# Educational Segregation in Spain, Episode One: A Legislative Initiative Begins

*Equity Spotlight Podcast Series*

Federico Waitoller, Ph.D., MAP Center Equity Fellow – Illinois

## TRANSCRIPTION

**Federico:** This is *Educational Segregation in Spain, Episode One: A Legislative Initiative Begins*.

[Transition music]

*Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka was a landmark 1954 Supreme Court case in which the Justices ruled unanimously that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional. There's been many efforts to desegregate schools since then: busing, magnet schools, school choice, redrafting school boundaries. But the problem is stubborn and persist across time. Almost 65 years later, schools are as equally or more segregated than in 1854. I begin wondering what can be done to such wicked enduring problems, and many scholars and advocates and parents and students and politicians have been pondering and wondering about the same issue.

What people do when they have a problem they cannot fix? Some people ask other people, friends, families, neighbors, who had experienced a similar problem, and maybe through their experiences, we learn something new about ours.

**Federico:** Well, in this podcast, we'll do something similar. We'll ask a neighbor. I mean, a very, very, very, very, very far neighbor. A neighbor that is 4,700 miles away. In this podcast, we will fly the Atlantic Ocean to Spain, to learn about school segregation and desegregation efforts in the Iberic Peninsula.

This podcast series will not provide the magic bullet to fix and remediate school segregation in the US. I'm not sure what we're going to learn. But what I'm sure is that by learning about other places, dealing with the same issues, we will be able



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to enrich our conversation, maybe generate new ideas, and raise new questions, and continue this important debate.

Are you ready? Pack your bags, exchange your dollars to euros, learn how to convert pounds to kilos, a kilo is about two pounds, I tell you that, and miles to kilometers. Please do not forget your wine opener, you're going to need it. You ready? Set. Let's go.

[Airplane Sound]

Okay. We're here at The Parliament. Let's be quiet and listen.

**Sabin:** [Sabin speaking in Euskera]

**Federico:** Let me introduce you to this person who was speaking in the parliament. His name is Sabin. Oh, yes, yes, yes. I know. If you thought that what you were listening was not Spanish, you were right. I'm sorry. I kind of lied, maybe a pitiful lie. I mean, not a completely [sic] lie. When I tell you that we were coming to Spain, we did came [sic] to Spain, but maybe not what you expected. We are in the Basque Country, and this was the Basque Government Parliament. The Basque Countries is an autonomous community within Spain located in the Northern corner boundaring [sic] France. I mean, if you're in Google, go and check it out. Look at the picture, it's gorgeous. What you listen Sabin speaking was not Spanish, was Euskara, the Basque language. There's a lot of things to say about the Basque language, and language politics in this region is fascinated. And I will introduce this a little by little in the episodes to come as it's very important to understand the education system,



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but also some aspects contributing to segregation. But for now, just let Sabin introduce himself, this time in English.

[Transition music]

**Sabin:** I'm Sabin Zubiri and I am activist in a social platform in the Basque Country that addresses different social problems. For example, a school segregation and, for example, the big difference of electoral participation between different cities.

**Federico:** In 2017, the social platform that Sabin was coediting decided to take up an issue that was not much part of the public debate on the Basque Country: school segregation. It became to be known as the ILP, and people involved in it will embark in a year and a half journey to educate themselves and others in the issue, build reports, gather signatures, and at the end as you just listened a few minutes ago, present in the Basque Parliament to push the parliament to pass legislation that will mitigate ethnic and class segregation in the Basque Country. But let's let Sabin speak about his own work.

**Sabin:** The beginning it was when we organized a debate about school segregation, and after the debate, we consider that there was opportunity to make a campaign against school segregation. Not just a debate, but a campaign, social campaign.

**Federico:** So, who organized this original debate?

**Sabin:** A little platform, little social movement, Zubia Eraikiz, that it means "building a bridge."

**Federico:** Building a bridge, okay.



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**Sabin:** Building bridge. And we organize—usually we organize different debates, and we consider that it was an interesting debate. Some people of the movement were involved in the—in the educational system who were pro—teachers and public administrators of the schools and so that was the beginning. Yeah.

**Federico:** So, do you remember who brought this idea or how education came to the a—a—interest of this social platform?

**Sabin:** I would say that it was because one of the members, Gonzalo Larruzea. Gonzalo Larruzea, he writes a book about the Basque education—education system. So, in a part of this book, he analyzes the problem of the social education. It was not the specific—the specific start of the book. It was a different approach of the educational system but one of the chapters was about this problem. We could say that Gonzalo Larruzea was the person who—who begins with the idea.

[Transition music]

**Federico:** So, note that Sabin mentioned another important actor on this legislative initiative, Gonzalo Larruzea. So, I contacted Gonzalo and one Thursday in his lunch break, we went to a coffee shop, grab a coffee. And he taught me a lot about segregation in the Basque Country.

[Transition music]

[Gonzalo and Federico Speaking in Spanish]

**Federico:** So, the interview with Gonzalo was in Spanish, but don't worry, I'll translate a little bit for you. Gonzalo is a veteran in education. He has been for decades working in



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the Basque education system, and for the last 10 years, he was a school inspector. He has also written numerous op-eds in newspapers, and articles in newspapers, about issues in education system, in the Basque Country. And actually he was retiring. This was the last year that he was working. He explained to me that there were many teachers and administrations that had complained about school segregation to him. And due to his background in education, and Sabin interest on the issue, they decided that *Zubia Eraikiz*, remember that social platform meaning "building bridges," will take up this issue.

**Federico:** So, between Gonzalo and Subin—Sabin, sorry. The first step was to organize a series of public talks, invite research and activists who have done work on segregation, invite other experts in segregation in Spain, everything that they could do to educate themselves, and also to bring attention to the public debate and invite different stakeholders to get them interested in the issue.

[Transition music]

**Federico:** So, I think we need to stop here and ask a key question, almost an elephant in the room. This initiative brought by the social platform, *Zubia Eraikiz*, was in 2017, and something doesn't fit in this story to me so far. Was segregation never an issue in the Basque Country before? What about the rest of Spain? Grappling with these questions, I did exactly what Sabin and Gonzalo did: I went to talk to the experts and learn that to understand segregation in the Spain and the Basque Country, and compare it to the segregation in the US, we need to learn about the history of the Spanish educational system. So let me introduce someone who can help us to better understand this history.

[Transition music]



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**Xavier:** Hi, my name is Xavier Bonal. I'm Professor of Sociology, here at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

**Federico:** Xavier Bonal has researched and written extensively about the Spanish educational system, segregation in Spain, and the role of public private partnership in education that contributes sometimes to segregation. But let—let's Xavier to tell us about the history of the education system in Spain. Can you tell me about the history of the current educational system in Spain?

**Xavier:** Yeah, very briefly because it's a long history. But yeah, probably the most salient aspect of the education system in Spain, it has been its dual character. We come from a long tradition of having private education providers. It was—that's one of the characteristics. And among the main providers of the private providers is the Catholic church. So, education was in the hands of the Catholic church for many years, especially during the Francoism, because Franco delegated and inhibited the state from the provision of education and delegated into the Catholic church, its provision completely. That has had incredible consequences in terms of education inequalities, because at the very beginning, those that could afford to pay for education and go to private schools, they could get access to a very high-quality education. And those that were in the public schools and municipal schools could have access a very basic, and with a low level of teachers that were poorly trained. And that was one of the main characteristics of the system during the Francoism.

**Xavier:** When democracy arrived, things—things started to change significantly because democratic governments, they were really aware that the system had to change. The access to education start becoming highly democratized, and that changed completely the picture. And part of the demand, especially in the middle classes



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start changing from private education to public schools, the teacher training system changed completely, the buildings of a school also changed completely. So now the system is much more balanced, and if you look at the percentages of each sector now, in the whole country, we might have over 70% already of public schools, and only 25-28% of private schools—of students enrolled in private schools.

**Xavier:** What is true also that there is high divergence among Spanish regions. There are some regions that had much more tradition of private schools. Catalonia is a good example of that. The Basque Country is also a very good example of that. The Basque Country still has more private schools, students enrolled in private schools than those in public. Madrid is also a very good example of high levels of private schools. So, in a nutshell, that's more or less one of the main characteristics of the system.

**Federico:** So, to put into context, what years did the Franco Regime ended?

**Xavier:** 1975.

**Federico:** So, until 1975, most students were going to private schools, and the public sector was very shrank and with very limited resources, is that correct?

**Xavier:** Yeah. Not only that. I would say even there were—we had a clear shortage of school places. When—the—the—the law, the general law in education that was passed in 1970 extended education up to 14 years old, from six to 14 years old. Until that moment, we had a law from the 19th century that obliged compulsory education up to 11 or 12 years old. So just when this changed and the—and the age of compulsory education ended at 14, automatically there were 1 million



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children in Spain that were not going to school. And these schools' places had to be built. Actually, we have one important agreement in 1978, which is Pactos de la Moncloa, the Moncloa Agreements, that all the political parties of the democratic regime decided to agree to build 800,000 school places to respond to the shortage of school places. So, the problems were huge at that moment.

[Transition music]

**Federico:** To have another point of view, I also met with another Professor of Sociology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

**Antoni:** Hi, I am Antoni Verger. I am a Professor of Sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

**Federico:** Toni Verger also expanded on this history of educational system in Spain, with the roots in the military government of Franco.

**Antoni:** We have to take into account that Spain had a dictatorship regime until the middle of the 70s, and the revelation for 40 years didn't pay very much attention to public education and was not really investing in public education, teacher training council. With a transition to democracy, there was an opportunity to modernize the educational system, and there was a big reform in the year '82. So, and this reform was advanced by a progressive government. We had the government of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español for the first time. So, there were many expectations between progressive movements of pedagogy and so on, in having cover in, let's say, advanced educational reform to modernize the educational system.



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**Antoni:** However, that reform came at the same time then the big economic crisis. And this meant that maybe the ambition of the reform was, let's say, advanced. And in the end, the only way to provide education for the masses was to organize a public-private partnership between the state and the Catholic church. So, there was more investment in public education, but also the government considered that it was necessary to have the support of private providers to support public education. And this was a critical juncture in the sense that changed the structure and the nature of the educational system in Spain for decades.

[Transition music]

**Federico:** So, let's stop and think about all this. After the Spanish Civil War that lasted from 1936 to 1939, Franco took power as a dictator. His dictatorship lasted almost forty years until he's dead in 1975. Let's throw a parallel here: in 1975, the US Congress was passing the Education for All Handicap Act, what we know now as the Individuals with Disability Education Act, or IDEA. So, this is not as long ago as one may think. I was born in 1979. This story is recent. During Franco years, there was little investment in public education, and the educational system mostly relied on the Catholic church and parochial schools subsidized by the dictatorship. When Spain became a democracy after Franco's death, there was a strong commitment to public education. But the country did not have the capacity to invest in expanding public school, creating more buildings, training more teachers, bringing more materials.

**Federico:** In addition, there was a negotiation between the right and left parties. While the former ones wanted to support Catholic private education, the latter ones wanted a nonreligious public education system. The result of this negotiation and this lack of capacity was a dual system: public schools and publicly funded private schools



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that are required to follow national educational policy, and provide free access to all students. These schools—these private public schools—are called Concertados, because a concierto is like a contract, similar to charter school. So, we still have not answered our question: is segregation in Spain a new phenomena, or it always existed? Here again, Xavier Bonal.

[Transition music]

**Xavier:** Well, what we had until that moment was this system that is called subvenciones, which is kind of a bonification that the state gave money to private schools. But of course, that was insufficient for the costs of everyday life of these schools that charge fees, and the state never controlled the fees that private schools were charging to students. So private schools became immediately selective because only those students that could afford the prices could go, and also, they were selective in terms of who goes to my school and who doesn't go. So, in that sense, they could exclude poor children, they could exclude children from Roma minorities for instance, and that increased this dualization between public and private schools in the system very profoundly.

**Federico:** So even it was not study or there was not a concern of that point. I imagine there was—there were huge levels of segregation in the schools.

**Xavier:** Absolutely. Absolutely. We had class segregation very strongly. And also, in terms of adding minorities, because we have one particularity of Spain is that we had kind of ethnic homogeneity until the year 2000, more or less, when migrant waves from the north of Africa and from Latin America start coming to the country. But before that, the main ethnic minority in Spain was the Gypsies, Roma children. And the level of segregation of these kids was amazing. So, nobody wanted to go



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with these children at a school, with incredible levels of absenteeism, too. But if you look at only class segregation, you would find incredible levels of class segregation between the public and the private system. And even within each of these sectors, you could find different levels and different fractions of these social classes being enrolled in different schools.

**Federico:** And now we transition into segregation within this history of Spain. Can you tell me a little bit about the history of segregation in the country?

**Xavier:** Yeah. I would say we had already this kind of segregation, but that was not very much into the public debate because we assumed that the system had to be changed when democracy arrived completely because it was in its design, it was completely unequal. Actually, we—we had an important law in 1985, which is the law on the Right to Education. We even had to approve a right—a law on the Right to Education in which the state commits itself to look after the provision of public places for children. That means—that—the problem is that we don't have specific indicators of data of those years about the level of segregation. But it was clear that the level of inequality and we have indicators of inequality that show that the system was completely—completely unequal.

**Xavier:** When we go to recent years, then we have realized that the level of ethnic segregation, not only the level of social segregation, has increased very much in our schools. Because you have to think that one of the problems that Spain had with immigration was not very much the level of migrants that we have in the country, but the acceleration of their arrival. So, in the year 2000, we could have around 200% of foreign nationality children in our schools, and only in seven or eight years, we jumped to 15%. So, the change was really strong. So, that favored the process of concentration. Ethnic minorities that arrived to our cities, they start



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living together in the same neighborhoods and attending to the same schools. And there was no policy at all those years and the concerns about these aspects.

**Xavier:** It's interesting because in the case of Catalonia, for instance, there were concerns because of linguistic aspects, especially, because some of the members of the Catalan Government the concerns were how to ensure that these kids will learn Catalan, which is the language of instruction of Catalan public schools. And in that sense, they wanted to make sure that Catalan could be used by them and that favor it a little bit, some initiatives to be concentrate. But there was no specific policy, nobody regarded these as a real problem, because we came from a tradition of private schools, which means we came from a tradition of school choice, high levels of choice and that assumed that was a natural distribution of students among our schools.

**Federico:** So, it was more like a de facto segregation?

**Xavier:** Absolutely.

**Federico:** People would think, "Oh, we're segregated because people choose to go here and there."

**Xavier:** Exactly. And assuming very much that it's—it's up to them, whether they want to go to this type of schools or other type of schools. And because there's a very low critical level about economic discrimination, for instance. We had, for instance, in Catalonia, a long tradition of conservative nationalists Catalan governments that assumed that private schools would charge fees, although it was forbidden by law at that time. But anyway, they assumed that that was a natural thing. So, inspection never took this seriously.



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[Transition music]

**Federico:** I was also able to talk [sic] another Spanish professor, but this time from the University of Glasgow.

**Adrián:** I am Adrián Zancajo. I am a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Glasgow at the School of Education. And during my career, I have been working on education market privatization, but also in relation to educational inequalities and school segregation.

**Federico:** Can you tell me about the history of racial, ethnic, class or different kinds of segregation in Spain?

**Adrián:** Okay. So, it's important taking into account that Spain has a comprehensive education system from the 80s, even from the 90s. So, most of this segregation in terms of socioeconomic status is relatively new because all these people, particularly from low socioeconomic background, were out of education, in most cases, in the 80s. So, the most important, or the most relevant school segregation in Spain, for me, is the socioeconomic segregation and the segregation which relates to the immigrant background of the students. Of course, all of this is related to racial and ethnic segregation, but in the public debate, even the policy debate or in academic debate, the main focus is on socioeconomic segregation and immigrant—the segregation of immigrant students.

**Adrián:** So, in terms of socioeconomic segregation, I will say that the expansion of the education system put this on the table because many—many people, students from low socioeconomic background, enter or access the education system, and this become a quite relevant issue, how they were distributed among the schools.



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And in the case of segregation of immigrant students, this is a relatively recent new phenomenon because it's important to take into account that the Spain experience its first significant wave of immigration by the end of the 90s or in 2000, and this is a relatively new phenomenon in our education system. But at the same time was a very dramatical increase of the number—in a short period of time, of the number of immigrant students. And in terms of history, I will say that at the beginning, this was not problematized by the public authorities, and now it's becoming more, particularly in Catalonia, I don't know the case in other regions of the Spain, but particularly in Catalonia it's more and more a very important phenomenon in the policy debate and in the academic debate.

[Transition music]

**Federico:** So, segregation in Spain is a recent phenomena in the public arena and political debate. There was some segregation before, but this involved that most students from lower class did not attend schools, as there was not enough school capacity to serve all students. Since it's democracy, Spain has been concerned mostly with providing universal access to school, trying to expand their public-school network. With this beginnings of democracy, and as a result of the right and left party negotiations and the lack of infrastructure and capacity to provide public education, the Spanish government incorporated Catholic schools, and other forms of private schools, into the public network. In exchange, these schools were required to follow national educational mandates and needed to be free to the public. But also, as Adrián and Xavi and Toni explained, have also created new forms of segregation.

[Transition music]



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**Federico:** In the next episode, we go back to a legislative initiative. Sabin and Gonzalo and others can organize and build a report to understand the extent of school segregation in the Basque Country, and they begin a campaign to gather signatures, to be able to present in the Basque Parliament. Will the ILP be able to gather support? Will people and other social groups support them? Some people will think that segregation is not a problem. Others thought it was. And others didn't know it even exist in the Basque Country. All that and much more in the next episode of *School Segregation in Spain*.

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