the most important and worrying of which is school absenteeism. This issue raises the question of the outcomes when a student will not

attend school despite the being mandatory. Before applied to schooling, compulsory attendance already existed working, and the same concept of absenteeism was extended to educational settings.

The terms work and school absenteeism indicate the setting that the individual fails to attend. Absenteeism is undesirable in both situations, so similar corrective measures used for workplaces can be employed for schools. In principle, adults' motivation for working is to earn money to acquire goods and services; thus, withholding part or all of their monthly salary, or ultimately, terminating their employment are very effective measures.

Students, though, are not necessarily motivated at first, while schools sometimes fail to provide any motivation. Until the Autonomous Communities in Spain legislated in the 21st century, the same measures were frequently, and still are, used for both workplace and school: in the case of the Autonomous Community of La Rioja, which delegates the responsibility to its municipalities, either the families of absentee students were punished economically or the absentee students were suspended from school for a specified period. However, such actions contradict to the purpose of discouraging absenteeism and encouraging attendance; in other words, the behavior being penalized is actually being authorized, which is clearly not only illogical but also ineffective. Indeed, (Costa-Lascoux, 2009) described these penalties as "paradoxical responses from the school institution" that would eventually result in the permanent exclusion and abandonment of this student group.

2. BACKGROUND

In Spain, there are several Autonomous Communities whose regulations state that school absenteeism has multiple causes, such as students' families, social and school environment, and individual reasons. However, categorizing and quantifying the problem is much more complex, but there are several approaches suggested in the research literature.

Some researchers propose taxonomies with which to categorize types of absenteeism: [Fernández and Bustos \(2006\)](#); [González \(2005\)](#) and [Muñoz and Feo \(2002\)](#) focused on familial characteristics; [Muñoz and Feo \(2002\)](#) along with [Gracia \(2005\)](#), also suggested those absentee students; [Bergeson and Heuschel \(2003\)](#), [Donkor and Waek \(2018\)](#), [Railsback \(2004\)](#) and [Tijjani, Kaidal, and Garba \(2017\)](#) put forward reasons related to the school; while official documents, such as, that of the [Ombudsman of Andalusia \(1999\)](#) pointed to features of the public administration as the cause of school absenteeism. Apart from the last reason, and acknowledging the existence of direct and indirect relationships, all originate in the immediate environment, which is relatively easy to examine and results in an excessive emphasis that neglects the external environment.

Other researchers have developed quantitative approaches based on the equivalence between truancy and nonattendance. In these studies, absenteeism has been graded according to the number of absences, whether or not the reason is justified. Therefore [Aguado \(2005\)](#); [Domínguez, 2005\)](#) and [Fernández and Bustos \(2006\)](#) established different grades in the opinion of the number of absences in a given period of time. [Fernández and Bustos \(2006\)](#) and others, such as [Bueno \(2005\)](#) further established categories according to the distribution of absences during a course, while [Blaya \(2003\)](#); [Costa-Lascoux \(2002\)](#) and [Roderick \(1997\)](#) calculated the distribution over a school day.

School expulsion, which regards all school absences as truancy, penalizes absenteeism without justification. The purpose of schooling is to educate minors, not to extract surplus value from their work; therefore, correcting school absenteeism must take a significantly different approach. The lack of assistance in addressing the problem has been observed, but the causes of, and reasons for, continuing absenteeism must be explored. That is to say, the origins of the problem should be sought in both the external and immediate environments to understand and resolve the issues.

2.1. School Absenteeism in the Canary Islands

The only official report on school absenteeism in the Canary Islands was published in 2005 by the Deputy of the Common—the High Commissioner of the Parliament of the Canary Islands. The report concluded that:

- Most of those municipalities surveyed provided generic and incoherent information on school absenteeism.
- The data available permits only generalizations or very global descriptions of the situation in the Autonomous Community of the Canary Islands to be deduced.
- A majority of municipalities have introduced extracurricular activities specifically to address the problem.
- While most of the municipalities stated they had specific protocols for absenteeism, only 7% provided details.
- There are no common characteristics to the protocols, but each include well-differentiated criteria and features.
- None of the town halls evaluated the protocols and their outcomes, and none had specialized teams dedicated to detecting and resolving school absenteeism.
- The staff of municipal social services who were dedicated to addressing school absenteeism had no exclusive right to intervene.

The subsequent recommendations include that:

[...] It is necessary to define the minimum official administrative performance framework that must incorporate intervention protocols for school absenteeism at the municipal level (coordination criteria, evaluation indicators, documentary support, needs assessment indicators, human resources with exclusive responsibility, etc.) (p. 36).

Thus, it is essential to define the content of school absenteeism programs, and the criteria for their implementation and follow-up to guarantee the universal provision of comprehensive care throughout the Canary Islands. In addition, specialized professional teams dedicated exclusively to the problem of school absenteeism and failure are required at the municipal level. In other words, there is a need to implement “comprehensive cross-cutting programs that affect the prevention of school absenteeism and school failure and that involve professionals in the school community, teachers, and families” (p. 36).

This study adopts a social perspective of the problem. Both the individual and school dimension of the problem of absenteeism is shaped by the students’ familial and social environment; therefore, municipal social services should seek to influence these external factors to prevent school absenteeism.

2.2. Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism and Training Days

Law 7/1985, of April 2, Regulating the Bases of the Local Regime—modified by Law 27/2013, of December 27, Rationalization and Sustainability of Local Administration—mandates in Article 25.2 (n) that the municipalities must “participate in monitoring the fulfilment of compulsory education,” and in this way address school absenteeism.

The only official report on the reality of the situation in the Canary Islands was that from the Deputy of the Common in 2005; as a consequence, in early 2012, the Canary Federation of Municipalities (FECAM) and the Canaries School Council (CEC) invited researchers from the Department of Evolutionary and Educational Psychology at the University of La Laguna (ULL) to investigate the scope and effect of school absenteeism in the Canary Islands.

The final report from this investigation, Combating School Absenteeism (CAE), initiated a request to the Ministry of Education of the Canary Islands Government for a regional meeting with stakeholders: municipal teams, political representatives from all the administrations, education system professionals, and university researchers. The Conference on Coexistence Management and Intervention in School Absenteeism was therefore held in the Adeje municipality in January 2013. The main conclusion was that municipal teams lack the necessary human, material, and training resources and effective interventions were difficult due to the lack of information on the occurrence of school absenteeism.

ULL’s response, with the financial support of both FECAM and CEC, was to develop a virtual platform of three web pages, the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism, comprising:

- A social network enabling municipal teams to share their experiences and doubts and publish digital newsletters, resources, and information about events, among others. This would mitigate the need for human resources by creating a virtual network between current personnel.
- A repository from which teams could download useful documents. For instance, the investigation had compared 30 protocols and many related documents, and the resulting standardized protocol had been uploaded in an open format so that teams could download, modify, and adapt to the needs of their particular context. Besides, this repository housed articles and internet resources that could be useful.
- A training platform, Moodle, providing a higher university course of 125 hours on absenteeism and conflict management.

The proposal was also approved by the Ministry of Education, which offer to host the platform for CEC on its server, beginning in March 2013. The final requirement still needed to be addressed: criteria with which to identify school absenteeism and mapping its occurrence across the Canary Islands.

Consequently, the Second Conference on Coexistence Management and Intervention in School Absenteeism was held in May 2014 at La Laguna, Tenerife, which was attended by both teaching and counseling staff from educational centers. The Ministry of Education of the Government had already implemented Ekade Brush—still in use—with which education centers recorded and automatically submitted school absences. The regulatory framework had previously been introduced by Decree 114/2011, of May 11, Regulating Coexistence in the Education System, in which the Sixth Additional Provision stated that:

School absenteeism is understood as the lack of attendance at an educational center by a student of compulsory school age without justification. Three levels of absenteeism are established: moderate, absence from up to 15% of class sessions; severe, between 15% and 50%; and very serious, more than 50% (p.14405).

A few months after the investigation started, the Ministry of Education approved Order of October 9, 2013, which further developed Decree 81/2010, of July 8, Approving the Organic Regulations of Public Non-University Schools Regarding their Organization and Operation. Article 46.3 stated that schools should prepare a report on the lack of assistance available and submit it within the first half of the following month.

At the Second Conference, the Watercolor (*Acuarela*) software was proposed to complement Ekade Brush in the municipalities. Although municipalities would still have to wait until the schools submitted the information, sometimes up to 44 days later, Watercolor enabled much faster communication between the municipalities, operationalized the information, and produced statistical data (Ruiz, García, Lorenzetti, & Pérez-Jorge, 2019).

Between 2013 and 2014, there were two versions of the higher university course, with 30 members of the municipal teams enrolled on the first (November 2013–February 2014). Then, in January 2015, the Third Conference was held in Arucas, Gran Canaria, following the same format as the second; in spite of its success, funding was not renewed, which resulted the website remaining accessible but not updated after March 2015. That was the first stage of the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism.

The second stage was officially approved, but without financial support. At the end of 2017, ULL tried to reactivate the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism through collaboration, holding a fourth conference in January 2018 in Santa Lucía de Tirajana, Gran Canaria, which included families. However, despite the positive feedback and the need for similar discussion forums expressed by all the participants, the administrations terminated the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism once more in September 2018.

This paper presents the results of the years of involvement and commitment to address and prevent school absenteeism, which is becoming increasingly relevant and worrying.

3. OBJECTIVE

The purpose was to analyze the reality of school absenteeism in the Canary Islands. This was achieved through a study of the scope and use of the Canary Platform for the Reduction of School Absenteeism as a resource for training and technical–professional qualifications for different educational personnel.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Sample

The study was carried out in 88 Canarian municipalities, and the participants consisted of municipal technicians, teachers, and educational counselors. Table 1 and Figure 1 show the total number of participants by islands and municipalities.

Table-1. People enrolled on each island.

| Islands | Totals |
|---------------|--------|
| Lanzarote | 25 |
| Fuerteventura | 29 |
| El Hierro | 10 |
| Gran Canaria | 68 |
| Tenerife | 116 |
| La Gomera | 11 |
| La Palma | 33 |
| Total | 292 |

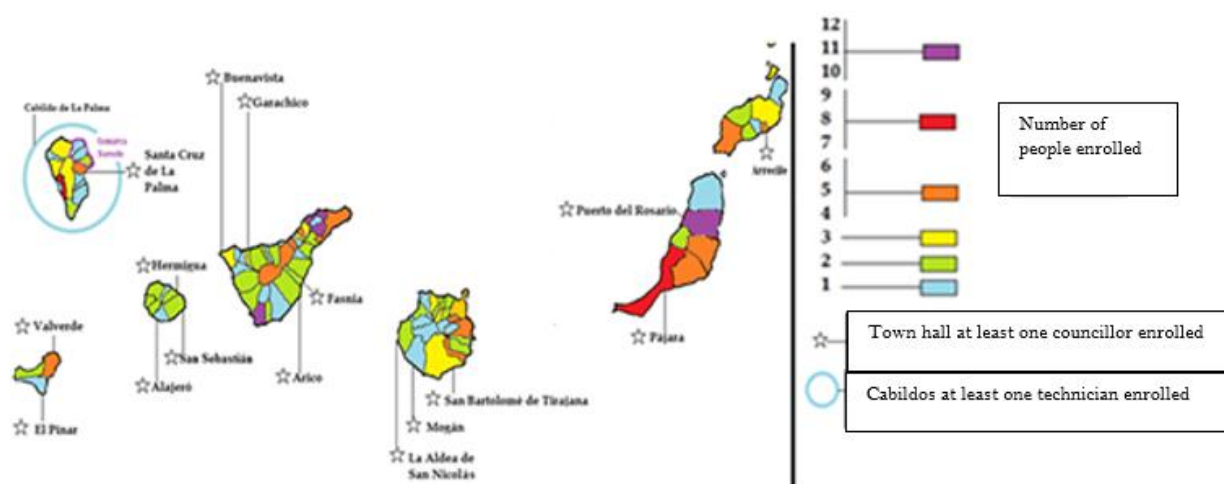


Figure-1. Mapping of people enrolled in the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism.

4.2. Instruments and Techniques

Information was collected from records, the number of downloads and times the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism accessed, along with a semi-structured interview about the use of protocols and procedures or the action taken in relation to absenteeism. On top of that, the contents of the available protocols (n = 30), as well as the materials and documents provided by the municipalities, were analyzed.

4.3. Procedure

The 88 municipalities were contacted and a telephone interview was conducted with a professional member of their technical teams. The results enabled a plan of priorities and needs to be established that justified the different training sessions provided between the years 2013 and 2018. During the interview, the municipal teams were asked and all agreed to submit their materials for examination, which led to a large number of materials and some protocols being supplied.

The opinions and suggestions collected over the years enabled the training plan to be update and improved, while another questionnaire obtained the training needs of municipal technicians, teachers, and counselors.

The counter that recorded the number of times the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism was accessed enabled the location and type of documents downloaded by each user to be identified.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To facilitate interpretation, the results were presented in stages corresponding to the implementation and development periods of the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism.

Stage 1: Downloads

The first stage of the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism ran from March 1, 2013 to April 30, 2015, during which period the number of and most downloaded documents were shown in [Tables 2](#) and [3](#).

Table-2. Total downloads in the first stage.

| Year | 2013 (10 months) | 2014 | 2015 (4 months) | Total |
|-----------|------------------|------|-----------------|-------|
| Downloads | 1282 | 945 | 101 | 2328 |

Table-3. List of the ten most downloaded files in each year of the first stage.

| 2013 (10 months) | N | 2014 (12 months) | N | 2015 (4 months) | N |
|---|-----|---|-----|---|----|
| Card for the interview with a minor absentee | 111 | Card for the interview with a minor absentee | 86 | Socio-familial questionnaire | 9 |
| Communication addressed to the Local Police | 85 | Socio-familial questionnaire | 71 | Letter informing of rights and obligations | 7 |
| Socioeducational report | 75 | Letter informing of rights and obligations | 60 | Card for the interview with a minor absentee | 5 |
| Socio-familial questionnaire | 69 | Evaluation record of a new case | 58 | Document for class attendance commitment | 5 |
| Letter informing of rights and obligations | 69 | Follow-up record of intervention process with a student | 56 | Socioeducational report | 4 |
| Document for class attendance commitment | 61 | Guidance model protocol for school intervention absence | 48 | School absenteeism record | 4 |
| Guidance model protocol for school absence intervention | 61 | Document for class attendance commitment | 46 | Referral form for school absence | 4 |
| Document for class attendance commitment | 61 | School absenteeism record | 45 | Educational center citation model for family members or legal representatives | 4 |
| Evaluation record of a new case | 51 | Socioeducational report | 38 | School Absenteeism in Primary Education (Morales, 2010) | 4 |
| Congratulatory letter from social services to families | 46 | Authorization of intervention | 35 | Guidance model protocol for School absence intervention | 2 |
| Subtotal | 689 | | 543 | | 48 |

Figure 2 details the number of downloads each month during the first stage.

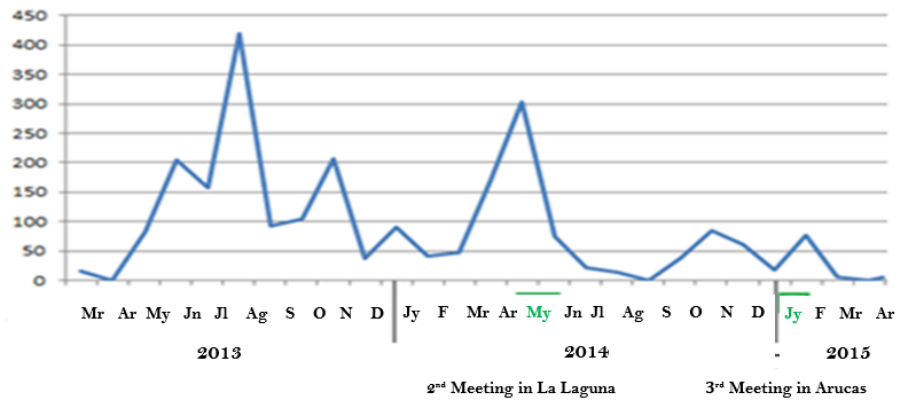


Figure-2. Download chart in each year of the first stage.

As can be seen, most documents were downloaded in July and August 2013 and April and May 2014, when the municipal technical teams were preparing the performance targets for the forthcoming school years. In the first year, the forecast was delayed until the summer, when schools were closed and their workload dropped; nevertheless, the experience they gained led to the forecast being brought forward in the second year, when the municipal teams still had a full complement of staff before the main holiday season.

During the first stage, the most downloaded document was the “card for the interview with a minor absentee,” which was basic guidance on the first contact with a child. Moreover, it is significant that documents record intervention activities were frequently downloaded: the “sociofamiliar” questionnaire and “orientational” model of protocol for school absence intervention”. Both the timing and type of documents downloaded reveal the need for guidelines that teams can apply in their work.

Stage 2: Downloads

The second stage ran from May 1, 2015 to April 30, 2017, during which period Tables 4 and 5 show the number of and most downloaded documents.

Table-4. Total downloads in the second stage.

| Year | 2015 (8 months) | 2016 (12 months) | 2017 (4 months) | Total |
|-----------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-------|
| Downloads | 272 | 710 | 54 | 1036 |

Figure 3 details the number of downloads each month during the second stage.

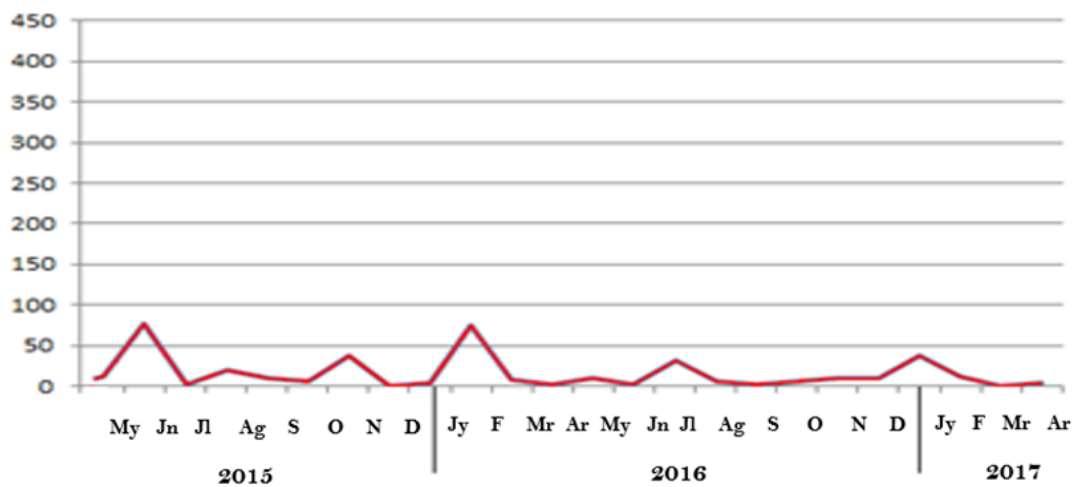


Figure-3. Download chart in each year of the second stage.

Table-5. List of the ten most downloaded files in each year of the second stage.

| 2015 (8 months) | N | 2016 (12 months) | N | 2017 (4 months)* | N |
|---|-----|---|-----|---|----|
| Guidance model protocol for school absence intervention | 32 | Guidance model protocol for school absence intervention | 72 | Guidance model protocol for school absence intervention | 7 |
| Document for class attendance commitment | 17 | Document for class attendance commitment | 42 | Communication addressed to the Local Police | 5 |
| Follow-up record of intervention process with a student | 15 | Follow-up record of intervention process with a student | 40 | Socio-familial questionnaire | 5 |
| Educational center citation model for family members or legal representatives | 15 | Educational center citation model for family members or legal representatives | 36 | Local Police report to the municipal social services | 4 |
| CEC report on the municipal School Councils (2014) | 15 | Socioeducational report | 34 | Action protocol for San Bartolomé de Tirajana | 3 |
| Communication addressed to the Local Police | 13 | Communication addressed to the Local Police | 32 | Follow-up record of intervention process with a student | 3 |
| Letter informing of rights and obligations | 13 | CEC report on the municipal School Councils (2014) | 31 | Document for class attendance commitment | 3 |
| Socioeducational report | 12 | CEC report on the municipal School Councils (2014) | 25 | Letter informing of rights and obligations | 3 |
| CEC report on the municipal School Councils (2014) | 12 | Minutes accompanying the child to the educational center | 23 | Educational center citation model for family members or legal representatives | 2 |
| Card for the interview with a minor absentee | 9 | Model request for information on ex officio action | 23 | Minutes accompanying the child to the educational center | 2 |
| Subtotal | 153 | | 358 | | 37 |

* Although Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism continued until September 2018, due to technical issues, download data were irrecoverable April 2017.

It is very significant that during the second stage, the most downloaded documents were: “Guidance model protocol for school absence intervention”, “Document for class attendance commitment”, “Follow-up record of intervention process with a student” and “Educational center citation model for family members or legal representatives”. This is because of the continuity in working methods, in spite of changes of staff in municipal technical teams, which leads to a cumulative process and reduces the need to download that the same documents every years. The resources and materials in the repository were updated in light of new research articles and publications on absenteeism; however, after examining the documents provided by the municipal teams, it was discovered that the most downloaded documents were those prepared in 2013.

In terms of monthly activity, although downloading declined significantly when the second stage started, most of the activity still occurred in the months near the end of the school year. Even so, the pattern changed in subsequent years, caused by the materials accumulated, stable working methods, and cessation of website updates. Furthermore, more downloads were observed at the beginning of the calendar year when the municipal staff contracts were renewed.

Stages 1 & 2: Comparison of Downloads

Download data for both stages is summarized in Table 6 and Figure 4. It should be remembered that the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism was basically inoperative during the second stage due to lack of funding and commitment from local and regional administrations.

Table-6. Total Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism downloads.

| Stage | First stage | | | Second stage | | | Total |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| Year months | 2013 (10) | 2014 (12) | 2015 (4) | 2015 (8) | 2016 (12) | 2017 (4) | March 2013– April 2017(50) |
| Downloads | 1282 | 945 | 101 | 272 | 710 | 54 | 3364 |
| Percentage | 38.11% | 28.09% | 3.00% | 8.09% | 21.11% | 1.60% | 100% |

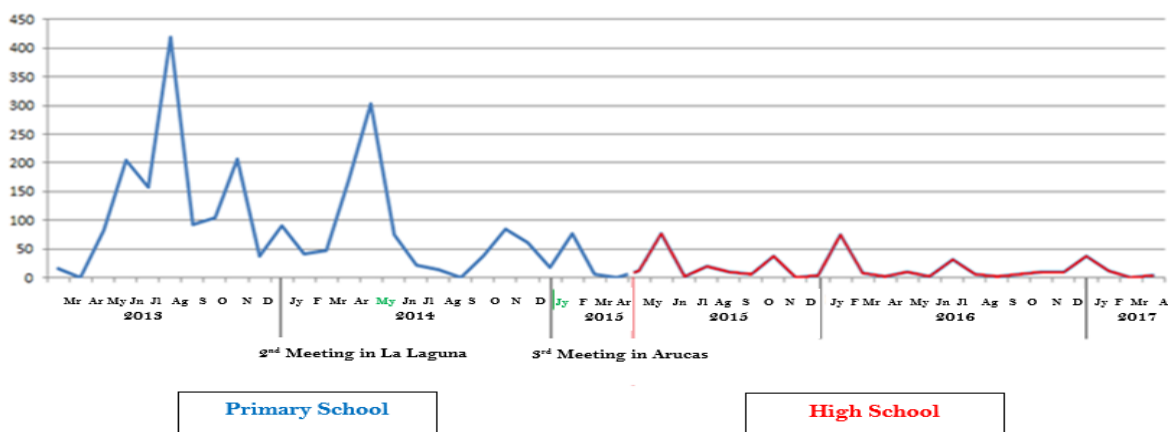


Figure-4. Downloads in canary platform for the reduction of absenteeism between March 2013 and April 2017.

In both stages, download activity continued to increase in the months before the end of the school year—albeit less in the second than the first stage—in preparation for the following year.

Based on the responses from the interviewees, administrations are generally not interested in addressing school absenteeism. On the one hand, despite being responsible for compulsory schooling, municipal administrations cannot guarantee staff retention or sufficient resources; while on the other hand, higherlevel administrations, such as the island councils, FECAM, and the Autonomous Government of the Canary Islands, offer no assistance. This is evident from the fact that the last official report from the Autonomous Government was in 2005, and no observatory studies have since been produced on incidence of school absenteeism.

Currently, none of the administrations are seeking to unify identification criteria, create protocols, and coordinate actions for school absenteeism. The Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism and three conferences was the only initiative in the Canary Islands, and one of just a few in the whole of Spain, to offer support; however, all efforts ceased after a few years, with other objectives taking priority. The state of education in Spain, and specifically in the Canary Islands, is undoubtedly precarious, and there are many challenges to address; the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports prepared by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) continue to point out the problems. School absenteeism cannot be resolved, though, by specific actions or political initiatives according to the understanding of those in positions of responsibility. Any undertaking should be based on four points: i) an observatory producing accurate data; ii) a realistic analysis of the data to determine the causes of school absenteeism; iii) action protocols for municipal teams; iv) coordination between municipal teams and educational administrations, as well as other administrations such as FECAM and island councils, to formulate a consensus.

The most advanced example, at least in terms of a social consensus, can be found in the Resolution of September 28, 2005, of the Autonomous Community of Castile and León, which established the Programme to Prevent and Monitor School Absenteeism with one of its principles being:

The problem that defines absenteeism presents multiple facets of a school, family, personal, and social nature. These situations require coordinated action by the institutions, as a means to

significantly improve the social risk situations that disadvantaged groups may suffer and respond to the educational needs they present (p. 17188).

Without such coordination, no response can be offered; as a consequence, this task should be undertaken by the Autonomous Government. It is not only crucial but also urgent that a consensus is reached on unifying identification criteria. This will both enable school absenteeism and how it is measured to be defined and remove the plurality of taxonomies and approaches, which lead to specific and separate prevention measures and action plans that only contain the situation but do not address and the root of the problem. Such a superficial approach, which is usually the result of politicians' short-term viewpoints, disregards the structural reasons for the problem. In this respect, [Walter and Pohl \(2007\)](#) made an interesting contribution that directly related school absenteeism to social inequality: the economic gap between the richest and poorest in society.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The data on academic and competence performance and development recorded in the PISA reports, the dropout rate, the number of students omitted from vocational training, and Canarian economic indicators justify the need for further studies. Improving the implementation of both human and technical resources is also necessary to effectively optimize intervention and prevention protocols for school absenteeism and reduce the school dropout rate ([Márquez & Gualda, 2014](#)). To achieve this would require the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism to be reactivated: public institutions would have to finance the project. This would enable the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism repository to be updated with new articles and publications, the 88 municipalities to be consulted on their current situation to adapt the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism to their new needs, five years later, and the personnel and equipment inventory to be revised. Moreover, the commitment of municipalities to the importance and relevance of addressing school absenteeism would need to be revitalized through continuous training plans specified at conferences or discussion forums and training sessions to raise awareness and provide guidance.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The number of downloads during both stages of the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism indicates that the repository is an essential and useful. During the second stage, however, it was not updated and no face-to-face meetings were arranged, resulting in a considerable decline in activity. It is significant a minimum download rate was observed and that the most downloaded documents during the second stage were the "Guidance model protocol for school absence intervention," along with other documents related to protocols for the technical teams. The data suggests that should the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism be reactivated and regularly updated, participatory events reinstated, and appropriate training provided, activity levels would return to the level observed in the first few years.

Furthermore, the Canary Platform for the Reduction of Absenteeism online tool had a high impact while its development and implementation incurred a low economic cost. This is of great importance in these times of austerity when public spending has reduced considerably and social inequality—a main indicator used by researchers [Walter and Pohl \(2007\)](#)—has continued to increase.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Acknowledgement: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

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