



POLICY BRIEF

The Challenge of Immigration for Spanish Education Policy: Towards an Intercultural Approach? November 2007

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1. Introduction

In the last 10 years Spain has witnessed a large influx of people from different parts of the world, especially from Latin America, Northern Africa and Eastern Europe. This immigration has not only contributed to the growth of the Spanish economy and enriched Spanish society with new languages, religions and customs, but also created new political challenges related to the accommodation of immigrants within Spanish institutional structures. Following the main focus of the EU project EMILIE interested in immigration related cultural diversity, in this study we have looked into the challenges of immigration in the education sector and analyzed policy responses in Spain and Catalonia. Based on a structural analysis of basic data, policy documents, in-depth interviews with policy makers at the Central and Catalan administrations, and a focus group with stakeholders in Catalonia, the following policy brief presents the main findings and policy recommendations.

The main questions that have been explored are:

1. What are the main challenges the children from immigrant parents are posing to the education system in Spain and Catalonia?
2. What are the policy instruments that have been designed by the Central and Catalan administrations to accommodate cultural diversity within compulsory primary and secondary education? And what kind of policy orientations do these instruments resemble?
3. What are the main issues that need attention of politicians and policy-makers to manage cultural diversity within the education sector?

2. Main educational challenges

- 1) One of the main challenges in Spain and Catalonia today is the concentration of immigrants in public schools. Of the foreign alumni in compulsory primary and secondary education, about 1/5 is enrolled in private schools, compared to 4/5 in public schools. Within the category of “private”, two types of schools can be distinguished: so-called *concertada* (partly financed by the government and partly by the Catholic Church) and non-*concertada*. The majority of *concertada* schools have failed to incorporate immigrant alumni, thereby creating a situation of concentrations in public schools. These concentrations are viewed as problematic, because they are believed to negatively affect the quality of education, and increase marginalization and social fragmentation of immigrant pupils.
- 2) Other educational challenges arise in the curriculum, which turns out to be unprepared for a society in where different languages are spoken, religions practiced and customs followed. Language poses the most important challenge in those Autonomous Communities with two official languages, like Catalonia (Basque country and Galicia). In these regions newcomers do not only need extra attention to learn the official language(s), but also pose a threat to the “normalization” of the minority language and identity. “Spanish only” in Catalonia by Latin Americans does not contribute, for example, to maintain bilingualism.
- 3) Increasing religious diversity on the other hand direct challenges the hegemonic position of the Catholic Church in Spanish society. First, the so-called *concertada* schools are a result of the political negotiation process that took place in the democratic transition phase, since the Catholic Church had practically the monopoly over education during the Franco dictatorship. Next to the ambiguous status of these *concertada* schools (that are partly in hands of the Church), Catholic classes are to be offered in all public schools, while classes in other religions are almost absent, in spite of the agreements between the Spanish state and the Jewish, Evangelic and Muslim communities. Next to these more obvious challenges, the cultural bias presented in subjects like history and geography also has become more salient.
- 4) Fourth, immigration has triggered some challenges for institutional practices, for example by claims for a diversification of meals in school canteens, petitions for religious holidays (other than Catholic) and claims of wearing the Muslim headscarf (and the question of religious symbols in general). Although these institutional challenges only result in conflicts sporadically, it indicates the need for multicultural accommodations of the institutional structures of primary and secondary schools.
- 5) Finally, the stakeholders in the focus group in Catalonia also addressed some challenges in the direct school environment, like the lack of lunch grants, problems of including immigrant parents in parents associations, and the lack of immigrants’ voice in decision-making processes about education policies.

3. Policy instruments to manage cultural, language and religious diversity

In order to prevent segregation of immigrants in public schools, the new Education Law (LO 2/2006, of 3 May) introduced the regulation of entrance of students with special needs (including immigrants) up to 10% per class room. In Catalonia a quota policy has

been introduced to regulate immigrants' admission, next to specific financial measures to promote immigrant admission in *concertada* schools and the instalment of schooling commissions that provide information about available places in schools. With regard to the management of diversity within the curricula and school environment, the Central and Catalan administrations have developed different policy instruments and approaches, depending on the type of diversity at stake (i.e. culture, language, religion). It is important to note that the Central administration has mainly competences in the management of religious diversity and the development of part of the basic curricula. The Catalan administration manages language and cultural diversity within its territory and also has competences of curricula development.

At first sight all policy-makers seem very much concerned with the need for recognition and respect of **cultural diversity**. In this context, the idea of "intercultural education" has gained a lot of popularity in the policy arena, which broadly speaking refers to an approach that is aimed at teaching all alumni values of respect, in order to live in *convivencia* (to coexist peacefully). Intercultural education is distinguished from both multicultural (segregation) and compensatory (assimilation) education, because it is aimed at the interaction of different cultural groups, without any supposition of cultural hierarchy. The intercultural approach expresses the need to change societal attitudes and modify the public opportunity structures of society in favour of cultural diversity, so that cultural differences do not lead to disadvantages. The efforts of the state administrations to implement such an intercultural approach has been limited to the introduction of a new course, called "Education for Citizenship" and the promotion of intercultural education materials. In Catalonia, intercultural education is mainly understood as an attitudinal change that teachers must promote among the students, next to being a guiding principle for cultural diversity problem solving by ways of peaceful negotiation and dialogue (rather than legislating the limits of cultural diversity in the public sphere). A new instrument introduced by the Education Department of Catalonia is the development of so-called local education plans (*planes del entorno*) that aim to create a local educational net to achieve school success of pupils and takes into account the factor cultural diversity.

While cultural diversity in general is thus understood as an enrichment of Spanish and Catalan schools (and society), the management of language and religious diversity highlight the limits of this intercultural approach in practice.

The aim of managing **language diversity** can be understood in the context of what policy-makers call *normalización* (normalization): incorporating immigrants within the mainstream of society avoiding whatever direct/indirect segregationist effect. This approach can be found in the so-called "compensatory programs" that were originally developed by the state to integrate the gypsy minority in mainstream schools and applied to immigrants when they started to enter classrooms in the 90s. The main aim of these programs is to solve the linguistic difficulties encountered as well as to bridge cultural and educational ability gaps. While compensatory programs are aimed at marginalized groups in general, the instrument of so-called *aulas de acogida* (insertion classes) organized in Catalonia (and other Autonomous Communities) are directed specifically at immigrants who enter to learn the Catalan language (as vehicle language). Many schools also have a specialist teacher, the so-called "cultural mediator" that helps immigrant children and their parents with the social integration in the education system, by solving conflicts related to language difficulties or cultural

differences. Teaching immigrant pupils in their mother-tongue language is not part of the official curriculum, and neither regarded a priority. Therefore, the management of language diversity can best be understood as an integration approach aimed at civic assimilation.

The approach is still different if we look at the management of **religious diversity**, where the Catholic Church maintains a hegemonic position in the Spanish education system. First of all, Catholic classes are to be offered in all public schools, while classes in minority religions are almost absent (in spite of the bilateral agreements signed with the Jewish, Evangelic and Muslim communities). Second, relevant Education and Integration policy documents do not mention the management of religious diversity. Third, the Catholic Church and affiliated parties tried to prevent changes in the status of religious education in compulsory education and the implementation of a new course “Education for Citizenship”. After heated debates the Socialist government managed to implement a new Education Law that has made religious education optional and introduced “Education for Citizenship”.

4. Policy recommendations

Admission policy

With regard to the quota policy introduced by the Catalan government, we (and most policy-makers we interviewed and participants of the focus group) are sceptical. Not only because of the limited chances of success, but also for normative reasons. First of all, parents' right to choose a school for their children poses an important limit to the quota policy. Second, the quota policy does not solve the core of the segregation problem, which is related more to access to housing than to schools. Finally, and probably most important, the quota policy is only aimed at a redistribution of immigrant pupils (and not of Spanish pupils), thereby discriminating and stigmatizing this specific group. Rather than forcing the redistribution of immigrants, the government should seriously engage in public housing policy and guarantee all alumni good quality public education, regardless of the composition of the school population. And if redistribution policy is a preferable policy instrument, it should apply to both immigrants and Spanish pupils, incorporate socio-economic variables, and be applied at the level of the neighbourhood.

Curricula policy

In general it can be said that while education in (and for) equality of opportunity has been developed within compensatory policy programs and language insertion classes, education in (and for) difference is a new policy discourse in development in Spain and especially Catalonia. The main shortcomings highlighted by policy-makers are the lack of teachers trained in intercultural education and a lack of awareness of the need for a positive evaluation of cultural diversity in the society at large. In addition to this, some focus group participants also stressed the need for more profound curriculum changes in order to fully develop an intercultural approach, including the diversification of religious education (or abandonment of religion from the curriculum), more attention for teaching mother-tongue languages and cultures and a critical reflection on subjects like history and geography.

Institutional policy

The decentralized education system has resulted in a situation in where institutional conflicts related to cultural diversity are mainly dealt with at the school level, and the implementation of an intercultural approach in practice largely depends on the interpretation and efforts of individual educational centres. Although institutional challenges have been limited in Spain and Catalonia to a few incidents related to the Muslim headscarf and religious holidays, the official recognition of the need to make negotionable the public structures of society (like the holiday's calendar of schools and school dress codes) would be an important sign of deepening the intercultural approach.

Evaluating policy implementation

Finally, we encourage the efforts that have been made by the Central and Catalan administration to develop a genuine approach towards the management of cultural diversity in the education sector that takes into account lessons from other approaches followed in Europe. In order to monitor the newly developed intercultural approach initiated in Spain and Catalonia, there is a need for the development of evaluation programmes that test the success of its implementation at the school level.