Dire Straits-Education Reforms

Ideology, Vested Interests and Evidence

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6. Spain

An Inside Story

In this chapter, we wish to provide a different perspective which we hope will complement what the data and the literature tell us. After much thought, we have decided to try to provide an insider's view of what we experienced when we accepted the task of designing and implementing an education reform in our own country. Our personal experiences will undoubtedly be narrower and we obviously run the risk of inadvertently including some biases, but we hope to shed some new light on the nature and magnitude of the political costs that education reforms face. As we shall see, many of the real obstacles in the process of reform remain hidden from the general public and even from academics who tend to gain access only to official documents, media articles and, in some cases, a limited number of interviews.

6.1. A Rough Start

We both joined the Spanish Government after the conservative party Partido Popular (PP) won the general election in November 2011. The severe impact of the financial crisis was by then highly visible. In fact, opinion polls show that PP's outright parliamentary majority was mainly rooted in widespread public dissatisfaction with how the previous (socialist) government had managed the financial crisis. However, as the new government took office it became apparent that the magnitude of the fiscal crisis was much greater than anticipated. Thus, the main focus was on the economy and fiscal issues. The fundamental aim was to avert the risk of being 'rescued', i.e. of receiving critical financial aid from the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International

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Monetary Fund. This entailed accepting the imposition of severe cuts to pensions and other public expenses (Wert, 2020). Furthermore, during the first months of government the main concern was how to prevent economic collapse.

The urgency of addressing these immediate problems did not prevent the government from looking at the medium and long term. It was clear that the reason why the financial crisis had a much greater impact in Spain than in other European countries was that it suffered from deep structural problems that had to be addressed in order to overcome this shock, as well as any future ones. Thus, the government decided to implement an ambitious package of reforms in many sectors, such as the economy, labour and education. At the same time, budget cuts had to be implemented in order to reduce the deficit. We were all aware that it was a toxic combination. But we were also aware that there was no choice.

The unavoidable target of decreasing the deficit (which was at 10% of GDP in 2011) could only be achieved by individual regions. Most—over 85%—of the public funding allocated to education, health and social affairs is managed by regional governments. Thus, the first hurdle was to work out how to empower regions to make the necessary decisions.

A brief historical overview will suffice to explain the governance arrangements implemented after a long process of decentralisation. After the transition from the Franco dictatorship to democracy, which was rightly hailed as an example of peaceful transition in which all parties involved had agreed to put their differences aside to reach a consensus, a new constitution was drafted and approved by referendum in 1978.

It defined asymmetric governance arrangements, granting special treatment to regions with strong nationalistic movements (such as the Basque Country and Catalonia) which included the 'devolution' of decision-making power and favourable fiscal arrangements. It also involved the upfront transfer of the management of education, health and social affairs. This asymmetric treatment of regions was regarded as unfair and soon created political tensions, eventually leading to the transfer of education, health and social affairs to all seventeen regions, a process which lasted from 1980 until 1999.

Thus, the main reason for transferring decision-making power and funds to regions was a vain political attempt to appease the

centrifugal forces of nationalist movements. Since the main objective of decentralisation was not improving efficacy or outcomes, central government agreed not to implement accountability mechanisms and accepted the role of raising most of the funds through taxes before transferring them to regions. Such governance arrangements would prove inadequate because efficiency did not improve. In addition, they led to never-ending political tensions between central government and regions, with the latter demanding greater decision-making power and more funds. Attempts to appease nationalist movements failed since education proved to be a very powerful tool in creating national identities, so some of these regions (in particular Catalonia) in practice took over control of education.

In the context of this quasi-federal governance model, the first issue that central government needed to solve was how to allow regions more flexibility to reduce public spending. Even after the risk of a 'rescue' was averted, stringent measures to control the deficit had to be implemented under fiscal euro area rules. Since central government is responsible for basic law which defines the ranges for a number of dimensions with a big impact on investment levels (such as student-teacher ratios, hours of teaching, replacement of teachers on leave, and so on) it had to modify the limits.

All teams at different ministries spent the first months estimating the impact of different measures on levels of investment and whether they were likely to affect outcomes. At the Ministry of Education, we worked tirelessly to analyse all the different options, which proved to be a very depressing start. Just a few months after coming into power the government approved a royal decree which allowed regions to increase student-teacher ratios by 20%, and to increase the hours of teaching, as well as a whole package of measures to reduce spending. It was up to regions to decide what the right balance was for spending in education vs health and social services and, within each of these sectors, which measures from a broad spectrum of options to implement.

To cut a long story short, on the whole, regions decided to implement larger budget cuts in education than in health. Since student-teacher ratios were already low in Spain compared to other European and OECD countries, the small increases implemented led to student-teacher ratios that were still below the OECD average. Actually, after

the implementation of those increases in 2014, the student-teacher ratio in secondary education was 11:1 in Spain vs the OECD average of 13:1 (OECD 2016a). Thus, in educational metrics such as these, there was room for improvement in the efficiency of investments.

Opposition political parties and unions were quick to build a very strong narrative denouncing the 'budget cuts' and the supposed damage they inflicted on public education; this causal link was taken for granted despite the lack of evidence. Central government was blamed and strong opposition to these measures was mounted, as regions watched on in relief. The political costs were so great that the education reform that we later designed at the Ministry of Education was met with fierce resistance because, among all the confusion caused by the blame games, people had been led to believe that the reform (which was not approved until late 2013 and did not address any of these issues) was responsible for the budget cuts (implemented by regions in 2012). The power of this narrative proved lethal to the education reform before it was even born.

The fact that a conservative government started with 'budget cuts' had far more damaging consequences than we could foresee in those difficult months. The government was blamed for using the financial crisis as an excuse to dismantle the welfare state. In the midst of a terrible financial crisis which led to very high rates of unemployment (which peaked at 26% in the first quarter of 2013, the highest rate in history), this idea proved so powerful that some years later it led to the emergence of populist movements on the radical left for the first time in Spanish history (Wert, 2020). But that is a different story. Let us get back to education.

6.2. Laws, Laws, Laws .... Are They Any Good?

One of the most damaging mantras about the Spanish education system is that it has suffered from the instability generated by too many laws, implemented by the two main political parties (socialist and conservative) when in power, for no other reason than to pursue their ideological agendas. Contrary to widespread belief, the Spanish education system had not undergone many changes after the transition to democracy. Quite the opposite: it has followed one basic model, approved by a socialist government, which has generated very poor

outcomes. On the one hand, Spain has high rates of early school leaving (around 30%) which have led to high rates of NEETs and youth unemployment; these were exacerbated during the financial crisis, which created astronomic levels of youth unemployment (65% at the peak of the crisis). On the other hand, student outcomes are mediocre (below the OECD average) and have stagnated for over two decades (Gomendio, 2021). These deficiencies together have resulted in Spain having an adult population with one of the lowest levels of basic skills among European countries (OECD, 2019l).

Since the 1990s, when a major education reform (*Ley Orgánica General del Sistema Educativo* or LOGSE) was approved by a socialist government with a parliamentary majority, Spain had implemented a very rigid form of comprehensive system. Following the steps taken much earlier by social democrats in some European countries, and particularly Nordic countries, the 1990s education reforms adopted a comprehensive model. This law, which was complemented by other laws approved by socialist governments during the following years, developed quite a radical and unique version of comprehensive education on the assumption that it would lead to higher levels of equity and thus contribute to the creation of a more egalitarian society.

This logic was based on the often-cited link between comprehensive education and equity in Nordic countries. It is based on the assumption that comprehensive education models generate egalitarian societies, rather than the opposite, i.e. that comprehensive education models can only work in societies that have achieved certain levels of equity (such as Nordic countries). The architecture and rules of the game of a 'radical comprehensive' system remained in place until 2013, when we designed a partial reform of the education basic law approved by parliament (LOMCE, 2013). Thus, in twenty-three years there was plenty of time to evaluate the impact of this model. But this was never done. The system lacked any means to evaluate the impact of the policies implemented. Good-natured intentions based on an ill-defined concept of equity seemed enough.

The LOGSE extended compulsory education to the age of sixteen and increased the number of teachers by 35%, which led to a marked decrease in class size. This is a constant demand from unions which the left has appropriated as a flag mistakenly assumed to signal good

quality. This required a substantial increase in education investment, which continued to grow until 2009, when the financial crisis led to the first budget cuts for education.

The extension of compulsory education had the immediate consequence of delaying the start of upper-secondary education by two years. Since a fully comprehensive model was implemented for all years of compulsory education, the start of academic and vocational tracks was delayed by two years (to sixteen years of age). Previously, at the age of fourteen, students could follow either an academic track or a two-year first vocational track. The sudden disappearance of the option to choose a vocational track at the age of fourteen, and the prospect of remaining on the academic track for two additional years led to a steep increase in early school leaving (30% of students), which remained at high levels for decades. This negative impact has been documented by research:

> Results show [...] that elimination of FP1 [first level of vocational education] for the youth 14 to 16 which took place after the enforcement of LOGSE had a negative impact on the will to pursue education among males (Felgueroso *et al.*, 2013)

After 1990, a progressive decrease in VET enrolment took place: in the academic year 1999–2000, with the new system fully operational, less than 150,000 students were enrolled in secondary VET, while the general programme (*Bachillerato*) enrolled over half a million students.[1] In tertiary education the imbalance was much bigger: almost 1.6 million students were enrolled in Spanish universities in the academic year 1999–2000, while tertiary VET enrolment was less than 150,000, i.e. less than 10% of total tertiary enrolment. At the same time, youth unemployment, early school leaving and NEETs (not in employment, education or training) were on the rise.

Since the main (if not only) explicitly stated goal was to achieve equity, the comprehensive model went far beyond delaying tracking. Any measure that could be regarded as leading to segregation was eliminated: students could not be grouped according to their ability (either within or between classes), students could not receive differential treatment according to their level of performance, and during compulsory education almost no subject choices were available.

1 Both programmes are two years long.

In other words, all students had to follow the same curriculum, in the same classroom, at the same pace.

The lack of national (and standardised regional) evaluations was regarded as a key element to avoid segregation and stress among students, so no national (or regional) standardised student assessments at the end of educational stages were implemented. As a consequence, students who were struggling in primary school could not be identified early enough and did not receive the additional support that they needed; they lagged further and further behind as they grew older until they started repeating grades when they became unable to learn what was being taught. As soon as they reached the age of sixteen (when compulsory education ends), they abandoned a system which had failed them well before they were legally entitled to leave. In addition, schools, teachers and families all felt the lack of the clear signaling system that national exit exams provide, since they set the standards that all students need to achieve to obtain a national degree. Finally, students who had the potential to become top performers were not given the opportunity to do so. The fact that the education system was rigid and blind to the performance and needs of a diverse student population led to the emergence of the two main deficiencies of the Spanish education system: a high rate of grade repetition, which was linked to a high rate of early school leaving among disadvantaged students and migrants.

According to PISA, the system remained flat: a small proportion of top-performing students and a similar proportion of low performers to the OECD average led to overall mediocre results (Gomendio, 2021). Levels of student performance were particularly poor for mathematics. Student outcomes also stagnated, with no improvements observed between 2000 (first PISA cycle) and 2012. But what PISA failed to interpret correctly was the association between the high rate of grade repetition in Spain at age fifteen (around 40% from 2000 until 2011) and the high rate of early school leaving (26% in 2011), which it consistently ignores, despite the obvious connections between the two that most analyses highlight. Thus, PISA has concluded from the very first cycle that the Spanish education system is equitable, contributing to the myth that it has prioritised equity over quality. In fact, it has led to the worst type of inequality: one in every four students is excluded from the education system because they have been lagging behind for years

and have lost any motivation or hope that it has anything to offer them. These students leave with such low levels of knowledge and skills that they face high levels of unemployment during their lifetimes and are very reluctant to engage in any form of adult learning (Gomendio, 2021; Wert, 2019).

How is it possible that an education system designed to avoid segregation and discrimination and to promote equity has ended up generating the worst kind of inequity? The explanation is complex and involves many factors. Compared to Nordic countries, Spain is not an egalitarian society. This is reflected not only in differences in wealth and income, but also in major differences in the skills of the adult population. While in Nordic countries most adults have high levels of skills, in Spain older generations, who have had fewer years of schooling, and a substantial proportion of those in younger cohorts who have dropped out of school do not reach the most basic levels of literacy and numeracy (OECD, 2016e).

In fact, the first round of the survey of adults' skills (PIAAC) revealed that Spain was the participating country with the lowest level of skills (along with Italy) in 2011. This was a shockingly poor result. If we look at progress over time, by comparing different age cohorts, we find that in Spain the level of skills of the older cohort (aged between fifty-five and sixty-four) is very low compared to other countries, but the levels of skills have improved as a larger proportion of the population gained access to education and remained in school at least until the end of compulsory education (forty-five to fifty-four-year-olds). Below this age range, the levels of skills stagnated. Thus, the skills of the sixteen to twenty-four cohort are similar to those of previous cohorts (twenty-five to thirty-four and thirty-five to forty-four), which means that no further progress has been made in over twenty years. This stagnation happened despite the fact that access to higher levels of education, particularly university, increased very rapidly in the last decades. Thus, a huge effort to expand access to university had very poor returns in terms of actual skills, due to the poor quality of the education system as a whole.

The lack of improvement in the acquisition of skills after universal access to education was achieved clearly shows that the quality of the system did not improve over time, which is consistent with PISA findings. Since differences in family socio-economic background and

parental levels of educational attainment are linked to major differences in the parental level of skills, these are likely to have a major impact on the development of cognitive skills during early years, on the support that parents can provide to their school-aged children, and on the expectations that parents have and how much they value education. This implies that the student population is more diverse than in egalitarian societies. Thus, when students join school, they have very different starting points which require a more flexible system able to adapt to their different needs. When rigidity and uniformity is misunderstood as equity, students with difficult starting points have no alternative way of catching up. In addition, students with different levels of skills learn at different paces and, when the degree of variation in the classroom is high, those lagging behind are likely to suffer the most. As we have seen, one of the main challenges that teachers face is dealing with student diversity within the classroom.

This seems to be a key factor, since international surveys show that teachers in Spain have relatively low levels of skills (Tatto, 2014). This is because students studying for degrees in education obtain low grades on university entrance exams, the training they receive at university is weak on subject content and strong on pedagogy, selection procedures to enter the profession give more weight to seniority (number of years on temporary contracts) than to merit, and there is poor professional development. Teachers with low levels of skills are less likely to be able to achieve learning gains from a diverse group of students, since they are unable to cater for their different needs. The combination of a low-quality teaching force, a diverse student population, the education system's lack of flexibility to adapt to different needs, and the absence of common standards ends up generating the very same issue that it sought to avoid: the expulsion of the most disadvantaged students, who cannot adapt to such a rigid model.

6.3. An Education Reform in the Middle of a Storm

A legitimate question which crops up again and again is whether the peak of the financial crisis and the difficult political context of 2012 was the right context for an education reform. It is often argued that education reforms should be carried out during less stressful times

when politics are less polarised, social tensions less intense and, therefore, consensus and social acceptance may be within easier reach. At the time, we decided that the education reform could not wait any longer because a low-quality education system was a major part of the problem. The poor development of human capital made it very difficult to transform the economy, which was still too reliant on low-skilled jobs in the construction sector and services, into a knowledge economy, let alone a digital economy. But this transformation had become more urgent in 2012 because the construction sector collapsed and, in order to prosper again, Spain needed to free itself from the low-skills trap: an education system which does not equip students with high levels of skills aligns well with an economy that does not demand high levels of skills.

We became acutely aware from the very beginning that consensus was not possible. It is well-known that in politics what is discussed at private meetings is very different from the public narrative which is carefully crafted to ensure key elements that will prompt rejection or support among certain sectors of public opinion. But we were not prepared for the abysmal gap between the resources that most stakeholders demanded in exchange for their support and the extremely antagonistic public narrative, which distorted the reform to the extent that it targeted elements which were not even part of it. In other words, with professional backgrounds in evidence-based sectors, we were prepared to defend the policies that we proposed against counter-arguments. But we did not expect opponents of the reform to send us a Trojan horse.

At the political level, we were informed in early private meetings that the socialist party would not support *any* reform by a conservative government, even before we had designed it. A 'socialist model' had prevailed for decades, and the left regarded education as their own territory. Thus, there was no room for any negotiation. The unions asked for the kind of compensation package that they had received as part of the negotiations to gain their support for previous reforms: further increases in teacher salaries and decreases in student-teacher ratios. They knew that we could not afford such measures under such strong fiscal constraints, but they expected some gains. We could not offer anything in exchange. Since the management of education was transferred to

regional governments, central government's budget for education was almost entirely devoted to studentships for disadvantaged students.

Most unions joined political parties on the left in denouncing our supposed intentions to 'privatise' education. There was never any element in the reform that would have justified such a criticism, but it worked. It fitted nicely alongside the scary story of a conservative government dismantling the welfare state built by the socialist party when in power. Neither narrative was true, but families were suffering the consequences of the economic crisis, mainly because of growing unemployment, and people were deeply concerned, so any argument suggesting that the safety nets of a welfare state would be removed under such terrible circumstances could light a fire that would soon grow out of control.

Most critics argue that policymakers are so short-sighted that they are prone to impose reforms when governments enjoy a majority in parliament, without taking into account the fact that reforms that lack consensus tend to be short-lived. This is oversimplistic and unfair. Most education ministers with whom we have discussed this issue were painfully aware of it when they decided to push ahead with a reform under such circumstances. They decided to proceed not because they were unwilling to negotiate or make concessions. Rather, they were aware that consensus was not possible, because they could not accept the demands of different stakeholders in exchange for their support. In countries where education is a highly polarised issue, consensus is difficult; the fact that it is more common in countries with rules that have historically promoted consensus (consociationalism) does not mean that it should be the norm for all countries. The mantra that consensus should guide all education reforms would lead in many countries to reforms which follow the minimum common denominator, or to no reforms at all. These critics fail to acknowledge that defending the need to reach a consensus is a formidable weapon for those opposing a reform (Allègre, 2000). It is also a great excuse for stakeholders who wish to gain more resources; a huge amount of investment goes into education systems, which rely on a vast number of teachers and other stakeholders who receive direct financial gains. Rent-seeking behaviour by some (or most) of the beneficiaries is often part of the reason why

education reforms are derailed and in this context calls for consensus are just a means of disguising the underlying conflicts of interest.

We were among those who decided to go ahead with a reform despite becoming deeply aware after negotiations that consensus was not possible. We were also aware that this threatened the continuity of the reforms, since the socialist party openly declared that no matter what reform was eventually approved by parliament, they would reverse it by approving a new reform as soon as they regained power. In fact, in Spain all major education reforms until then had been approved by governments which enjoyed a parliamentary majority (socialist). History showed that consensus was difficult in our country, but that did not stop us from trying.

With hindsight, we believe that our mistake was to trust that an evidence-based reform would help us to overcome the polarisation and that the positive impact we expected to achieve would be enough to preserve those policies which had proven to be effective. This turned out to be wrong on many counts. The fact that the reform was based on international evidence, as well as a deep analysis of the national and regional data, did not make any difference: some contested the evidence, claiming—without grounds—that it was biased, while others simply refused to take it into consideration. The conflicts of interest were too deep for any robust evidence to have an impact: political games and vested interests combined to form a coalition against the reform which used very basic levers to create a narrative which proved a fatal blow: budget cuts and the fear of privatisation took over any rational argument.

We did try hard to explain the real aims of the reform, but we refused to denounce in public what we were told in private so that people could be aware of the real motivations behind the rejection of the reform. We were concerned that, if we did, any trust between us and stakeholders would be destroyed and the public debate would escalate even further. We pinned all our hopes on the evaluation of the reform's impact. Although improvements could be objectively assessed in many areas, the most visible metric for the media (PISA) failed too.

6.4. Aims, Policies and Impact of the Education Reform

To address the deficiencies of our education system, we worked with our teams of experts from different sectors at the Ministry of Education, as well as groups of teachers, to design an education reform which was approved by parliament on 9 December 2013. The new law, *Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa*, or LOMCE (Law for the Improvement of Quality in Education), consisted of amendments to around one third of the provisions of the *Ley Orgánica de Educación*, LOE, which had been passed in 2006. These amendments basically aimed to address the main weaknesses of the system (high early school leaving and low VET enrolment) and were supported by strong international evidence.

The law explicitly used PISA data to justify the need for improvement and we (the authors) are responsible for that, but it did not follow all (or even most) PISA recommendations, and we are also responsible for that. The reason for this much-criticised approach is that while PISA data clearly showed that Spanish students had low levels of performance and that no improvement had taken place for over a decade, we believe that PISA failed to identify major deficiencies and gave recommendations which did not apply to the Spanish context. But this is very far from manipulating PISA to justify enforcing reforms which were part of an ideological agenda, as some critics have argued in the Spanish case and others (e.g., Choi and Jerrim, 2015; Fischman *et al.*, 2018).

The reform was ambitious. It introduced national assessments to signal common evaluation standards at the end of each educational stage, to identify struggling students early enough and provide them with additional support, to overcome major regional disparities and to evaluate the impact of education policies. It gave more autonomy to schools and strengthened the leadership of principals. It developed and modernised vocational education and training in order to offer an alternative pathway to those students who were dropping out of school, as well as those who wished for more direct access to the labour market and higher employability levels than universities were achieving. It also modernised the curricula, introduced evaluation standards and re-defined the responsibilities of the state and the regions.

Shortly after implementation started, these changes in educational polices led to clear and rapid improvements in some areas: the proportion of students enrolled in vocational education and training at upper-secondary level increased dramatically, leading to a historic decline in the rate of early school leaving between 2011 and 2015 (down from 26.3% to 20.0%) and a marked decrease in the rate of grade repetition (Gomendio, 2021; Wert, 2019). Most of these variables remain outside the scope of what PISA measures and taking them into consideration radically changes the overall perception of levels of quality, equity and progress over time.

However, the national evaluations were never fully implemented due to the intensity of political pressures against them. They had not been designed as high-stakes exams, in the sense that the final grade was a combination of the result of the end-of-stage assessment and of the grades that teachers had given to students as part of the school´s internal assessments.[2] But all main stakeholders formed a strong coalition against them: some regional governments and nationalist political parties opposed them because they regarded them as a form of re-centralisation; unions rejected them outright because they regarded them as an indirect means of assessing teachers; and parties on the left rejected them because they refused to support any change to the prevailing, radically comprehensive socialist model.

While it is easy to understand what kind of vested interests facilitated this 'coalition of the unwilling', all of the stakeholders created a common narrative which disguised the underlying conflicts of interest. This narrative attributed intentions to national exams which were completely false, such as excluding underprivileged students from university. They were re-labelled with an old nickname (*reválidas*) which had a huge impact, since the name itself resuscitated in the collective imaginary vivid memories of exams which had been implemented a long time ago and which acted as bottlenecks at a time when access to university was quite limited. As we explained many times in parliament, at meetings with regional ministers, with unions, at press conferences and media interviews, all of the evidence from international surveys clearly showed that exit exams had a positive impact on student performance,

2 The relative weight of marks given internally by teachers, 60%, was actually larger than the weighting of the exam (40%) in the final grade.

particularly on the performance of those students who were struggling, but the impact of such evidence was null in the face of such strong conflicts of interest, because this was not the real issue at stake.

In relation to the curriculum, the modernisation of the content, the establishment of evaluation standards, and the development of a more schematic curriculum which gave greater freedom to schools to complement the basic content, did not generate strong reactions. Our role was to provide guidelines, such as moving away from a system which was almost exclusively based on memorisation to one in which the acquisition of knowledge remained important, but the development of more complex tasks such as teamwork or problem solving were also required. The actual work was carried out by experienced teams of teachers under our guidance. It really was a massive enterprise to coordinate all of them. These curricular changes were implemented in primary schools and were associated with improvements in mathematics and science among primary-level students (TIMSS) and even more substantial improvements in reading (PIRLS) (Gomendio, 2021). More subtle improvements were detected in PISA 2015, as would be expected given that the implementation calendar was designed so that changes in lower-secondary education would take place later (after changes to primary education).

What did cause a strong negative reaction at the political level was the change in how responsibilities were shared between central and regional governments. The previous model adopted the solution proposed by King Solomon when faced with two women claiming to be the mother of the same baby: splitting the curriculum in every subject. In those regions with an official vernacular tongue (Catalonia, Basque Country, Galicia, Balearic Islands and Valencia) the national government defined 55% of the subject (the so-called 'minimal content') while the regional government defined the remaining 45%. In all other regions, the national government defined 65% of the content and the regional government defined the remaining 35%. This led to difficulties in deciding which metrics were used to measure such percentages, and misalignments between the curricular content defined by central government and that defined by regions.

To solve these problems, we used a different approach and defined three different categories of subjects. For the subjects we labelled as

'core subjects' (equivalent to foundation skills at every stage, including reading, mathematics, Spanish, English and History) the national government defined the content, the assessment criteria and the standards to achieve. These subjects would account for at least 50% of teaching time. For those other subjects we labelled as 'specific subjects', the national government decided only on evaluation standards and assessment criteria, but the regional government defined the content. Finally, a third group of subjects that we labelled as 'free subjects' were entirely defined by regional governments. This new arrangement faced strong opposition from nationalist parties, who found it easier to have control over subjects which had proven instrumental in creating a new national identity, such as history and geography, thanks to the previous 'unmeasurable' percentages. Thus, the changes were labelled as 're-centralisation', a term coined to create the false impression that central government had a hidden agenda to regain control of education.

At this point, we wish to explain perhaps the most 'political'—and one of the costliest—decisions that we made. As we have explained, the decentralisation process in Spain led to some sort of quasi-federal asymmetric distribution of powers, by which some regions (Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia) were able to seize more political power from the outset, including in education. As a result, the regional governments of those regions have had a lot of leeway to define substantial aspects of their education systems. In all three regions, co-official vernacular languages (Catalan, Basque and Galician) were given the status of learning languages, together with Spanish (Castilian, the common language). In most of these regions a system developed which integrated Spanish, English and the co-official language.

The exception was Catalonia, where Spanish had in practice been eliminated as a language for teaching and learning. Even when some families in Catalonia asked for bilingual teaching and learning in Spanish and Catalan, the regional education authority systematically applied the principle of "linguistic immersion", meaning that all teaching (except of Spanish as a subject) takes place in the vernacular language, Catalan. We introduced in LOMCE some mechanisms to allow families to exert their right to choose a mix of both Spanish and Catalan as teaching and learning languages. However, the Constitutional Court dismissed it on the grounds—debatable in our opinion—that this

was beyond the role on education assigned by the constitution to the national government. Consequently, until 2020, families in Catalonia were denied the right to choose a combination of Spanish and Catalan for their children´s education. This highly contentious issue was solved in theory by a ruling of the *Tribunal Superior de Justicia de Cataluña*—the highest court at the regional level—in 2020, which finally established that at least 25% of the teaching in primary and secondary education must take place in Spanish. In practice, this means that on top of Spanish as a subject, another "relevant" subject has to be taught in Spanish. There is widespread skepticism about the extent to which this ruling will be effectively enforced, given the permanent reluctance of Catalan education authorities to abide with laws or court rulings on this matter.

In contrast, the policy which was supported by the strongest international evidence, but which proved futile, was granting more autonomy to schools in exchange for accountability through national standardised exams. In this case, all regions reacted in the same way: they offered their full support to a measure which involved transferring decision-making power away from central government, but during the implementation phase they hijacked those powers. As a result, schools did not enjoy greater autonomy because regions seized the opportunity to gain more power leaving virtually no room to school autonomy.

Since national standardised exams were never implemented, regions are not held accountable for their results. As we have seen, divergence between regions is such that at the age of fifteen the difference in student performance between the best- and worst-performing regions is equivalent to more than one year of schooling. Despite clear regional differences, all Spanish students receive the same educational degree from the Ministry of Education given that there are no national evaluations (or regional evaluations with common standards) at the end of educational stages. Perhaps counterintuitively, in regions which are top performers according to PISA, students have lower grades in the university entrance exam, the only evaluation which is similar at the national level and in which secondary schoolteachers participate in deciding the grades (Wert, 2019). This finding strongly suggests that the level of demand that teachers place on students differs widely between regions. All these factors may generate large regional disparities in terms of student performance (as measured by PISA among fifteen-year-olds)

which will have a huge impact on their lives: students in regions with lower levels of overall performance suffer higher rates of grade repetition, which lead to high rates of early school leaving and very high rates of youth unemployment (Gomendio, 2021; Wert, 2019).

A major pillar of the reform was the development and modernisation of VET. The reforms we undertook first in 2012, by developing a legal framework for Dual VET, and then in 2013 with the new Education Act (LOMCE), had a twofold aim: to attract more students to VET in order to decrease early school leaving by encouraging progress towards upper-secondary education among those more interested in applied subjects and to offer an alternative with better employability prospects for those who regarded university as the default option. However, there was strong opposition to the fact that we introduced curricular optionality for specific subjects (applied and academic options) gradually in eighth grade and more resolutely in ninth grade, at the end of compulsory secondary education. Together, these reforms produced a very swift improvement in an area where results were particularly poor: enrolment in VET grew at an unprecedented pace, with a 40% increase between 2010 and 2015. But thereafter, as the practical implementation of the new act stalled, growth in VET enrolment, though still significant, slowed down, with only an 18% increase between 2015 and 2020 (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2020).

The main and most powerful argument against our efforts to make VET a more attractive option was that it was a secondary pathway designed to prevent disadvantaged students from attending university. In addition, the introduction of a modified version of a Dual VET system, which established closer links to a labour market which was undergoing major disruption by introducing on-the-job-training, was criticised on the grounds that it represented 'cheap labour' for employers. We emphasised that in the Spanish case the *real* problems that we needed to tackle were that one in four students were dropping out of school, while access to university for those who continued into upper-secondary education was not an issue since Spain had one of the highest rates of access in Europe, and that university graduates had much lower employability levels than in other European countries (Wert, 2019). But we discovered that the narrative depicting the reform as one intended to make it more difficult for economically disadvantaged students to go to university—which was neither the aim nor the result—was more

powerful than reality. Time and again opposition parties, unions of teachers and students used imaginary narratives like, for instance, the tale of the grand-daughter of the illiterate peasant who had been able to make it to university and become a doctor, a vivid example of social mobility which opponents argued could no longer take place due to the reform. Scary tales became more compelling than reality.

Here are a few examples taken from the parliamentary hearings in the education committee. First, this was the statement given by the PSOE spokesperson at the Education Committee of Spanish Congress:

> [T]his law, Mrs Secretary of State, represents more obstacles in the path of disadvantaged students, because as we have stated repeatedly, underperforming students can either receive help or they can be expelled, and you have decided to expel them just in case they reach university if they get any help. Thus, you have designed an obstacle course and you have searched for sewers like VET. (Education Committee Spanish Congress, 26 June 2013)

Or, in the words of the spokesperson for the Catalan Nationalist Party:

> [Y]ou have presented many data, but we are talking about people, education, feelings, personal relationships [...] many variables which these data fail to take into account properly; so you just propose copying and copying when we have enough people in our country to be creative and design our own education system [...] You just want external evaluations to centralise, to impose, to decide how to homogenise all students in the Spanish state. (Education Committee Spanish Congress, 26 June 2013)

Or, for a taste of the unions' perspective, these excerpts from statements made by Comisiones Obreras (the main Teachers' Union) on evaluations:

> [E]xit exams are based on the atrocious belief that any improvement in education will be the result of the pressure exerted by the results of students [...] they classify students into those that are successful (because they pass) and those which are not (because they fail) which is the most repugnant aspect of this reform [...] teachers feel that this is a challenge to their professional competence. This is because they are losing control over what they teach and how they wish to evaluate it. (Milán and Recio, 2013)

Eventually the implementation of national exams was halted by the very same conservative government—we had quit government a few

months before—that proposed it as a concession to facilitate a national consensus on education. But no progress was made for years.

6.5. Back to the Future

As we explained before, the impact of the financial crisis and the budget cuts led to a political tsunami of a magnitude that we failed to recognise when it began. A mostly bi-partisan system was replaced with a very fragmented landscape in which new populist parties on the radical left emerged with unexpected energy. Later on, populist parties on the radical right also emerged, probably due to concerns about the power gained by nationalist movements with the next government.

By mid-2018 a vote of no confidence ousted the conservative government, and a minority socialist government took office. It was short-lived, since it did not get the 2019 budget approved and was forced to call an early election. In late 2019 a new government was formed, a coalition between the socialist party and a new far-left party (Podemos). Since the coalition does not have a parliamentary majority it relies on the support of other parties, such as nationalist parties, to approve budgets and legislation. Under these conditions, a new education reform has been approved in exchange for budget approval support, which has required many concessions (LOMLOE, 2020). The latest reform not only returns to the failed model which had been prevalent for over two decades. It actually goes even further: national standardised evaluations at the end of lower- and upper-secondary education for all students have been replaced with so-called 'general evaluations of the education system' which include only a sample of students and take place once every three years. Regional governments can implement diagnostic evaluations, but these cannot take place at the end of educational stages, and no common standards between regions are agreed. In an unexpected move, students who are failed by their teachers (according to the teachers' own standards) will be promoted to the next grade (since grade repetition has been almost forbidden) and can eventually obtain a national degree. In addition, students who fail several subjects at the end of upper-secondary level can still take the university entrance exam. The current government has argued that these policies follow OECD recommendations since all students will advance irrespective of their performance, in order to avoid grade repetition (Gomendio, 2020a). The

logic here seems perverse: grade repetition is avoided, not because all students achieve pre-defined levels of performance at the end of each grade, but rather because performance no longer matters.

The government has defended these measures on the grounds that they promote equity. All students will advance and obtain degrees irrespective of their levels of performance, therefore eliminating the impact of family socio-economic background and migrant status, but also of effort and ability. In our view, the approval of this education reform represents an open capitulation by central government of the responsibility to implement policies to improve student performance and, in particular, mechanisms to allow disadvantaged students to perform well.

Central government has given up on evaluations, curricula and any aspiration to improve quality. Instead, it has created a complete disconnect between levels of student performance and educational degrees, by eliminating reliable ways to assess the former. This will devalue degrees and de-incentivise effort. No education system has improved under these circumstances. It is just a mirage to pretend that equity can be achieved when those who learn are treated exactly the same as those who do not. A system which intends not to leave anyone behind will ultimately leave everyone behind.

In contrast, the current government has maintained most of the elements of our reform (LOMCE) which made VET (and Dual VET) an attractive option for an increasing number of students. Given that in Spain rates of early school leaving and youth unemployment remain high when compared to other European countries, the current government seems to have taken a more practical approach and buried all the ideological arguments against the first steps taken by our reform. This is a very revealing case of a political party (in this case the socialist PSOE) imposing very high political costs on its main opponent (the conservative PP) on ideological grounds and then reaping the benefits of the very policies that it deemed unacceptable once they have been implemented and they hold power.

The rationale for relaxing the requirements for grade promotion and for obtaining degrees is probably the same as the rationale for keeping changes already implemented in VET. This seemingly contradictory combination will improve the statistics to which the EU pays attention: early school leaving and grade repetition will decrease, as will youth

unemployment. But these statistics will be a mirage because they will provide no information in relation to the performance of students, which is likely to suffer.

In response to pressures from nationalist political parties, the new reform transfers more control over the curriculum to regional governments and completely eliminates the obligation to use Spanish (along with the co-official language) in schools. The reform also limits parental choice and implements rules of admission by schools which represent a threat to government-funded, privately run schools; this is a concession to the radical-left populist (Podemos) partner in government, which proposes eliminating these schools to ensure that all children attend public schools thus eliminating any privilege. The current education minister has repeatedly stated that the latest reform follows OECD recommendations to avoid segregation and inequality by eliminating standardised assessments, allowing students to make progress and obtain degrees irrespective of their level of performance and decreasing the role of government-funded, privately run schools.

6.6. What Has Been the Role of PISA?

In recent years, successive education reforms at the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of aims and policies (LOMCE and LOMLOE) have argued that they use PISA data and policy recommendations. Thus, it seems fair to ask: what position has been defended by the OECD?

In short, it has supported both sides, as well as a long and futile pause to find consensus. Andreas Schleicher (widely recognised as the father of PISA) is highly respected in Spain, so he has been invited to parliamentary commissions and other relevant committees. He has been granted an influential role.

In the 2013 parliamentary Education Committee hearings which discussed the LOMCE prior to its approval by parliament, his statements included:

> [T]here are systems which work well from the point of view of equity but not quality, which is the case in Spain […] to use evaluation to improve quality, accountability and evaluate the improvement in student performance […] is one of the areas in which the reform [LOMCE] is trying to improve education in Spain […] It is very important that school autonomy and accountability go hand in hand […] Student performance

> improves when there are standardised student assessments [...] I do not think that it is correct to argue that the reform implements early tracking and therefore segregation, because both options are offered when most countries do. (Education Committee, 15 July 2013)

Four years later, in 2017, his statements for the same Education Committee included:

> PISA data do not show major regional differences [...] Teachers need to play a relevant role in the design of education reforms [...] Modern curricula need to be designed by teachers [...] Evaluation is key because you cannot improve what you don´t measure, but I don´t see a relationship with accountability [...] Some countries do not share the results of student assessments with anybody [...] because if teachers feel that they are being evaluated from the outside [...] it is possible that they will withdraw and there will be no benefit because they may feel judged (Education Committee, 13 September 2017)

There were no hearings in parliament to discuss the most recently approved education reform (LOMLOE). In fact, no debates took place despite the governments´ claims about ongoing negotiations and the search for consensus. Instead, the channel through which Andreas Schleicher expressed full support for this reform was a recent interview in the leading Spanish newspaper, in which he stated:

> To memorise content about physics or chemistry is not useful. The real issue is: can students think like a scientist and design an experiment? [...] The same happens with history. To remember facts does not help. [...] Successful schools are those which equip students with strategies to learn and unlearn and relearn as the context changes (*El País*, 2021)

We assume that this means that it is not important to memorise facts, and from this mistaken premise it follows that the acquisition of knowledge should not be evaluated. It seems contradictory that the person who is responsible for PISA would support a lack of evaluations at the national level, because evaluating student performance in different countries is precisely what PISA does.

The personal support that Schleicher has lent to the latest reform has led some education experts to criticise OECD support of education policies which disguise the poor quality of the Spanish education system with good intentions based on a misleading concept of equity (Luri, 2021).

It is difficult to understand why PISA has supported successive reforms in Spain each representing such different approaches, but this is probably the result of a willingness to be seen as having influence in the policy arena. More importantly, PISA values its huge media impact in Spain highly, since it uses this variable as the main measure of its own success. Finally, it needs to ensure that Spain continues to make the massive financial contribution that an extended sample of all seventeen of its regions represents. Spain is one of the countries which provides the largest amount of funding to PISA, so its participation is key to PISA's survival. In other words, PISA also has vested interests to defend in Spain, even at the expense of clear contradictions.

Perhaps the greatest incongruity has been the publication of the PISA 2018 results after they were withdrawn a few months earlier at the official global launch due to inconsistencies and unreliability. Apparently, the same results (with no corrections to or explanations about the inconsistencies detected) were published at the request of the current Minister of Education, who wished to use the alleged decline in performance to justify a new education reform and to point fingers at those regions governed by other political parties which supposedly had worse results (Gomendio, 2020b). The education reform was approved a few months later with no consensus at the national level but with the support of PISA. In the controversy surrounding this reform, no one seemed to notice that the OECD had published the results but included a warning in small print stating that they were not comparable with those of previous cycles.

PISA's lack of accountability and the inconsistencies shown when supporting reforms which propose completely different policies throw into question its role as an honest broker using objective evidence. It also challenges its self-proclaimed role as an influential player in education policy. Education reforms are crucial, and robust evidence about good practices should guide the decisions of policymakers. To play a role in the education policy debate, PISA needs to be consistent about its policy recommendations, should address any concerns that countries may have about the reliability of the data, and should provide solid data and objective advice to reformists willing to pay the heavy price of education reforms.