

Narratives of Democracy: A Comparative Study of How Spain and Portugal Teach Their Transitions¹

Narrativas sobre la democracia: un estudio comparativo sobre la enseñanza de las transiciones en España y Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Transitions from dictatorship to democracy in Spain and Portugal reveal how schools confront authoritarian pasts and shape civic identities. Drawing on teachers' perspectives, this study compares curriculum focus, pedagogical strategies, and treatment of controversial issues. In Spain, the transition is taught superficially, limited by textbook dependency and idealised narratives of consensus. In Portugal, it benefits from stronger curricular integration and commemorative practices around the Carnation Revolution. Despite differences, both contexts need deeper critical engagement, multiperspectivity, and active methodologies linking past democratic experiences with present civic challenges to strengthen democratic education across the Iberian Peninsula

Keywords: Democratic transition, Spain, Portugal, history education, controversial issues, memory.

RESUMEN

Las transiciones de la dictadura a la democracia en España y Portugal muestran cómo las escuelas enfrentan los pasados autoritarios y configuran las identidades cívicas. A partir de las perspectivas docentes, el estudio compara el enfoque curricular, las estrategias pedagógicas y el tratamiento de cuestiones controvertidas. En España, la transición se enseña de forma superficial, limitada por la dependencia de los manuales y las narrativas idealizadas del consenso. En Portugal, destaca una mayor integración curricular y prácticas conmemorativas en torno a la Revolución de los Claveles. Ambos contextos precisan un compromiso crítico, metodologías activas y pensamiento histórico reflexivo para fortalecer la educación democrática en la Península Ibérica.

Palabras clave: Transición democrática, España, Portugal, didáctica de la historia, temas controvertidos, memoria histórica.

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Introduction

The study of transitions to democracy is a privileged field for understanding how societies process their recent past, build memory and identity, and transmit civic values in schools. The Iberian Peninsula offers a particularly rich comparative framework: Portugal experienced a revolutionary rupture in 1974, with the quick dismantling of authoritarianism and intense social mobilisation; Spain, by contrast, underwent a negotiated transition after Franco's death, marked by institutional continuity and agreements between elites. These divergent trajectories continue to shape public discourses on the past and make it especially relevant to investigate how such processes are currently taught in classrooms in both countries.

From the perspective of Social Science Education, the Spanish and Portuguese transitions can be understood as controversial issues. Their incorporation into curricula and teaching practices therefore requires educational strategies that go beyond closed narratives and foster multiple perspectives.

Within this framework, the main objective of this study is to compare how the transition to democracy is taught in Spain and Portugal from teachers' perspectives. More specifically, it examines the importance attributed to this period in both educational systems, teachers' perceptions of teaching materials and resources, and the possible persistence of stereotyped or idealised narratives in the teaching of this subject. Given the distinct historical legacies and curricular frameworks of the two countries, differences may be expected in terms of integration, criticality, and pedagogical practices.

To address these objectives, an ad hoc questionnaire was designed for use in both contexts, consisting of fourteen open-ended questions and five analytical dimensions. The sample was composed of 96 teachers (61 in Spain and 35 in Portugal) in Secondary Education and Bachillerato/Ensino Secundário, selected through non-probabilistic sampling. The analysis combined qualitative and quantitative procedures: thematic coding was carried out with the support of NVivo v.15, and frequencies were quantified to enable cross-country comparisons.

Overall, the study seeks to contribute to current debates on the teaching of recent and controversial history by examining how two neighbouring countries with different democratic trajectories approach this shared historical problem in school settings.

Theoretical framework

From distatorship to democracy. Differences between Spain and Portugal: past and present

The Iberian Peninsula offers a rich field for comparing transitions from dictatorship to democracy. Spain and Portugal both endured long authoritarian regimes during the 20th century, but their democratization processes diverged significantly. These differences were not merely circumstantial; they shaped each country's political, institutional, and cultural paths, with legacies still visible

today. Examining the contrasting transitions, the later construction of memory and identity, and the rise of the far right shows how history continues to shape current democratic vulnerabilities.

Divergent paths to democracy

Although both countries shared a peripheral position in Europe and post-war alliances with the United States, Spain and Portugal developed what Romão (2008) calls ‘Iberian uniqueness.’ Isolated from the broader democratic wave of the mid-20th century, their transitions differed in origin, pace, and character (Palacios-Cerezales & Fernández-Soriano, 2023).

In Portugal, authoritarianism collapsed abruptly with the Carnation Revolution of April 1974. Driven by military opposition to the colonial wars and massive popular mobilisation, it was relatively non-violent but deeply transformative: institutions were dismantled rapidly, and society entered a phase of radical political experimentation. The ‘*Verão Quente*’ (Hot Summer) of 1974-1975, with provisional governments and ideological clashes, illustrates this intensity (Fishman, 2011; Pinto, 2008).

Spain, by contrast, experienced a slower, negotiated transition after Franco’s death in 1975. The transition sought to minimize disruption, preserving continuity through the monarchy and elite pacts that included former Francoist actors (Miralles, 2015; Leivas & Kerangat, 2018). Democratization was less a rupture than a managed reform aimed at avoiding civil conflict and securing consensus (Pollack & Taylor, 1983). This ensured stability but limited structural change (Ysàs, 2010, 2024).

These divergent paths shaped institutional design. Portugal’s 1976 Constitution enshrined unamendable clauses to protect rights and embed social democracy, marking a radical break with authoritarianism (Botelho, 2019). Spain’s 1978 Constitution, though democratic, reflected major compromises that restricted some rights and preserved elements of the Francoist legacy (Álvares & Damásio, 2013).

Memory, identity, and unresolved pasts

The two transitions also diverged in how they addressed memory and identity. In Portugal, the revolutionary rupture enabled an open reckoning with authoritarianism and colonialism. The revolution became a founding democratic myth, celebrated as collective liberation from dictatorship and empire. This narrative integrated critical perspectives on the Estado Novo while reinforcing the emancipatory meaning of 1974 (Silva, 2019; Aguilar, 2002).

In Spain, the negotiated transition discouraged confrontation. The ‘Pact of Oblivion’ institutionalised silence about crimes of Francoism, reinforced by the 1977 Amnesty Law, which blocked transitional justice (García-Colmenares, 2020). Francoism, Rubin (2018) notes, survives not only in memory but also in infrastructures—street names, monuments, mass graves, and archives—that still shape daily life and politics. Casanova (2008) adds that memory has moved into the public sphere as a moral and social issue, challenging the Transition’s consensual narrative. Franco’s legacy continues to ‘govern from beyond the grave,’ influencing rulings, symbols, and debates decades later.

Portugal dismantled most authoritarian structures and wove critique into its democratic identity. Spain, however, preserved significant legacies, creating a lasting tension in political culture,

leaving injustices unaddressed and society divided. This unresolved memory continues to shape media discourse, identity, and polarisation (Hernández-Cardona et al., 2019).

Consequences for democratic culture

Different approaches to transition and memory produced contrasting democratic cultures. In Portugal, grassroots activism and broad participation during and after the revolution embedded participatory practices in political life. The 1976 Constitution safeguarded rights expansively, reinforcing a clear break with authoritarianism (Pinto, 2008).

Spain built a limited democracy where consensus and stability outweighed deeper reform. Reconciliation allowed elites to retain control and silenced many social demands. This ‘culture of silence’ normalized authoritarian continuities and weakened democratic awareness (Rubin, 2018). For Pollack and Taylor (1983), incorporating Francoist elites made Spain a case of continuity rather than rupture. Casanova & Gil Andrés (2014) argue that the negotiated Transition ensured stability but left residues of authoritarianism. The ‘pact of silence’ between UCD and PSOE avoided debate about the Civil War and Francoism, consolidating democracy at the expense of victims (García-Colmenares, 2020).

Since the 1990s, initiatives such as granting nationality to surviving International Brigades and exhumations by the ARMH reignited public debate, with international organisations criticizing Spain’s neglect of Franco’s victims (Bernecker, 2020). This led to the 2007 Historical Memory Law, which recognised victims, annulled Francoist tribunals, and ordered the removal of symbols—though conservatives saw it as ‘revanchism,’ and the left as insufficient (Bernecker, 2020). Memory has since become a political battlefield: President Rajoy cut funding for exhumations, while President Sánchez promoted resignification, including Franco’s 2019 exhumation. The rise of VOX and renewed opposition from the Partido Popular have further deepened polarisation (Bernecker, 2020). The Ley 20/2022, de Memoria Democrática expanded the 2007 framework, strengthening truth, justice, and reparations, creating new institutions, and explicitly condemning Francoism.

These cultures of democracy still shape political engagement. Portugal celebrates the revolution and democracy as interconnected, while Spain’s democracy remains overshadowed by unresolved historical conflicts.

The rise of the far right and youth radicalization

Despite different pasts, Spain and Portugal now face a common challenge: the rise of the far right and the radicalization of youth. This reflects wider European trends but is shaped by each country’s historical legacy.

In Spain, VOX has disrupted the party system, reviving ultranationalist, nativist, and anti-feminist discourses. It feeds on unresolved memory conflicts, presenting itself as the defender of national unity against separatism, feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, environmentalism, and immigration (Rodríguez-Gago, 2025). Disinformation and accusations of school indoctrination deepen polarisation (Delgado, 2024). Surveys show troubling attitudes among 18–24-year-olds: 12.3% consider authoritarianism acceptable in some cases, and 15% are indifferent between democracy and dic-

tatorship (CIS, 2023). Scholars link this fragility to the lack of critical historical education and the silences of the Transition (Magaldi, 2022).

In Portugal, far-right parties were long marginal, but Chega's rapid rise since 2019 has been striking. Under André Ventura's charismatic leadership, Chega rapidly became the third-largest parliamentary force. Its discourse blends nativism with populist anti-elitism, appealing to disillusioned citizens (Soares et al., 2025). Among young people, radicalization is explained less by nostalgia for authoritarianism than by distrust of institutions, precarious living conditions, and attraction to direct democracy. Research shows that negative emotions such as anger and anxiety, reinforced by reliance on digital media, are key predictors of support for Chega (Soares et al., 2025).

Despite differences, both cases show converging dynamics: declining trust in representative democracy, the mobilisation of negative emotions, digital strategies, and charismatic leadership. In Spain, the far right thrives on memory conflicts and cultural backlash; in Portugal, on a crisis of representation and legitimacy. Both reveal young people's vulnerability to exclusionary discourses, exposing the fragility of democratic resilience across the Iberian Peninsula.

Controversial issues

Elements present in Social Science curricula across countries can be approached in two ways: as means of integrating individuals into the social system or of fostering critical citizens. To cultivate the widely invoked notion of critical thinking, controversial issues are often employed (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Santisteban & Pagès, 2019). These are historical or current questions that provoke debate and have been described as 'controversial topics' (Stenhouse, 1987), 'painful events' (Ernst, 2008) or 'hot social conflicts' (López-Facal & Santidrián, 2011). Definitions vary: for López-Facal and Santidrián (2011), they are issues likely to spark confrontation, whereas Evans et al. (1996) describe them as problematic matters that generate disagreement and debate. Despite the disputes they may provoke, such issues have considerable educational value (González-Monfort, 2012) and elicit emotional engagement, making them a powerful resource for history teaching. VanSledright (2008) argues that addressing them enables students to view history as an interpretive discipline rather than a fixed narrative.

Promoting critical thinking is a central aim of European curricula. Yet this involves more than scepticism or argumentation; it requires the capacity to interpret information accurately (Noddings & Brooks, 2017). Including controversial topics motivates students by allowing them to defend their beliefs and moral commitments while reinforcing democratic values through the confrontation of ideas, argumentation, and consensus-building (Santisteban & Pagès, 2019). In this regard, Barton and Levstik (2004) emphasise deliberation and historical empathy as essential for forming critical, participatory citizens.

These issues are rarely universal; they are often rooted in specific communities marked by conflict, inequality, or discrimination. Experiencing trauma firsthand is not necessary for being affected by it, as such experiences can be culturally transmitted. Common examples include the

representation of ethnic minorities (Jiménez & Felices, 2018; Sanhueza et al., 2020), religious or cultural questions (Von der Lippe, 2021), the Spanish Civil War (Fernández-Muñoz, 2021), and gender issues (Triviño, 2017).

Despite broad scholarly agreement on their pedagogical importance and teachers' willingness to address them, obstacles persist. These include fear of students' emotional reactions (Ortega-Sánchez & Pagès, 2022), teachers' reluctance to express positions, and pressure from families (López-Zurita & Felices de la Fuente, 2023).

A clear example is the Spanish Transition, a controversial subject comparable to the teaching of the 'discovery' of America (Carretero & Kriger, 2008; Martínez-Llorca & Moreno-Vera, 2017) or the contested Reconquista (García-Sanjuán, 2020). A parallel can be drawn with the Portuguese Transition after the 1974 Carnation Revolution, which has also generated debate over how the Salazar dictatorship and democratization are represented (Palacios-Cerezales & Fernández-Soriano, 2023). In both contexts, the persistence of idealised narratives reflects an ongoing societal need to come to terms with the past (Eason et al., 2021), as though citizens were heirs to previous generations' actions. This often entails omitting injustices or excluding minority perspectives (Kadianaki et al., 2018). In this regard, research with Spanish and Portuguese preservice secondary teachers highlights the importance of addressing these issues through a rigorous disciplinary perspective, as it allows questioning elements often absent from dominant narratives, such as the continuity of people and institutions from the dictatorship, the violence and instability of the transition process, the analysis of its causes and consequences, and the persistence of stereotyped knowledge reproduced through school textbooks (Armas-Castro et al., 2021).

Alongside education and textbooks (Martínez-Llorca & Moreno-Vera, 2017), collective memory—reproductive by nature (Rodríguez et al., 2014)—frequently sustains glorified visions of national achievements, sometimes producing a form of national narcissism (Zaromb et al., 2018) and a widespread disconnection from historical reality. In this sense, Macintyre and Clark (2004) warn that the so-called 'history wars' reveal how curricular debates about the past are not merely academic, but also political and identity-based struggles over which narratives should dominate collective memory.

Curricular and legal framework for teaching the transition

Spain

Unlike Portugal, where the revolutionary rupture of 1974 directly reshaped school curricula, in Spain the incorporation of the democratic transition into educational policy took place in a far more controlled and consensual manner. This reflected the nature of the transition itself: a negotiated process designed to avoid confrontation and legitimize the new political system without fully breaking with the Francoist past (Morán, 2016). The 1977 Amnesty Law epitomized this logic of "no rupture," since it facilitated political consensus while shielding perpetrators of Francoist crimes.

The 1978 Constitution provided the legal foundations of democracy and was presented in schools as the cornerstone of the new order. Article 27, which recognized the right to education, referred explicitly to the “democratic principles of coexistence” (Constitución Española, 1978). In practice, however, this framework did not encourage critical engagement with the recent past so much as it promoted a narrative of reconciliation. Education became a central mechanism for reproducing the myth of a “peaceful transition,” minimizing conflict, silencing victims, and legitimizing the continuity of former elites (Aguilar, 2002; Encarnación, 2014; Baby, 2018).

The first educational reforms after 1978, LOECE (1980) and LODE (1985), introduced democracy as a civic value but avoided direct confrontation with Francoism. Emphasis was placed on civic harmony and rights, while the curriculum largely ignored the authoritarian legacy. In History and Geography, the transition was presented as a natural and almost inevitable evolution from dictatorship to democracy, with little reference to social mobilization, the persistence of repressive structures, or tensions surrounding amnesty and memory (Aguilar, 2002; Faber, 2018).

The LOGSE reform (1990) consolidated the Transition in the curriculum, particularly in Geography and History. It established the study of the 1978 Constitution, the democratic transition, and Spain’s European integration as key topics in Secondary and Baccalaureate education (LOGSE, 1990). Yet the critical dimension remained largely absent. Textbooks continued to portray the Transition as a model of moderation and consensus, emphasizing the monarchy, political elites, and the Constitution, while marginalizing popular struggles, trade union activism, and the ongoing influence of Francoist institutions such as the army, police, and judiciary (Fuertes, 2018; Magaldi, 2022; Tappi & Tébar-Hurtado, 2024).

Subsequent reforms, including LOE (2006), LOMCE (2013), and LOMLOE (2020), broadly preserved this approach by framing the Transition as a success story centered on modernization, democratic consolidation, and European integration. Controversial issues such as the pact of silence, the 1977 Amnesty Law, and the marginalization of memory movements were generally avoided (Encarnación, 2014). In educational terms, however, the Transition constitutes a controversial issue that could promote moral reflection and critical thinking through multiperspectivity (Santisteban & Pagès, 2019). Spanish curricula and teaching practices have instead tended to neutralize conflict and perpetuate the myth of consensus.

A significant shift began with the Law of Democratic Memory (Ley 20/2022) and the new curricular decrees (Real Decreto 243/2022). Expanding the 2007 Historical Memory Law, this legislation strengthened mechanisms for truth, justice, and reparations, created new institutional structures, and explicitly condemned the Francoist regime. The new curricula require teaching the Civil War, dictatorship, repression, and the Transition, with explicit reference to victims’ rights and democratic memory. This shift reflects increasingly intense “memory battles” in Spain and attempts to revise the consensual narrative long dominant in classrooms (Faber, 2018; Díez-Gutiérrez, 2014; Valls, 2009).

Historiography has both reinforced and challenged that consensus. Early works celebrated elite moderation and presented the Transition as a model for other countries (Preston, 1986; Santamaría

& Maravall, 1985). Later critical interpretations described it as an elite pact that avoided a true rupture with Francoism, stressed the persistence of political violence, and questioned the limits of the 1978 settlement (Ortí, 1995; Baby, 2018; Juliá, 2017; Ysàs, 2024). Yet these debates remain largely absent from the curriculum, which continues to privilege simplified and idealized narratives. As a result, the historiographical shift toward more critical interpretations has still not been fully reflected in teaching practice (Movellán-Haro, 2021).

Portugal

Even during the dictatorship, under Marcello Caetano, an educational reform was enacted through Law no. 5/73 of 25 July. This law reorganized the education system into basic, secondary, higher, and professional education, and established eight years of compulsory schooling. Its purpose was explicitly ideological, aiming to “stimulate the love of the homeland and all its values” (Lei 5/73, 1973, Base III, p. 1316). It also introduced, from basic education onward, the “teaching of national history and geography” (Lei 5/73, 1973, Bases VII and VIII), ensuring that compulsory schooling transmitted the nationalist values of the *Estado Novo*.

This framework was short-lived, since only a few months later the Revolution of 25 April 1974 took place. Even during the revolutionary process, the Ministry of Education sought to align curricula with democratization (Decreto-lei 203/74, 1974), reformulating programmes in order to eliminate the “serious distortions imposed for political reasons” (Desp. 24-A/75, 1975). These changes marked the beginning of a gradual reorientation of school curricula away from authoritarian nationalism and toward democratic citizenship.

Throughout the 1970s, History programmes were repeatedly revised, although the democratic revolution of 1974 only appeared explicitly in the 1987 programme, under the topic “Portugal and the colonies,” taught in the second year of Preparatory Education. Contemporary history progressively gained more room in the curriculum, and the democratic transition became more clearly defined in the early 1990s following the Basic Law of the Educational System (Lei 46/86, 1986), which established nine years of compulsory basic education and three years of secondary education.

The topic first entered the curriculum in the late 1980s in a limited form, focused mainly on the revolutionary process itself. The reform of the early 1990s (Decreto-lei 286/89, 1989; Desp. 124/ME/91, 1991) gave this period greater prominence by introducing the Portuguese democratic transition as an autonomous theme in the 9th and 12th years (DGEBS, 1991a; 1991b). This was a significant step, as it consolidated the study of the transition as a specific object of historical learning rather than a secondary aspect of broader political change.

In the third cycle of basic education, the topic appears at the end of the 9th year. Students are expected to understand why “important sectors of the Armed Forces” revolted against the regime, to explain “the popular support for this movement,” to grasp “the meaning of the democratization made possible,” and to “know the circumstances in which decolonization occurred” (DGEBS, 1991a, p. 78). Suggested activities included viewing documentaries about 25 April and the revolutionary pro-

cess or gathering information on local and central government (DGEBS, 1991a, p. 79). The programme therefore emphasized not only the causes of the revolution but also the political reorganization that followed, particularly the creation of democratic institutions and new forms of territorial power.

In the early 2000s, a new curriculum reform was introduced, although its changes were mainly methodological and left the content essentially unchanged. The 1991 programme remained in force until 2021, when it was replaced by Desp. 6605-A/21. Even so, the contents related to the democratic transition were preserved and expanded. The Metas Curriculares (Desp. 110-A/2014) stressed not only the revolutionary period but also the need to understand the “divergence of political projects in confrontation” (p. 29). Similarly, the Aprendizagens Essenciais reinforced the importance of understanding the revolutionary process, the establishment of democratic and decentralized institutions, and the consequences of decolonization (Ministério da Educação, 2018a).

In Secondary Education, the same orientation persisted, though with greater depth. The 1991 programme introduced the topic “From the Revolution to the Stabilisation of Democracy” emphasizing “the depth of the rupture operated by the April Revolution in Portuguese society, as well as its international impact” (Ministério da Educação, 2001, p. 53). It addressed the democratic revolution, the revolutionary process, the creation of democratic institutions, and decolonization, while the following theme examined its international significance, including its influence on the Spanish transition. Suggested activities included reenacting the 1975–1976 Constituent Assembly or organizing school commemorations (Ministério da Educação, 2001). Later reforms again introduced mainly methodological changes, while the current Aprendizagens Essenciais continue to include all contents from the revolutionary process to the 1982 constitutional reform (Ministério da Educação, 2018b).

Since the late 1980s, the democratic transition has remained consistently present in Portuguese History curricula at both Basic and Secondary levels. It has been framed as a means of “developing awareness of citizenship and the need for critical intervention in various contexts and spaces” (Ministério da Educação, 2018b, p. 5), while placing the 1974 Revolution “in the context of the country’s internal evolution and international framework” (Ministério da Educação, 2001). This continuity confirms the enduring curricular and commemorative significance of the Revolution in Portuguese schools.

Educational practices for teaching the transition from dictatorship to democracy

Spain

In contrast to Portugal, where commemorations of the Carnation Revolution are deeply embedded in school life and supported by strong institutional initiatives, Spain’s educational treatment of the democratic transition has been more limited and fragmented. Although curricular reforms since the 1990s have made the Transition a compulsory topic, its classroom teaching shows significant shortcomings.

Textbooks remain the main medium through which the Transition is presented. Studies indicate that these manuals reproduce a simplified and consensual narrative that highlights political elites, the monarchy, and the 1978 Constitution, while downplaying social conflict, popular mobilisation, and political violence (Fuertes, 2018; Ramírez, 2023; Tappi & Tébar-Hurtado, 2024). As Piazuello-Rodríguez and Bermejo-Malumbres (2025) note, this approach fosters an uncritical collective memory, hindering both contextualized understanding and the development of students' historical thinking. The topic usually appears at the end of the syllabus, meaning teachers often rush through or skip it due to time constraints (Valls, 2009; Díez-Gutiérrez, 2014). Consequently, students acquire a schematic and celebratory image of the process, detached from debates on memory and justice. Rarely treated as a controversial issue, the Transition seldom encourages debate, critical thinking, or multiperspectivity (Santisteban & Pagès, 2019). Teachers typically rely on lecture-based methods and avoid contentious aspects such as the Amnesty Law, the persistence of Francoist structures, or the limits of democratization (Movellán-Haro, 2021).

Commemorations and institutional initiatives have also been far weaker than in Portugal. Although anniversaries like the 1978 Constitution or the failed coup of 23-F are occasionally marked, they lack the broad educational involvement associated with Portugal's 25 April. Civil society groups promoting historical memory sometimes enter schools through workshops or external projects, but these remain exceptional.

Recent developments, however, hint at change. The Law of Democratic Memory (2022) and the LOMLOE curricular decrees have spurred new teaching materials, online platforms, and didactic guides incorporating the Transition into a broader democratic memory framework (Ley 20/2022; Real Decreto 243/2022). Yet research shows these resources have not significantly transformed classroom practices, where textbook dependence and exam pressure continue to sustain traditional approaches (Magaldi, 2022).

Portugal

Over the past few decades the topic of the democratic transition has been extensively studied in Portuguese schools, and it is common to design activities that combine learning with the preservation of memory related to this issue. Thus, and given that in recent years there has been intense preparation for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the April 1974 revolution, examples of how this content is addressed in 9th and 12th-grade textbooks are provided here, including the digital pedagogical resources produced by textbook publishers and some pedagogical proposals prepared by different Portuguese institutions.

School textbooks and digital resources

Textbooks from different periods (1986, 1991, 1993, 2002, 2015, 2024) show that the topics covered, and the proposed pedagogical activities follow a vision of a revolutionary movement that enjoyed widespread popular support on the day of the revolution and in the following months. Naturally, one of the objectives of the Armed Forces Movement was to end the colonial war, and the theme of

decolonization that followed 1974 is also deeply addressed due to its consequences on Portuguese society. Among the proposed activities, particular emphasis is placed on connecting the events with the present from a critical historical perspective. As mentioned in the current normative documents, this aims to help students acquire ‘a historical awareness that allows them to take a critical and participatory stance in society’ (Ministério da Educação, 2018a, p. 2) through the analysis of diverse sources that promote ‘the development of a critical perspective, enabling the deconstruction of information, identifying error and illusion, promoting conscious and democratic intervention in collective life’ (Ministério da Educação, 2018b, p. 2). Thus, thematic dossiers, preparation of exhibitions, and especially throughout the 1990s, a focus on memory through oral history are suggested. On the platforms of the two major textbook publishing groups, the digital resources presented are mostly audiovisual documents and interactive exercises for consolidating learning. The contest promoted by one of these groups, ‘25 de Abril, um Projeto de Liberdade’ (25 April, a Project of Freedom), stands out with the aim of promoting not only the project methodology but also ‘promoting creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration among students, taking as a starting point the values of 25 April’.

Institutional pedagogical proposals

As previously mentioned, many institutions have promoted activities related to the democratic transition as part of the 50th-anniversary commemorations. The government’s Commemorative Commission for the 50th Anniversary of 25 April has played a central role in this effort. Several initiatives available on its website include pedagogical proposals. Although not numerous, they follow a similar format: introductory texts prepared by the Commission and participants in the Revolutionary Movement, followed by primary sources that teachers can use in class. Three dossiers focus on the meetings of the Captains’ Movement, while another addresses decolonization through an exhibition on Amílcar Cabral, again highlighting the centrality of the revolutionary process and its influence on Portuguese decolonization.

The same website also provides pedagogical materials created by the Association of History Teachers, including a timeline of the revolutionary period and a range of documents for classroom use. As a topic of recent history, the democratic transition offers a particularly broad and diverse body of primary sources. Reflecting this significance, the 25 April Documentation Centre was established forty years ago, in 1984, within the rectorate of the University of Coimbra in order to “recover, organize, and make available to scientific research the valuable documentary material scattered across the country and abroad about the Portuguese democratic transition (the 25 April 1974, the preparatory events, and its main consequences).” Over time, numerous individuals and institutions have donated personal or organisational archives, expanding the Centre’s holdings.

As part of its mission to disseminate knowledge about the democratic transition, the Centre has produced pedagogical dossiers, travelling exhibitions, and educational activities aimed at schools. One of its most recent initiatives is 25APRILPTLAB – Interactive Laboratory of the Portuguese Democratic Transition, a research project funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology and developed in partnership with the Centre for Social Studies. The project presents “an online platform

about the history of the transition to Portuguese democracy – from the background to the ‘Carnation Revolution’ to the evolution of democratic institutions – aimed at the educational community.” Designed specifically for teachers and students, it includes ready-to-use activities as well as tools for creating new ones. Its main goal is to promote “the creation and construction of knowledge by teachers and students, encouraging dialogue and reinforcing the democratic convictions of new generations,” in line with the objectives established in educational policy documents for the teaching of History.

Another pedagogical initiative prepared for the 2024 commemorations was the exhibition 50XABRIL – Are There Still Stories to Tell? supported, among others, by the 25 April Documentation Centre. Beyond presenting the revolution’s antecedents and the projects launched during and after the revolutionary period that contributed to Portugal’s modernisation, the exhibition sought to engage different student groups with the history of this period through interactive and experiential activities. These included reconstructing fragments of personal stories featured in the exhibition or simulating what it was like to live before and after the April Revolution. To complement the event, the organisers also produced a pedagogical dossier to help teachers integrate the exhibition’s documentary sources into classroom learning.

Across the years and through various institutions, there has been a consistent effort in Portugal to bring the history of the democratic revolution into schools, generally from a critical perspective and taking advantage of the still vivid memory of that period. At the same time, this critical approach coexists with a view of the revolution as a successful and exceptional democratic process, as emphasised by Pedro Adão e Silva, then Minister of Culture, in one of the documents produced by the Commemorative Commission: “There are not many cases of revolutions – and even fewer triggered by a military coup – that immediately orient themselves towards the creation of a pluralistic and democratic society. We are fortunate to have lived through one of those rare cases, and I believe that is why the Portuguese people maintain a positive memory and a certain and justified pride in that date” (Neves & Martins, 2023).

Method

The main objective of this study (MO) is to compare how the Transition to democracy is taught in Spain and Portugal from the perspective of teachers. The secondary objectives are to analyse the relevance that teachers attribute to this historical period in both countries (SO1), to identify their perceptions of the teaching materials used (SO2), and to determine whether stereotypical or idealised narratives persist in the teaching of this topic (SO3).

To achieve these goals, a single ad hoc questionnaire applicable to both national contexts was designed, ensuring consistency and comparability of the data. The questionnaire was developed from a prior literature review and aligned with the research objectives. It was then linguistically adapted into Portuguese and distributed simultaneously in both countries. It included fourteen open-ended questions, from which five main analytical dimensions were selected to guide the subsequent analysis, although all responses were considered during the coding process.

Data collection was conducted among History and Geography teachers in Secondary Education and Baccaureate in Spain, and in Ensino Básico e Secundário in Portugal. The total sample consisted of 96 teachers: 61 Spanish and 35 Portuguese. In both cases, the same inclusion criteria were applied: having at least one academic year of teaching experience and having taught recently (either currently active or within the last two years). Participants were selected through non-probability sampling, with attention to geographic diversity and the heterogeneity of teaching profiles.

The analysis of the responses followed a mixed-methods approach. Initially, thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo v.15 software to identify patterns and emerging categories linked to the study objectives. These categories were subsequently quantified in terms of frequency, allowing for comparisons between national contexts. The data were interpreted in a contextualized manner and contrasted with curricular frameworks and existing literature on the teaching of transition processes in both countries.

The research complied with all ethical regulations regarding data protection and informed consent. It was reviewed and approved by the relevant university ethics committees in Spain and Portugal, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of the participating teachers.

Regarding the instrument's validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by a multidisciplinary team of experts in Social Science Didactics and research methodology from both Spain and Portugal. This review ensured the relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness of the questions. In addition, the reliability of the analysis was enhanced through double coding procedures and cross-validation of categories in both contexts.

Among the limitations of the study, it is acknowledged that, although qualitatively significant, the sample does not allow for statistically representative generalizations of the teaching population in either country. Furthermore, no disaggregation was made by type of school, specific educational level, or methodological approach, which could be addressed in future research. Nevertheless, the study provides a robust and rigorously designed comparative foundation for understanding similarities and differences in the teaching of democratic transition processes in Spain and Portugal.

Results

Presence and Importance of the Democratic Transition in the Curriculum

The first question examined whether the democratic transition, as included in the national curriculum, was given sufficient attention in classroom practice or treated superficially. Responses revealed a marked contrast between Spain and Portugal. In the Spanish case, the predominant response (65.6%) was that the topic is treated superficially or not covered at all: 'In general, it is taught superficially, especially among those teachers who rely exclusively on textbooks (...)' [T.18.Q.2]. Only 19.7% considered that it is given sufficient importance: 'Yes, it is present and yes, it is given importance.' [T.52.Q.2], while 9.8% stated that it depends on the specific course or context: 'In secondary school, practically nothing; in high school, a bit more, but only in recent years' [T.46.Q.2],

and 4.9% suggested that it is approached hurriedly due to lack of time: 'It is covered, but since the syllabus is so dense, sometimes it's impossible to get to it, or it's only touched on in passing without being able to go into depth.' [T.27. Q.2]. This resulted in a negative overall balance: a gap of almost -46 points between the proportion that valued the treatment as sufficient and those who perceived it as superficial.

In Portugal, the distribution was essentially the opposite. Nearly half of the teachers (47.1%) considered that the democratic transition receives sufficient importance, 'the topic is well developed and explored in the textbooks and curricula' [T.28.Q.2] as well as 'with the appropriate importance for the age level of the students' [T30.Q.2], compared with only 23.5% who argued that it is treated 'very superficially' [T.18.Q.2], or not covered, even though 'teachers have the autonomy to further develop the content' [T17. Q.2]. In addition, 26.5% responded that the level of treatment depends on the course or context, with various teachers stating 'In 12th, the program allows for a deeper understanding of the democratic transition, [...]. However, in the case of History in 9th grade, the subject is treated in a superficial manner' [T8.Q.2], while just 2.9% mentioned that it is covered hastily. This resulted in a positive balance of +23.6 points in favour of those perceiving sufficient treatment.

These findings underline three key contrasts. First, the balance of perceptions diverges, with Spain dominated by the view that the topic is handled superficially, while in Portugal the dominant perception is that it is given adequate attention. Second, contextual factors such as course, school, or teacher appear more salient in Portugal, as indicated by a higher proportion choosing this response. Third, the perception that the transition is addressed hastily is present in both countries, though more commonly in Spain. Taken together, these responses suggest that Spanish teachers regard the transition as marginalized in practice, whereas Portuguese teachers are more inclined to recognise its relevance and integration, even if subject to contextual variability.

Critical Dimension of Teaching Materials

The second question asked whether textbooks and other teaching resources treat the democratic transition in a critical way. In Spain, most teachers (63.9%) declared that materials do not treat the topic critically: 'No. It's a very aseptic version; there's no interest in engaging in debate or criticism.' [T.14.Q.3], with only 18% affirming that they do. Another 14.8% pointed out that the quality of treatment depends on the specific materials: 'It depends on the publisher. At my school, the publisher Vicens Vives includes the transition and provides interesting resources' [T.61.Q.3], while 8.2% provided answers outside the main categories: 'Obviously, not all ideologies can be satisfied.' [T.36.Q.3]. The prevailing perception in Spain is thus one of absence of critical engagement in the resources typically used in secondary education.

In Portugal, while the largest group of respondents also judged the materials as lacking critical treatment (47.1%), for instance 'textbooks are overly simplistic, for example, in comparing the political and social views that the main political groups and actors had during the revolutionary process' [T.8.Q.3], this figure is considerably lower than in Spain. Importantly, 32.4% of Portuguese teachers stated that the materials do offer a critical perspective, almost double the percentage

found in Spain, but specifically stating that ‘It is up to the teacher to select those that allow for a more critical dimension’ [T.3.Q.3]. A further 5.9% argued that the quality of critical engagement depends on the resource, and 14.7% gave varied responses that reflect a wider spread of perceptions. In general, Portuguese teachers believe that it is up to teachers to select materials that promote critical thinking, but that, on the other hand, there is not enough time to explore everything properly. In addition, some consider that there is still a lack of contemporary documentation that would allow for alternative approaches and a comparison of perspectives.

These results point to a consistent pattern: both countries register dissatisfaction with the critical depth of teaching materials, but Portuguese teachers are more likely to identify positive examples of critical engagement, and their answers show greater diversity. In Spain, by contrast, the responses are more uniformly negative, suggesting a greater need for curricular and editorial reform to support more critical and pluralistic representations of the democratic transition.

Enduring Narratives in History Teaching

The third question explored whether certain enduring topics or clichés about the transition continue to appear in the teaching of history. In Spain, the most frequently cited element was the idealization of the transition, identified by 44.3% of teachers. This demonstrates the continued dominance of a celebratory narrative that presents the transition as a consensual and exemplary process: ‘The transition as a unanimous, peaceful, and exemplary process.’ [T9.Q.4], highlighting especially some of its figures such as Adolfo Suárez: ‘(...) the role of Adolfo Suárez (...)’ [T.15.Q.4] or King Juan Carlos I: ‘The King was one of the main architects of the arrival of democracy.’ [T.8. Q.4], or the absence of violence: ‘The peaceful transition, as if ETA, the GRAPO, or Terra Lliure had nothing to do with it.’ [T.23.Q.4] An additional 8.2% of respondents highlighted the concealment of the Francoist past or its portrayal as something easily overcome, which further underscores the persistence of an uncritical account: ‘Yes. Concealment of the coup d’état and of the dictator’s atrocious personal traits. Complete family silencing of the victims out of shame.’ [T.1.Q.4]. Meanwhile, 14.8% of teachers offered negative or dismissive reactions to the question, and 32.8% provided ambiguous or non-committal responses: ‘There are clichés in every subject. This is widespread.’ [T.58.Q.4].

In Portugal, the pattern was different. Only 20.6% pointed to the idealization of the transition, because ‘there is a feeling that we have moved on from the dreamlike moment of April 25, 1974, to the Constitution of 1976’ [T.5.Q.4] or that ‘everything was bad before and then everything was good’ [T.31.Q.4], a much lower proportion than in Spain. Instead, 23.5% gave negative answers, stating that ‘the information is presented in a scientific manner’ [T.2.Q.4], and 17.6% identified simplification of the historical account as a problem [T.11.Q.4]—an issue not cited in Spain. This last point reveals particular concern with the reduction of complex political and social processes to overly simple narratives. Significantly, no Portuguese teachers indicated concealment of the dictatorship as a persistent topic. Ambiguous responses were also frequent (38.2%), as Spain, reflecting both the difficulty of identifying dominant clichés and the coexistence of multiple teaching approaches.

Overall, the Spanish results illustrate the persistence of a hegemonic, idealised account of the transition, while Portuguese results highlight a tendency to question prevailing narratives, particularly regarding oversimplification.

Classroom and School Activities

The fourth question asked whether teachers recalled specific activities carried out in their classes or schools on the theme of the democratic transition. The answers revealed one of the starkest contrasts in the study. In Spain, 44.3% of teachers stated that no such activities had been undertaken. Another 36.1% gave ambiguous or vague answers: 'Issues related to historical memory' [T.25.Q.5], which suggests either uncertainty or reluctance to identify activities as relevant to the transition. Only 19.7% recalled specific activities, making them a minority experience in Spanish schools: 'I have been implementing a project in 10th grade for several years (...)' [T.35.Q5].

By contrast, in Portugal 76.5% of teachers reported having organized or participated in specific activities on the transition, such as 'Ask your grandparents', where students interviewed their own grandparents about the period before, during, and after April 25, creating interviews in written and/or multimedia formats.' [T.3.Q5], 'Posters about where we, the teachers, were on April 25 and what significance that day had for each of us. The students had to read the posters and try to identify their teachers. It was a way of bringing the topic into all the classrooms. Recently, with the 50th anniversary celebrations, we held exhibitions and debates on 'April democracy today.' [T.10.Q.5], 'Sending commemorative postcards of April 25 (designed and written by the students) to the president of the regional government, reminding him that autonomy comes from the democratization of the country.' [T.19.Q.5] or 'a videoconference with one of the captains of April, on the 50th anniversary of April 25, 1974.' [T.25.Q.5]. Only 14.7% denied such activities had taken place, and 8.8% gave ambiguous answers, like 'various lectures' [T.4. Q.5], 'debates' [T.24.Q.5] or 'watching videos' [T.2.Q.5]. These data show that in Portugal the transition has a far greater presence in school practice, not merely as curriculum content but as a theme for experiential and participatory activities.

This divergence suggests structural differences. In Spain, the transition is often confined to textbook treatment and lacks translation into active methodologies. In Portugal, the topic is much more embedded in classroom practice, reinforcing its visibility and pedagogical importance.

Importance for Student Formation

The fifth question addressed the degree of importance attributed to the transition for the general formation of students. Both countries displayed high levels of recognition, though with different intensities. In Spain, 73.8% considered it very important: 'Very important, it is a decisive aspect of our recent past that explains our present.' [T.40.Q.6], 6.6% judged it important but complementary, and another 6.6% stated it was not especially important: '(...)I don't think it should be given more importance than other processes or historical events either.' [T.59.Q.6]. A further 13.1% of responses could not be classified.

In Portugal, the consensus was even stronger. Nearly nine in ten teachers (88.2%) rated the topic as very important, especially because 'it is essential that students finish with a wealth of knowledge that allows them to be critical, conscious, informed, and proactive citizens.' [T.3.Q.6.], 'it can enable them to work on democratic values, which are fundamental to the consolidation and defence of democracy.' [T.11.Q.6] and 'so that they have a critical spirit and knowledge and do not adhere to populism, among other aspects that endanger democracy.' [T.15.Q.6], while 5.9% said it was complementary and another 5.9% provided non-classifiable answers. Notably, no Portuguese teacher considered the transition unimportant.

Thus, while both countries view the transition as essential for student education, Portuguese teachers displayed a greater degree of unanimity, with no dissenting voices minimizing its significance. Spanish teachers also expressed strong support, though a small minority assigned it secondary or limited value.

Relevance for Adult Life

The sixth question asked teachers what value learning about the transition might have for students in their adult lives. In Spain, the responses highlighted a broad range of contributions. The most frequently cited was the development of political awareness (63.9%): 'To be aware of the importance of a democratic system and a state of law' [T.57.Q.7], followed by fostering democratic values and coexistence (54.1%): 'Fundamental. Because it connects with the problems of a polarized society in its inability to return to the past.' [T.25.Q.7]. Historical understanding was mentioned by 49.2%: 'To understand where we come from and the current situation.' [T.22.Q.7], and critical thinking by 45.9%: 'To be citizens who do not allow themselves to be manipulated or deceived in other historical processes and to take part in democracy.' [T.49.Q.7]. These figures reveal that Spanish teachers consider the transition a multifaceted educational resource, with potential to shape civic consciousness, ethical reflection, and intellectual skills.

In Portugal, the same categories appeared but with markedly lower percentages. Political awareness was cited by 29.4%, stating its importance in 'making informed choices in their political options' [T.1.Q.7], critical thinking by 26.5%, who state that it helps them 'to think before acting, before being manipulated, before being used' [T.13. Q.7], 23.5% state that it stated democratic values, 'that keep them away from extremist programmes' [T.16.Q.7], and historical understanding by 14.7% as 'it can be useful because it allows us to better understand the present' [T.20.Q.7] and 'this knowledge is as important as the purpose of the subject of history' [T.34.Q.7]. Other responses were minimal. This distribution suggests that Portuguese teachers see the transition as useful, but attribute to it a narrower and less comprehensive role in students' adult lives.

The contrast indicates that Spanish teachers tend to emphasise the transition's broad civic and formative potential, while Portuguese teachers frame its relevance in more restricted terms.

Discussion and conclusions

This comparative study has highlighted significant contrasts between Spain and Portugal in how the democratic transition is taught, perceived, and integrated into educational practice. The results show that Portuguese teachers generally perceive the transition to be sufficiently present in the curriculum and often connected to commemorative activities and most Spanish teachers describe its treatment as superficial, fragmented, and constrained by time. This aligns with previous research indicating that Spanish curricula relegate the Transition to the end of the syllabus and reproduce an idealised, consensual narrative centred on elites and institutional continuity (Fuertes, 2018; Piazuero-Rodríguez & Bermejo-Malumbres, 2025). By contrast, in Portugal, curricular reforms and commemorations of the 25th of April have embedded the transition as both a historical subject and a civic ritual, consolidating its presence in schools (Henriques & Pintassilgo, 2013; Pinto, 2008).

A second key observation concerns the critical dimension of teaching resources. Teachers in both contexts expressed dissatisfaction with the way textbooks treat the transition, though this perception was notably stronger in Spain. This echoes analyses of Spanish textbooks, which have shown their tendency to present an aseptic account that highlights the monarchy and political consensus while downplaying popular mobilisations, repression, or political violence (Magaldi, 2022; Movellán-Haro, 2021; Tappi & Tébar-Hurtado, 2024). Portuguese materials, while not immune to simplifications, were more frequently described by teachers as including critical perspectives and diverse activities, consistent with curricular objectives that promote historical awareness and democratic participation (Ministério da Educação, 2018a, 2018b).

Third, the persistence of idealised narratives remains a defining feature of Spanish teaching about the Transition. Almost half of Spanish teachers in the sample referred to the ongoing mythologization of the process, especially the roles of King Juan Carlos I and Adolfo Suárez, or the supposed absence of violence. This confirms the endurance of what Casanova & Gil Andrés (2014) describe as the ‘consensual myth’ of the Transition, which prioritises stability over justice and silences the victims of repression. Portuguese teachers, by contrast, were more concerned about the risk of oversimplifying complex revolutionary processes than about reproducing celebratory clichés, suggesting that in Portugal the challenge lies not in overcoming silence but in deepening critical engagement. Moreover, recent research highlights that overcoming idealised narratives requires drawing on the conceptual and methodological tools of the historical discipline. Such disciplinary approaches aim to challenge the romanticised or overly complacent visions of both the Spanish and Portuguese transitions that have been perpetuated by traditional historiography and the media. They help foreground the diversity of social projects at stake during the crises of the dictatorships, the crimes that certain memory politics have attempted to obscure, and the inherently turbulent and uncertain nature of both transitional processes (Armas-Castro et al., 2021).

The study also revealed sharp contrasts in terms of classroom practices. Spanish schools rarely organize participatory or commemorative activities on the Transition, while Portuguese schools frequently do so, often linked to the national commemorations of 25 April. This disparity reflects broader political cultures: in Spain, the legacy of Francoism continues to ‘govern from beyond

the grave' (Rubin, 2018), constraining the recognition of dictatorship and repression, whereas in Portugal, the memory of the revolution has been institutionalised as a source of democratic pride (Silva, 2019). The result is that Portuguese schools tend to foster citizen participation and collective memory through history education, while in Spain the absence of such practices reinforces passivity and distance from democratic reflection.

Regarding its broader significance, teachers in both countries consider the transition an important element in students' education, but their opinions diverge about its relevance for adult life. Spanish teachers more often emphasised its civic potential—developing political awareness, democratic values, and critical thinking—whereas Portuguese teachers framed its role more narrowly. This paradox suggests that, in Spain, despite the limited and superficial curricular treatment, teachers project higher expectations on the transition as a formative topic. Yet without structural reforms to curricula and pedagogy, such expectations risk remaining unfulfilled.

These findings have several implications. First, they underscore the need to approach the transition as a controversial issue rather than a closed and celebratory chapter. This would align with recommendations in the literature that history teaching should embrace multiperspectivity, debate, and historical empathy (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Santisteban & Pagès, 2019). Second, the results suggest possibilities for cross-learning: Spain could benefit from Portugal's more participatory commemorative culture, while Portugal could expand the civic dimension of teaching about the transition beyond celebratory frameworks. Third, both cases illustrate the risks of oversimplified narratives: in Spain, they perpetuate silence about authoritarianism; in Portugal, they can obscure the contradictions and conflicts of the revolutionary process.

These challenges are particularly urgent in the current political context, marked by the rise of the far right across the Iberian Peninsula. In Spain, Vox exploits unresolved memory conflicts, while in Portugal Chega capitalises on institutional distrust and social discontent (Forti, 2023; Marchi & Zúquete, 2024; Soares et al., 2025). In both countries, the fragility of democratic resilience is linked to how societies process their past and how schools teach it. Strengthening critical, participatory, and multiperspective approaches to the democratic transitions is therefore not only a pedagogical priority but also a political necessity for safeguarding democracy in the present.

This study shows that the teaching of the democratic transition is more complete and integrated in Portugal than in Spain. The Portuguese case reflects the legacy of a revolutionary rupture, which embedded the memory of 25 April into both curricula and school culture, reinforcing commemorative practices and civic participation. By contrast, the Spanish negotiated transition, marked by consensus and silence, has resulted in a more fragmented educational treatment, often reduced to schematic textbook accounts and limited classroom engagement. These divergent patterns underline how historical legacies continue to shape the pedagogical present.

At the same time, the comparison highlights opportunities for mutual learning. Spain can draw on Portugal's commemorative culture to enrich classroom practices and promote active student involvement, while Portugal might benefit from adopting a broader civic and critical lens that prevents revolutionary narratives from becoming simplified or idealised. In both cases, the challenge

lies in recognizing the transition as a controversial issue that can stimulate multiperspectivity, empathy, and democratic reflection, rather than a closed or celebratory chapter.

Finally, these lessons are urgent given current threats to democracy. The resurgence of far-right movements in both Spain and Portugal demonstrates how unresolved historical legacies and fragile civic education can be exploited to foster polarisation, distrust, and authoritarian nostalgia. Strengthening the teaching of democratic transitions—through critical resources, active methodologies, and plural narratives—is therefore not only an educational responsibility but also a safeguard against the return of authoritarianism.

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