

# Education • Cults

## Is There “No Construction Without Destruction”?

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Good afternoon. First of all, I want to thank the invitation for this Annual FECRIS Meeting, to present some thoughts on the theme that brings us together today: "Education and / vs Cults". I ask you to be patient with my English. I hope that the written text will facilitate understanding where my speech does not arrive.

I will speak from my experience in the last 20 years helping families and former members of cults as a psychotherapist and exit counselor. But also, from my perspective as a director of the Working Group on Cultic Derives (Official Psychologist Association) and clinical supervisor of AllAP association.

Beginning with the title of this year, the word “education” came to my mind in the sense of formal education firstly<sup>2</sup>. Next, I thought that this topic goes beyond just considering the possible presence of proposals or activities linked to a cult in the school context. In particular, the greatest incidence of cultic practices can be found in non-formal education<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The highly institutionalized, chronologically graduated and hierarchically structured educational system that extends from the first years of primary school to the last years of the university.

<sup>3</sup> Any activity organized, systematic, educational, carried out outside the framework of the official system, to facilitate certain classes of learning to particular subgroups of the population, both adults and children.

## Extreme Scenarios

History offers us several examples of how cultic functioning has led to interferences or irreparable damage to minors, specifically in the field of education. We can find those groups that slide towards death (Davidians, People's Temple, etc.), in which the educational project was completely destroyed.

But without going to extremes, we can jump to other destructive scenarios, as would be the case of the hundreds of girls abducted by **Boko Haram**, isolated, mistreated and sexually abused, living in a state of permanent fear of death and finally delivered as wives to those who decided to become militants of Boko Haram. It's impossible to maintain an educative proposal in a such chronic traumatic scenario.

But also, on another level, we'll find groups such as **Sociedad Benefactora y Educacional Dignidad** ("Dignity Charitable and Educational Society", aka **Colonia Dignidad**), the nazi commune in Santiago de Chile, so cultic in nature, in which the leader Paul Schäfer held the ultimate power, residents were never allowed to leave the colony and they were strictly segregated by gender, with other additional restrictions: mass media were banned, forced working, prohibition of sex, use of drugs as a form of sedation and severe discipline (beatings, torture) as a "spiritually enriching" procedure.

I would like to recount some particular cases that we have had in Spain in which minors have been very damaged. I'm thinking, for example, in the case of the trekking group **Edelweiss**, an organization that encouraged sports and children's contact with nature (as an extracurricular activity in schools), and ended up functioning as a cult where the leader had sexual relations with children under the pretext of being a "divine messenger". Here, the "educative project" was focused on how to initiate the minors into a pedophilic abuse.

Analogously, we could talk about the problems that happened in various parts of Spain with the communities of **La Familia (Children of God)** or even communities like the **Action Analysis Commune (AAO)** that had its commune in La Gomera. In both cases, the children were not schooled at ages that should have been and other abuses also occurred (sexual abuse, flirty fishing, etc.).

In all these circumstances, learning is not possible, due to the high levels of psychotic anxieties and the great distortion of parental functioning. The children are "educated" by other members, just inside a climate characterised by fear and paranoia. The "educational project" is concentrated around the guru. And what is introjected as an emotional experience is submission, contempt, rejection, non-thought and a mental functioning based on clichés and a significant splitting.

These extreme situations can give us some indicators about the risks of high level control environments of groups living in a comunal style.

But there is a gradation of control environments and intensities, with varying degrees of emotional and physical damage.

Anyway, I don't want to focus my paper on those extremists groups. I want to share with you some thoughts based on daily practice, in which we find different intersections between education (in a broad sense) and cults.

## **Formal Education**

Although it is a fact that in Spain some cultic movements have managed to introduce certain proposals in a limited number of public and private schools, *there is no study to estimate the extent of these practices up to date.*

With regard to schooling in Spain, some explanatory notes (because what seems clear is not always clear). From a recent survey carried out in 2017 by the World Association of Early Childhood Educators (AMEI-WAECE), it turned out that for 60% of Spanish parents thought that the obligatory education begins at a year and a half ... when the reality is that it is not until the age of six.

In Spain, the non-obligatory education levels correspond to children's education (from 0 to 6 years old), post-obligatory secondary education (from 16 to 18 years old) and university and equivalent education (from 18 to 24 years old). In short, obligatory education in Spain is between 6 and 16 years of age. Regarding the type of educational center chosen, the preferred one turned out to be the concerted school (45%), followed by the public (38%) and finally the private (5%); 12% acknowledged feeling in doubt about the final decision.

Surely, I will not surprised you if I say that in the context of formal education, traditionally, in our country, we have a **wide network of religious educational centres associated with Opus Dei (<https://bit.ly/2GVLGBX>)**, with a “differentiated learning” (by gender), arguing its greater effectiveness through nice and coloured statistics (The Science, the Statistics... are sacred terms today).

Opus Dei has about 35 educational institutions (primary and secondary), numerous centres and clubs for young people. Additionally, they have the University of Navarra, the International University of Catalonia (UIC) and the IESE Business School, among other institutions who offer educational programs.

The majority of charter schools that segregate by gender in Spain are linked to the Opus Dei (16 centres). Recently, they have begun to incorporate female teachers into the teaching staff of their male schools. The decision comes after the sanction of 50,000€ received by the Work Department for gender discrimination on hiring and professional promotion.

Equally, we also find the **Legionaries of Christ**, who although they have experienced a decline in their *clientele* as a result of the serious actions of Padre Maciel, have 7 educational centres throughout Spain and the Francisco de Vitoria University (FDV) in Madrid.

We could also mention the various colleges associated in some way with the **Neocatechumenal Way** or **Communion and Liberation**. Not too long ago, the Mexican group **El Yunque** developed extracurricular activities in some schools.

You will excuse me for the schematic of my presentation, but time forces me to a certain synthesis. The model of this type of centers it's based on the progressive introduction of ways of behaving and thinking associated with the organization, with an over imposed ideological patterns in contexts of emotional relationship with the other members, in order to prepare the ground for the moment of *to be of age (18 years)*, at which time young people are pushed to enter into the organization ("whistling"), after a long and insidious previous time preparing it.

The trajectory in these schools tends to define a main character, which I have been able to observe in my clinical experience, a character dominated by an important anxious dependence on the organization and obsessive-controlling mental functioning. From the religious point of view, far from promoting a religious commitment based on the autonomy of the person, a masochistic surrender is demanded in which the sadistic superego of the organization can end up imposing itself on the person.

In parallel, I have been observing a phenomenon in the last few years in my clinical practice: **the increase of accelerated vocations for cloister vows**<sup>4</sup>. The style of attracting new candidates by these young religious congregations, approaches them to the cult-like functioning, generating problems even among those families with religious backgrounds, who are the first to criticize the high-speed process and the secretive of it. In these cases, the group push to stop the studies (if they were started) or to recommend certain studies to be carried out, compatible with the interests of the congregation. I do not know if you have observed the same problem in your countries and I would like to know about your experiences.

Leaving the religious context, another area where we are observing the introduction of certain proposals linked to some cults, are the **procedures of relaxation and personal well-being**. I mean, as you can imagine, on the introduction of techniques or procedures based on meditation or yoga in school environments, with the important "trending topic" of mindfulness.

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<sup>4</sup> Although we tend to repeat that "cults are not exclusively religious in nature" and every time they are less, in my practice I observe a certain discrete growing trend of consultations related to religious-based groups.

Here, we found some proposals who depends through groups like **Sahaja Yoga, New Kadampa Tradition, Self Realization Fellowship or the Kundalini Yoga (3HO)**. Mostly, they offered this activities covertly and through teachers linked to the organization who use the school for a subsequent attraction to external activities linked to the group.

## **Extracurricular Education**

Beyond formal education, we can thought also on the proposal of extracurricular activities for schools.

In recent years activities related to "coaching" have also begun to be increase. We are talking about an activity that has been regulated by professional psychology recently, although this has not prevented the proliferation of numerous dubious workshops under that name. In some cases, with clear links with movements such as **Lifespring**; that's the case of the workshops of **4 Mar or Arquitectura del Éxito** (<https://bit.ly/2rDmJqi>), as I showed elsewhere in relation to the lawsuit that they filled against me (and that they finally lost).

Some of these activities have been carried out in private and in some public schools, as a way to promote their workshops among the adult public (parents).

Another modality of introduction in formal education environments has to do with the **attention to children with special needs**. In this area, there are also some proposals linked to **New Acropolis** through its program "Despertando sonrisas" (<https://bit.ly/2xhclo2>). Recently, New Acropolis came to perform some activity aimed at children at special risk, in the context of Residential Centres of Educational Action (CRAE), centres that offer the child or adolescent (0-18 years) an alternative resource to a non-existent family environment, deteriorated or with serious difficulties to cover their basic needs.

In this same area, the introduction of activities linked directly or indirectly to the **Kryeon** nebulosa and its "indigo children" has been detected in some workshops for children with ADHD or other behavioural difficulties, in the context of extracurricular activities promoted by some parents in private schools.

An activity that in recent months has generated some concern is the proselytising activity linked to memory courses **Genius / Your Trainers Group** (<https://bit.ly/2HRs6IX>), a group that, following its mnemonic rules, proposes a very intense emotional bonding with the whole group, which ends up becoming a "group of living" that requires a total identification with the company (leaving aside studies, going on to live with other members of the group, having to work long days, etc.). They carry out activities within the schools, they are always outside of them, attracting new potential students. Maybe then the Italian colleagues want to add something in the debate on this topic.

Obviously, groups like **Scientology** also deploy its Applied Scholastics programs in Spain through centres such as My Academy (<https://bit.ly/2jSexhD>) or Certare (<https://bit.ly/2IBzOu4>), to improve academic performance, achieve study techniques or develop academic potential to the maximum. It is also common for certain private centres in Spain to invade advertising campaigns, especially through their publications of the CCHR and anti-drug campaigns.

For not extending more of the time that I have assigned, again, I will be able to mention only some other examples. The **Insight Seminars**, linked to MSIA, continue to offer its format for children between 6 and 12 years of age, in a motivational course to improve the performance of the students.

Other groups such as the **Great Universal Brotherhood** organize their summer camps for children and teenagers, apart from their yoga classes for children.

Of course, yoga continues to be an area where various well-known cults have extended their proposals, as is also the case of the **Association for Yoga in Everyday Life**, which promotes their yoga courses for children between 4 and 12 years old, with the claims to improve the concentration of children, increase relaxation and obtain greater mental balance.

## **Alternative Education & Homeschooling**

The other interesting trend is the growing opening of alternative pedagogy centres, whose most obvious expansion revolves around the **Waldorf pedagogy** (<https://bit.ly/2LxmiGm>) and that at the moment has some 53 centres where they carry out activities with children distributed throughout Spain, with one of the islands in Spain where the training of teachers is carried out. The perception of families is that Waldorf Schools are an alternative educative system validated and at the height of proposals such as Montessori or other educative programs.

The other area where different proposals are converging is precisely that of homeschooling, a situation that at the moment in Spain is still alegal, but where clearly “new age cooperatives” and associations have appeared that would welcome multiple proposals. At the same time, homeschooling can be equated directly and wrongly to cultic dynamics. We must be careful. The same could be applied to “alternative practices”. Although many current cultic proposals can be related with some alternative practices, not all alternative practices are related directly with cult group dynamics.

**Homeschooling is estimated to be practiced in Spain between 2,500 and 5,000 families.** In Spain, as I told you before, the Law requires schooling from 6 to 16 years of age, although in practice there is a certain administrative tolerance towards homeschooling.

In Spain the Homeschooling Movement had its beginnings in 1985, the year in which a group of members of the **Vida Sana (Health Life)**, “a collective who worked to develop a biological culture”, rented a house in Bellaterra (Barcelona), which they assigned to the children's residence and some of parents who wanted to educate their children at home.

Following the teaching method of Freinet, they advocated that children “learn by playing and cooperating”, combining theoretical classes with practical classes in the school garden, theatre, dance, and so on.

The house of Bellaterra was open until 1989, when the Office of the Juvenile Court forced the parents to admit their children to public schools after appearing some public complaints about irregularities and a cultic functioning.



The community's ideal of playing education had been transformed into the demand to work for the community and the abuses had spread. In these moments, although the movement as such no longer exists, they have left diverse legacies, above all the Bio Cultura annual festival.

Within homeschooling we have been able to observe some proposals in the line of **Sant Thakar Singh**, where births are natural in the community and accompanied by the leader, while the children are educated by members of the tribe in line with the ideological voice of Sant Mat (<https://bit.ly/2wBEET7>).

In the case of home education, the **Doce Tribus** community is responsible for educating the children within the group, in a context where there are important deficiencies in health and education, apart from documented physical punishment (<https://bit.ly/2L0QQ22>).

Other groups such as the one previously known as **Sierra 21**, a cult of supposedly Jungian heritage -now operating under the name of "Los Portales"-, were always dedicated to maintaining an inner and secret education of their children. Now, they changed their ideological substratum towards the EMF Balancing, the Circles of Women and other similar activities. Education at home seems to tune well with discourses of the "Gestalt way-of-life", natural childbirth, Women's Circles, Internal Goodness, EcoAldeas, PermaCultura or other variants where we also see in the development of other groups.

## **Living in a Parallel World**

Undoubtedly, one of the most complex areas has to do with **the indoctrination from within the family itself**. I refer, above all, to the common situations in which the parents can be linked to some cult group but school their children in a public or private school.

There's a double education system: the school and another education consisting on re interpreting a series of facts to adapt them to the group's ideology. That's the common situation in most cult groups at the present.

On a general sense, we could see how all the cults approach children in different ways, and each one of them manages their own ideological system through their parents in parallel with the educational system.

Apparently, this is the situation with least impact (in comparison with another extreme situations). However, in my clinical experience a greater split is generated in the minds of children that does not favor intellectual and emotional integration.

Obviously, there are additional criteria to evaluate the risk over the mental health and emocional development (and education, of course), because not all groups functions at the same level and not all parents shown the same level of blind trust to all guru's principles.

There are other family scenarios so cultic, like the Turpin's family in California, "The House of Horrors", in which David and Louise Turpin allegedly imprisoned their thirteen children for years or even decades.

This case (and other similar cases) remembers me the classic Spanish description of the mother of **Hildegart**, "**the prodigy child**".

I feel that this cases sheds light on how education is in an ideologically closed context between two persons.

In that context, the "spider-mother" Aurora raised from his birth to his daughter (Hildegart) following strict eugenic rules, as a "scientific experiment", an experiment that led to madness.

The little girl, an "sculpture of flesh" of Aurora, read from the age of two, wrote from the three and at the age of eighteen carried behind her an extraordinary number of merits. Law graduate with an outstanding score, she had become the youngest lawyer in Spain and was studying two new careers: Philosophy and Medicine.

Hildegart was one of the most active people of his time in the movement for sexual reform in Spain, and was connected with the European avant-garde in that area.

Her promising trajectory was frustrated in 1933, when she was 18 years old and the mother murdered her, fearing that the deterioration of the relationship between them would distract Hildegart "from the straight path for which she had been conceived". Hildegart tried several times to separate from her mother, to which Aurora responded with threats of suicide. When Aurora saw that her daughter was separated from her, she decided to destroy it: "The sculptor, after discovering the slightest imperfection in his work, destroys it," he would say later. Aurora shot her daughter three shots in the head and one in the heart while she was sleeping in her bed.

If I have brought this vignette -beyond the differences with dynamics of cult groups-, it is by some common points between both situations. We can take this brief description as a *one-to-one cultic relationship*, if you want. First, we found the requirement of a complete adherence to the "educational system" received. Secondly, the two of them are situations in which the difference or the separation of the other's mind is not tolerated.

Third, a relationship of domination is established in which one seeks to purify the other (aka, projective identification<sup>5</sup>). Finally, the over imposition of the ideological system over biology.

In general, children education seeks to model the mind, to give shape on a ductile personality but with love and tenderness. *Cultic indoctrination (or folie à deux or à famille) seeks to sculpt breaking the stone into small pieces to give a new form, but these manoeuvre is not based on love, but on hate, envy and destruction of the different.*

It is probably in the case of adults in which we can think that Mao's maxim applies: *"it's necessary to destroy for building"*. The cultic (re)education on adults, seeks to remove or destroy the old elements.

In the case of children, they are educated from the beginning on a link based on the suppression of autonomous thinking and creativity (subjectivity, also). But, above all, in a type of relationship where parents are dependent on the guru, in a group climate of incest, paranoia and intense fear of destruction.

In the context of some schools linked to a religious group with cultic functioning, the process of "carving the soul" of the children will not respect the *natural tempo*. These schools will seek to make shape quickly: we will find young pseudo-adults. Externally, they will appear as "nice busts", but at another level they have been petrified with the organization.

In the context of education carried out from within, in the family nucleus (and attending at the same time a school that is not in tune with the group), the pressure on the split will be important and that does not favor emotional integration either. Here, one also learns to coexist rigidly in two separated and unlinked worlds.

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<sup>5</sup> "Projective identification" is a term introduced by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein to describe the process whereby in a close relationship, as between mother and child, lovers, or therapist and patient, parts of the self may in unconscious *fantasy* be thought of as being forced into the other person. Projective identification may be used as a type of defense, a means of communicating, a primitive form of relationship, or a route to psychological change used for ridding the self of unwanted parts or for controlling the other's body and mind.

Finally, the context of the child who lives in a closed community (or in a cultic family nucleus) is more complex due to the degree of isolation and rupture, which is often accompanied by physical and/or sexual abuse of the child under the name of “educative measures”. The patients that I have been able to attend who left such communities, in general, feels very disorganized, with deep fractures in their identity and many additional emotional complications.

## **Closing Remarks**

As time is limited, I want to give some general thoughts to share just before finish my short presentation:

- We detect some cases of cultic activities in public and privates schools of Spain. We should be more active in *educate the educators* to prevent the risk.
- In my professional experience with educators on this topic, it seems that we have an important task to do with the school management teams, since *the current perception by teachers is that “the problem of cults is something old...it’s something from the past...I saw on the TV many years ago”*.
- Although the introduction of cultic practices in the public school seems a phenomenon of low incidence at the present time, it would be interesting to work deeper on three significant areas: a) the education of educators, as I told you before, b) the education of school directors teams and 3) AMPAS’ (Associations of Mothers and Parents of Students) education as a preventive measure.
- We’re working just with the schools in a *model of diverse modalities of abusive relationships* among the students themselves, specially in group dynamics, as a bridge to connect with cults groups, as a path to give emotional resources to our students to identify cult dynamics.

- We need a extra effort to share all our experience in different countries in order to unify the data. Meetings like this help us to update our information on certain groups in different countries.

Hope that this short communication can open the debate.

Thanks to all of you for your attention.