

Education counter-reform: critical review or backtracking?

La contrarreforma educativa: ¿revisión crítica o huida hacia atrás?

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Abstract

The emergence of educational innovation in Spain as a strategy for educational reform has generated an ambiguous response: while some support it, others, especially teachers, families and institutions, have shown mistrust. Criticism stems from academic results in standardised tests, high dropout rates, discipline problems in classrooms and the loss of some of the traditional functions of educational institutions. These reactions have prompted the formation of groups that question the direction of education under the standards imposed by current regulations and innovative reform. One of the key issues in the debate is compulsory schooling up to certain ages, a central component of progressive legislation.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the discourses of institutionalised groups of teachers, families and students in Spain that question the current model of compulsory schooling. To do so, we will examine their documents and speeches published on their official platforms. The result of this analysis allows us to identify points in common between these groups, as well as to point out their main arguments and avenues of debate regarding compulsory schooling. The paper concludes by providing a detailed profile of these organisations and their claims, and by contributing to an understanding of the criticisms and proposals surrounding the reform implemented in the light of educational innovation and the specific field of compulsory schooling in Spain.

Keywords: innovation, education, compulsory education, organisation, reform.

Resumen

La irrupción de la innovación educativa en España como estrategia para reformar el ámbito educativo ha generado una respuesta ambigua: mientras algunos la apoyan, otros, especialmente docentes, familias e instituciones, han mostrado desconfianza. Las críticas surgen debido a los resultados académicos de pruebas estandarizadas, el alto abandono escolar, los problemas de disciplina en las aulas y la pérdida de algunas funciones tradicionales de las instituciones educativas. Estas reacciones han impulsado la formación de agrupaciones que cuestionan el rumbo de la educación bajo los estándares impuestos por la normativa vigente y la reforma innovadora. Uno de los aspectos clave en el debate es la obligatoriedad de la escolarización hasta determinadas edades, un componente central de las legislaciones progresistas.

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar los discursos de las agrupaciones institucionalizadas en España de docentes, familias y estudiantes que cuestionan el actual modelo de escolarización obligatoria. Para ello, se examinarán sus documentos y discursos publicados en sus plataformas oficiales. El resultado de este análisis permite identificar puntos en común entre estas agrupaciones, así como señalar sus principales argumentos y vías de debate respecto a la obligatoriedad escolar. El trabajo concluye proporcionando un perfil detallado de estas organizaciones y de sus reclamos, y contribuyendo a comprender las críticas y propuestas en torno a la reforma ejecutada a la luz innovación educativa y al ámbito concreto de la escolarización obligatoria en España.

Palabras clave: innovación, educación, enseñanza obligatoria, organización, reforma.

Introduction

In recent decades, the commitment to educational innovation has occupied a large part of the pedagogical debate. Articulated to overcome the limitations of the education system, it has permeated everything, from policies to practices, materializing in an imperative that cannot be ignored. Therefore, talking about the imperative to innovate implies accepting that neutrality is not an option: education systems around the world have committed themselves to varying degrees to innovation, backed by an intention to implement improvements

at different levels. In Spain, we find the seeds of this commitment at the beginning of the century. In 2001, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport announced the first National Awards for Educational Innovation (González, 2002), which until then had been known as the National Awards for Educational Research. The Ministry of Education and Science itself would split in 2018, renaming itself as the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities and integrating the term. In terms of investment, innovation has also been a priority in Spain: in 2024 alone, the Ministry of Education has allocated more than €54 million to innovation and excellence in vocational training (MECD, 2024).

At the regulatory level, Organic Law 2/2006, of 3 May, on Education included the word “innovation” 20 times, making the term ubiquitous in educational centres. At the social level, one of the greatest concerns of Spaniards regarding education lies in its shortcomings (Centre for Sociological Research, 2023), and 75% consider innovation to be key to bringing about a necessary and urgent transformation in education (COTEC, 2024). Public administrations, in line with this view, have taken on the responsibility of implementing a major educational change based on the imperative to innovate. However, this has not only been an institutional drive at the state level: private entities such as ABANCA have understood the capital value of educational innovation and annually organise awards for innovative experiences and teachers (Plataforma Educa, n.d.), and companies such as Google, Amazon and Acer, with no direct link to the field of education, sponsor them (Educational Innovation Awards, n.d.).

This general drive for educational change has generated both agreements and tensions between those who support comprehensive reform and those who call for a more conservative stance, reminding us that what is new is not necessarily better and that what already exists can be of great value, even if it is difficult to see amid constant novelty (Biesta, 2024). The OECD (2013), however, stresses that well-planned and targeted innovation can boost economic growth and help solve social problems, which are fundamental goals for any education system. This dichotomy between innovation and conservation is at the heart of the debate, fuelled not only by the limits and possibilities of pedagogy, but also by interests and contradictions present in

educational policies and reforms (Martínez and Rogero, 2021).

These tensions can open up spaces for dialogue (Bellamy, 2021), but they can also lead to polarisation and the systematic rejection of any change, perceived as an imposition under the imperative of innovation. Critics of educational change point out that innovative reforms impose new roles on professionals and institutions (Prieto et al., 2011), which would conflict with a democratic vision that considers all agents to be active participants in the educational debate, rather than mere recipients of guidelines. However, although these reforms involve prescriptions and are framed within an imperative for innovation, this does not mean that they are necessarily undemocratic or immoral, as they have followed the usual procedures of educational policy, both nationally and internationally, and are based on the collective confidence that tangible improvements will be achieved.

However, when a reform has already been implemented and the results it produces do not satisfy some of the stakeholders involved, this dissatisfaction turns into disappointment (Ascuí-Gac & Thezá-Manríquez, 2024) and leads to questioning the need for and meaning of the promised change. In fact, even though they are in favour of innovation, part of the population distrusts the institutional management of it (Edelman, 2024) in view of the results obtained. It is therefore necessary to analyse the reform proposals formulated to date and the premises for improvement implicit in them, in order to understand at what point a gap has opened up between what is desirable and what has been achieved, leading to mistrust and a need for confrontation on the part of society.

Critical premises regarding innovative educational reform

Internationally, innovative reform has been based on considering the institutional form of knowledge management obsolete and on the need to break with the past in favour of a present that is thirsty for the future (Valenzuela-Echeverri, 2023). Instead, it advocates prioritising skills-based, collaborative, barrier-free, personalised learning (Marimon-Martí et al., 2022), abandoning statism and promoting individual knowledge construction based on the

interests and needs of each student. In the Spanish educational context, mistrust of this approach is based on several critical premises: the first and most important is *that reforming the identity of educational institutions and abandoning their role as transmitters of knowledge is a mistake*.

Critical voices argue that the free and autonomous construction of knowledge requires, first, a transmissive process that awakens interest, and warn that it is not a question of confronting the past and the future (Bellamy, 2021). They argue that transmission is not only an intellectual activity, but also a comprehensive experience that involves different human dimensions and contributes to personal fulfilment and identity construction (Ibáñez et al., 2022). Thoilliez (2022) warns that conceiving knowledge solely as an individual construction deteriorates the relationship between teacher and learner, as it breaks the link of transmission of the valuable knowledge that the former bequeaths to the latter. In response to this, advocates of innovative reform question this emphasis on transmission, as it is based on the idea of the intrinsic goodness of the teacher and overlooks the fact that school is also a space of domination and social reproduction (Carrasco-Bahamonde, 2023). However, critics of this reform reply that the means for self-construction of knowledge are not exempt from manipulation either, as demonstrated by the role of algorithms in digital platforms and social networks (García-Marín & Serrano-Contreras, 2023). A second premise emerges from this debate: *the questioning of the role of educational environments and the essential role of teachers*.

From a reformist perspective, teachers act as guides and mediators of learning (Cabrera, 2023; Rico-Gómez & Ponce, 2022; Villanueva et al., 2021), offering security, respect and esteem to students (Córdova et al., 2022). However, critical positions of the innovative reform warn that, by losing their capacity to transmit knowledge, which is essential for motivating and guiding students, their role becomes diffuse (Solé, 2024), making it difficult to provide guidance even in their own professional practice. Thus, many teachers turn to social media to find teaching resources (Beltrán-Flandoli et al., 2023; Guillén-Gámez et al., 2023; Marcelo-Martínez et al., 2023), which facilitates individualised teaching and, in turn, encourages students to do the same to construct their own knowledge (Chávez-Moreno et al., 2021;

Martínez-Domingo et al., 2021). It is therefore worth asking, if teachers and students access knowledge through the same means, what differential role does the teacher play? Even more so when, in this digital context, the value of the teacher seems to lie not in their teaching ability but in their expertise as a consumer and their productivity as a content creator, the latter requirement being highlighted in awards such as the ABANCA for Best Innovative Teacher.¹

Much of the debate also revolves around this digital issue, as one of the major commitments of the innovative reform has been the digitisation of educational settings, conceived as a way to connect multiple languages, knowledge and experiences (Biaconcini de Almeida, 2021), optimise knowledge management and contribute to social progress (Montoya & Agbu, 2022), as well as facilitating universal access to education and reducing inequalities (Uribe et al., 2022). However, critical voices of this reform warn that accessing information in a mere process of datafication (Sánchez-Rojo et al., 2022) is not the same as transforming it into meaningful knowledge capable of generating new questions and needs. They also warn of the risk of leaving educational management in the hands of private digital platforms with business interests, as this tends to reduce learning to the acquisition of skills useful for the labour market, when learning involves not only preparing for a job, but also questioning fundamental issues (Hitz, 2025). And so the third premise emerges: knowledge management and its relevance, that is, *the curriculum issue*.

The value of knowledge and the curriculum issue, the seed of confrontation

Reform proposals advocate for what they consider to be a more meaningful curriculum (Salas-Hernández, 2023), focused on the interests of students and oriented towards the development of skills required by an increasingly globalised and digital world (Aparicio-Gómez, 2022; Gómez, 2023). From

¹ The contest rules specify that “the teacher’s presence on social media and platforms for the dissemination of knowledge will be valued (...) to confirm their passion for education by continuing to educate and transmit knowledge beyond the classroom.”

criticism to innovative reform, however, perceive this transformation as a concession to political correctness (Amilburu, 2022), which accelerates and disrupts content, generating disoriented teaching practices (Thoilliez, 2024) and questioning the existence of objective knowledge. They also denounce that this global and unstructured curriculum transfers all responsibility for learning to the student, making the construction of knowledge contingent on their own conditions (Enkvist, 2022), while institutions and teachers wash their hands of its transmission. In contrast to this logic that defends changing and personalised knowledge, critics defend the right to common and accessible knowledge. As Crato (2024) points out, renouncing unified knowledge responds to relativist and anti-scientific views that weaken its value. Thus, the debate shifts to the very meaning of knowledge in education.

The innovative reform is critical of what Freire termed ‘banking education’, in which building knowledge is equivalent to storing static information through repetition and memorisation (Hennig, 2023; Real & Ramos, 2023; Roa, 2021), and points to the role of the teacher as transmitter as its greatest representative when they offer knowledge that should not be processed, but stored. Instead, it proposes competency-based education, based on instrumental learning for life, which allows students to adapt to constant change from a leading role (Quilabert et al, 2023). The OECD justifies the competency-based model on the basis of the need to adapt to a complex, interconnected and changing world (OECD, 2019), and the United Nations refers to the value of its cross-cutting nature, which allows students to develop versatile profiles (United Nations, n.d.).

Critics of the competency-based model point to the lack of precision in this cross-cutting approach to knowledge, considering it alien to the reality of the education system (Aguirre, 2023). They question whether competencies, valued above all for preparing students for an intrinsically uncertain future, can really be transferred to any context (Bueno, 2022). According to Cañadell (2022), this uncertainty leads to the abandonment of students, who are no longer required to learn specific content, but simply to “learn to learn” in order to become users and investors in their own education. This skills development is described as a capitalised long-distance race, in which banks, companies and individuals reap economic benefits, displacing educational institutions

from their role in knowledge management (BBVA, 2012; Alcázar, 2023).

All these disagreements surrounding the innovative reform have therefore resulted in different demands from educational agents and scepticism about a promising future. Although the reform was proposed as a response to current needs for change (Palacios et al., 2021), it has failed to generate confidence in part of the education sector. This mistrust has led to the emergence of associations and groups calling for an urgent review of the changes, especially in key areas of the Spanish educational context, such as compulsory schooling.

The educational counter-reform and the debate on compulsory schooling

The critical positions we explore in this paper through the analysis of various statements and documents that have been published do not propose new innovative reforms, but rather adopt a counter-reformist approach, opposing both the changes implemented, as reflected in the critical premises analysed, and the very need to carry them out. They argue that the innovative reform has led to an educational regression (Fundación Episteme, 2020), violating the rights of families and students (Observatori Crític de la Realitat Educativa [OCRE], n.d.) and being based on particular ideological interests. This has fuelled the debate on the universalisation of compulsory secondary education (Moreno & Gortázar, 2024), seen as a key exponent of the reforms, especially by teachers at this stage in Catalan public schools, where innovation has had a major institutional impact.

According to the counter-reformist approach, educational institutions have been stripped of their enlightening function and have become places where young people remain only because they are of a certain age. This is detrimental both to those who do not wish to study, who are forced to stay, and to those who do want to learn, who are limited by the low level or lack of interest of their classmates, considered unmanageable from the age of twelve onwards (Moreno, 2021). They argue that the comprehensive model, which prioritises respect for individual rhythms and interests, ends up being unfair,

as it focuses on students with greater difficulties. To prevent dropouts, Andreu Navarra (2019) points out, it forces teachers and institutions to “level down”, i.e. to take the worst results as a reference. Along these lines, Xavier Massó (2024), president of the Episteme Foundation, criticises the permissiveness of the current system and advocates a return to a more rigorous and demanding model, similar to the one prior to the legal reforms, which, according to Alberto Royo (2016), better guaranteed the social mobility that education promises.

These positions are reinforced by seemingly contradictory but essentially complementary trends that advocate flexible schooling tailored to each student in order to avoid uniformity that leads to mediocrity and to enhance individual abilities, as pointed out by Carmen Sanz (2013). From this perspective, the idea that educational institutions should give special encouragement to those with the greatest potential for achievement is endorsed, although it should be noted that this demand, if not accompanied by an increase in resources, would mean devoting less attention to the less efficient. This perspective, which is often presented as sympathetic to those who fail to adapt, defending freedom of choice and even justifying dropping out of school in search of a fulfilling life, it can contribute to reinforcing the idea that, at a certain point, education should be the preserve of those who have a background that allows them to pursue it with a promise of demonstrable effectiveness and efficiency.

Both positions agree in diagnosing an education system that is incapable of guaranteeing real learning for all students, which calls into question the point of maintaining institutions as they exist today. They argue that compulsory schooling in Spain responds more to the interests of the state than to an effective strategy for achieving good results, and they consider it ineffective to cater to unmotivated or unruly students, proposing instead to focus efforts on those who do take advantage of education. This gives rise to the defence of a chosen and meritocratic schooling system that recognises individual effort and merit as a guarantee of success. In the words of Gregorio Luri (2024), meritocracy treats people as dignified and respectable individuals by considering them committed to their own self-improvement. This idea stems from the conviction that discipline and effort are transformed into

knowledge, which is key to academic and social prosperity, as pointed out by members of *La Facultad Invisible*², attributing the ineffectiveness of the Spanish education system to a lack of recognition of effort and knowledge (Sanmartín, 2024).

Thus according to this perspective, hard work is the only solution for those born with fewer opportunities³, and that when educational institutions adjust to those who cannot or do not want to progress through effort, they end up becoming segregated spaces and lowering their standards in order to control the student body, as sociologist Rafael Merino indicates (Rodríguez & Oliveres, 2021), denying those who strive the opportunity to climb the social ladder. Merino adds that the centres that give in to this marginalisation are mostly public, and that this creates a vicious circle in which young people have low expectations, and institutions reinforce this, with no government doing anything to remedy the situation. This creates “ghettos” conducive to the proliferation of maladjusted, truant and unruly students, contributing to the complete deterioration of the education system and preventing it from achieving the universal goals for which it was designed.

The ecosystem of the ungovernable

Hence, counter-reformists call for consideration of whether it is desirable for these students, who not only have low expectations but also little discipline, little effort or little knowledge in their individual ability to overcome them, to be forced to coexist with those who do wish to prosper. However, they do so without establishing mechanisms to intervene in these students’ self-perception or without providing evidence about the number of vulnerable students who end up climbing the social ladder thanks to their academic performance. The attitude that seems common among students who fail due to an apparent inability to exceed expectations, a lack of interest in studying and

² It is an “apolitical, non-profit association with no membership fees,” according to the “About Us” section of its website, made up of people who have been awarded the National Prize for Academic Excellence at the End of their Studies by the Ministry of Education, as well as other similar academic awards.

³ The Episteme Foundation and OCRE, among others, devote several entries on their websites to defending this issue.

a commitment to remaining in the same status, is attributed to those referred to as ‘ungovernable’. This is not only the case for vulnerable students, but also for the so-called “soft generation”, young people who, when they fall, no longer get up because they are waiting for someone else to lift them up, as pointed out by the writer Eva Millet (De Vega, 2017).

They point out that unruly individuals of any kind cannot be expected to be capable of self-management. Some earn this label through a lack of efficiency, but also through a lack of respect for academics and a disregard for knowledge. Their discipline is placed exclusively in the hands of teachers, they criticise. David Cerdá (2025), philosopher and economist, points out that it is not possible to teach those who do not respect the teacher, and calls for a common front against the interference of parents⁴, whom he blames for trying to pave the way for their children by taking paternalistic positions. As Professor Miriam Gallego (2025)⁵ points out, this attitude leads them to raise spoilt and pampered children who are incapable of making an effort and committing themselves, thereby contaminating the educational space and condemning it to mediocrity.

By avoiding failure at all costs, they argue, the educational system becomes complicit by allowing students to move up a year without having learned, contributing to a decline in standards and disruptive behaviour, worsening discipline and the learning environment in the classroom, as indicated by Professor Paco Benítez (2025). Precisely one of the main reforms implemented by the LOMLOE has been the expansion of failed subjects with which it is possible to move up a year. This is another of the major counter-reformist criticisms, as they consider the system to be too permissive with academic failure.

Thus, we could summarise the main counter-reformist arguments as a concern for the value of knowledge in educational institutions, resulting in a loss of identity for these institutions, which in turn leads to a loss of confidence in their educational potential and a rapid deterioration of their function. This deterioration manifests itself in a lack of discipline and good behaviour, as well as a lack of effort and work on the part of students, a lack of authority

4 This article appears in “Featured Articles” on the OCRE website.

5 It also appears in OCRE’s highlights.

on the part of teaching staff, a lack of respect on the part of families, and a general decline in the standard of the education system. Counter-reformist voices endorse the need for a return to the basic fundamentals of learning (OCRE, 2024)⁶, that is, a return to the origins based on a reconsideration of the changes implemented, which are considered absurd (Benítez, 2025) and have led to the deterioration of the system. This deterioration is evident and culminates in compulsory schooling imposed on those who do not even acquire basic skills such as reading and writing, as indicated by professor and politician Bernat Joan i Martí (2024). According to these positions, this marks the beginning of the end for educational institutions if nothing is done to prevent it.

Based on these arguments, they assert that compulsory education until the age of sixteen should be reviewed, as the current system, in the words of Professor Ricardo Moreno, constitutes an act of barbarism against the most intelligent and hard-working students, which, moreover, in no way benefits the least able (Cunyat, 2012). However, abandoning compulsory schooling would mean renouncing a democratic achievement that has been maintained in Spain for more than three decades and accepting voluntary alternatives or those determined by academic results for those who, in their unruly state, were not likely to successfully complete a longer academic period.

It is striking that the latest legislation to conceive of this, the LODE, referred in its preamble to the success of extending compulsory education (LODE, 1985, para. 5). It is therefore worth asking whether making it more flexible again would be a step forward or an endorsement of the need to look back and accept failure.

Limits and possibilities of the educational counter-reform

It is thus clear that there is disagreement regarding the relevance of the reform implemented in the Spanish education system under the banner of innovation. Debate on this issue, and especially on the desirability of compulsory schooling, is necessary.

6 This is stated in the manifesto of Col·lectiu Hèlios-OCRE IB, the Balearic branch of OCRE.

In fact, in February 2025, the Front Comú per una Educació de Qualitat (FCEQ) was formed, a “coalition of teachers, families and members of civil society” united to “demand that our leaders implement educational policies that allow all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, to become intellectually autonomous, emotionally mature and socially responsible citizens”. The FCEQ is made up of nine organisations that have drafted and signed the manifesto. Five are mainly composed of teachers: Associació de Catedràtics d’Ensenyaments Secundaris de Catalunya (ACESC), Col·lectiu Pere Quart, Sindicat «Professors de Secundària (ASPEPC-SPS)”, Impulsors del Manifest per a la millora de l’ensenyament secundari de Catalunya and Plataforma No al nou currículum. One is essentially made up of families, Plataforma per l’Educació de Qualitat, and the remaining three, Fundació Episteme, Observatori Crític de la Realitat Educativa (OCRE) and Seminari Ítaca d’Educació Crítica, are made up of a compendium of teachers, students, families and professionals related to different disciplines, such as economics and philosophy. Some of these groups have websites where they publish materials related to the demands of the manifesto, and various meetings and conferences have been organised with the participation of some of the most notable voices within this position⁷.

Both their objectives and their demands have been set out in the public manifesto «Manifest del front comú per una educació de qualitat» [Manifesto of the common front for quality education] (Front Comú Per una Educació de Qualitat, 2025), in which they call on society as a whole to participate. Among their concerns are the low academic results in the PISA standardised tests and the introduction in schools and colleges of what they consider to be “pseudo-scientific innovations that belittle knowledge, effort and a sense of responsibility”. Among the consequences they identify as most serious is a student body that finishes its schooling without sufficient maturity and self-government skills to confront abuses of power.

These demands, which arose in public schools in Catalonia but have been extrapolated to the whole country, are based on the conviction that the most disadvantaged students see their opportunities for social

⁷ Both OCRE and the Episteme Foundation are prolific organisers of joint events. They share announcements and reviews of these events on their websites.

advancement limited, while those who can afford private schools have access to greater knowledge, thus widening inequalities. Their demands include: a curriculum structured by subject, an education system that values academic qualifications, objective assessments based on quantitative grades rather than qualitative indicators such as basic skills, and specific attention for pupils with difficulties, including behavioural problems. They also demand that teachers be recognised as public authorities, with continuous training, real academic freedom and trust in their professional judgement.

In addition, they call for transparent control of the education system, the standardisation of teaching materials based on scientific evidence, the protection of the state's cultural and linguistic heritage, and digitisation managed through specific training, independent of other subjects and based on free software that guarantees the protection of data for the entire educational community. They also share a concern for the emotional well-being of students and for problems of coexistence in the classroom, insisting that students be able to fully exercise their right to a public and quality education, a right they consider to have been violated by the transformations promoted by the state and regional administrations. Hence their opposition to reforms based on the imperative of innovation.

The counter-reformist proposals contained in the manifesto are not far removed from the general concerns and interests of society as a whole with regard to education. The national public media have echoed concerns about the results of the PISA tests (Martín, 2022), and the OECD's *Education at a Glance 2024* report confirms the inequalities that exist among students in the Spanish education system. The defence of linguistic diversity is shared by the Spanish Government, which in 2022 signed an agreement with the Generalitat de Catalunya for the protection and promotion of the Catalan language (Ministry of the Presidency, Justice and Relations with the Courts, 2022), and issues such as the protection of data in the educational community are supported nationally and internationally. The Spanish Data Protection Agency has published a specific guide to ensure this issue is addressed in educational centres (Spanish Data Protection Agency, 2021). We are talking about ideas that are generally shared, both at the citizen and institutional levels.

However, counter-reformist claims are specifically opposed to the current innovative educational reform, and are neither new nor recent. During the drafting of the LOE, the cornerstone of the current LOMLOE, demonstrations were organised throughout Spain, predicting a debacle in the education system. Some of the entities that signed the manifesto, such as the Association of Secondary School Teachers (Chatillard, 2005), appeared at these demonstrations, predicting current counter-reformist claims such as a decline in educational standards due to the possibility of promotion despite failing subjects or the limitation of families' freedom of choice (Asenjo, 2005). These, in turn, appeared in those demonstrations represented by the National Catholic Confederation of Parents of Students (CONCAPA) and the Confederation of Parents of Students (COFAPA), together with other organisations such as the Spanish Confederation of Education Centres (CECE) and the National Association of Special Education Centres (ANCEE). All of them continue to be critical of the LOMLOE and the reform carried out under its auspices.

Other entities that are not specifically educational and are openly conservative also joined these protests, such as the Family Forum and the Episcopal Conference. Both continue to be critical of the current education system. The Confederation of Students (CES), the Democratic Coalition of Students (CODE) and the Union of Student, absent from the FCEQ manifesto, took part in the rallies against the reform proposed by the LOE, although they expressly differentiated their positions, with the openly progressive student groups criticising the openly conservative ones and deciding not to appear together, as reported by *El Confidencial* (Efe, 2005). We are therefore talking about a disenchanted position that has been developing for more than two decades and has now become an urgent call for counter-reform. It is worth asking whether this counter-reform is possible and, if so, how it could be articulated democratically and not remain a mere nostalgic lament.

As for the confrontation with current regulations and the proposal to return to past laws as a strategy for progress, this does not seem to be a viable option. It is understandable that, in the face of discontent, the first option is to return to the past, but it is not possible to do so because the doors have closed behind us (Zanatta, 2021). When we admire what was but can never be

again, we do so not only because we consider the past to be necessarily better, but also because of the insecurity we feel in the face of a present fraught with difficulties and disappointments, which prevents us from developing and leads to enormous anxiety about current models of society (Montesó-Ventura, 2024). The first step, therefore, is to ask ourselves whether we have idealised and romanticised the past in a need to escape the present we inhabit. A counter-reform proposal that arises from the mere confrontation between the old and the new in a simplistic dichotomy can even lead to the loss of what has been achieved by defending it not from a pedagogical perspective, but from a nostalgic one.

In relation to the conflictive and unsustainable environment in classrooms and concerns about the “ghettoisation” of some public schools due to the poor atmosphere, this seems to be justified, in his view, by a concentration of unruly students that feeds on itself due to the permissiveness of families and institutions on the one hand, and the inaction of the State on the other. However, the report by the OECD (2024), the body that regulates the standardised tests whose results are used to justify some of the counter-reformist claims, reveals that it is the freedom of choice of school by families that is one of the aspects that most increases school segregation. Therefore, these processes of isolation of certain schools occur because they are not chosen by families and remain as residual options for the most vulnerable students or those whose families have less choice.

In Spain, this freedom is also specially protected, as shown by the Master Law on Freedom of Educational Choice passed in 2022 in the Community of Madrid. Furthermore, Spain is among the OECD countries with the highest enrolment in private and state-subsidised private schools. The report warns that, in order to ensure equity, it would be necessary to restrict these options in order to reduce segregation and offer equal opportunities to the most vulnerable students (OECD, 2024). Therefore, an educational counter-reform that aspires to defend the right to universal and emancipatory education, and to protect public schools from becoming ghettos, should critically examine the segregating effects of freedom of educational choice and its repercussions on the equitable distribution of students, as well as on their access to public resources, both in academic terms and in terms of well-being, bearing in mind

that this right to free choice is still not fully guaranteed.⁸

With regard to the academic level of students, the OECD points out that Spain has a school repetition rate that is higher than the European average, which limits equity and inclusion. In turn, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) shows that the socio-economic status of families has a decisive influence on academic performance, systematically favouring students from more affluent backgrounds. Thus, students' living conditions are revealed as a crucial factor in school failure, even above methodologies or curricular structures. An educational counter-reform that aims to improve academic standards should recognise that improving the material conditions of families would have a direct impact on educational quality and results, which in turn would allow for a more objective evaluation of the effectiveness of certain pedagogical or curricular methods, highlighting their possibilities and limitations.

Conclusions

Finally, counter-reformist voices recognise that education is key to building societies that are open to the future and free from ignorance and neglect (Luri, 2024). It is thus concluded that, as we argue in this paper, a coherent counter-reform must point out the shortcomings of the education system, but also its possibilities, defending its value as a guarantor of what is possible and as a collective achievement, even if it raises debates on issues such as the configuration of the current compulsory model. It should also demand better conditions for its implementation and assert its unique potential to educate citizens who are critical, constructive and committed to common projects (Thoilliez, 2019). The growing challenges of compulsory schooling do not, in themselves, justify renouncing its value for democratic societies that defend universal rights.

In summary, in the face of discourses that prioritise action on

⁸ For freedom of choice to exist, there must be the ability to choose. Families living in impoverished areas, rural and urban environments with a low supply of school places, or who arrive in Spain after the school year has begun, among others, have fewer opportunities to choose than those who live in environments with a greater supply or are of Spanish origin.

individuals rather than contexts to reduce inequalities, we must demand that the process be reversed (Sánchez & Prieto, 2020). Defending compulsory schooling is a responsibility and a commitment to hope in a disillusioned society. Any counter-reform proposal must reintroduce into the education system what has been stripped away, adapting to current contexts, because outside of it there is only precariousness, marginalisation and the loss of dignity and opportunities for emancipation. No educational proposal can accept that part of the population, especially the most vulnerable, is condemned to be ungovernable, especially for itself.

Among the limitations of this work is the speed with which these discourses emerge and become established as arguments for different groups. The rise of counter-reformist organisations is recent, making it necessary to investigate their evolution and the new focus of their criticism. This also constitutes a field for future study, which will allow for a deeper exploration of issues outlined here, such as the positions of families in the debate on compulsory schooling, or in areas that have yet to be explored, such as the voices of students who graduated under the innovative reform, whose trajectories will allow us to discern how much of the current mistrust was simply fear of the future and how much was a prelude to what was to come.

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