

The (manufactured?) pedagogical debate behind Compulsory Secondary Education

El debate pedagógico (¿manufacturado?) tras la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria

<https://doi.org/10.4438/1988-592X-RE-2025-411-722>

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Abstract

In Spain, the Community of Madrid has authorized pre-primary and primary schools to teach the first two years of Compulsory Secondary Education. This policy measure has been justified by a vague need related to childcare, preventing youth gangs, addictions and school drop-out and failure, and reconciling family and work. For the 2025-2026 school year, 52 pre-primary and primary schools have signed up for this proposal (although in the end only 49 have had sufficient demand). This article attempts to look deeper into the needs this policy is meant to address. To that end, interviews were held with the principals at schools that will be implementing it next year, as well as with principals at assigned secondary schools,

schools that are already running these courses, schools that have not been authorized by the administration to do so and representatives of principals of pre-primary and primary schools and secondary schools. Our results show that the vague pedagogical debate is articulated into two types of tensions: an understanding that the 12-to-14-year-olds stage is part of childhood or adolescence (thereby stressing the retention purpose of primary schools and the accompanying purpose of secondary schools), and the generalist *grammar of schooling* at the former and the specialized grammar at the latter. These tensions raise the question of whether we are facing a process of *primarization* of Compulsory Secondary Education, and the effects this may have on its comprehensive nature.

Keywords: Secondary Compulsory Education, childhood, adolescence, grammar of schooling, comprehensiveness, basic education, compulsory education.

Resumen

La Comunidad de Madrid inició el curso pasado la autorización para que los centros de educación infantil y primaria puedan impartir los dos primeros cursos de la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria. Esta medida se ha justificado desde una necesidad imprecisa relacionada con el cuidado de la infancia, la prevención de las bandas juveniles o las adicciones y del abandono y el fracaso escolar, y la conciliación familiar. A esta propuesta se han adherido para el presente curso escolar 52 centros de educación infantil y primaria (aunque finalmente solo 49 han tenido demanda suficiente para aplicar la medida). Mediante entrevistas realizadas con direcciones de los centros que la aplicarán a partir del curso 2025-2026, institutos adscritos, centros que ya imparten estos cursos, centros que no han sido autorizados por la administración a hacerlo y representantes de las direcciones, se ha tratado de profundizar en las necesidades educativas a las que pretende dar respuesta esta medida. El debate pedagógico, indefinido en los discursos, se articula en los resultados en dos tipos de tensiones: la concepción de la etapa 12-14 años como parte de la infancia o de la adolescencia, y consecuentemente la función de retención de los centros de educación primaria y de acompañamiento de los institutos, y la gramática escolar generalista de los primeros y especializada de los segundos. Estas tensiones plantean la cuestión de si nos encontramos ante un proceso de *primarización* de la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria, y los efectos que éste pueda tener sobre su carácter comprensivo.

Palabras clave: Educación Secundaria Obligatoria, infancia, adolescencia, gramática escolar, comprensividad, educación básica, educación obligatoria.

Introduction

In September 2024, the President of the Community of Madrid announced that newly created pre-primary and primary schools would teach through the 1st and 2nd year of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO). This policy measure was presented with arguments mixing ideas of a pedagogical and social nature, such as addressing the needs for reconciling work and family, and for fighting against high failure and dropout rates with other dangers regarding safety and security, such as “addictions and the potential influence of gangs.” One month after this first announcement, Madrid’s Board of Education announced that they were extending this policy to existing schools, and in December they announced that 25 pre-primary and primary schools would be participating in the upcoming school year. Finally, on February 3, the Board published a list that increased that number of schools to 52¹ for the 2025-2026 school year².

This policy significantly alters how the 1990 General Organic Law on the Ordering of the Education System (LOGSE, in Spanish) initially organized compulsory education into six years of primary school from the ages of 6 to 12 and four years of Compulsory Secondary Education to be taught at Secondary Education Institutes from the ages of 12 to 16. Subsequent reforms of the Spanish education system passed in laws in 2002 (LOCE), 2006 (LOE), 2013 (LOMCE), and 2020 (LOMLOE) brought about internal changes but did not change the duration or structure of Compulsory Secondary Education³. The policy measure proposed by the Community of Madrid distributes the 4 years of Compulsory Secondary Education into two different schools, which raises the question of whether this entails a *de facto* split of this stage in secondary education.

Although this measure does not arise from a process of detecting educational needs, it does usher in a new context of debate on the structure of secondary education, which is a stage historically noted for being poorly

1 At the time of writing this article, the number has dropped to 49 since three schools finally opted out due to lack of demand by the families.

2 The press releases are referenced at the end of this article.

3 The current structure of the Spanish education system can be found at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/es/eurypedia/spain/estructura-y-organizacion-del-sistema-educativo>

defined. Consequently, the present article aims to look deeper into how this policy is enacted and how it connects to the longstanding historical context in light of the discourse voiced by the principals of the schools involved in the measure.

Compulsory Secondary Education: A stage with its own identity?

The configuration of Compulsory Secondary Education: a differentiated stage

Secondary education, particularly in its lower stage, is an especially thorny issue in every education system (Puelles, 2011); it has always had to fight for its own identity (Nasarre, 2000), in part because, unlike the other stages, it is aimed at an poorly defined, intermediate student body (often known as middle school years) nestled between mass education and the introduction of higher studies. Until 1970, students began this stage at the age of 10; it was not until the General Education Law (LGE) established General Basic Education (EGB) that it included a general, shared stage for the whole population that put off secondary education until the age of 14. It is a stage whose target student body has been shifting, going from being school years aimed at a very exclusive part of Spanish society to becoming more generalized, reaching its current level of one hundred percent of students from the ages of 12 to 16.

From the very start in the initial debates of the experimental phase, one of the aims of the LOGSE reform was to make education compulsory up to the age of 16. The draft bill *Hacia la reforma* (MEC, 1985) justified the increase with two key goals: equal opportunity and extension of comprehensiveness, seeking to give the whole population a higher level of common education. Thus, the basic and compulsory stage increased by two years (ages 6-16) but the number of years in primary education was cut to six while secondary education was increased, thereby creating a lower stage of secondary education (known in Spain as ESO) for the first time.

This change was one of the most controversial points before the reform was passed. In 1987, Maravall (the Minister of Education at that time) presented his *Proyecto para la reforma de la enseñanza. Educación infantil, primaria, secundaria y profesional. Propuesta para el debate* (Ministerio de Educación, 1987). It called for splitting primary and the new lower secondary into twelve years because that age coincided with pre-adolescence (proposal 10.1). In addition, the project, heavily debated by the educational community for a year, gathered different opinions on how long ESO should last and even on how to distribute the different “cycles⁴” of the compulsory secondary education stage between primary and secondary schools. In fact, the Ministry’s initial proposal was for the first cycle of ESO (ages 12–14) to be taught in EGB schools by *maestros* (primary-trained teachers), thereby leveraging both those schools’ resources and their educators’ training, while the second cycle (ages 14–16) would be taught alongside upper-secondary education (*Bachillerato* and vocational training) in high schools and vocational training schools (*Institutos de Educación Secundaria y Profesional*). However, the long-term goal was always to create an integrated ESO stage—taught at a single type of school with a unified teaching body (Proposal 11.19).

Even though that was the Ministry’s primary plan, feedback from the educational community—documented in the *Papeles para el Debate* publication series (Ministerio de Educación, 1988)—overwhelmingly advocated for the entire stage to be taught in high schools by university-trained secondary teachers (*profesores de secundaria*), as was ultimately ratified in the LOGSE reform (Marchesi, 2020). However, upper-cycle EGB *maestros* (primary school teachers with a 3-year teaching degree) retained protected status, enabling them to transition to teaching the first two years of ESO (LOGSE, Fourth Transitory Provision). Simultaneously, it remains ambiguous whether this decision reflects the law’s recognition of secondary education as an extension of primary education (LOE, Preamble; Puelles, 2011, p. 723).

4 Translator’s note: In the Spanish education system, “ciclos” are multiple academic years based on developmental and curricular criteria: e.g., primary school has three 2-year cycles: 1st and 2nd grade, 3rd and 4th grade, and 5th and 6th grade.

Compulsory Secondary Education: Global or specialized?

Despite ongoing debates and criticism, ESO's structure as an independent educational stage assigned to high schools (known in Spain as *institutos de educación secundaria*, (*IES*)) has survived subsequent reforms, though modifications have compromised its comprehensive nature through horizontal tracking within the stage.

The first modifications were introduced under the Organic Law on Education Quality (LOCE, 2002), which established tracked pathways (Article 26) in the third and fourth years of ESO. This indirectly undermined the comprehensive model while granting the same final diploma. The fourth year was structured as an orientation and preparatory phase for subsequent studies.

Subsequently, the Organic Law on Education (LOE, 2006) reinstated ESO's comprehensive model while retaining the fourth year's orientation function (Article 25). Yet its most innovative proposal was undoubtedly the introduction of a new master's level postgraduate degree (Articles 94, 95, and 100) as a mandatory training requirement for teaching across all secondary education levels (Tiana, 2009).

The *Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality* (LOMCE, 2013) marked a complete break from the comprehensive model that had been maintained—with varying degrees of success and support—in the structure of compulsory education since LOGSE. The LOMCE structurally divided ESO into two cycles: the first encompassing the initial three years, and the second—of a propaedeutic nature—the fourth year. Not only did the final cycle divide its curriculum, it also granted different diplomas through two distinct pathways: an 'academic' track providing exclusive access to *Bachillerato* (Spain's university-preparatory upper-secondary program), and an 'applied' track mandatorily for entry into vocational training. The LOMCE also promoted basic vocational training as of the third (or even second) year of compulsory secondary education. Another major change was the requirement of evaluations to graduate from this stage of secondary education.

The current law—Organic Law 3/2020 of December 29th, amending Organic Law 2/2006 of May 3rd on Education (LOMLOE)—reinstates a

single certification stage granting access to all of Spain's non-tertiary post-compulsory education (Articles 21 to 32). This new structure retains a number of elective subjects that facilitate tracking pathways not explicitly stated in the law itself. Furthermore, it eliminates organization of the stage into cycles (through the repeal of Article 23 bis of the LOE) while maintaining the orientation function assigned to the fourth year.

It is inherently challenging to combine, within a single educational stage, the basic and compulsory nature characteristic of primary education with the specialization and horizontal and vertical segmentation typical of secondary education that was ultimately assigned to ESO (Viñao, 2004). This lack of definition is largely due to the intrinsic tension within lower-secondary education in modern systems concerning whether this stage should serve a propaedeutic purpose, a terminal purpose, or both (Nasarre, 2000; Puelles, 2011). According to all regulations over the last 40 years, compulsory secondary education must simultaneously prepare students for further academic study and for entry into the job market. This ambiguity has led to ESO being viewed as a natural extension of primary education, with which it shares more features and similarities—due to its comprehensive and compulsory nature—than with post-compulsory secondary education (Viñao, 2011). However, for many policymakers and education professionals, this vision is considered one of the major failings of this educational stage (Nasarre, 2000, p. 19). It is no coincidence that upper-secondary teachers decried the LGE, lamenting the '*egebeización*'—the assimilation to EGB culture—of secondary education, nor that those same teachers now protest against ESO and the loss of *Bachillerato*'s distinct identity (Puelles, 2011, p. 723). Furthermore, ESO's comprehensive model (identical objectives for all students in the same schools) has been identified as the cause of the perceived decline in Spanish education since the LOGSE was passed (Delibes, 2006; García Garrido, 2002; Nasarre, 2000). In a contrasting interpretation, Viñao (1992) observed the '*bachilleratization*'—the imposition of an academic, university-preparatory model—of the second stage [of EGB] and predicted this same for the LOGSE's ESO, which he credits with reinforcing this very process of academization.

Method

The objective of this study was to understand the *meanings* assigned to the proposal of teaching the first two years of ESO in primary schools (*Centros de Enseñanza Infantil y Primaria* (CEIPs)) by those who were previously responsible for this stage, represented by secondary school principals at the IESs, and by those who are being responsible for its implementation in the 2025-2026 academic year. To this end, interviews were conducted with the principals of 7 out of the 52 designated ‘CEIP+1and2’⁵ (Table 1), representing 13.4% of the total population.

Table I. Type of school where the interviewee works

DAT*	School pseudonym	Type of school
1	CEIP Las Praderas	CEIP not selected to incorporate years 1 and 2
1	CEIPSO Los Brotes	Secondary added recently**
1	IES Tallo	Affiliated with a school that recently added secondary
2	CEIP Los Montes	CEIP+1and2
2	CEIP Las Hojas	CEIP+1and2
2	CEIP Las Semillas	CEIP+1and2
2	IES Frutos	Affiliated with CEIP+1and2
3	CEIP Las Hierbas	CEIP+1and2
4	CEIP Las Flores	CEIP+1and2
4	CEIP Los Pétalos	CEIP+1and2
4	IES Ramas	Affiliated with CEIP+1and2
5	CEIP Los Bosques	CEIP+1and2
5	CEIP Los Jardines	CEIP+1and2
5	CEIP Los Valles	CEIP+1and2
5	IES Arboleda	Affiliated with CEIP+1and2
5	IES Rosedal	Affiliated with CEIP+1and2
5	IES Limbo	Affiliated with CEIP+1and2
-	ADIMAD	Association of High School Principals in Madrid

5 We use the designation ‘CEIP+1and2’ to refer to primary schools (CEIP) that have incorporated the first and second years of lower-secondary education (ESO) in the 2025-2026 academic year and therefore are not yet combined primary and lower-secondary schools (CEIPSO).

-	<i>Consejo de Directores</i>	The Community of Madrid's consultative body
Source: original work by authors. *To protect the identity of the interviewees and the schools, we have used a numerical process to make the DAT (Regional Management Area) to which they belong anonymous. **To protect the identity of the interviewee and the school, we do not state the specific year they added secondary education.		

For a better understanding of how this measure has been received at secondary schools that are affiliated with CEIPS+1and2, especially in light of the presumable drop in enrollment and the elimination of some of their functions, we have also interviewed administrators from 5 secondary schools that are affiliated with CEIP+1and2. The selection of participants responds to a theoretical sampling criterion typical of grounded theory (Flick, 2012). In accordance with this criterion, we contacted all the CEIP+1and2 and interviewed all the principals who agreed to participate, as well as their affiliated IES, assuming that their interventions would also offer different discursive positions regarding this measure (Barbeta-Viñas, 2021). In view of the variety of territorial contexts in the region, we sought to ensure that the interviews covered the five territorial areas into which the community is administratively distributed in terms of education.

In accordance with the criterion of gradual selection, when preparing for the first interviews, we found other participants whose voices might also represent the same positions, although in different contexts. They would therefore enrich the variety of participating voices. Thus, we also interviewed the school principals of: a primary school that applied to add years 1 and 2 of ESO but was not finally selected; a school that became a CEIPSO; and two members representing the Association of Principals and Public High Schools of Madrid (ADIMAD) and the *Consejo de Directores de la Comunidad de Madrid* (the official advisory board for principals of public schools in the Madrid region, encompassing early childhood, primary, special, and combined primary-lower secondary education). Thus, our analysis material consists of 19 interviews, with which we have reached the saturation point (Table 2).

Table II. Number of people interviewed at each type of school

CEIP+1and2	High Schools affiliate with CEIP+1and2	Primary school recently converted into a CEIPSO	IES affiliated with a school recently converted into a CEIPSO	CEIP not selected to incorporate years 1 and 2	Representatives from groups of school principals
9	5	1	1	1	2
Total: 19 interviews					

Source: original work by authors

In keeping with hermeneutic and critical research approaches, we do not conceptualize interviews as a technique for capturing an objective ‘truth.’ Instead, we see them as interactions between participants, thereby gaining access to their subjective meanings regarding the object of study (Kaufmann, 2021). From this premise, our analysis identified that the key elements structuring the discursive framework are the participants’ understandings of 12-14-year-old students and the ‘grammar of schooling.’ In view of this, our procedure has been to analyze the discursive positions (Barbeta-Viñas, 2021; Conde, 2009) that emerge in the interviews on both topics. Unlike content analysis, which seeks to quantify the most representative elements, discursive approaches aim to analyze texts in light of their context through an iterative process. This analysis is artisanal in nature, characterized by a continuous back-and-forth between the texts and theory, resulting in a circular and always provisional interpretation. Thus, the analysis of discursive positions affirms their collective—not individual—nature. These positions are intrinsically connected to the likewise collective social positions that individuals occupy within a given context, such as their social standing, roles, identities, or social practices. The analysis of discursive positions elucidates the dialectical relationship between text and context by observing how this relationship is expressed through linguistic usage.

In light of this dialectical relationship between text and context, our analysis considers two contextual dimensions (in addition to the interview situation itself): (1) the immediate context generated by this specific policy measure, which activates these discursive positions, and (2) a long-standing context characterized by the persistent ambiguity of lower-secondary education. We have deliberately omitted a third contextual aspect, even though the interviews reveal it as key: the current landscape of competition between

schools, a defining feature of the Community of Madrid (Prieto Egidio, 2022). Although the interviewees do indeed reference this context of competition to explain their motivations, this article focuses exclusively on the pedagogical arguments they deploy regarding this measure.

Results: The debate behind the first two years of Lower-Secondary Education (ESO)

The Community of Madrid's proposal under analysis here constitutes a hybrid measure: the first two years of lower-secondary education would be taught by secondary-level teaching staff, but within early childhood and primary education schools (CEIP). The interviews reveal, however, that this hybrid nature lacks a precise justification. This ambiguity is reflected in the participants' positions, which mirror the undefined nature of the pedagogical need or problem the measure purportedly aims to address.

The criticism of this measure raises two essential, yet unresolved, questions that—as presented in the following pages—emerge from the discourses of the interviewed principals: who is responsible for teaching 12-14-year-old students, and to what end? And which *grammar of schooling* best addresses their needs? In the discourses of the primary (CEIP) and secondary (IES) school principals, we identified two distinct models of conceptualizing childhood. Whereas the CEIP principals seek to retain and prolong childhood for as long as possible, the IES principals aim to guide students beyond this life stage, albeit with varying degrees of support. These conceptions, in turn, suggest two models for supporting these students: one of control and one of autonomy. As we will see, these models find their place within two distinct—each internally coherent—*grammars of schooling*.

Who is ESO for? Childhood versus adolescence

Not a single primary or secondary school principal we interviewed cited specific difficulties experienced by students during the transition to secondary school or their first years there, nor did they mention any negative effects caused by this move (Calvo and Manteca, 2016). In contrast to the specific motivations for implementing ‘CEIP+1and2’ put forward by the regional government—such as preventing addiction or youth gang involvement, reducing early school leaving and academic failure, and improving work-life balance—a far less defined idea permeates the discourse of CEIP principals: ‘they are too young to go to secondary school’. However, the lack of a clear reason *why* they are considered too young is just as unanimous as the idea itself.

This claim of a lack of maturity at age 12—a view held by CEIP principals and concurred with by IES principals—encompasses a confluence of different observations. Behind the assertion ‘they are too young,’ CEIP principals express fears such as students’ access to cultural content not designed for children—which they perceive as threatening—and the pressure of new responsibilities associated with the transition to secondary school. Although they concede that there is no homogeneity in their maturity levels (*‘some are young,’ ‘some adapt well’*), this does not invalidate their overall impression that they are too young to move on to secondary school. When viewed together, their arguments reproduce the image of childhood fabricated over the last two centuries: that of a subject whose natural spaces are the family and the school, whose main activity is play, and who is kept separate from the adult world—its tasks, responsibilities, and cultural consumption (Carli, 1999). Whether because they perceive learners that age as not yet capable (immature) or because it is a risk for them to want to grow up too quickly, they maintain that this boundary must be reinforced. This notion of a boundary aptly reflects the ambivalent perceptions surrounding this transition, framing it as a ‘rite of passage’ (Ávila Francés et al., 2024).

This representation of childhood approaches a form of exaltation through expressions that valorize protection—such as *‘my children,’ ‘well-cared-for chicks,’ ‘like a mother hen brooding over her students,’* and *‘being*

more closely watched’—or through nostalgic references to play, lamenting that the young learners must give up play when they go on to secondary school. The discourses of the CEIP principals reflect an *infantilized* conception of 12-14-year-old students (Alcubierre Moya, 2016), a conception in which the need for protection is paramount and which assigns schools the primary function of monitoring them. Consistent with this perception, they identify the smaller size of primary schools as an ideal characteristic for providing a ‘family-like’ environment. They contrast this with the large, populous institutes filled with older students. CEIPs, their principals affirm, are perceived by families as a contained and protective space—sometimes even one of surveillance or control—where childhood can be prolonged. This can be observed in the following testimonies from primary school principals:

[Families] have the peace of mind that their ‘well-cared-for chicks’ are still at school; they have the lunchroom, someone keeps a closer eye on them, they don’t mix with older kids—in the end, they will still be the oldest in the school. (CEIP Las Semillas)

Right now, we enroll 50 students by name in the sixth grade of primary. It’s true that over there [at the institute], we’re talking about them having... even 200 students in a sixth-grade cohort? That’s rough. In the end, even when you want to get to know them, it’s complicated. [...] They are still ‘my kids’ from the moment they enter at age 3. (CEIP Las Flores)

It’s not the same to say ‘I want him in the lunchroom, where I know he will eat and that there is someone to keep an eye on him,’ versus ‘my son goes to the cafeteria—who knows what he eats or doesn’t eat?’ (CEIP Las Hierbas)

In contrast, IES principals characterize these fears as an attitude of irrational and unfounded overprotection. They highlight how hard secondary schools work to make students feel welcome, support them, and ensure their transition to high school is smooth. From their perspective, students have a mandate to ‘adapt’ to the secondary school, hinting at the need to develop student autonomy. This stance distances them from the CEIPs’ recurrent model of surveillance, yet without failing to recognize the need for support—a need inherent to both the transition itself and students of that age:

When was the LOGSE reform implemented? In 1992, I think, if memory serves me. And ever since, there have been a lot of graduating classes, 20, 25, 30 classes in this education system. And no one is traumatized from having to go home and microwave their own meal. So I think it's legitimate for parents to have that fear because as parents, we all want to protect our kids. But it's also true that you get used to it and things work out and move forward. No kid has ever gone hungry. (IES Ramas)

Schools aren't what they used to be; they've changed a lot. The kids in the first year of ESO get a lot of support. All the schools have plans for how to help and support them during the first few days, student helpers, mediators. (ADIMAD)

In regard to this autonomy, there are other concerns about the children's transition into secondary school, such as going home from school alone or having smart phones, but these concerns are the family's, not the school's. In fact, the family's support and view of the student changes when they reach high school; this change is felt to be a rite of passage toward a degree of freedom:

Families make a lot of changes in how they help their child or how they treat them when they start high school, not when they reach a certain age. In other words, it's not so much about age as it is about going to high school. They're given a lot more freedoms when they start high school. But they're really too young for those freedoms [...] you can't tell your twelve-year-old they have free use of a cell phone, but when they go to high school, they get free reign. You can't stop looking at your twelve-year-old's class notebooks ever, but when they start high school parents do. (IES Tallo)

In consonance with how CEIP principals depict their students and little children, there is a degree of fear of their having contact with the older students at the IES, often presented as a fear the families have and that the school has to deal with. In contrast, the IES principals respond to this idea, noting that the conflicts do not arise from contact with older students (there are no conflicts between grades) but between students in the same grade, and

the ones that cause the most trouble are usually the first and second year students in ESO (Calmaestra et al., 2016). That innocent childhood purported by pre-primary and primary schools is dashed upon entering high school, but according to the high school principals, it is due not to the change in venue but to the child's own evolutionary process, thereby associating trouble-making with age.

We have problems between the kids in first year A and first year B because they behave as they do, and we'll have that here in grade school or in second year of ESO or in third year. We don't have those problems, we don't have gangs or fighting, or of the older kids picking on the younger ones; the older kids keep as far away as they can from the younger ones. (IES Rosedal)

The interviews show that the primary teaching staff believe that by knowing all the students and their families and keeping them in the same place despite the change in stage, they can stave off new or bigger problems. However, just by having these students go somewhere else seems unlikely to address the core issues that arise in high schools everywhere. Furthermore, as the representative from ADIMAD notes, they have no way of knowing how these same students will behave one or two years from now, nor have they been able to prepare for dealing with challenges other than the ones they have faced so far at their school.

Seeing the sixth graders I have now, I'm not at all worried about them getting along or not. (CEIP Los Montes)

We haven't had much problem with this [the first and second year ESO students getting along]. In the end, I think there will be some problems of some students not getting along, but really, they've all known each other for years and years. The fifth and sixth graders already fight over who gets the ball on soccer days, who gets the field first, [...] I think that's also given them some bonding, some respect, so I do hope that's one of the advantages to this way. (CEIP Los Jardines)

What is ESO for? Globalization vs specialization

In the interviews, the high school principals refer to the risks of splitting up compulsory secondary education, with arguments that have reverberated in public opinion. In contrast, for primary school principals, it is not about the split, but about the space, since secondary education teachers will ensure continuity. Thus, the school principals' discourses reflect a clash in the *grammars of schooling* (Elías, 2015; Viñao, 2002) at primary and secondary schools:

We have no primary or secondary here...no, here we're all one school, a CEIPSO, and we all work together, secondary, primary, and whatever else they throw at us, as we've all been working so far, so nothing is going to change, and if it does, I'm closing up shop. I don't get why we're each going separately. We'll have four more groups, and they're our kids, right? They've spent the last nine years here. (CEIP Los Montes)

[...] this isn't primary and secondary of ESO; it's seventh and eighth grade; and... and we'll do whatever we think is best for the kids. The school's projects stay at the school regardless of how old the students are. And the teaching staff has to fit in with the school's projects. (CEIP Los Bosques)

The reference to the "school's project" that comes up again and again in the CEIP principals' discourse captures the spirit of a global, comprehensive grammar of schooling that is also correlative of an equally globalizing teacher identity (except for the specializations) (Bolívar et al, 2005). This same globalizing feature is what turns the teaching staff into the basic organizational unit (RD 82/1996, art. 38). In contrast, the discourse from the high school principals focuses on the specialized structure of this stage. This aspect reflects a grammar of schooling organized into didactic departments, thereby making the subject matter its curricular unit (RD 83/1996, art. 40). The following extracts represent both lines of reasoning:

What is taught in primary school and what is taught in secondary school are different, the way of teaching it in primary school is different from how it is taught in secondary school. Primary school

attends more to more global structures and secondary to subject matter. How can, say, biology teachers really do quality teaching if they are teaching biology, physics, math, and technology? The way I see it, they can't. But that's what's happening now. The quality of education is taking a beating. (IES Tallo)

We're always unsure, especially in primary school, where there's a greater calling for the profession, we are concerned about doing the right thing, treating the students well, looking out for them, of course, and for quality teaching [...] For instance, in our organization we are thinking that if someone teaches French, if French turns out to be a compulsory elective we have to offer, since if that person wants to, for us we would like them also to teach language arts [...] The longer that person is here, the more involved they are in the projects. (CEIP Los Bosques)

Although the LOMLOE allows for ESO subjects to be integrated into broader interdisciplinary fields (Article 24)—a change that could potentially modify the 'grammars of schooling' of high schools towards a more globalized conception, aligning them with those of primary schools—this remains merely a curricular change. For it to have a real impact on these grammars of schooling and on teacher identities, it would need to be followed by organizational reform. Precisely this lack of organizational change within high schools has been one of the noted shortcomings of the LOGSE reform regarding ESO, which represented a curricular—but not an organizational—shift (Bolívar, 2010). This dual approach to the ESO stage combining the globalized perspective of primary schools' *grammar of schooling* with the specialized one of high schools may reflect the persistence or resurgence of the debate surrounding ESO's hybrid nature, which is both basic and specialized (Viñao, 2004). This same debate also surrounded the upper cycle of EGB (Viñao, 1992), a system that now appears to be looked back on with nostalgia as a potential solution.

However, the debate about lower-secondary education does not occur in a vacuum, but within a structure that has remained in place for 30 years—a *structure* that, in turn, shapes the very reasoning of high school principals. They defend a holistic vision of the educational stage based on the work

they effectively carry out as a collective, a point they are keen to emphasize (*'we place great importance on it,' 'we are very demanding,' 'excellent work,' 'effort towards,' 'we have been working on this for years'*). From this perspective, continuity within the same school is the essential condition for success at this educational stage. This is especially true from the third year onward, which is when options for specialization become formalized (through elective subjects, programs of curricular diversification⁶, and basic vocational training cycles⁷). Only continuity within the same school guarantees what they attribute to those first two years: a unified, *'homogenizing'* educational approach and a consistent diagnostic function:

When you get the first-year students in ESO, there's a lot of work to do because you're the one who has to set the basis for everyone to move forward together [...] Third year of ESO is radically different, the curricula are already jam-packed with things at a much higher level of difficulty. The effort at evening out everything that has been taught in each place and all that planning to squeeze everything in smoothly and progressively, you can't do it if they go into the third year of ESO. (IES Tallo)

We give a lot of weight to the diversification profile. We're very demanding about defining the learner for that program, so we have diversification groups that really work well and help a lot of the kids get into upper secondary school. We don't know what profile they're going to send us from second year of ESO from a CEIPSO. (IES Rosedal).

These excerpts reveal the importance the high school principals attribute to their own work, in this case, their work on orientation during the first few years of ESO. This specific defense of their work on orientation is an example of their more general defense of their specialization in subject matters, by which they show their knowledge of the stage, of the student body, and thus, that they are the best suited to teach them. Thus, throughout

6 This program allows for the curriculum to be modified starting from the 3rd year of ESO so that the stage's objectives and competencies are achieved by organizing the subjects into broader interdisciplinary fields and using a specific methodology.

7 Vocational Studies is part of compulsory basic education and is designed to prepare students for the job market or to go on to vocational training.

the interviews, they voiced a number of concerns about potential devaluation of secondary education: a decline in quality if the incorporation of Years 1 and 2 into primary schools (CEIP) comes at the expense of teacher specialization; the incorporation in Year 3 of a highly disparate student body, having lost the homogenizing effect of taking the first two years in a high school; and the risk of increased early school leaving by delaying the transition to high school until a more critical age—14, which can extend to 16 in the case of students who have had to repeat a year.

For high school principals, specialized teaching staff is a central aspect for this educational stage; they also emphasize the importance of having stable faculty to guarantee its delivery. This organizational issue is especially critical for secondary schools (Red por el Diálogo Educativo, 2020). The organization of the first years of secondary education within primary schools (CEIP), combined with the limited number of teaching hours allocated per specialization, will prevent the creation of permanent posts. Consequently, the teaching of these courses will be carried out by interim teaching staff. While CEIP principals do not attach importance to this issue, placing their guarantee of continuity on the school's project itself, for high school (IES) principals, the continuity of their teaching staff is key to ensuring the continuity of the educational stage:

If we hire more full-time teachers to share our team's way of working, we'll set the bases and a way of working. (IES Ramas)

How can a teacher fully invest in a school's educational project or way of working if they only spend four hours a week there because they have to divvy up their day working at other schools? How invested can teachers be at a school? How engaged can they really become? (IES Tallo)

The short-term, interim, and part-time contracts they predict for the teaching positions that will be opened at the CEIP+1and2 are chief concerns among high school principals. They understand that part-time work, especially at schools with different grammars of schooling, creates material conditions that hinder teacher commitment to student development.

Conclusions: Towards a ‘*primarization*’ of Secondary Education (ESO)?

A primary line of inquiry in this study has been to understand the rationale for this policy, particularly after confirming that the Madrid government’s motives do not align with the motivations of the primary schools (CEIP)—as expressed by their principals—for implementing it. There is no indication in the school principals’ discourse of any specific prior demand to incorporate the first two years of ESO into primary schools. Furthermore, we have not found any debate in recent academic or grey literature that calls for this measure. This lack of prior debate leads us to identify a manufactured debate, one that was activated by the announcement from the Presidency of the Community of Madrid regarding the expansion of the ‘CEIP+1and2’ model and that unfolds within a context of competition among schools. Nevertheless, aware of this fact, this study has sought to recover the pedagogical meanings that school principals attribute to this measure.

We have identified a discursive framework that pivots around two distinct perceptions of students in the first two years of ESO, each consistent with the two differentiated grammars of schooling of each type of school. In light of this, and borrowing Viñao’s concept of ‘*egebeización*,’ we argue that this policy advances a *primarization* of these two years of ESO. We define ‘*primarization*’ as the subsumption of the first two years of ESO under the *grammar of schooling* of the primary schools that come to host them, and their consequent subordination to the globalizing, generalist educational model of primary education, to the detriment of the specialized instruction found in secondary education. Thus, IES principals expressed concern that this policy breaks the unity of ESO, connecting to a historical debate around the principle of comprehensiveness. It is upon this principle, at least discursively, that ESO’s compulsory and globalizing character has been built. This principle would be effectively suspended by separating ESO into two types of schools with markedly different characteristics (Marchesi, 1995), which are grounded in different perceptions of students (childhood versus mature or maturing subjects), different modes of relating to them (control/protection versus autonomy), and different grammars of schooling

(globalizing versus specializing). Thus, another effect of this *primarization* is that, when faced with the two perceptions of students, the control/protection model is privileged over the support model. This is driven by a discourse that exalts childhood and, consequently, strives to retain it, ultimately causing its infantilization. Finally, this article contributes to a critical understanding of this policy's effects by examining the systemic foundations upon which it is built. Thus, we observe that the gap between the different depictions of students as well as between the different grammars of schooling reflects long-standing discursive continuities that this policy, far from resolving, has brought to the surface. Consequently, we argue that the 'CEIP+1and2' policy by itself does not resolve or alleviate the clash between the two grammars of schooling—a key problem identified in the literature on primary-to-secondary transitions (Gimeno, 1997)—but merely postpones it for two years.

This discursive framework reflects the tensions that have shaped lower-secondary education within the broader historical narrative of the 20th century, a period during which it was established as a compulsory stage of basic education. This discourse is now emerging as a still incipient debate, due to the embryonic state of the policy itself, which began in September 2025. However, we maintain that, even at this incipient stage, this proposal alters the structure of ESO and could, in a sense, fracture it. In light of this finding, we emphasize the importance of ensuring that educational reforms not only arise from regulatory processes that allow for the participation of all members of the educational community, but also stem from diagnostic, analytical, and discursive processes to clearly identify needs, the most appropriate policy measures to address them, and their implications. This study is necessarily constrained by the policy's incipient character. Its focus is further limited to the views of school principals, since they are the officials responsible for requesting and, where applicable, implementing the policy measure in their schools. Nevertheless, their testimonies are but a preliminary sketch of a picture that must be fully rendered with the voices of all other stakeholders in the educational community.

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Funding

This article has been written within the framework of the research project “The imperative of educational innovation: analysis of its reception and articulation in the Spanish education system” (IMPNOVA) (Ref: PID2022-138878NA-I00), funded by 2022 Call for Projects in Knowledge Generation from the National Research Agency of Spain.