

# Devolution and Involution: De-federalization Politics through Educational Policies in Spain (1996–2004)

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**ABSTRACT** Spanish autonomous communities have extensive powers in education, gradually extended since the 1980s. These have been used to engage in region and nation-building at the level of the autonomous communities. There is also a division between the main state-wide parties over secularism and the degree of inequality in the education system. Under the government of the Popular Party (1996–2004) there was an effort to recentralize the educational system, to emphasize conservative values and Spanish national identity.

**KEY WORDS:** Spanish education policy, Popular Party, nation-building, autonomy, centralization

## **Policies and Politics**

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 offered a paradoxical solution to a conflict concerning the territorial organization of the state, which since the end of the nineteenth century had caused nationalist parties in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia to clash with Spain's national parties. The framers of the Constitution effectively deconstitutionalized the matter by setting up an open and undefined formula, subsequently called the State of the Autonomous Communities (*Estado de las Autonomías*). This allowed variable rates of access to political autonomy for the various regions and nationalities, along with diversity in their respective competences, and a growing *federalization* of the system both quantitatively (in the development of autonomous competences) and qualitatively (by reinforcing autonomous legislation and the constitutional status of the Statutes of Autonomy).

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Initially considered the system's great virtue, this open and indeterminate nature eventually revealed itself to be a double-edged sword. Just as it allowed the system to federalize, it subsequently facilitated a process of de-federalization, or recentralization (Máiz and Beramendi, 2004). The indeterminate nature of the model allowed for extraordinary advances in regional self-government during the 1980s and early 1990s, though there was some tension and conflict between central government and the autonomous communities with strong nationalist parties. But this open and undefined quality of the system was later used by the two Popular Party (PP) governments (1996–2004) to recentralize power and curtail policy autonomy. There was a clear involution in the decentralization process once the PP began a second term in government, in 2000, this time ruling with an absolute majority. This involved the recuperation of much of the Catholic and traditional Spanish nationalist legacy, along with centralist encroachment in matters that had been transferred to, and developed by, the autonomous communities.

This analysis will focus on educational policy, due both to its relevance in the dimension of national political identity and to its centrality in the realm of public policy as an exclusive competence of the autonomous communities. From a national perspective, the decentralization of the educational system at every level permitted cultural and pedagogical progress in adapting Spain to the 1978 constitutional design of a plural state, composed of nationalities and regions with diverse cultures, myths, symbols, narratives, traditions, historical experiences, geographical contexts, and territorial and economic diversity. The reinforcement of identities through educational policies was of particular relevance in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia. For the first time, these historical nationalities had a chance to provide a new generation of students with an education in their own language, history, geography and particular socio-economic features. Along with the provision of public health services, education constituted the second basic and exclusive competence at the core of the political, administrative and financial decentralization process of the autonomous communities.

Two key dimensions of educational policies will be examined here: nation and identity building; and the implementation of education policies, which according to the Constitution and the Autonomy Statutes falls exclusively within the sphere of the autonomous communities.

### **Regional Policies and the Reinforcement of Sub-National Identities**

We assume a theoretical framework in which a nation is not something given or natural, but instead is a result of a process of social and political construction (Máiz, 1997, 2003; Losada, 2000; Máiz and Losada, 1999). This process implies:

- the consolidation and institutionalization of a differential 'ethnicity' (language, myths, symbols, culture, history, institutions);
- the mobilization of resources and its impact upon specific social and economic pre-conditions and the construction of a common matrix of interests as sub-national or regional interests;
- the creation of a new structure of political opportunity more favourable for some sort of nationalist project. This includes new local arenas of political competition through

- regional elections and leadership, autonomous parliaments and governments, and regional or nationalist political parties defending exclusively community interests;
- the creation of nationalist interpretative frames as a narrative of problems, antagonisms, alternatives and protagonists, and their institutionalization through concrete policies in fields like education, communication, culture and language.

Our underlying hypothesis is that the creation and rapid development of the autonomous communities and their institutional functions is one of the key variables reinforcing the social preconditions for nationalism in Galicia, Catalonia and the Basque Country. This variable also helps to create a political opportunity structure that favours the development of nationalism. The decentralization and devolution of education policies to the regions played a key role in the process of building a 'Galician nation', a 'Basque nation' and a 'Catalan nation'. Education policies have also played an important role in the process of the political, organizational and discursive production of a new vision of the Spanish state as a pluri-national state. This has been realized through several paths:

- the consolidation and institutionalization of an ethnic base in language, culture, history and institutions. This base is now being elaborated, manipulated and re-defined, through institutional action by the regional administrations in their education policies: language normalization, history textbooks, symbolic days, creation and development of regionally-coloured services and media.
- the mobilization of resources and their impact on the social and economic preconditions for mobilization: greater social mobility and supra-local communication, more important economic, legal and technical resources, formation of a common matrix of interests.
- the creation of a new political opportunity structure by better access to governing institutions, the creation of new institutional settings, and greater political participation.
- the creation of nationalist interpretative frames and their institutionalization through particular policies in education, health, culture and communications.

The policies carried out by regional governments in Galicia, Catalonia or the Basque Country, and their relative success, contributed decisively to the institutional consolidation of the autonomous communities. This, in turn, brought about certain relevant effects on what we might label the political, institutional and identity production of a nation. This process of construction may be understood as combining the following elements:

1. *Political*: the idea of nation and national identity as the determinant factors in the legitimacy and representativeness of the political actors, parties; expansion of the political competition sphere centred around the new national space; an increase in the stability of the electoral alignments; opening access for the nationalist forces to the governmental institutions; incorporation of these elites into the process of institution building.
2. *Institutional*: the growth of the nationalist or regionalist groups' organizational and material resources; the expansion of the institutional spaces to which nationalist

forces can have access; and the capacity of these institutions to compete for allocation of resources in the national and supranational arenas.

3. *Identity*: discursive and mythic/symbolic processes perceiving a collective national identity with its own interests and objectives based on national solidarity, as opposed to class or other forms; legitimacy of national public policies and cultural homogenization; development of a centre/periphery discourse; and competition with other nationalities for resources during a process of state construction.

Education policies implemented by the regions have helped to articulate a solid collective identity and improve the organization of collective interests. This has contributed to the political, institutional and identity production of the nation through a greater use and institutionalization of distinctive languages, educational and cultural changes that introduce nationalist discursive elements, institutionalization of nationalist values and collective identity features in history, language, culture and folklore. In many areas of public sector action, such as health, education, fishing and agriculture, devolved policies become the normative framework that provides the rules of the game for the various actors, including firms, political parties, pressure groups and unions, thus becoming the main frame of reference. This in turn has contributed to the consolidation of a matrix of coherent regional interests in different economic sectors, such as agriculture, fisheries, industry and infrastructures, which previously lacked a territorial articulation.

### The Content of Spanish Educational Policies before 1996

Spain's first educational policy under democracy was introduced with the Moncloa Agreements and article 27 of the 1978 Constitution. During this first period, the

**Table 1.** The impact of Autonomous Educational policy on Sub-national identities

Arena	Output	Outcome	Nation production
Education policy	Alternative academic programmes New language regulation Powerful regional bureaucracies	Increasing use of national languages Nationalist revision of history, culture, traditions New universities and research units	Institutional Administrative and geographic identification of a common regional service Political Integration of professional elite Autonomy of the regional educational systems Identity Increasing use of a common language Increasing cultural identification Institutionalization of political and cultural nationalist myths and symbols

left-wing parties made concessions in matters referring to equality, and the right-wing parties compromised in matters related to freedom of education. A substantial private sector was to be allowed as a supplier of educational alternatives.

The major achievement during this phase was the recognition of education as a right, based on democratic principles, provided by the public authorities, and with primary education being compulsory and free. Yet, this agreement did not have the effect of bringing the agents or their positions any closer, but instead tended to polarize them. The role of the political parties as channels for collective action was reinforced, leading to a progressive demobilization of collective agents. In addition, the governing centre-right UCD party emphasized freedom of education, which in turn amplified the conflicts with teachers and led to increased subsidization of private education. During this period, there was also a heavy influence from the Francoist heritage, maintained by a powerful private religious sector and characterized by a strong centralizing tendency. Although diminishing, this remained present during the process of designing educational policies.

The next two periods provided a counterweight to this first stage, demonstrating much more progressive preferences and a growing presence of peripheral nationalist demands. Spain's great educational transformation began in 1982 with the Socialist Party's first government. This phase presented improvements in both the extension and organization of public education, along with an effort to modernize the system in order to adapt it to European standards. The PSOE party devised the Organic Law for the Right to Education (LODE, 8/1985), which was opposed by a significant portion of the private educational sector as it reduced some of their privileges. In attempting to find a balance between equality and social equity, the Socialist Party consolidated a dual educational system of public and subsidized private schools, while also facing issues relating to student admission policies and over-financing in the private sector, which are problems that have still to be resolved. During this phase, a series of new actors appeared on the scene, exacerbating the tensions evident during the design of the education system. These new actors, the peripheral nationalist parties, exerted strong pressures to obtain greater competences in all areas.

The regional autonomy system led to a decentralization of the management of educational services in an attempt to reduce the gap between the administrators and users of these services. But this process did not reach the local level, so it is doubtful whether the aim of decentralization was actually realized. Devolution to the autonomous communities favoured the development of diverse educational policies in the various regional communities, which also led to a decentralization of the networks of educational actors.

The last stage began in 1985, as the LODE became law, and culminated in October of 1990, when a new law LOGSE came into effect. Its main public objective was to transform the curriculum and increase the quality of education. In prior stages the emphasis had been on ensuring equality, but now the focus was on the excellence and quality of educational institutions. Yet, this phase still presented several contradictions, such as the poor reputation of vocational training and the lack of resources. At this stage, there was a push for a normative system of evaluation in a context dominated by deregulation. One of the most significant characteristics of the changes in educational policy was the creation of quasi-markets, creating a system that prioritized

**Table 2.** Evolution of Educational Policy Regulation in Spain

	1970–77 Decline and end of Francoism	1978–82 Democracy and constitution	1982–85 First left-wing government	1985–96 Dominance by the PSOE
Objectives	Construction of a meritocratic system	Democratization of access to education	Extension and modernization of public education in accord with European standards	Change in curricula Seeking excellence in education Decentralization of the system
Problems	Overly ambitious project Scarcity of resources	Conflicts with education personnel Economic restrictions	Industrial bourgeoisie becomes distant Co-existence of two different systems: public and private	Poor reputation of Professional Formation Scarcity of resources Democratic Deficit Conflicts in the transference of competences
Principal actors	Francoist elites Private religious sector	Private religious sector represented by the right Neighbourhood associations represented by the left	Private religious sector and elitist schools Nationalist political parties	Teachers and students Regional governments Appearance of new social movements

efficacy and efficiency over equality. The inherited deregulation process permitted the flexible management and financing of education, but also allowed the possibility of preference, thus maintaining the dual educational system. This dual system took advantage of private resources, but also sustained a clear socio-economic separation between students from the public and private sectors.

The Spanish educational system has always operated with a level of resources below the average of neighbouring countries. During the 1980s, the increasing demand for a substantive improvement in quality, and the impulse and development of the educational devolution process, intensified the dilemmas concerning how to assign scarce resources for modernization, and led to doubts concerning the various public administrations' capacity to commit resources and promote changes. In order to solve the historical shortages of resources, greater academic and financial autonomy were given to the schools, and personalized learning programmes were encouraged, while school curricula were modified. This approach ran into strong resistance from several sources: an obsolete pedagogical culture; deficiencies in teacher training; a lack of infrastructure and materials; and a shortage of financial resources.

However, the decentralization process has not led to an overall convergence of investment across the autonomous communities. As can be seen in Table 4, the autonomous communities that in the 1980s were below average in educational expenditures per capita were Andalusia, the Balearic Islands, Catalonia, Madrid and Valencia; while the ones most above average were Aragon, Asturias, Castile-Leon and La Rioja. The spending tendencies in the 1990s indicate that essentially the same autonomous communities are still below average, but the ones with the highest spending are now the Canary Islands, Navarre and the Basque Country. These three autonomous communities have competences in education and are clearly exempt from the general tendency to freezing budgets (in the Balearic Islands, Catalonia, Galicia and Madrid), or cutting them (in Andalusia, Valencia and the majority of the regions that remain within the national education system).

**Table 3.** Public expenditures in education (PEE), as a percentage of total public expenditures (TPE) and total Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 1994

	PEE (primary and secondary) over TPE	PEE (primary and secondary) over GDP
Spain	6.3	3.37
United States	9.4	3.50
Japan	8.4	2.90
Korea	13.7	2.90
France	7.7	4.17
Germany	6.1	3.01
Italy	6.2	3.36
Holland	5.9	3.30
Sweden	7.3	5.06
Great Britain	8.7	3.86
EU Average	7.2	3.86
OECD Average	8.7	3.37

*Source:* Adelantado, Losada et al. (2002).

Decentralization of the Spanish educational system is evident in the legislative capacity of the regions with competences in this area, and in the new distribution of financial resources. One of the most evident consequences is the appearance of multiple new networks of actors within the decentralized territories. This has put pressure on the remaining state powers intended to guarantee the homogeneity and equity of the educational system. This situation, which has been labelled by Bonal (1998) as *regulated decentralization*, has generated a series of intense conflicts between the state and the autonomous communities concerning competences. These have been settled through a culture of negotiation that became a yearly game of exchanges, with conflicts resolved in a competitive but cooperative fashion. The ERA group's report correctly concludes that the paradox of two expressions, *centralized deregulation* and *regulated decentralization*, illustrates the tension that seems to characterize the Spanish educational system. Tensions exist between homogeneity and differentiation, between centralization and decentralization, and between efficiency and equity. The key element of the Spanish educational system is its complexity; which is probably in the very nature of education (Subirats and Gallego, 2002: 224).

A good example of this complexity is the delicate balance between public and private networks. In Spain as a whole, 65 per cent of students attend public schools, while around 30 per cent go to subsidized schools, and less than 5 per cent are in private schools. There is significant regional variation. From the data in Table 5 we can see a clear contrast between a group with low numbers of students in private schools (Andalusia, Canary Islands and Galicia) and another group with much higher percentages (Catalonia, Navarre and the Basque Country).

**Table 4.** Public expenditures in education, per capita  
(ages 5–14) (Spain = 100)

	1980	1985	1990	1995
Andalusia	95	93	86	84
Aragon	115	113	108	109
Asturias	121	111	115	121
Balearic Islands	87	88	86	89
Canary Islands	106	118	126	127
Cantabria	106	99	95	104
Castile-Mancha	110	104	97	100
Castile-Leon	127	118	110	114
Catalonia	90	91	93	94
Extremadura	119	108	98	97
Galicia	108	108	114	111
La Rioja	128	112	104	107
Madrid	85	94	90	96
Murcia	105	102	95	96
Navarre	109	98	153	148
Basque Cntry	107	122	144	157
Valencian Com.	94	90	97	88
Ceuta & Melilla	105	91	77	70

Source: Adelantado, Losada et al. (2002).



**Table 5.** Percentage of students attending private schools by region

	1981–82	1985–86	1990–91	1994–95
Andalusia	27	26	23	23
Canary Islands	21	18	17	21
Catalonia	48	45	41	41
Valencian Comm.	35	32	31	30
Galicia	29	27	25	25
Navarra	46	41	35	41
Basque Country	47	43	50	51
Spain	37	34	31	31

Source: Adelantado, Losada et al. (2002).

These differences are indicators of specific historical traditions and tendencies. The weight of the private educational arena, the presence of independent pedagogical movements, and the connection of the educational sphere with peripheral nationalist demands are all factors that clearly explain the powerful private education networks in regions such as Catalonia and the Basque Country. However, these historical peculiarities have recently been reinforced by political choices. In this regard, the differences between regions have remained highly consistent over the last two decades.

**Educational Policies in Spain since 1996: Administrative Decentralization, Political Recentralization**

During the 1990s and particularly after the Popular Party’s rise to power, educational policies experienced a phase of deregulation in which the declared objective was to decrease central state intervention in the system by granting greater autonomy and financial diversification to the schools. In tandem with the process of deregulation, central government reinforced its inspection and evaluation mechanisms. The growth of a quasi-market in the educational sphere is a key feature in the most recent tendencies of the system, privileging efficiency and effectiveness over equity. The deregulation process facilitated flexibility in educational management and

**Table 6.** Expenditures on public schools as a percentage of total educational expenditures

	1980	1990
+80%		Canary Islands
71–80%	Andalusia	Andalusia
60 – 70%	Galicia	Valencian Community
	Canary Islands	
– 60%	Catalonia	Catalonia
	Valencian Community	Navarre
	Navarre	Basque Country
	Basque Country	

Source: Uriel (1999: 243)

financing, but also increased the possibility of opting and/or selecting between the two educational networks. This duality of networks makes use of private educational resources and at the same time distributes students on the basis of their socio-economic situation, with all its costs and benefits.

In the last 15 years the educational system has extended educational benefits to the entire country, and the aggregate results now place Spain on a par with the European average. The percentage of students finishing secondary education has remained relatively stable at about 65–70 per cent, while the percentage that pass the university entrance exams has increased continuously, from 65 per cent to 80 per cent. Table 7 shows data illustrating the academic success of each region. It is clear that academic performance does not vary much from region to region, but it does vary significantly between public (55–65 per cent pass) and private schools (85–90 per cent pass). These differences hold true in all the regions.

The Popular Party's lack of a majority during its first term required it to seek the support of moderate Catalan nationalists, leading to an educational policy that was clearly oriented to the status quo and settled as a mid-range priority on the Popular Party's governmental agenda. The partial reforms during this phase were mainly intended to accelerate changes already begun during the prior socialist governments in the management and financing models, strengthening the tendency towards a private educational network, introducing competitive and quasi-market models, and empowering alternative means of financing schools.

The Popular Party's absolute majority in the elections of 2000 produced from the very beginning a radical change in educational policy. Education became one of the priorities of the new government's agenda, both implicitly in the decision-making processes and explicitly in the Aznar government's speeches and communication strategy. Prime Minister Aznar declared, publicly and often, that one of his priorities was to change the national educational policy, as a key element of his political project and of the legacy that his government would leave behind. The new policy centred less on education's means and instruments and more on its contents. This initiative did not try significantly to modify the management model, the structure of expenditures

**Table 7.** Percentage of students passing the final year of school by region

	1985–6	1994–95	Public	Private
	Total	Total		
Spain	64.6	65.9	60.0	83.4
Andalusia	64.6	64.7	61.0	82.8
Canary Islands	39.6	62.4	59.3	92.9
Catalonia	61.2	61.5	53.7	78.7
Valencian Com	65.4	62.8	56.4	88.0
Galicia	68.8	63.9	59.1	85.6
Navarre	67.7	75.1	68.6	88.3
Basque Country	68.6	71.1	64.2	83.9

*Source:* Estadística de la Enseñanza en España, Madrid, Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia.

or priorities in that field, or the balance between private and public education systems. The changes were rather intended to help central government regain control of political decision-making in education, to modify the content of the academic programmes and the structure of the curricula, and to reintroduce a culture of individual effort in contrast to a prior model that was thought undemanding for the students and their capacity to learn (based more on an ideological judgement than on a professional one). This was essentially a counter-reform that sought to disassemble and reverse the two most profound changes in educational policies during the democratic period: (1) reversing the process of devolution and decentralization of everything related to educational policy decision-making; and (2) reversing the modernization of subject matters, which had been based on cooperation and civic and progressive values, establishing instead a more individualistic and competitive model, while recovering the influence lost to the regions in regard to control and production of the educational agenda.

The educational counter-reform was implemented through changes in educational policies, particularly through new legislation (LOCE), and was facilitated by the structural institutional deficit of the Spanish system of devolution. It was not simply a matter of turning the direction of public policies away from the tendency of the socialist governments. Although this was a decisive factor, it is important to see both dimensions of the problem: policy and institutions. One structural problem in the institutional design of the State of the Autonomies, derived from the open nature of the state model established in the 1978 Constitution and which had so many advantages for unblocking the process of decentralization of the state, was a failure to ensure that the autonomous communities had guaranteed legislative competences vis-à-vis the legislative power of the state. The broadest aspect of the problem derives from the mechanism that superimposes the regional legal order on the state framework, so that regional laws cannot repeal state laws in spite of the constitutional principle of political autonomy. Even though the range of the competences of the autonomous communities in Spain is considerable, the latent legislative competence of the state remains full and universal. Even

**Table 8.** Key Elements of the popular counter-reform

	First PP legislature (1996–2000)	Second PP legislature (2000–2004)
Expenditure over GDP	Increasing	Frozen
Management model	Decentralized	Decentralized
Public/private schools’ relationship	Complementary	Complementary
Type of relationship with regions	Cooperation through negotiation	Conflict through competences
Control of curricula	Negotiated sharing	Exclusive control of central government
Regional use of peripheral languages	Peaceful	Conflictual
Design of and decisions concerning changes in the system	Negotiated	Imposed by the central government

in areas where the Constitution gives *exclusive* competence to the autonomous communities, state law remains *valid*, though supplementary to regional law, so that the ratification of a regional law only acts to limit the actual territorial *application* of state law. That is, instead of establishing criteria of *validity* that favour either the state or the regional law depending on who is entitled to legislate in a certain matter, criteria that merely establish the *applicability* of the law – regional or central – are used. Either state or regional law is applied, depending on the area of competence to be regulated, but *both* are constitutionally valid. This has led to a notorious lack of protection, and even a deficiency in safeguarding regional legislative competences – the central axis of regional self-government – in the face of expansive state laws and public policies. This can be clearly seen in the case of the education policies of the PP Spanish government. In sum, the state can create parallel legislation of a subsidiary or supplementary variety, but this has allowed the state to carry out *recentralizing* policies which erode the areas of competence of the autonomous communities.

The problem of a structural weakening of the regional legislative competences – which remain at the mercy of governments in Madrid, whether decentralizing or centralizing – should be seen in conjunction with two other problems that are closely linked. First, there has been an extensive interpretation of the notion of *foundational* or *basic laws* through which the state is constitutionally permitted to set only the general principles upon which the autonomous communities may then legislate. On numerous occasions, basic laws have been used unilaterally to amplify the area of competence of the state by interpreting in an abusive manner the so-called general interest. Second, there has been an inappropriate expansion of the ‘organic law’ sphere to invade areas of competence of the autonomous communities in matters reserved to them, on the pretext of protecting such fundamental values and core principles of the system as ‘the equality of all Spaniards in exercising their rights’.

It is this latter instrument which was overwhelmingly used in education. Given that education is a right of all Spaniards, as recognized in article 27 of the Constitution, the regulation of the basic conditions of education is subject to an organic law according to article 81 (laws that require an absolute majority of the Congress of Representatives to approve or modify them in a final vote on the entire bill). Under the Socialist government, this left a broad margin for the autonomous communities in regulating and administering education at all levels. The Popular Party, however, used this organic law mechanism significantly to erode the exclusive or shared educational competence of the autonomous communities. The mechanism employed was a dual one: broadening the ‘essential aspects’ of education that are to be regulated by organic law; and use of the competence heading of article 149.1.1 of the Spanish Constitution, which allows the state to regulate the basic conditions that guarantee equality in the exercise of constitutional rights and fulfilment of duties. This problem had already arisen concerning other matters, and since the mid-1980s the Constitutional Court has ruled (STC 137/1986) that the *formal* element represented by organic laws should not prevail over the *material* criteria of the distribution of competences reserved to the autonomous communities. That is, according to the Constitutional Court, organic laws cannot be used to erode regional competences or to amplify improperly the state’s areas of competence.

In 2003, the Popular Party ratified the *Organic Law on Quality of Education*, which sought to recover values key to Spanish conservative nationalism, as manifested in their view of history, in their approach to the languages of Spain's nationalities, and in the statute for teaching Catholic religion. This significantly eroded the autonomous communities' areas of competence in educational matters, as recognized in the statutes of autonomy. Some significant aspects in this regard include:

*Peripheral languages:* teaching in Spanish has been reinforced, as a failing grade in Spanish language or maths means failing that year of school. This threatens teaching in vernacular languages and undermines the linguistic normalization process, as these languages are no longer basic curricular subjects and become optional. These effects were subsequently amplified in the decrees regulating the implementation of the law, which made it difficult to give the vernacular language equal time with Spanish.

*Religion:* religious teaching has been strengthened and the alternative subjects that were regulated by the regions have disappeared, while Catholic religion has gained the same status as the other subjects and counts in the final pass/fail evaluation for the year, and in the final grade that becomes part of the average with the university entrance exam.

*Common subjects:* the number of subjects that are common to all regions has increased, thus weakening the adaptation of education to the cultural, linguistic and social realities of each autonomous community. In addition, the law encroaches upon competences that the Statutes of Autonomy recognize as regional, such as titles, forms of baccalaureate education, and learning programmes in compulsory secondary education (ESO).

*Teacher training:* The law has encroached upon the regions' competence in autonomously developing teacher-training programs, both for initial and continuing training.

*Pre-school education:* regional competences have been hindered when pre-school education is considered as social assistance rather than fully educational.

*Repeating a year:* central government has encroached upon the competences of the regions in regulating the promotion of secondary school students, as it unilaterally sets the standards.

*Regulation of reading:* the competences of the autonomous communities have been invaded in the areas of pedagogical content and methods of promoting good reading habits and the capacity of students to express themselves publicly.

*Fourth itinerary:* regional competences have been invaded by the introduction of a class-biased 'hidden itinerary' for students with lower performance, by means of professional initiation programmes, implying that they are practically expelled from the educational system by state legislation.

## Conclusions

From 1996 to 2004, Popular Party governments carried out a recentralization of the State of the Autonomous Communities that was particularly visible in the realm of educational policies. Two parallel processes mutually reinforced each other.

One occurred in the arena of political identities, where educational policies were part of a broader PP strategy to recover conservative Spanish neo-nationalism. This course of action involved a defence of the unity of Spain, the negation of its pluri-national character as recognized in the 1978 Constitution, opposition to reforming the Constitution or the autonomy statutes in order to correct the system's federal deficiencies (especially regarding the Senate and the mechanisms for participation in the European Union), a return to Catholicism as a central element of the authentic belonging to the Spanish nation, the party's use of national symbols like the flag, as well as various efforts to encourage cultural *Castilianization* and anti-Europeanism. Political control of education by the government in Madrid and the decreasing autonomy of the regional communities were central to this process. This particularly affected the historical nationalities of Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia, where policies in these areas had been especially significant in reinforcing sub-national identities and questioning any Castilian-centred vision of a unitary Spain.

A second recentralizing process took place in the public policy sphere. The Popular Party's counter-reform took advantage of the flexibility of the State of the Autonomous Communities and the poor safeguards established to maintain the autonomous communities' competences, thereby eroding regional competences through an expansive exercise of national state legislation. The need to reform the university system for the new European context, and to address the excessive number of school drop-outs, in conjunction with the deteriorating standards of the baccalaureate and other problems in the educational system, all turned into motives for the central government to homogenize and standardize the competences and educational models of the autonomous communities so as to improve their quality. This was particularly visible in the communities that had developed asymmetrical and differentiated educational systems due to their sub-national characteristics in areas such as language, history and culture. This involution built upon an ideological offensive in support of Spanish nationalism, a reinforcement of Catholic religion in the schools, and a legal reinterpretation of the State of the Autonomous Communities that implicitly tended to de-federalize the system. This improper use of organic and basic laws went beyond the constitutional intent of establishing principles and increasing the majorities needed to legislate on key questions (as stated by the Spanish Constitutional Court), going so far as to encroach upon key regulatory details in the autonomous communities' competences.

So, there was something much deeper involved in the divergence that took place from 1996 to 2004 between the left and the right, the Socialists and the Popular Party, the policies of Gonzalez (1982–96) and Aznar (1996–2004) in disputed matters such as the place of religion in education, the separation of students into different educational levels and itineraries, or the educational treatment of immigrants. The real clash revolved around the Spanish demos and the very different ways of defining and politically producing a collective Spanish identity. While the Popular Party sees

Spain as a unitary nation-state, for others, it is a plural nation; the Socialists consider Spain to be a nation of nations, and the nationalist governments of Catalonia and the Basque Country see Spain as a multinational state.

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