

Two Centuries of Educational Innovation in Spain. Alternative Pedagogies: Are They Neo or Retro?

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Abstract

During the last 200 years, the school and the educational system in Spain have experienced an explosion of ideas, approaches, trends, models and pedagogical currents which proclaim themselves as alternative or innovative. In this article, we are going to compare the alternative models and practices with the traditional educational model. We are going to start with a conceptualization of traditional pedagogy and the alternative models which have been presented in Spain in recent years. The conclusions of the study are going to show the relevance of the alternative educational practices; a limited relevance, which is more retro than neo; a recovery of the pedagogical memory and an updating more than an innovation.

Key words: *School, Tradition, Innovation, Alternative, Spain*

Introduction

We can establish the year 1812 as the origin of the political-social germ which triggered the development of the educational system in Spain. The fundamental principles of institutionalized education in Spain in the nineteenth century were homogeneity, enforceability, universalization of primary education, uniformity of teaching, administrative control by inspection. Thus, directive instructional methods were designed, centred on teacher's authority and student's passivity. They

also have the idea of homogenizing and complying with the criteria previously indicated.

This is what has usually been called traditional pedagogy, against which many non-conformists took a stand, especially since the New School movement and the emergence of many of the pedagogical models which we now call alternative.

In this article, we are going to summarize the features of traditional pedagogy (to understand its rejection) and the alternatives which are offered in Spain. We are going to conclude with an analysis of these alternative pedagogies. In addition, we are going to apply the cultural analysis offered by Christopher Dawson (2012) to understand that the geographical, political and social environment of Spain are determining factors in the educational, social, cultural and personal activities of the subjects, who generate active cooperative movements of social and cultural construction (Herce, 2013). The main conclusion of the study is going to be developed in the last pages, where we will consider the relevance of alternative educational practices; a limited relevance, which is more retro than neo, a return to the past rather than an innovation; a different relevance, but not a new one; a relevance based on the construction of a collectivity, which generates a cultural and educational communication in which the actors are involved. As a result, we can understand the educational practice as an intelligible entity for all the members of that community, and the relations with the human essence, the change, the progress and the learning in the social and educational context (Zbróg, 2016).

Traditional pedagogy

Traditional pedagogy is understood as a teaching-learning process based on a directive, hierarchical, authoritarian and vertical instructional model, where the teacher, who is considered the maximum authority, bases his or her teaching process on universal and immobile learning, in which the memorization of contents prevails. Another defining feature is learning centred on the group, and not on the individual characteristics of the subject.

In general, the common features (and vices) of traditional education can be summarized in: passivity in the work of the student, who is directed and organized at all times; intellectualism focused on the content to be transmitted and memorized; magistrocentrism and directive teaching; superficiality in teaching, where encyclopaedia and verbalism prevail, without reflection or relation.

In the traditional school, the teacher controls, directs and regulates everything, monopolizes the word and the action, centralizes the power, the authority and the

decisions, is an authoritarian institution which limits children's creativity. In fact, the main (and most criticized) characteristic of the traditional school is that in the pedagogical models which are developed teachers talk and talk, and students remain seated, silent, inactive and passive; they are mere spectators who pass through an assembly line, a real learning for service in the factory.

Taking into account what we have seen so far, it is evident that the traditional school model is based on total obedience to an absolute rationalism defended by Modernity, which understands society as something homogeneous. Therefore, the school must reproduce this model, in a sort of endogamic entity which transmits the formalized contents, the great meta-narratives and narratives approved and recognized as truths. In this setting, the teacher's authority is indisputable with an encyclopedic, vertical and passive teaching model (Martín-Sánchez & Flores-Rodríguez, 2018). It is a simplistic conception of Pedagogy and school, which assumes the methodology of Modernity.

Thus, over the last 200 years, the school and educational system in Spain have experienced a sort of explosion of ideas, approaches, trends, models and pedagogical currents. Moreover, they proclaim themselves as alternative models which try to improve Spanish education. These alternative movements are not exclusive in Spain, but spread throughout the world, in response to the needs of parents and members of the educational community to respond to dissatisfaction with the official school, the effort to provide a better educational and discontent with official pedagogical methods (Rochovská et al., 2020).

Alternative pedagogies

The educational disenchantment, which is related to the postmodern philosophy and the universal traditional school that we have mentioned above, was established in Spain during the last years of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. It is based on the philosophical traditions of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lyotard, Vattimo and others, on the epistemic insurgency and the school resistance movements, led by Ivan Illich or Everett Reimer, where we find a detachment and an opposition to school and pedagogy (Martín-Sánchez, 2014).

With the arrival of the New School in Spain, the scientific concept and knowledge about children and their educational treatment made an important advance (Braster, 2018): the change to the paidocentric paradigm and the activity, especially the activity and freedom based on children's interests were the great innovations. As in the rest of Europe, in Spain Decroly and Montessori were received with

special interest, although on some occasions they generated confrontations and conflicting positions (Van Gorp, 2020), especially in the inter-war period (Van Gorp et. al, 2017).

The new pedagogies which have emerged as alternative models to the traditional school are sometimes very complicated to define, conceptualize and label, in many cases due to their own contradictions. In general, we can define all of them as different or located at the margin of the official model, and they include practices, theories, trends, models, which are very similar. Moreover, we can find a lot of student's active and dynamic experience, self-learning, the full development in tune with nature and/or spirit, home schooling, libertarian, personalist, paidocentric, non-directive, participatory... and a long etcetera. All these aspects sometimes converge, but in others cases are totally divergent.

In the case of Spain, we are witnessing an authentic boom in alternative pedagogies, which sometimes are called active, and on other occasions they describe themselves as innovative. All of them claim to be different and contrary to the official model of education. We find the boom in the 1970s when, after the death of the dictator Franco and the beginning of the Democratic Transition, Spain experienced an authentic social and cultural revolution which also influenced the educational movements. Thus, there is a flourish of models of alternative pedagogies (which are named in that way in opposition to the traditional model), active pedagogies (because they prompt student participation) and innovative pedagogies (although they develop models which are more than a hundred years old). All these models want to represent a change and transformation of teaching practices. Although the phenomenon is not exclusive to Spain, it was and still is particularly successful, due to the economic crisis and the training-work model, the focus on the educational system as incapable of finding solutions, the loss of the value of education as a social motor, and the crisis of general values in which the Spanish population is immersed (García, 2017). If we add the high figures of school failure (Spanish Ministry of Education, 2020), the rate of premature abandonment of the school system -17.3% in 2019, the highest in the European Union and almost double the average- (Spanish Ministry of Education, 2020), and the disastrous results in recent years' PISA reports (OECD, 2019), we have the perfect cocktail for educational disenchantment, the loss of confidence in the official school and the search for alternatives.

Only in the last few years, there have been more than 570 models, schools and institutions which call themselves alternative, active or innovative in Spain. They can be grouped in Free Schools/Viva, Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio-Emilia, Amara-Berri, Democratic Education, School-Forest, Community-Learning, Mul-

tiple Intelligences, Emotional Education, Parenting Groups... and a long etcetera (Ludus, 2020).

From the pedagogical point of view, and *using Pedagogy*, as a scientific construction on Education, with an autonomous and substantive pedagogical mentality, we can identify the main alternative (or emerging, or self-styled innovative) pedagogical models more common in Spain (Carbonell, 2015): *Non-institutional pedagogies*, focused on education outside the school and in the field of non-formal education; *Critical Pedagogies*; *Free Non-Directive Pedagogies*, designed as alternatives to ordinary schooling and based on Neill's thinking and the Summerhill experience; *Inclusion Pedagogies* and cooperation, such as the Folch i Torres School in Catalonia; *Slow, Serene and Sustainable Pedagogy*; *Integrated Knowledge Pedagogies*; and *Pedagogies of the diverse intelligences*.

If we analyse one by one these neo-educational approaches, we observe that they are much more similar to each other than they first claim. In addition, they have little scientific foundation which in some cases verges on mere pedagogical induction without scientific evidence of their claim to usefulness. Even recognizing the value of many of them, the common denominator is to proclaim themselves as an alternative to a model they consider outdated and useless. If the pedagogical model is justified only in the confrontation with another pedagogical model, in this case *Traditional vs. Alternative*, they make the mistake of thinking that Pedagogy is Manichean, that Pedagogy can only be done from one end; a question which feeds the anti-pedagogical forums. Good pedagogy does not deserve to be labelled as traditional or alternative: it is good pedagogy without anything else (Gil, 2018).

Are they truly innovative?

We observe a constant in all the various manifestations and educational practices which we have listed: the use of the word educational innovation. Furthermore, many of them have already been established and consolidated in Spain.

In these practices and schools which call themselves alternative and innovative, there are rather pedagogical trends that claim to be innovative, but in fact they are not. Innovative is confused with *rare*; innovative with *alternative*, which is not the same.

Educational innovation is the pedagogically elaborated process, from an autonomous and substantively scientific pedagogical mentality, which seeks to generate improvement processes, intervention and application strategies which provoke positive changes in current educational practices. It is not an end, it is a process. It

is about provoking a change in pedagogical intervention, an educational and social transformation. Searching and finding new solutions to old (and new) problems. In this sense, it is necessary to understand that to innovate we must appeal to intention, in a sort of pedagogical trinomial: theory, practice and intention. Innovation is not about applying pedagogical models from past centuries and making them look as if they were new.

What has been observed in many of the existing alternative schools in Spain, responds to the criticism which has just been presented: the schools say that they are innovative, but they present methodologies typical of the New School (early 20th century), of Fröbel (19th century), of gamification (Nebrija already said it in *De liberis educandis libellus* 500 years ago, even Quintilian), of attention to the integral formation of the individual (Luis Vives proposed it in the 16th century, and the whole movement of Humanistic Education paid attention to these principles), personalized attention (it was already proposed by others in the middle of the 20th century such as Mounier or Milani who proposed the school of experience -like Dewey-, something which is repeated and presented systematically as innovative), and many others. Not to mention the repeated use of new technologies, understood not as techniques to implement and improve the teaching-learning process, but as the use and abuse of technological hardware and software devices without reflection or justification. Innovation is not only applying new technologies, but innovating requires focusing on new learning techniques supported by scientific research on Education and Pedagogy.

In conclusion, current research on new pedagogies in Spain shows the worrying tendency among teachers to present practices as innovative, revolutionary or alternative, which in fact develop existing models and proposals. They may be alternatives to the traditional school, but they are not innovative. What has been seen in the majority of alternative schools in Spain shows that they are neither as innovative nor as different from each other as they claim to be.

Despite the good will and interest, the so-called alternative and innovative pedagogies in Spain are more *retro* than *neo* models; they are a disinterment, a recovery of the pedagogical memory and an updating more than innovation. They are *retro* because the pedagogical approaches which they defend (education in nature, coeducation, the elimination of textbooks, the ideological struggle against the hegemonic state education and the educational self-management) were already implemented by the Free Institution of Education in the 19th century, the New School and the Unique School (an authentic alternative educational revolution to the official pedagogy) by Lorenzo Luzuriaga, the recognized Spanish pedagogue of the beginning of the 20th century; the Modern School which Ferrer i Guardia

opened in Barcelona in 1901 (educational self-management and libertarian education); the School of the Sea by Pere Vergés in Catalonia (Brasó, 2017); the Movements of Pedagogical Renewal (Groves, 2012), which emerged in the 1960s and in which Rosa Sensat and the *Escolas d'Éstiu* in Catalonia stand out, and the Freinet Movement, which spread throughout Spain from 1970 with the arrival of democracy (Groves, 2014); they are mentioned today as innovative pedagogical proposals. Although they were and are very interesting, they are based on already experienced models.

Conclusions: Change and Uncertainty. The Spanish School at the Crossroads

The Spanish school is in crisis, even though it has always been. The classrooms of our days are very different from those known by previous generations. It is important to understand that the crisis in education does not attack and accelerate the disappearance of tradition and culture, it is precisely a reflection of this disappearance (Snir, 2018). The generational leap is now more evident than ever, promoted by changing values and attitudes at a dizzying rate. The school is a transmitter of values anchored in scales that no longer have a place in today's society. However, the Spanish educational system and the school as an institution have remained unchanged for 200 years, despite the great crises of humanity, even in the current times of pandemic (Cáceres-Muñoz, et. al., 2020).

Yes, school and education in Spain are in crisis, but what school? Which pedagogical model? what kind of innovation do we need? Spanish education must abandon traditional pedagogical practices, as we have described them in this article, and adopt democratic models in which, from a critical perspective, they foster among students the ability to face challenges and seek novelty, training students to be autonomous and capable of facing problems on their own. Recent research shows the need for a change in the educational paradigm, where education is conceived as a place of lifelong learning, and not a rigid school that conceives educational success as performance of exams (Rochovská et al., 2020).

It is a matter of social and pedagogical justice to recognize the good aspects which these alternative pedagogical models have, but from a critical and scientific position, abandoning all hagiographic and mythical pretensions. They are not innovative approaches, because their pedagogical principles were born more than a hundred years ago, but they are alternatives to the traditional model, so it would be unfair to call them simply educational fashions, since it would ignore their origin

and trajectory. It is not possible to certify the educational success of these models compared to the traditional model, since there is no solid evidence to prove it, but neither the contrary; what we can say is that this type of alternative pedagogies is not for everyone, since it requires a different conception of the school, as well as a very large process of family involvement. Perhaps, this type of school does encourage student participation and self-education processes, being in many cases inclusive and lived, causing a quality education, real equal opportunities and not just formal, enhancing social justice (García-Gómez, 2018).

The great paradox of schooling in Spain, although it is not exclusive to Spain, is to find new pedagogies which respond to and solve old problems, but that do so from research and scientific evidence, not exclusively from good will. More research, more data, more analysis and evidence are needed to show that the models which are presented as alternative and innovative are really so. More research is needed, from the plurality of approaches, with a new broad epistemology, which understands that education and knowledge are not homogeneous, but influenced by culture and context, because homogenization does not help to observe or explain what is happening (Clemens, 2020). For an authentic dialogical education, all forms of knowledge must be placed in dialogue at the same level, accepting that no form of knowledge has more legitimacy than another because of the position of power of the one who wields it, but because of the validity of that construction and its capacity to exercise as a liberating education (Kohan, 2019).

There is no point in talking about new methodologies if the traditional chalkboard is replaced by a digital one, and the pedagogical method remains directive and authoritarian. What is more, it is then that, before choosing a model, we must assume an educational teleology which overcomes the contradiction of education in the West, that is, that resolves the dichotomy between what education *aims to be*, and what *is actually* (Martín-Sánchez & Flores-Rodríguez, 2018). Precisely, in the case of Spain, the political alternation and conflict in the educational field has generated the creation and implementation of five educational laws in the last 40 years that have only generated controversy and conflict. There is a need for an educational pact in which the entire community feels involved and identified. It is not a question of looking for a new navigation route, but of applying the old ideas which are still current because Freinet, Freire, Montessori and many others are *retro models*. However, what makes them current and alternative is their ability to present a relationship between theory and practice. Therefore, that is different from the traditional model of the nineteenth-century school which still prevails in Spain.

Spanish education is at a crossroads, and in the face of the terrible data on failure and abandonment already mentioned, the dissatisfaction and teachers' burnout syndrome, estimated at 60% of primary and secondary school teachers in Spain (Teacher's Defender, 2019). This indicates that educational disenchantment is present and that it is necessary to do things differently. There are alternative pedagogies which work, and they must be accepted, wherever they come from. Alternative pedagogies will always be that, despite the passing years, alternatives to the traditional official model in order to overcome the crossroads, broaden perspectives, and ultimately improve educational practice.

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