



PLURALISM IN SCHOOLS AS A GUARANTEE OF NON INDOCTRINATION

JULY 2018

SÌNDIC

EL DEFENSOR
DE LES
PERSONES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Catalan Ombudsman submitted a monographic report on July 2nd, 2018, in which was tackled the hypothetical indoctrination within Catalan schools. The document addresses two fundamental issues: the approach of political controversy in schools following the complaints handled by the Catalan Ombudsman and the Spanish Ministry of Education as a result of the events of October 1st, as well as an exhaustive analysis of the content of textbooks, following a previous report from a Spanish entity that denounced supposedly indoctrinal material.

The report is conclusive: beyond specific situations that must be amended in the approach of the political situation in schools, **the thorough analysis carried out by the Catalan Ombudsman shows there is no indoctrination of students in Catalonia.**

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE REPORT

■ Instructions from the Catalan Department of Education on the approach of political controversy safeguarding pluralism

Need to incorporate in the instructions of the Catalan Department of Education the criteria and guidelines for schools to deal with the political situation (and other controversial issues), in accordance with the elements set forth below in the box.

Criteria and guidelines for the approach of political controversy in schools

Approach of the political situation in class

- The superior interest of children and adolescents and the exercise of their rights on equal terms should be the governing criterion of the decisions of the educational Administration.
- The school must be a space of plurality that welcomes students in their diversity.
- Approaching the political situation and the events that take place in the social context is part of the content of the right to education, which includes training in human rights to exercise active citizenship.
- This approach should be developed according to the age of the students.
- Children and adolescents have the right to seek and receive information, and this should be adequate, truthful and plural.
- The teaching staff can express opinions about the political situation, as long as they are framed in a personal opinion and have no contemptuous nature or are contrary to the norms of coexistence of the centre. Teachers cannot make derogatory or offensive comments about the opinions of others.
- Teachers should seek to create an environment in which all opinions can be expressed freely.

- Class work that contains political views of students should be framed in their right to freedom of thought and expression.
- Children have the right to freedom of thought and expression, not to be discriminated against by expressed opinions and the right to privacy if they do not want to express them.
- Students have the right to have their convictions respected and not to show them.
- Schools should not promote ideological or propagandistic manipulations.
- The teaching staff must take into account when there are children directly or especially affected by the political situation and must ensure the good atmosphere among the students and approach controversial issues in class in an empathetic way and respecting all the sensibilities to avoid any possible discomfort.
- The conflicts arising from the approach of the political situation must be analysed and also resolved in a positive way, through the mechanisms established administratively to this effect, not through the criminal way.
- The fear of the teachers dealing with the political situation generates the risk of restricting the rights of the students to express their opinions or to express themselves.

Strikes and class breaks related to the political situation

- Students have the right to make collective decisions regarding class attendance, as well as the right to express themselves and participate in public assemblies.
- Children have recognized the right of assembly and demonstration, in accordance with age criteria and with full respect for the voluntary participation. From high school, students can take collective decisions regarding class attendance, which are not punishable if they are the result of the exercise of the right of assembly and they are previously communicated to the school direction.
- Inform students about their right to express themselves as part of their training as active citizens. Asking them to make a responsible use of the right not to attend class, to understand the differences with a holiday, can be a good practice.
- Class breaks due to exceptional events to promote and strengthen the values of peace, tolerance and coexistence do not imply any irregularity and are part of the objectives set forth in the coexistence projects of schools.
- It is not irregular to make specific breaks of the school activity for the students, as long as the duration and periodicity do not alter the normal functioning of schools and, consequently, the right to education of children.
- Class breaks with protest content can be done provided that participation is voluntary, and provided that the participating students have, by age, the right not to attend class.
- The voluntary participation in protest events by the centres must avoid the stigmatization of the students who do not take part.
- Exercise of the right of demonstration or non-attendance in class of a group of students should not condition the right to education of other students who do not participate in this decision.

- This right must be exercised in compatibility with the right to education of the students that wish to attend the class.
- Teachers also have the right to strike and the right to assembly and demonstration, as long as they preserve the right to education of children.
- The right to education, as a fundamental right, should be specifically pondered in the decisions regarding the establishment of minimum services in the case of general strike calls.

Political symbology in schools

- Schools must avoid displaying symbols or identifying signs with the different partisan options, whatever they are.
- The installation of partisan symbology outside the school grounds, without the participation of the school community, is not the responsibility of the school's management.
- If the school's management detects partisan symbols displayed in schools, it must urge their withdrawal.
- Messages with political content that denote a certain position on the political situation, but that are compatible with the democratic values of peace, tolerance, coexistence and the defence of the rights and freedoms that inspire our educational system can be exhibited with the consent of the school board. Although they are not irregular, their controversial character may advise its temporary exhibition or withdrawal.
- The display of posters with supportive messages made by unions of students or teachers who, for instance, inform about strikes convened by these entities is protected, among others, for the right to information about the school community about the aspects affecting it (and which do not necessarily have to be shared), provided they are disseminated adequately and through the indicated channels.

Statements

- Schools cannot make statements that express a political partisan position.
- Schools can make statements expressing a political position as long as it is not partisan, and always respecting the school's own character and pluralism.
- School statements must respect the own character of public and concerted centres.
- School statements on strikes must inform families about the existence of the strike, the convening entities and the reason for the convocation, in accordance with the right to be informed.
- Members of the educational community, but not part of the Education Service of Catalonia, can express political positions, in accordance with the internal procedures established in each case.

■ **Teaching materials and spaces for discussion in the approach of the political situation in class**

Develop teaching materials to deal with controversial issues in class and facilitate teaching staff instruments to avoid the risk of bias and ensure that the approach is plural and not partisan.

Promote the learning and discussion of controversial issues in schools, as an element of cohesion and expansion of the culture of democracy and respect for human rights, in accordance with the recommendations of the Action Pilot Plan of human rights and democracy, projected jointly between the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

Promote the approach of political situation in schools, so that students can enrich their views, according to their age, as a consubstantial part of the training for an active citizenship and as an opportunity for the development of critical thinking, with full respect for the principle of pluralism, in which all visions can be exposed with freedom and respect.

■ **Dissemination of children's rights in the approach of the political situation (and other controversial issues)**

Guarantee children's rights, especially the right to freedom of thought and the right to freedom of expression, and also the right of not expressing their views.

Promote and facilitate the conditions to be able to approach these issues with full guarantees and respect for the rights of all members of the educational community, especially students and teachers.

Ensure the good atmosphere in class and the emotional well-being of children. The complexity of the political and social situation must not prevent the approach of the political situation in class, but it is necessary to be especially careful to preserve and protect the well-being of these children, always with respect and understanding the emotional tension that the approach of this situation may generate, and always creating spaces for discussion and dialogue that contribute to reduce this tension.

Ensure that children can express their political opinions freely, also in their work in the class.

Ensure that in all schools it is guaranteed that high school students can make collective decisions regarding the attendance in class without being sanctioned, and respect the will of the students that decide not to attend class and participate in demonstrations.

Ensure the right to education and the possibility of attendance of students that do not take part in the collective decisions of not attending class and establish minimum services in situations of strike, outweighing the the right to education as a fundamental right.

■ **Teacher training for the approach of controversial subjects in class**

Promote the training of teachers to tackle controversial issues in class, especially:

- Ensure a teacher approach that takes into account the circumstances of each class, each school, and the knowledge, values and experiences that students already have.

- Protect the sensibilities and emotions of the students and control the atmosphere of the discussion.

■ **Dissemination and promotion among the school community of the procedures for the positive resolution of conflicts through administrative channels**

In case there is any inappropriate action of teachers or students, guarantee the resolution of these possible conflicts according to the procedures established by schools, especially mediation, and if necessary, with the subsequent intervention of the students, Educational administration and the Catalan Ombudsman, not through criminal and judicial channels.

Guarantee the dissemination and use among the members of the school community of the complaints procedures available in the educational system to deal with issues, being internal at first instance (school direction, school board), external to the centre but of the same educational system (Inspection of Education), or external to the educational system (Catalan Ombudsman, city councils, etc.).

■ **Guarantee of non-indoctrination in the development of textbooks**

Ensure that the development and adoption of textbooks falls within the educational community, as in the present, in accordance with pedagogical and non-political criteria, while maintaining scientific and didactic rigor, without this task being affected or interfered with partisan disputes.

Supervise, where appropriate, the content of the textbooks to guarantee their scientific rigor and their compliance with the provisions contained in the study plans established in the legal system.

Continue ensuring the plurality in the model of curriculum specification in the textbooks.

Guarantee to the teaching staff the necessary training to foster the critical spirit among students in the work derived from the textbooks.

■ **Social responsibility in the discussion on indoctrination at school**

Tackle the discussion about indoctrination with responsibility, with the ability to correct certain irregular practices and improve aspects that are amenable to improvement, but without decontextualizing the contents and practices that are criticized, and without confusing the fight against indoctrination with the will to impose one way of presenting reality.

The Catalan Ombudsman calls on all the administrations and authorities of the Catalan and State Governments, to preserve the atmosphere of coexistence and educational activity without partisan interference or instrumentation, so that the right to education of all students is preserved.

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