



© ELOI BONJOCH

A TOWN AS PRETEXT

SANTA COLOMA, A TOWN WHOSE POPULATION HAS MULTIPLIED BY EIGHT SINCE 1940, HAS ALWAYS BEEN A PIONEER IN UNDERTAKINGS IN FAVOUR OF ENCOURAGING THE GENERALIZED USE OF CATALAN, IN SPITE OF THE PROPORTION OF IMMIGRANTS, WHICH EXCEEDS 80% OF THE POPULATION.

JOAQUIM ARENAS | SAMPERA HEAD OF THE CATALAN TEACHING SERVICE

Careful reflection on the ground covered over fifteen years (1978-1993) of making the use of the Catalan language in the educational system normal makes it quite clear that rather than linguistic normalization itself, teaching, learning and use in the classroom, what is considered essential is the global educational project designed in the country—that is, the “Escola Catalana”.

The Catalan people, and the administration that serves them (remember that the administration is the operative part of the executive), has since the beginning of the century been shaping a model of education which

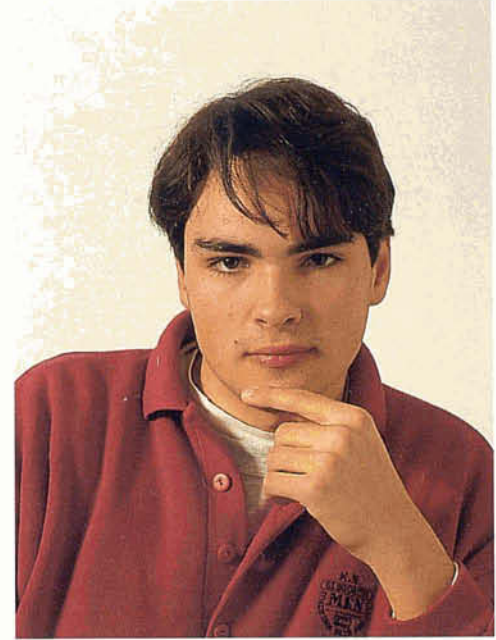
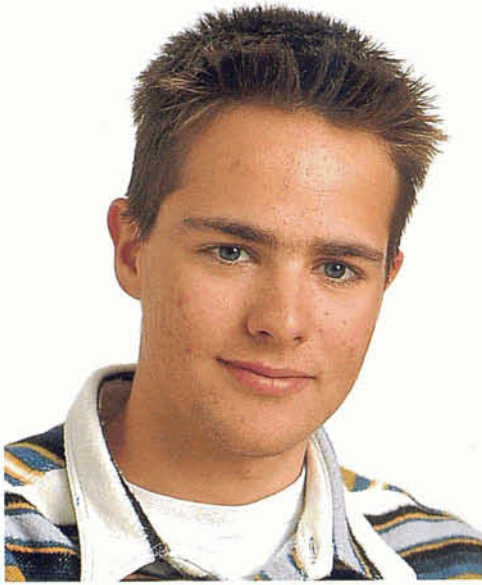
is characterized by the teaching language and by its contents, but equally by the way the school is conceived and by the educational approach.

Furthermore, the Escola Catalana, attentive to today’s educational needs, has been designed as an integrative educational project providing all boys and girls with the same instruments so that they develop under the same conditions, not making the language a source of discrimination.

Santa Coloma de Gramenet

An integrative education that compensates for social, linguistic and cultural

inequalities needs specific methodologies and human and material resources. In applying the Escola Catalana educational project, the best possible method was needed so as to be able to educate without separating, educate without discriminating. We mustn’t forget that each year in Catalonia almost 50% of the pupils entering the educational system are unfamiliar with Catalan, the language of the country, while on the other hand the rest know two: Catalan and the official state language, Castilian, or Spanish. The latter are the children of autochthonous families. Hence the “Linguistic Immersion” method,



© ELOI BONJOCH

in the form of a Programme, began to be applied in Santa Coloma de Gramenet ten years ago. This town, whose population has multiplied by eight since 1940, has since the first years been a pioneer in undertakings in favour of making the use of Catalan normal, in spite of the proportion of immigrants, which exceeds 80% of the population.

In fact, the request by pupils' parents for a school which at least educated and instructed in Catalan in the academic year 1983-84 was fully realised. Twelve state schools have offered an education in Catalan since then, eleven starting progressively from infant school and one completely new school entirely in Catalan: the Santa Rosa school which later became the CP Roselló-Porcel. Today, the town of Santa Coloma de Gramenet stands out for its normalization of education.

Let us take a look at the latest statistics corresponding to the 1993 school year. Of the 29 state schools, 28 provided teaching in Catalan; they apply the Immersion Programme (PIL) in classes from three to ten years. From then on they teach and educate in Catalan. Castilian, the official language of the state, is also taught. In most schools this teaching has now reached the 8th level of EGB. Only five have not yet reached this level. The private schools taking part, 15 in all, offer the following picture: five apply the PIL and ten do most of their teaching in Catalan, though not reading and writing.

In subsequent years, and in keeping with their linguistic projects (PIL) –consolidation of the treatment of languages in the school–, these educational centres will adopt immersion as the technical model by which to make the Escola Catalana a reality.

But what is linguistic immersion?

Santa Coloma de Gramenet has set quite a remarkable example of the achievement of objectives, of popular participation and of the joint efforts of local and autonomous administration, and, needless to say, in the dedication of its teachers, of whom 75% today have a good command of the language, which reflects a generalized wish to keep up with the times. Linguistic immersion, then, is a methodology, a bilingual teaching project for pupils of the dominant language. The person –child, teenager, adult– whose family language is not also that of his or her immediate environment and who needs to acquire linguistic competence in another language unfamiliar to him is the ideal candidate for linguistic immersion.

It seems obvious that immersion –when all is said and done, a learning technique for optimizing results– is not exclusive of any language or any age. On the other hand, for it to be successful, its application must be applied in pupils who are competent in their usual language and who, therefore, are unfamiliar with “the other” –in other words, pupils of the dominant language.

Is there, by any chance, any Catalan young person or child who is unfamiliar with Spanish? The answer is clear enough. And this is not only because Castilian, or Spanish, is the predominant language in the linguistic use of Castilian speakers in Catalonia, but also because, to a large extent, it still is for Catalan speakers too.

Immersion is for anyone who is unfamiliar with a language they need or want to speak and use. It's important not to confuse teaching in Catalan, as laid down by current legislation, with immersion, applied as a programme in Catalonia, and primarily a methodology as specific as it is universally recognized. Whenever linguistic immersion –the Immersion Programme– is applied, education and learning take place in Catalan, although we mustn't forget that it also includes the study of Castilian; but immersion is not necessarily involved every time Catalan is the official teaching language. Catalan schools therefore offer a bilingual education and with the new educational system (the Reform) a step is being taken to increase opportunities by applying plurilingualism. For the good of the society, without backing down, but on the contrary, with general enrichment.

The twelve pioneer schools in Santa Coloma have been joined so far by hundreds of state and private schools, with a single aim, that of improving services by the application of this great educational project we call the “Escola Catalana”. ■