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Research article

# Educational reforms and teaching of history in contemporary Spain – nation, history and education as contested issue

Ander Delgado<sup>1,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education of Bilbao, University of the Basque Country, Leioa (Bizkaia), Spain

\* Correspondence: [ander.delgado@ehu.eus](mailto:ander.delgado@ehu.eus)

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## Abstract

This article analyses the changes in education legislation and the history curriculum in Spain over recent decades. To this end, the characteristics established for the teaching of history in the last two education laws, passed in 2013 and 2020 – the first by a conservative government and the second by a progressive one – are studied and compared. This study is carried out by situating the education debates presented in this research in the social and political context of Spain. The study of these legislative changes allows us to observe the different visions of national identity existing in Spain, which find a prominent area of confrontation in education and the teaching of history. The article also argues that the emergence of the ultra-right has led to a markedly nationalist vision of Spanish history that seeks to recover elements of national unity, and that has become one of the axes defended by conservative options for the teaching of history in Spanish schools. This view contrasts with the approaches advocated in the latest education legislation, which propose a more heterogeneous approach to the subject of identity in Spain.

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**Keywords** education; history teaching; national identity; politics; Spain

## Introduction

Disputes over the nation have been a constant feature of Spanish politics since at least the nineteenth century (Álvarez Junco, 2016). The confluence of different national identities in the same territory has been, and continues to be, one of the challenges with which Spain has had to deal. The end of Francoism and the transition to democracy did not serve to redirect this issue, as reflected, for example, in the persistence of terrorism for many years, and in the more recent independence process in Catalonia (Molina and Quiroga, 2019).

Disputes over identification with the nation have developed in different spheres from the transition to the present day. This article focuses on the study of one sphere that has always been considered 'sensitive': education. In the realms of both politics and academia, it is accepted that the education system plays an important role in the spread of national identity among the inhabitants of a given country. As has long been argued in classic studies on nationalism by, for example, Ernest Gellner (1983), Eugen Weber (1976) and Eric J. Hobsbawm (1992), it is one of the nationalising mechanisms in the hands of the nation state to pass on to younger members of the population the idea that they are part of a differentiated national unit. It can be argued that this was one of the original objectives when public education systems were established from the nineteenth century onwards in many countries, and it continues to be so today (Green, 1990; Meyer et al., 1992; Ramirez and Boli, 1987).

Among the activities carried out in schools that might play an important nationalising role, one might specifically identify the teaching of geography – to make known the borders of the national territory – and, especially, the subject of this article, history. This subject teaches the origin and temporal development of the nation itself. Given that the role of the teaching of history is so important in processes of nationalisation, this subject is often one that produces the greatest controversy and debate at times when education reforms are being carried out. This is especially true where the vision of a nation's past is questioned, disputed or, depending on the case, in conflict with alternative national narratives. What history is brought into the classroom, what vision of a nation's past is presented, how a narrative is articulated that helps to unify a society around the nation, and whether the narrative presented in the classrooms can be considered to promote division and a conflicting vision of that past, are all controversial issues in many countries.

The study of the struggles and controversies over the choice of which past to bring into the classroom is a topic that has created a fruitful line of research. Numerous studies have shown how controversial, in some cases even conflictive, the choice – to use the title of a well-known book – of 'the right kind of history' (Cannadine et al., 2011) to bring into the classroom can be in countries with different national identifications, conflicting or traumatic pasts, or heterogeneous social and cultural composition, and how there can be different views about what role the education system should play in society, what values it should disseminate, and its role in shaping 'nationals'. Studies of disputes over the teaching of history in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, France and Canada are good examples of this (Cock, 2018; Lévesque and Croteau, 2020; Macintyre and Clark, 2004; Nash et al., 2000; Philips, 1998). Other collective works that bring together different research on this topic also reflect the variety of countries analysed, and the different approaches that can be followed in this type of research (Carretero et al., 2012; Carrier, 2013; Delgado and Mycock, 2023; Epstein and Peck, 2018; Guyver, 2016; Taylor and Guyver, 2012). These studies serve as a point of reference to contextualise the example of Spain analysed in this article, and to note how widespread these types of disputes are.

This type of debate is also present in Spain. A context of ongoing confrontation around the existing nation in Spain makes the choice of history taught in classrooms a controversial issue, due to the nationalising role attributed to this subject; even more so, considering that the teaching of history is constant and compulsory throughout almost all pre-university studies in Spain. In the six years of primary education (age 6–11 years), it is integrated into the area of Social Sciences. In secondary education (age 12–16), combined Geography and History, in which the latter has a prominent place, is a compulsory subject for all students during the four years of this educational stage. In the second year of the baccalaureate (age 17–18), the subject History of Spain is also compulsory for all students. History

is therefore a constant presence in the education of young Spaniards. Taking into consideration the importance of this subject in the Spanish education system, this article compares the last two education laws passed in Spain by the central government, in 2013 and 2020, whose acronyms in Spanish are LOMCE and LOMLOE, respectively.

Through this analysis, it is possible to observe two different aspects that converge in the elaboration of these education laws. On the one hand, there are conflicting views about how history should be taught, and what should be the characteristics of the elements (content, assessment and so on) that make it up. These views reflect a conservative and a more progressive approach to the defining elements of history teaching in Spain. On the other hand, the study of the debates surrounding these laws allows us to observe the changes in the Spanish political context in recent years, and the role attributed to Spanish history in this context. It is not claimed that curriculum writing responds solely and exclusively to an ideological view of education. Studies of the process of approval of the English National Curriculum in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, show a more complex situation, in which different points of view converged in its drafting. Aside from the ideological drivers of it, concerned about the 'loss' of British identity among young people who do not know past glories, or who only study a social history that emphasises problematic situations, there were also government staff who brought their 'technical' view to the subject, and groups of advisers chosen to provide a 'scientific' or 'academic' approach (Ball, 1990; Guyver, 2012; Philips, 1998). These three types of input reflect the different points of view that can come together in the drafting of an education law. It can be assumed that a similar situation has also occurred in the drafting processes of the education laws studied here, although, simplifying somewhat, this article shows that there are different concerns among legislators that can be related to their political views. Controversies over education legislation cannot be separated from the political environment in which these laws are proposed and passed. In fact, it can be argued, the characteristics of that context and its interactions with the educational sphere can help us to better understand some of the features of such legislation. At the same time, however, these debates also serve as evidence of the changes that have been taking place in the Spanish political context in recent years regarding concerns about national identity.

## LOMCE: a conservative proposal

LOMCE is the acronym used to refer to Organic Law 8/2013, 9 December, for the Improvement of Educational Quality (BOE, 2013; acronyms for laws used in this article come from their name in Spanish). This law, approved in 2013, was drafted by the conservative government led by the Partido Popular (Popular Party, PP) to reform the education policy implemented by earlier socialist governments, adapting this to the conservative ideology of the second decade of the twenty-first century. This reform covered various areas, but one of the objectives of the conservative government was to gain more extensive control over the teaching of history throughout the whole of Spain. This new law did not change the basic characteristics of the education system previously established, such as the maintenance of competency-based education, but it introduced some novelties which could be considered minor, but which ultimately implied greater control over educational activity, as discussed below.

To understand the objectives of those who drafted this legislation, one fundamental feature of the Spanish education system must be mentioned. Spain is an administratively decentralised country, including in the field of education. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 (Article 27, Point 5), as well as subsequent organic education laws, have established a system of relationships between different administrations with overlapping jurisdiction over education. The central government legislates the general framework of the education system through organic laws, and by defining the basic content of the curriculum through corresponding royal decrees. The development and materialisation of these general principles through respective curricular decrees is left in the hands of autonomous communities, to whom some jurisdiction over education has been transferred. However, national legislation does not establish what mechanisms and criteria should be used to apply the general framework locally in each autonomous community. That is, it remains ambiguous if the provisions established by the central government must be adopted literally, or if a general spirit of collaboration between institutions, reflected in the way the principles are taken into consideration, is sufficient. The second interpretation has been adhered to up to the present (Frías del Val, 2007).

This legislative context has meant that, on some occasions, there have been disagreements or differences when it comes to implementing the stipulations of general state legislation in some autonomous communities. When the central government and some autonomous communities are governed by different political parties, general policy clashes have also reached the regional education administration sphere. This has been the case recently with the debates that have arisen over the LOMLOE, and the disagreements between the ruling socialist party in Spain and some of the autonomous communities governed by the conservative PP. However, the most recurrent and most common controversies have been with the autonomous communities governed by regionalist parties: the Basque Country and Catalonia.

The decision-making capacity of the different autonomous communities with respect to their management of their jurisdiction over education, especially in relation to the teaching of history, was viewed very critically in various conservative circles (and by some other political sectors as well). From this point of view, the transfer of jurisdiction over education from the central government to the autonomous communities caused a 'regionalisation' or fragmentation of history taught in Spanish classrooms. The different autonomous communities could put more emphasis on the local to the detriment of an overall vision of the history of Spain. [Montero \(2018\)](#) demonstrates how this is also important in 'non-nationalist' autonomous communities. According to this view, this situation became more pernicious in those autonomous communities where regionalist parties identified with alternative national projects held government. Rather than giving students a picture of what united them to Spain, the teaching of history in these communities was seen as working in the opposite direction: promoting national identities alternative to the Spanish one.

A few years after the implementation of the LOMCE, the PP Minister of Education pointed out that the sharing of jurisdiction between the state and the autonomous communities produced possible inconsistencies in the education curriculum, and promoted 'ultra-parochial approaches in subjects such as geography and history, and blatantly indoctrinating and false content, especially in historical matters' ([Wert, 2019](#): 183, all translations are my own). One of the aims of the conservative education authorities was to put an end to this situation. That this was one of the main objectives pursued by the Madrid education authorities was made clear in a newspaper article reporting the draft of the LOMCE. Summarising so-called 'ministry sources', it pointed out that:

the Government wants History to be studied in the same way throughout Spain. All pupils in all schools in all autonomous communities will have to know the subject in the same way because they will be assessed in the same way ... there is going to be a common History throughout Spain. Students will first have to acquire knowledge of the common subject and afterwards, they will be able to learn whatever the autonomous community wants to add. ([Sanmartín, 2012](#): 18)

For this reason, the conservative government identified a necessity to limit the decision-making capacity of the autonomous communities, to exclude those elements that they considered harmful to the unity of Spain.

The LOMCE was an attempt to redress this situation. This organic law was a reform of Organic Law 2/2006, 3 May, on Education ([BOE, 2006](#)), of which some articles were left unchanged and others were modified, while a number of new articles were introduced. One of the articles modified was Article 6, which specifies the powers of different administrations in detail. Analysing the wording of this article, it is clear that one of the objectives of the legislation was to remove the ambiguity mentioned above, and to eliminate the possible alterations or manipulations of the meaning of state legislation by the autonomous authorities that the conservative-led central government so often denounced. Without rejecting the principle of collaboration, the powers corresponding to each administration were established in detail with respect to one crucial issue: defining the contents of different subjects. In Article 6, the powers corresponding to the central government are indicated, and Point 1, Section E establishes that one of these powers is to define the elements constituting the basic curriculum applicable throughout the Spanish state. Even more importantly, the next point of the article establishes three types of subject in the education system: core, specific and electives, with the electives available to students varying between different autonomous communities. In the context of this discussion, core subjects are the most important, as they are compulsory for all Spanish students, and because defining curricular elements, including content and learning and assessment standards, fell under the jurisdiction of the Spanish Ministry of Education. Core subjects included Social Sciences in primary education,

combined Geography and History in secondary education, and History of Spain in the second year of the baccalaureate – the non-compulsory sixth and seventh years of schooling for students aged 16–18, which is the most common gateway to university access. With this modification, it became clear which administration was responsible for deciding on the fundamentals of these subjects, although autonomous communities could also complement some aspects.

To eliminate any remaining doubt about autonomous education authorities' compliance with this legislation, a means of better ensuring that contents considered to be fundamental and basic were studied in the same way throughout Spanish territory was provided by another mechanism: the establishment of standardised tests administered externally to schools, and with their own assessment schedule (Pérez Gómez, 2014; Trepát, 2015). This type of standardised test can be used to determine the results achieved by students at different points in their schooling, and to make different educational decisions on the basis of this information. Without denying the validity of this idea, it can be added that the best way to control whether contents considered fundamental and basic in history were studied in all the autonomous communities in the same way was through the mechanism of these evaluations. Using the same test and the same evaluation criteria for all Spanish students was a means to force all teachers to deliver the same contents, so that their students could pass the test.

Finally, legislators' desire to establish greater control can also be observed in the royal decrees that established the basic curricula for primary education, compulsory secondary education and the baccalaureate, where the common contents of core subjects, named above, were defined. Royal Decree 126/2014, 28 February, established the basic curriculum for primary education (BOE, 2014), and Royal Decree 1105/2014, 26 December, established the basic curriculum for secondary education and the baccalaureate (BOE, 2015). These two royal decrees established the contents that teachers must deliver in the classroom, and that students should know at different educational stages. In the case of the selection of contents for history, these were organised chronologically and were, depending on the educational stage, specified with a greater or lesser degree of detail. In any case, the specific characteristics and sense of the content that must be delivered in these areas was not defined. More than the chosen content itself, it is interesting to highlight the assessment criteria and the 'assessment learning standards' to be applied to all Spanish students of these subjects. Studying these is relevant because they reveal legislators' interest in ensuring that all students know some basic, shared elements of the history of Spain, thus avoiding the problems indicated above. The educational stages in which this is most evident are primary education and the second year of the baccalaureate. The secondary school subject Geography and History – taken over four consecutive years – is a global overview of history, which only mentions Spain in terms of the repercussions and manifestations of general historical processes, and the occasions on which Spain played an important role. That said, the Franco dictatorship, and the transition to democracy are expressly mentioned, as well as the problem of terrorism in Spain.

The subject History of Spain in the second year of the baccalaureate is notably different in this respect. This subject includes content from prehistory to the present, although greater importance is placed on the contemporary period, due to the difficulty of dealing with the whole range of topics in a single year. This subject is important for students who want to continue their studies at university, because it is part of the university entrance examination held at the end of the school year. The volume of contents, evaluation criteria and assessable learning standards defined in the royal decree indicate that almost no aspect considered to be important was left out of the syllabus. This profusion of contents to be included has the objective – specified in the description of the subject – of contributing to the formation of 'responsible citizens, aware of their rights and obligations, as well as their heritage', who, upon reaching adulthood, should 'know the history of Spain in an unfragmented and systematic way' (Royal Decree 1105/2014, 26 December [BOE, 2015: 321]). Spain shares commonalities, but it is diverse:

History of Spain in the second year of Baccalaureate aims to offer an overview of the fundamental historical processes in the territories that make up the current Spanish state, without ignoring its internal plurality and its belonging to other broader groupings, including Europe and Ibero-America. In this sense, the subject addresses, in the analysis of historical processes, both shared and distinctive aspects. (Royal Decree 1105/2014, 26 December [BOE, 2015: 321])

The primary education subject Social Sciences is similarly defined. In this case, a very detailed list of curricular elements is not established, since the age of the students makes working on these in the classroom difficult. Rather, the importance that knowledge of the history of Spain has for students at

this educational stage is made explicit, and more space in the basic curriculum is given to knowledge of this subject than in previous legislation. An emphasis consistent with the importance attributed to this subject is stated in its description:

It is important for students to acquire the historical references that will allow them to develop a personal interpretation of the world, through a basic knowledge of the history of Spain and their Autonomous Community, with respect and appreciation for shared aspects as well as those of a diverse nature. (Royal Decree 126/2014, 28 February [BOE, 2014: 19373])

While the contents of the subject are defined only by mentioning various periods in the history of Spain, without going into detail, content relevant to this article is included in the legislation, specifically the section 'Our historical and cultural heritage'. More so than in subject definitions, the evaluation criteria and the evaluable learning standards are highly specific. These clearly demonstrate the legislators' desire to establish a series of basic elements of the history of Spain that all students should work on in the classroom. Evaluation criterion Number 3 defines one objective to be achieved in this educational stage: 'Identify and locate in time and space the most relevant historical events and processes in the history of Spain to acquire a global perspective of its progression.' This criterion is divided into other evaluable learning standards that deepen this objective. These include, for example, '3.2. Identify and locate in time and space the basic events in the History of Spain, describing the main characteristics of each', and '3.9. Explain the main events that took place during the 19th and 20th centuries that have shaped our contemporary history.' These definitions reflect an interest in cementing knowledge of the history of Spain among students, and transmitting this 'cultural heritage' to all Spanish citizens (Royal Decree 126/2014, 28 February [BOE, 2014: 19372–7]).

What can explain this interest in defining these elements with this level of detail for primary education? Perhaps presenting this history during primary education is considered important because it is during this period that students' personalities and identities are shaped. By the time students reach secondary school, this socialisation process is more difficult to influence because most basic identity kinships are already established, so it is considered desirable to begin this work earlier. Answering these questions is complex, but they can be used to hypothesise about one of the objectives guiding those in charge of drafting these basic education decrees. Knowledge of the history of Spain was taken to be one of the fundamental steps for Spanish youth to be able to identify with the Spanish nation.

## Counter-reform to conservative reform: LOMLOE

The LOMCE was a controversial legislative change that provoked heated debate, and widespread rejection, not only among opposition political parties and the governments of autonomous communities, but also among other agents involved in the field of education, including teachers, parents' associations, unions, social movements and education experts – although there was also considerable support for the legislation from other groups (López Facal, 2014).

Criticisms of the law focused on various aspects, the analysis of which is beyond the scope of this article. Some of these criticisms focused on the teaching of history. The first element criticised was the choice of teaching based on a profusion of theoretical content, which, combined with assessable learning standards, made it possible to consider this law as a return to more 'traditional' teaching. This created an excessively broad, overloaded curriculum, which was at times repetitive and, according to many teachers, impossible to fit into available class time (Trepát, 2015). This situation was made more complex by the establishment of standardised tests that effectively made it mandatory to include all the contents established in the curriculum in the classroom. Finally, another criticism of the LOMCE curriculum was related to the suitability of the teaching of history for fostering historical thinking, that is, with reference to second-order concepts used for the analysis of history (Domínguez Castillo, 2015; Lévesque, 2009; Seixas and Morton, 2013). In the classroom, these concepts must be worked on specifically, together with some basic historical content, so that students can understand, interpret and adopt a critical approach to the historical past, as well as to their own identity based on this past. Limiting history to theoretical contents, the interest and relevance of which, on many occasions, students do not understand, makes it difficult for this objective to be fulfilled, and thus for greater meaning to be given to the teaching of history (López Facal, 2014).

In 2018, the PP Government fell after losing a vote of no confidence led by the opposition party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party, PSOE), following a court ruling



of corruption against the governing conservative party. After a few months of the PSOE minority government, and two general elections in less than a year, the PSOE, in coalition with Unidas-Podemos (United We Can, UP), finally concluded negotiations to establish a government in 2019. Having witnessed clear opposition to the LOMCE legislation in parliamentary debates prior to its approval, the new governing coalition, supported by other minor parties, immediately began the drafting of a new organic law on education, so as to reverse the most controversial aspects of this earlier legislation, and to promote a return to the educational principles in force prior to its approval. The new organic law was passed at the end of 2020. Many of the characteristics of this new legislation are guided by generic pedagogical arguments, but it can be considered that it has also had a direct impact on the teaching of history, because it implies a change in objectives from those that were guided by the LOMCE with respect to the subject.

The preamble to Organic Law 3/2020, 29 December, Which Modifies Organic Law 2/2006, 3 May, on Education (LOMLOE) (BOE, 2020) contains two elements that are especially relevant for this article. First, the legislation sought to re-establish the dynamics of collaboration between the Spanish ministry, autonomous communities and schools for curricular design, as had been the norm up until 2013. To this end, Article 6 was redrafted. In its Point 3, the government is granted, following consultation with the autonomous administrations, the power to define basic educational content, leaving the elaboration of more detailed curricular decrees materialising these general minimum requirements in the hands of the governments of autonomous communities. Second, the LOMLOE ended the system of differentiating subjects into core, specific and elective, which had given the Spanish Ministry of Education a prominent role in the definition of the former, and, therefore, control over them. This division had generated a de facto limitation on collaboration between the different educational agents in curriculum design. For this reason, mention of this division of subjects, and their attribution to different authorities, disappeared in the new legislation. The much-reviled assessable learning standards also disappeared. As has been pointed out, in addition to the impact that these had on teachers in the classroom, they constituted a means of control over subjects taught in all Spanish schools, as standardised tests had to be used.

Organic laws on education, as has been indicated, are elaborated through royal decrees on basic education that establish shared contents and other elements to be applied and developed across all autonomous communities. Early public working documents of these decrees indicate that the option chosen was to draft a basic and generic definition of various aspects of the curriculum, leaving autonomous communities and schools wide margins of autonomy for their elaboration and implementation. This approach has materialised in the royal decrees that have developed the LOMLOE. This is another example of a break from the LOMCE approach. (Royal Decree 157/2022, 1 March, established the organisation and minimum teachings of primary education [BOE, 2022a]; Royal Decree 217/2022, 29 March, established the organisation and minimum teaching of compulsory secondary education [BOE, 2022b], and Royal Decree 243/2022, 5 April, established the organisation and minimum teaching of the baccalaureate [BOE, 2022c]).

Since the end of 2020, the Ministry of Education has promoted an online forum for debate called 'The curriculum under debate: A curriculum for an advancing society' (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2020a), followed in April 2021 by the 'Schools' forum: New curriculum for new challenges' (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2021). In the first forum, a reflection paper called (in English) 'Curriculum Reform within the Framework of LOMLOE: Background paper, Keys for dialogue November 2020' was published (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2020b). This document establishes the deepening of competency-based teaching, which includes knowledge, but focuses more on the contextualisation and mobilisation of learning as the main axis of the reform. Learning by rote and the accumulation of knowledge, often unattainable in practice, is considered inadequate and, in the face of this reality, the document supports education based on the development of competencies, which allows students to cope with future situations. To this end, the document defends a curriculum with less 'curricular weight' that favours interdisciplinary work based on innovative methodologies. It also puts a limit on the 'recitation of accumulated encyclopaedia entries and deepens knowledge selected as essential' (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2020b: 6–8).

The public process of reflection on the minimum curricular elements (available at Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, n.d.) derived from the new education legislation resulted in the decrees published in 2022. Due to space limitations, only a synthetic approach to all the elements and 'essential' content reflected in these documents is made here. It can be ascertained that the Ministry of Education proposes to establish the characteristic elements of historical thinking in the classroom,

and is committed to research and work with sources as a way of allowing students to work on areas related to their lives and their environments, and to allow them to develop a historical and geographical perspective. The evaluation criteria are not determined by knowledge of obligatory content delivered in the classroom, but are linked to specific competencies that students must develop. Contents are no longer at the centre of the curriculum.

For the primary school subject 'Conocimiento del medio natural, social y cultural' [Knowledge of the natural, social and cultural environment], three blocks of basic knowledge are established: 'Scientific culture', 'Technology and digitisation' and 'Societies and territories'. History is integrated under the name of 'Societies over time' in the third of these blocks. The age of the students in primary school makes it difficult for them to delve deeply into the subject, and early primary school years focus on basic aspects: the measurement of time, the use of information sources, causality, simultaneity and so on. Within this same block of contents, the section called 'Civic literacy' stands out. This section refers to the diversity of identities, ethnicities and cultures, respect for diversity and the rejection of discriminatory attitudes in this area (Royal Decree 157/2022, 1 March [BOE, 2022a]).

For the high-school combined subject Geography and History, and the second-year baccalaureate subject History of Spain, the aforementioned trend of emphasising the use of historical methodology for topics where the basic knowledge is defined in a generic way is maintained. Major questions and challenges relevant to contemporary societies are raised, including the role of women, social conflicts, the world of work, political conflict and sustainable development, within various historical periods, as a way of making these issues relevant to the discussion of the present, and to help students understand them and their historical context. Among these types of topics, those related to identity, which are only mentioned in the case of primary education, are now dealt with in more detail. In these two subjects (Geography and History, and History of Spain), it is proposed to use history and scientific procedures in this area to generate a critical and long-term approach to the 'cultural diversity and identities' existing in Spain. Given that this is one of the most complex and problematic issues of the current moment, the curriculum seeks to encourage students to learn about the mechanisms that generate these identities, their origins and historical development, and the different scales on which each one of them has developed, and to become aware of the conflicts that they have sometimes produced, as evidenced in the suffering caused to the victims of violence and terrorism. It sets out from the context of the diverse identities that currently exist in Spain, seeks out their historical origins, and aims to promote an attitude of respect and tolerance between them, as the following assessment criterion states:

7.2 Identify the historical origin of different collective identities that have developed in Spain, interpreting the use that has been made of them and showing an attitude of respect towards the different senses of belonging, promoting solidarity and social cohesion. (Royal Decree 217/2022, 29 March [BOE, 2022b: 41683])

In this context, concepts such as 'the richness of multiple identities' and 'shared multicultural identity' are used as an approach that proposes a solution, given the complexity of a topic such as this in Spain (Royal Decree 217/2022, 29 March [BOE, 2022b: 41687, 41689]). This approach is maintained in the high-school subject History of Spain, where the analysis of the different identities existing in Spain is added to the generic study of nationalism. This idea is summarised in the second specific competency for this subject in the baccalaureate, which is defined as follows:

Recognise and value the diversity of identity in our country, by contrasting information and critically reviewing sources, and becoming aware of the role it plays today, in order to respect feelings of belonging, the existence of multiple identities, and the rules and symbols established by our common framework of coexistence. (Royal Decree 243/2022, 5 April [BOE, 2022c: 46243])

## Conclusion and discussion

The analysis carried out on the two organic laws on education, one enacted by the conservative PP and the other by the progressive coalition government of the PSOE and UP, shows the existence of two different ways of organising education and defining the curriculum. The LOMCE established greater control over some subjects and a more rigid approach to their syllabuses, especially through learning standards. Although the structures for sharing jurisdiction over education between different



administrations were not modified, control was established indirectly over the contents taught in the classrooms. This can be directly related to the objective of ending the 'manipulation' and indoctrination with respect to this topic denounced by, among others, the conservative minister who led the effort in support of the legislation (Wert, 2019: 183).

In the case of the LOMLOE, the proposal is different and, although it is presented as a return to the approaches established in organic laws approved by earlier PSOE governments, it also implies a deepening of competency-based teaching, and all the methodological changes that this entails. On the one hand, the spirit of collaboration between different institutions to define the curriculum is re-established. On the other hand, this legislation advocates a deepening of competency-based learning, which theoretically implies a series of methodological changes in teaching practices in the classroom. The LOMLOE returns to the idea of establishing only 'essential' and basic contents, allowing teachers sufficient autonomy to choose, adapt or modify these to their respective school contexts, and to incorporate different educational practices more in line with their reality in their own classrooms. These two factors mean that, with regard to the teaching of history, the approach established by the LOMLOE is effectively a return to that which the LOMCE aimed to avoid. This, for many, has implications in terms of the way in which Spain's past is presented to students.

The differences between the two laws are not limited to the aspects mentioned above. The political contexts in which they were passed have also varied. The study of the debates that arose around these laws serves to confirm the existing changes in the political context and their influence in order to place a conservative vision of history as one of the axes of educational debates. In recent years, some elements that make up a conservative view of Spanish history, which might have been less widely disseminated, have achieved greater social and media coverage thanks to the use made of them by a party in its political and electoral activity. They cannot be considered a novelty, because numerous publications have presented many of the aspects of this vision over the years. Now, however, these approaches are more present in the public sphere, and they have a greater social impact (Batalla, 2021). One of the reasons for this process is related to the emergence of far-right party Vox in Spanish politics following its electoral successes in 2018. This party has put aside the reticence that other conservative political parties might have had to express these aspects publicly – to avoid any accusations of closeness to, or influence from, Francoism – and it has come to defend them openly and publicly. Moreover, it has resorted to a traditional vision of Spanish history that emphasises the struggle of Spaniards in defence of their nation and against their adversaries, both external and internal, as well as choosing events that are considered to be the embryo of Spanish national unity and identity, and in defence of Christianity against, for example, Islam. With this aim in mind, it sets out to recover and highlight Spain's history of great feats and national heroes. Among them, the figure of Blas de Lezo seems to have acquired special relevance. His struggle and personal sacrifice in defence of the Spanish Empire and against the Catalans in the Civil War seem to represent all the values of Spanishness that this party seeks to promote. It is a history at the service of national discourse, to show deeds that reflect the struggle for Spain and its unity. It is a history that also serves as a guide to the attitude that should be followed and maintained today in the face of the crisis situation that the country is considered to be facing. In this context, discussions about what history is to be taught to Spanish students has become more prominent in the political debate. This circumstance is related, indeed, to the debates around the idea of nation in Spain today.

The emergence of Vox has had a strong impact on the conservative ideological sphere, and it has provoked a struggle between right-wing parties to present themselves as the best defenders of this unity in a context considered critical for the Spanish nation as a result of the 'Catalan problem'. Hence, Vox has been the party that has most vehemently and clearly used the argument for the importance of the historical past in resisting the passage of the LOMLOE, both when justifying its proposed amendments and in parliamentary debates. The conservative PP has not demonstrated as much clarity on this issue, because its campaign has focused more on the defence of private schools, and parents' freedom to choose how and where their children are educated, leaving supposed indoctrination in the teaching of history in some autonomous communities as a less important issue. Having achieved a significant electoral result in the general elections of 2019, Vox made its position on the history of Spain, and its role within the education system, explicit. In a document released in 2018 containing one hundred measures proposed by the party, the eighth point proposes the establishment of a:

comprehensive plan for knowledge, dissemination and protection of the national identity and of the contribution of Spain to civilisation and universal history, with special attention focused on the deeds and exploits of our national heroes. (Vox, 2018: 3)

On the basis of these ideas, Vox has clearly expressed its view of the dangers that the LOMLOE represents for the unity of Spain. In its rejection of the entire organic law, Vox opined that the original draft 'violates the principle of unity of the Nation (art. 2 of the Constitution)', not only by exacerbating the absence of Spanish in Catalan, Basque, Galician and Valencian schools, but also because of the history taught in them (Vox, 2018). The curricular contents and textbooks for Geography and History used in some autonomous communities 'serve to indoctrinate students for separatist purposes, giving a biased and incomplete view of history, with an unacceptable lack of rigour' (*Diario de sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados: Pleno y Diputación Permanente*, 2020: 49). In this sense, the argument about the risks to the unity of Spain was explicit in the party's total rejection of the legislation:

(13) Because by not protecting and instead undermining the unity of the nation, the tendency is reinforced in certain CC.AA. [Autonomous communities] that the contents of subjects such as geography and history continue to be systematically falsified in their desire to indoctrinate students for separatist purposes. This is a bill of a weak and ineffective government, allied with separatist groups, which have the firm intention of using education as a battering ram for secession and the break-up of Spain. This is a legislative project that continues along the path of surrender to lies, racism and hatred of Spain. (*Boletín Oficial de las Cortes Generales*, 2020: 8)

This approach was also evident in Vox's proposal for its preamble to the organic law, in which it expressed its idea that education was one of the pillars of the 'unity of our country', and pointed out the pernicious results of the way in which history was taught in some parts of Spain:

Autonomous Communities taking jurisdiction over education has resulted in the use of these powers to advance in the construction of splinter nations, constructing fictitious accounts of the individual histories of those communities and erasing all reference to Spain. We understand education as a necessary means to guide future citizens in the necessary commitment to their nation and not in its weakening. (*Boletín Oficial de las Cortes Generales*, 2020: 310)

The legislative processes accompanying the LOMLOE have made it clear how the issue of the unity of Spain has become an important element in the discourse of right-wing parties, especially Vox, about education. It is difficult to imagine that this issue will be set aside in the current Spanish political and parliamentary context, a context in which the governing PSOE–UP coalition government needs the parliamentary support of Basque and Catalan nationalist and independence parties to govern, and is continually being accused of 'selling out Spain' to stay in power. This is even more the case in a context in which this question, the teaching of history, is directly related to the vision of the Spanish nation defended from conservative postulates. This controversy is not new, and it reuses ideas that have already been voiced in the past, including accusations of indoctrination and manipulation in the teaching of the subject. However, in the current Spanish political context, the dynamic has taken on a different character.

Debate about the history taught in classrooms is not new in Spain, and it has recurred a number of times since the beginning of the democratic period. However, as a working hypothesis, it is proposed that the changes in the current political context are influencing these debates, and that they are acquiring greater intensity and specific characteristics. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially following the economic crisis at the end of the first decade, many aspects of political life have changed in many places, including in Europe. The new radical right which has grown or emerged in many places during recent decades is one of the most significant examples of these changes. Some of the axes of the demands of this European right – presented here in summary – include a rejection of European Union institutions for their alleged interference in national politics, denunciation of the negative social and demographic effects of the arrival of migrants and refugees, a proportion of them Muslims, and a defence of a generic European Christian cultural identity. However, together with the above, the idea that the different nations that constitute Europe are its defining and constitutive element is important for this argument. This last idea has once again put state nationalism at the forefront of resistance to

ideas of convergence and union in European supranational institutions, and also resistance to nationalist movements that call existing nation states into question (Hermansson et al., 2020; Zúquete, 2018).

Another important aspect of the new European political context is that mainstream conservative political parties have begun to echo many of the ideas upheld by various groupings tied to the more radical right. This has occurred with issues associated with them, such as the rejection of Islam, immigration and refugees, and the defence of traditional values. The process by which the most ideologically centrist conservative parties have taken up these issues in their discourse, to regain the support of an electorate that has abandoned them for far-right alternatives, must also be taken into consideration. For this reason, many of the positions that until recently were limited to more radical and marginal sectors of the right have now acquired a greater public presence (Mondon and Winter, 2020; Renton, 2019).

These changes have led to debates about the nation and the teaching of history in Spain gaining distinctive characteristics. While many of the elements present in these controversies are not new, the debate has now acquired a greater presence in the political and social sphere. Until the early years of the twenty-first century, controversies in this area centred on denunciations of the manipulation of history as taught in the Basque Country and Catalonia. According to the complainants, the educational authorities of autonomous communities sought to use the teaching of history for the indoctrination of students, to nationalise them in a national identity alternative to the Spanish one (see, for example, Delgado, 2018). This criticism has not disappeared, but now other debates about how the history of Spain should be interpreted and valued have been added. The aforementioned convergence in the conservative sphere has led to the appearance of a traditional perspective on the history of Spain which emphasises and positively values the 'glories' of the shared past of the Spanish nation in public discourse. While this perspective did not disappear following the end of the Franco regime, it was limited to smaller circles, but it has now returned with greater intensity and presence. One example of this is the discourses around the discovery and subsequent colonisation of the Americas, which includes a rejection of the 'Black Legend', a historical reading critical of Spain's role in this period (Straehle, 2020). Requests made by some Latin American authorities that Spain apologise for its colonial past have been met by a response positively valuing Spanish colonialism, and highlighting its 'civilising' and 'Christianising' character. This type of debate has also ended up engaging with the presence of different versions of this history in classrooms.

This 'noise' makes positions around educational laws remarkably polarised, and finding a point of agreement seems almost impossible. This has been the case with the LOMLOE. From the beginning of the legislative process, the president of the PP, and some representatives from the governments of different autonomous communities from this party, indicated that they would repeal the law or begin judicial processes to annul it as soon as possible. For them, it meant an attack on educational freedom and basic rights. Representatives of the PP, protesting together with representatives of Vox and Ciudadanos at the gates of the Congress of Deputies of Madrid at the end of 2020, declared: 'the war begins' (Stegmann, 2020). Given the use of this 'bellicose' terminology, and the importance of the teaching of history, it does not seem that this topic will remain outside the realm of work in the classroom. This controversy reflects just how far Spain is from a much-desired educational consensus that would remove this issue from the arena of political confrontation, and help the work of teachers.

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## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

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