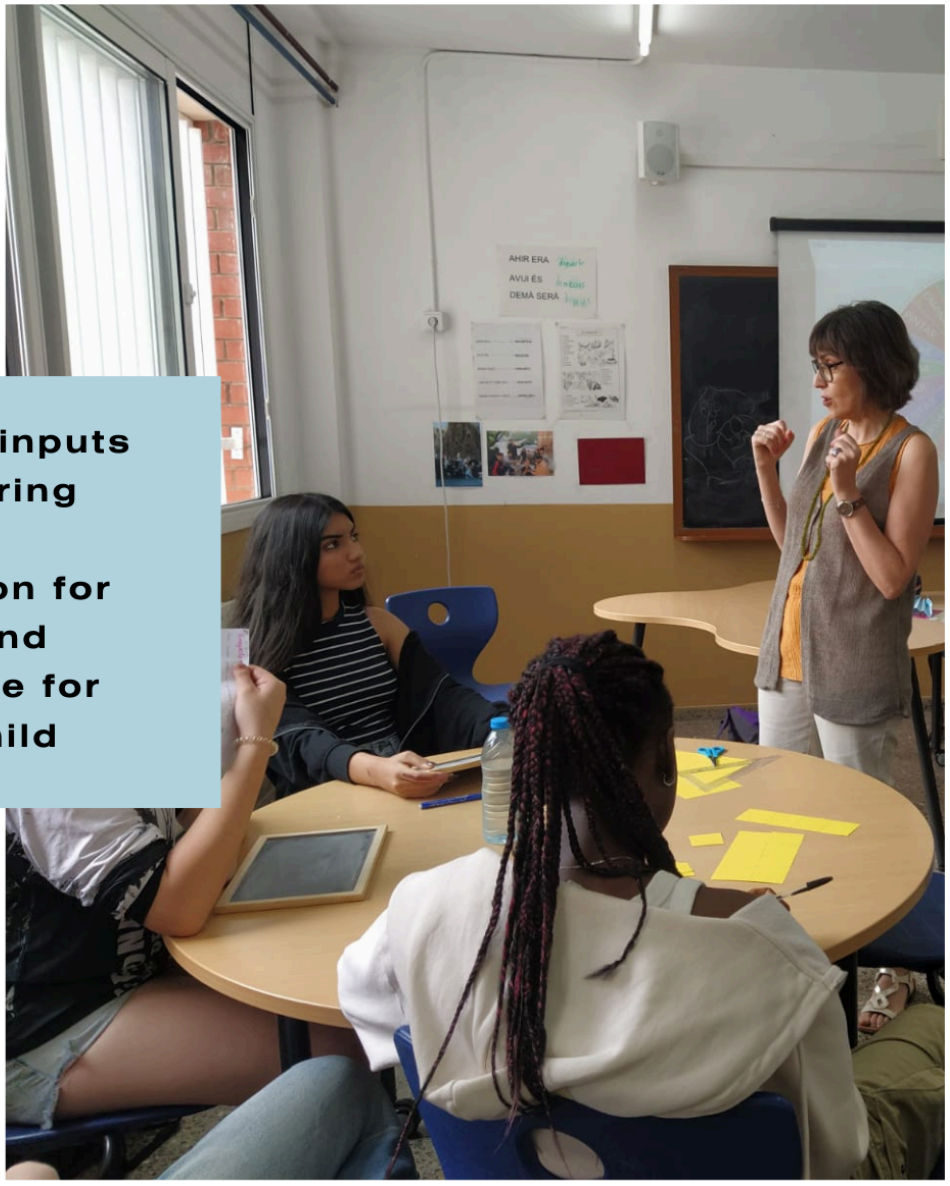
Ensuring quality education for the most vulnerable children in Catalonia

Call for inputs on ensuring quality education for peace and tolerance for every child



Photograph from Catalunya Plural

SUBMISSION
Prepared by the participants of the course “International Human Rights Protection” at ESADE, University Ramon Llull, Barcelona, fall term 2024.

Executive Summary

Call for inputs on ensuring quality education for peace and tolerance for every child

The aim

The research aims to identify the challenges and lessons learned within Catalonia's education system, regarding one of its vulnerable populations. Additionally, it seeks to showcase these by examining the relevant legal framework and specific case studies.

The findings

Catalonia's language policy prioritizes Catalan to foster respect and preservation as a minority language. However, this efforts may limit integration efforts within the educational system. Therefore, the education system should adapt to mitigate such unintended consequences while promoting inclusivity.

The most vulnerable children in Spain	The most vulnerable children in Spain are the Northern African immigrants, together with other minorities such as the Roma and Sikh people. Adapting to a new space and new culture is extremely difficult, specially at young ages, specially when you arrive to a new country, with not only one language to learn, but two.
The current legal framework	Spain's current legal framework mandates all children , including undocumented migrants, free and compulsory education under Organic Law 3/2020 , promoting equity and integration as a core principle.
The current legal framework: Catalonia	Catalonia is facing an increase in newly arrived migrant children. Through policies as the Pact Against Segregation 2019, the autonomic community tries to commit to foster social unity with its diverse educational environment.
The present challenges	Overall in Spain there is a higher concentration of immigrants in public schools rather than in charter or private schools. As a result, instead of there being integration and social cohesion in practice "school ghettos" are encountered, that exacerbate further isolation and exclusion of this vulnerable community.
The areas of opportunity and growth	The recent pilot test in Catalonia, to have accelerated "Aulas de Acogida" (Welcome Classrooms) exemplify the importance programs tailored to support students at an early age to improve cultural and linguistic integration. The pilot achieved positive outcomes, with 74% of students reaching an A2 level in five months.
The case of Catalonia	Catalonia's language policy prioritizes Catalan, but limited Spanish instruction creates challenges for migrant students, who often lack the support needed to integrate. Many struggle academically and socially, with failure rates significantly higher than native students, underscoring the need for more inclusive language policies.

This submission was prepared by the participants of the university course "International Human Rights Protection" at ESADE, University Ramon Llull in Barcelona during the fall term 2024. The participants were Carmen Ferrero Garcia, Maria Tolosa Tamarit, Isabel Marcos Dengra, Lucía Valldosera Solera, and Lucía Raso Paliza.

It is not easy to arrive in a completely new country, with a culture different from your own and traditions you are not used to. It is not easy to live thousands of kilometres away from home, to adapt to the new streets where you live and to unfamiliar customs. Nevertheless, it is even more difficult when, on top of everything, you have to learn an entirely new language. This is the situation of more than 2,000 immigrant minors in Catalonia, Spain.

As outlined in Spain's constitution, the country has **four co-official languages** alongside Spanish, one of which is Catalan, predominantly used in Catalonia.[1] Due to the rise of political movements within the region, **Catalan has become a subject of politicisation**, which has affected how the language is approached in educational and social contexts. Catalan is a vehicular language in schools, meaning it is used as the primary language of instruction, impacting both native and immigrant students. For migrants, **this adds an extra layer of complexity**, as they must not only learn Spanish but also Catalan to fully engage in the educational system and broader society. This dual language requirement can present significant barriers, especially in cases where academic resources are already limited, making integration into the school system and society an even greater challenge for these young newcomers. Catalonia's overall population is 7.9 million people, of which 1.36 million are foreign nationals, accounting for 17.24% of the total Catalan population.[2] More specifically, 23.9% of the foreign nationals in the autonomous region come from Northern African countries.[3]

The quality of education in Catalonia for immigrant minors faces notable challenges, especially given the demand for additional language support in both Catalan and Spanish. Despite efforts to integrate these students, academic resources, such as specialised language support classrooms and bilingual instructors, are often stretched thin. This can lead to **disparities in educational outcome**s, as foreign-born students may struggle to keep pace with the curriculum, impacting both their academic success and social integration. Additionally, the politicisation of Catalan in educational settings **can create tension**, further complicating immigrant students' adaptation and sense of belonging in the school environment.

The Spanish education system is based on a legal framework that has recently been modified. In 2020, the Spanish government enacted an amendment to the Organic Law 2/2006 of May 3, through the new Organic Law 3/2020 of December 29. **LOMLOE** has established a modification in the core principles of the educational system's framework, which included ensuring an inclusive, equitable and non-discriminatory education. Furthermore, **Article 81**[4] emphasises the correspondence of educational administrations to guarantee inclusive and equal access and schooling processes for vulnerable children to prevent segregation. Thus, such administrations must **adopt preventive and compensatory measures** in regions with high concentrations of vulnerable students. Additionally, to implement joint socio-economic initiatives with local administration and social entities, these must include extracurricular educational activities, mentoring and assisting for students in fragile situations and their families.

In spite of the legal framework established by the central government, the **role the different autonomous communities play** is crucial in making decisions that shape educational matters. This decision is established under the premise of adaptability for the different areas, as each has different

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[1] Spanish Constitution, article 2

[2] Idescat, *Población extranjera a 1 de enero. Por nacionalidad (continentes),* 2024, https://www.idescat.cat/indicadors/?id=basics&n=13214&lang=es

[3] Idescat, *Población extranjera a 1 de enero. Por sexo y grupos de edad*, 2024, https://www.idescat.cat/indicadors/?id=basics&n=10332&lang=es

[4] "BOE.es - BOE-A-2020-17264 Ley Orgánica 3/2020, de 29 de Diciembre, Por La Que Se Modifica La Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de Mayo, de Educación." 2020. Www.boe.es. December 30, 2020. https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2020-17264.

needs to address. Among the many competences the autonomous communities have, they are the able to regulate the distribution of their own scholarship and aid programs within the available budgetary resources and in verification and coordination of other policies to tackle educational disparities.They are also responsible for developing the programme that outlines the availability of spots in the various centres. Moreover, the educational administrations may form agreements with centres that demonstrate initiatives beneficial to their socioeconomic context, curriculum development, and inclusion of diverse students, with ongoing monitoring of results. Demonstrating how the educational system can vary across the different communities.

For example, Catalonia implemented the **Pact Against School Segregation in 2019** across most municipal councils, which was declared a decree in 2021. A document that involves enhancing education funding for guaranteeing a free access to education, the need to articulate the benefits of the available instruments, the development of a new decree on the student admissions process, agreements between local schools and approval of a protocol for utilising reserved places for a balanced enrollment and the promotion of good communicative practices with families, among other measures. [5]

Despite the framework presented appearing to provide quality education where peace and tolerance prevail in an increasingly diverse society, the reality looks different. Reality reveals a situation of isolation in these already marginalised communities, with **82% of immigrant children being schooled in public centres** in el País Vasco (and with a similar situation across other regions)[6]. As a result, social cohesion and equality of opportunity are under threat if these children continue to be concentrated and thus marginalised in these schools. Given that native Spanish children have gradually changed to charter schools, these public centres have become **"ghetto schools,"** diminishing the chances for integration into the local context. Experts have attributed this fluctuation in education registration preferences to the phenomenon *of* ***native flight***[7] , which entails native families responding to the incrementing arrival of immigrants by changing their children to charter or private facilities, as shown by **Figure 2 in the annex**. Consequently, this could erode the social commitment of these future adults who will be educated in an unrepresentative environment of their diverse society. Additionally, this effect also hardens the integration process of newcomers.

Therefore, the lack of proper enforcement of the well-intentioned policies aforementioned has led the State to create disadvantaged citizens" further excluding this group from Spanish society; according to the Living Conditions Survey published by the Spanish National Statistic Institute in 2015, the percentage of **immigrants living below the poverty risk threshold exceeds 52%** compared to the 18.8% of Spaniards[8]. Illustrating how this income division also translates into each group's available schooling opportunities. Furthermore, with increasing potential factors of social exclusion, it is harder for immigrant children to finish their entire pedagogic cycle, as illustrated by the school **dropout rate being as high as 30%**[9]. So, the question that prevails is who is responsible for creating these ghettos: citizens or the State? As Arantza Semprún[10] claims, a Spanish teacher in a

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[5] "Documento." 2021. Diari Oficial de La Generalitat de Catalunya. 2021. https://dogc.gencat.cat/es/document-del-dogc/index.html?documentId=893678.

[6] Azumendi, Eduardo. "La Escuela Pública Es La Que Asume La Inmigración, Pero Sin Medios." elDiario.es, February 3, 2018. https://www.eldiario.es/euskadi/euskadi/escuela-publica-asume-inmigracion-medios_1_2809174.amp.html.

[7] "Refugees and Economic Migrants: Facts, Policies and Challenges Edited by Francesco Fasani a VoxEU.org Book."2016.)https://giovanniperi.ucdavis.edu/uploads/5/6/8/2/56826033/refugees_and_economic_migrants.pdf#page=13. & (Coen-Pirani, 2011; Cascio & Lewis,2012)

[8] "Evolución de Los Ingresos Medios Por Hogar Y Por Persona Euros Ingresos Medios Por Hogar Ingresos Medios Por Persona." 2011. https://www.ine.es/prensa/ecv_2016.pdf?prm=ep-app.

[9] Femmine, Laura Delle. 2017. "El Reto de La Educación Para Los Niños Migrantes." El País, November 3, 2017, sec. Internacional. https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/11/03/actualidad/1509728546_634446.html.

[10] Azumendi, Eduardo. 2017. "'¿Por Ser Alumnos Inmigrantes, Pobres Y Estudiar En Castellano No Merecen Nada?'" ElDiario.es. March 5, 2017. https://www.eldiario.es/euskadi/euskadi/alumnos-inmigrantes-estudiar-castellano-merecen_1_3543556.html.

ghetto school, it is not reasonable that charter schools being financed by the State budget set barriers for immigrant children to access them. There should be a more equal distribution of students with different backgrounds among the education centres available.

As noted by the **United Nations Special Rapporteur from the visit to Spain in 2019**[11], "the academic year 2014/15, was not particularly helpful in terms of promoting an inclusive, tolerant society through education", highlighting how Spain can still make significant efforts to promote an inclusive and tolerant society through education, especially concerning that of marginalised communities.

Catalonia's language policy illustrates **two key challenges**: preserving a regional language within a national framework and managing the integration of a significant immigrant population. It was in this context that, since the 1980's, a Catalan immersion program model has been initiated, aimed at fostering linguistic normalisation, and ensuring that the graduates are both Spanish and Catalan speakers. However, nearly all subjects in primary education are taught in Catalan for the early schooling years whilst Spanish and other foreign languages are introduced later.

Be that as it may, this immersion model however, does model some **complexities for children of migrants**. Legally, there exists a law in Catalonia that schools must provide at least **25% Spanish lessons**, but research shows that this provision is rarely adhered to, as most of the schools still tend to use mainly the Catalan language.[12] This situation has especially adverse implications for migrant students, many of whom join schools without any knowledge of Catalan and are then thrust into a completely foreign educational language. The issue is aggravated by an **absence of transitional bilingual help**, as innumerable migrant pupils find it difficult to follow the lessons and interact with native Catalan speakers, thus hindering both their effectiveness in school and other opportunities to fit in socially.[13] According to the **2015 PISA report**, 32% of immigrant students in Catalonia failed to meet the minimum proficiency levels, a rate nearly three times higher than that of native students (11%). [14]

The immersion policy also generates conflicting messages regarding language use in Catalonia.[15] On one hand, Catalan is promoted as a public, fully functional language in official contexts. On the other, Spanish dominates informal and practical interactions. This dynamic can be disorienting for migrants, who are expected to adopt Catalan in schools and official settings but encounter a **broader society** where Spanish is widely spoken, often for convenience or familiarity.

To address the social exclusion and provide vulnerable children with the linguistic and cultural tools needed, various governmental bodies across Spain have created what is known as **"Aulas de Acogida" or Adjustment classrooms**. These initiatives, implemented in the early 2000s, differ across regions[16]. For instance, Catalonia emphasises Catalan language learning and emotional support[17].

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[11] United Nations Human Rights Council. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues on His Mission to Spain*. A/HRC/43/47/Add.1. Forty-third session, Agenda item 3. Geneva: United Nations, 2020. https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g20/063/88/pdf/g2006388.pdf.

[12] Pons Parera, E. (2009). *Lengua e Inmigración en el Estado Autonómico y en Cataluña: una Aproximación Jurídica*

[13] Onsès-Segarra, J., & Estalayo-Bielsa, P. (2020). *Integration policies of migrant children in Catalonia: Challenges and opportunities for change*. Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies, Series Historia et Sociología, 30(4), 629-642.

[14] Catalana, C. C. (2015). *Los inmigrantes en el sistema educativo de Cataluña. Barcelona; Convivencia Cívica Catalana.*

[15] Pujolar, J. & Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. (2010). *Immigration and language education in Catalonia: between national and social agendas*.

[16] Chamseddine Habib Allah, Mohamed , Alba Alarcón Cárceles , and Francisco Javier Ibáñez López . 2024. "Vista de Aulas de Acogida: Revisión de La Normativa Y Sus Consecuencias." Rieoei.org. 2024. https://rieoei.org/RIE/article/view/5945/4776.

[17] Generalitat de Catalunya. 2024. "AULES D'ACOLLIDA." *Servei de Suports I Recursos Lingüístics*, October. https://projectes.xtec.cat/acollidasuport/wp-content/uploads/usu2169/2024/09/Monografic-AA-setembre-2024.pdf.

In 2023, the Consorci d'Educació[18] launched **a pilot program, an "accelerated version" to improve the language competences** aiming for secondary level students (ESO) aged 12 to 16. In collaboration with the Escola Oficial d'Idiomes, the five-month program focused on oral comprehension, practical skills (how to use the metro or access the library), and emotional adaptation. The program included students from diverse backgrounds. Contrary to previous Adjustment classrooms, the students within the pilot test did not change between "ordinary" and "adjustment" classrooms. Moreover, the initiative used smaller class sizes to enhance learning. Results show that within this school year **74% of participants achieved an A2 language level**.[19] The aforementioned was assessed with specific tests[20]. The Consorci claims that absenteeism and a low alphabetization level account for a higher and more successful percentage.

Further research shows that children can benefit to a greater extent at a young age, before the age of 12, because of their **linguistic flexibility**. After the success of the program, plans to continue and expand the pilot program in the 2024-2025 school year are on their way. The continuation will specifically target Hispano-American children to assess the most effective learning methods and rhythm[21].

Critics of the initiative highlight the resource shortages in some areas of Catalonia which in some cases forced students to complete their lessons in spaces without natural light[22]. Teachers claim that such conditions hinder emotional adaptation. Additionally, there is **limited research** on the role of teachers and their qualifications. These are crucial for effective learning as they are responsible for the identification of key issues, facilitating interaction and explaining the curriculum. Lastly, students are often segregated in the "Aulas de Acogida" from mainstream classrooms during language instruction, which delays their integration into regular classes and **further reinforces feelings of isolation** and "otherness." **This complex language landscape calls for balanced policies** that respect Catalan's cultural importance while providing inclusive support to ensure that language becomes a bridge, not a barrier, for migrant students.

Catalonia's language policy highlights the dual challenges of preserving a regional language while integrating a substantial immigrant population. Catalan, an essential part of Catalonia's identity, is maintained through immersion programs that make it the primary language of instruction in schools. However, this approach creates barriers for integration into the educational system and society. Efforts by the government, such as "Aulas de Acogida" and accelerated language programs, seek to bridge these gaps, providing tools for smoother linguistic and cultural adaptation. To ensure a greater inclusion, further investment in quality education and support systems in Catalonia is essential to promote an inclusive and cohesive society.

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[18] "Qué És El Consorcio." 2024. Edubcn.cat. El Consorcio de Educación Barcelona. 2024. https://www.edubcn.cat/es/el_consorcio/sobre_el_ceb/que_es_el_ceb.

[19] Pellicer, Judit, and ACN. 2024. "Éxito En Las Aulas de Acogida Aceleradas de Barcelona: El 74% de Los Alumnos Obtiene El Nivel A2 de Catalán." ElNacional.cat. June 18, 2024. https://www.elnacional.cat/es/sociedad/exito-en-aulas-acogida-aceleradas-barcelona-74-alumnos-obtiene-nivel-basico-de_1237155_102.html.

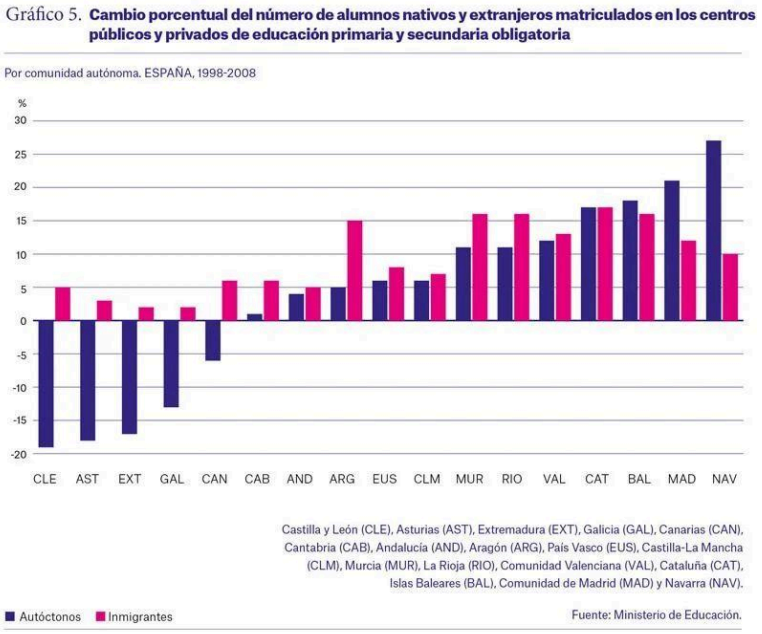
[20] Sánchez Merino , M. José , and Pere Mayans Balcells. 2014. "LAS AULAS de ACOGIDA de CATALUÑA (2004–2014)." *Departamento de Enseñanza de La Generalitat de Catalunya*. Departamento de Enseñanza de la Generalitat de Catalunya. https://img.mesvilaweb.cat/wp-content/uploads/sites/1984/2015/09/Aules-dacollida.pdf.

[21] Farreras, Carina. 2024. "'A Los Que Venimos de Fuera Nos Ayuda Hablar Catalán Antes de Ir al Instituto.'" La Vanguardia. June 18, 2024. https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20240618/9739506/venimos-fuera-ayuda-hablar-catalan-instituto.html.

[22] Vozpópuli. 2024. "La Generalitat Separará a Alumnos Latinos Del Resto Durante 5 Meses Para Que Aprendan Catalán." Vozpopuli.com. Vozpópuli. September 9, 2024. https://www.vozpopuli.com/cataluna/generalitat-separara-alumnos-latinos-resto-durante-meses-aprendan-catalan.html.

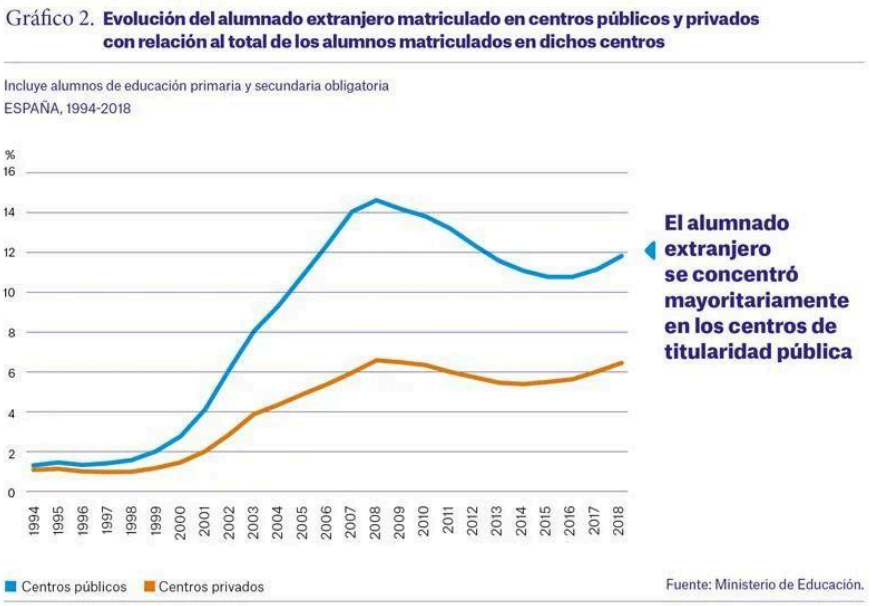
Annex:

Figure 1:



This figure illustrates the percentage change of immigrant children registered in schools within each region compared to native Spanish students within the same region. Showing how there is not an equal distribution among the different autonomous communities, being Aragon, Murcia and Catalonia relevant examples that stand out.

Figure 2:



This figure portrays the phenomenon known as “native flight”, whereby native Spanish children have gradually changed to private schools, while immigrant minors remain within public institutions and both of these trends grow in parallel. Particularly, from 2008 onwards when there was a greater influx of immigrants.