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MARIA RÚBIES I GARROFÉ

(1932–1993)

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Maria Rúbies' physical appearance—rather small, discreet in her demeanour and with a high pitched and somewhat frail voice—contrasted sharply with the strength of her beliefs and the range and scope of her public activities, as well as with the fortitude she showed in coping with a long and painful illness at the age of 60. As she herself said, her strength came from a very deep inner life, from the support of her family and from the widespread acknowledgment of her efforts to put her ideas into practice.

Biographical summary

Maria Rúbies was born in Camarasa, a rural community in the province of Lleida (Spain) on 21 November 1932. She was sorely affected by the hardships of the Civil War. Her father was forced to seek refuge in France, while the rest of the family stayed in a small village in the Catalan Pyrenees close to the frontier. During that period Maria was unable to attend school. Subsequently, after a short stay in Os de Balaguer, the family settled in Lleida. This early experience of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) led her to take a keen interest in what was later to happen in the other European countries during the Second World War.

On completing her university studies in Barcelona, where she graduated in mathematics in 1957, she returned to Lleida. Here she worked as a teacher in religious establishments and in the teacher-training college, in secondary school institutions preparing pupils for the *bachillerato* in La Seu d'Urgell and in Lleida and in other schools involved in teacher training, where she was instrumental in establishing the 'L'Espiga' school.

From 1967 to 1977 she held various positions at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, as head of the new Teacher-Training College, co-ordinator of the teaching staff of

the Institute of Educational Sciences and, subsequently, head of its department in Lleida. During those years she also organized various teacher-training activities.

In 1975, at the beginning of the period of political transition following the death of General Franco, Maria Rúbies, then aged 42, decided to dedicate herself to the reform of the education system and its teaching methods and the reconstruction of her country. She joined *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya*, a centre and centre-left coalition party defending national identity, for which she was elected as a senator in the first democratic elections and, later on, as a deputy. Subsequently, she also became a city councillor in Lleida and a deputy in the Catalan parliament.

Her various political responsibilities did not prevent her from continuing to play an active role in the more specifically educational field. From 1980 she took part in the development of new school curricula at the behest of the autonomous government. In 1986 she was appointed the first chairperson of the School Council of Catalonia, the highest advisory and participatory body involving the educational community in the Catalan education system.

In 1988 she gave up active party politics, and the way was free for her to become more directly involved in education. She took on new responsibilities in various educational bodies and institutions and returned to teaching at the Teacher-Training College of the University of Lleida. The news of her death in January 1993, after a long illness, saddened wide sectors of the educational community and of Catalan society in general.

Commitment to education

Maria Rúbies was a woman committed to education and the reconstruction of her country, equipped solely with the force of her convictions and her faith in dialogue. It is difficult to separate her personal commitment from her educational, social and political commitment. From the very outset of her professional career, she dedicated herself entirely to the pedagogical and organizational reform of the school system and carried her concerns into the heart of the institutions that were in a position to promote change in education. From 1977 onwards, with the beginning of democracy in Spain, educational changes went hand-in-hand with a much wider social and political transformation.

She believed that everyday behaviour should clearly reflect both personal and collective values. She defined political action as ‘ensuring the spread of the ideas that I regard as fundamental’. In the more strictly educational field she said: ‘It is impossible to educate

without educational principles and without values: [we must develop students'] critical capacity and awareness, so that they become able to acquire their own scale of values and form their own personal ideas.'¹

The beginnings of her professional career coincided with the rise of the educational movement for pedagogical reform that had grown up around the Rosa Sensat Teacher-Training College, which played a leading role in the organization of *escoles d'estiu*, summer schools devoted to the continuing education of the teaching staff. The idea behind these schools was to make teachers aware of the importance of raising the status of Catalan schools and to provide them with the knowledge required to carry that out. Maria Rúbies took part in this collective movement from the very beginning and was one of the driving forces behind the Escola d'Estiu de Lleida.

The promotion of Catalan education went hand-in-hand with the incorporation of the principles of the 'active school' that had had so much influence in France, Belgium and Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century. These ideas had reached Catalonia too at that time, but had been totally rejected by the dictatorship in favour of a single model of public education that was traditional and uniform for the whole of the Spanish State. The only alternative, apart from a few rare exceptions, was the education offered by the schools run by the religious orders. Towards the 1960s, a few groups of parents and teachers founded in Barcelona and in other towns and cities in Catalonia various educational institutions that followed the pedagogical principles of the Active School, with the express intention of encouraging the use of the Catalan language and Catalan culture. It was against this background that Maria Rúbies helped to found the L'Espiga School in Lleida in 1967.

That same idea of introducing reforms and seeking an educational model that would respond to the needs of the country was what prompted her to take up successive senior management positions at the new Teacher-Training College and the Institute of Educational Sciences of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

One of her outstanding qualities was her ability to adapt to the demands of teaching at the different educational levels—primary, secondary and university—in the public and private sectors alike. In this way she showed how concerned and keen she was to work in partnership with all the individuals and institutions interested in improving education, avoiding the temptation to act alone in small or select groups. Nevertheless, in general she preferred the public sector as a way of reaching out to all sections of society.

Another characteristic was her closeness to her rural roots, which eloquently explains why she constantly returned to Lleida—'her city', as she says in her autobiography—after

each of her various periods of work in other cities.² Also in her autobiography she says how gratifying it had been for her to be a local councillor in Lleida since, in the short time she occupied that position, she had managed to obtain an extraordinary increase in public spending for improvements to school buildings in the city.

Her contribution to the teaching of mathematics

To improve education meant training teachers, encouraging them to review their everyday working methods and urging them to find out how things were done in other countries, so as to help them change and adapt their methodology and practice. Her efforts to introduce the so-called 'new mathematics', that would help develop in pupils the skills of rational thinking and analysis of processes, were a specific contribution to that objective. For Maria Rúbies the introduction of set theory into schools was a way of stimulating the pupil's reasoning power. It avoided routine activities and methods that were not sufficiently stimulating with the danger of inhibiting learning and confining mathematics to the realm of the incomprehensible.

What she wanted was to overcome the limitations of mathematics as taught in schools. This meant venturing into areas other than arithmetic and geometry and introducing the study of logic, statistics and probability. It meant changing the methodology so that mathematics could be used as a tool for understanding and solving everyday problems.

She was one of the driving forces behind the translation and dissemination of the work of Dienes and she edited a collection of textbooks for primary schools that were accompanied by teaching guides. She clearly explained in these guides the conception of mathematics teaching in school that was to prevail in the 1970s: 'It involves encouraging in the child the formation of a structured way of thinking and, at the same time, enabling him/her to handle working tools, operational techniques and concepts that facilitate the study of other subjects and are of practical help in everyday life.'³ This collection was a reference work for many teachers, on account of not only its innovative content but also its methodological approach. Each manual consisted of a set of cards that encouraged self-learning and was accompanied by easy-to-use cut-outs, the idea being to bridge the gap between theory and practice. All the illustrations in the books were designed to stimulate motivation and contributed to the effective expression of mathematical ideas. The books were published in Catalan, which had once again been accepted for use in the schools for scientific purposes and as a means of communication.

Following this same approach, Maria Rúbies participated in the preparation of the mathematics syllabus for primary education, explaining that: ‘In order to facilitate the step from the most concrete to the most abstract, procedures such as observation and experimentation have been selected, since they give rise to a way of thinking on the basis of which ideas can be constructed.’⁴

She ran in-service training courses for teachers on the teaching of mathematics and was a member of various working groups of teachers specializing in this area, always encouraging an attitude of analysis and study, together with the need to seek out a pedagogical approach that would be of practical use in the classroom.

She was also a leading proponent of the introduction of information technology into schools. She saw in it a great pedagogical potential that should be exploited by teachers. She personally experienced the beginning of this process and was supportive of programmes such as ‘Logo’, which encouraged the student to play an active role vis-à-vis the machine.⁵

Democratic practices in the school

Education in freedom and for freedom requires a high degree of adult participation and responsibility. In this regard, she attached particular importance to teachers and expressed her views as follows: ‘these objectives, such as education to promote tolerance, freedom, respect for pluralism and democracy, may be attained through the action of teachers, since they are the main actors in the educational process who, through their approach and practice, will bring them into the school.’⁶

This did not prevent her from opposing the attitudes of sectarian-minded teachers blindly defending their union rights and resisting change. She insisted that teachers must be at the service of education and not education at the service of the teachers: ‘The acquired rights of teachers must be respected, but that does not mean that from now on the rights of the teachers should always prevail over those of the pupils. We should give priority to the pedagogical, educational and cultural function that we perform, rather than to our own rights.’⁷

Maria Rúbies attached great importance to teachers working together as a team. Educational values should be shared, reformulated and redefined within the schools’ overall conception of education, and each of them should have its own identity.

Education to promote democracy and the free and mature acceptance of the demands of living together required an education in values which, in her opinion, could not be provided

without the participation of the parents and of the students themselves in the different areas of school activity. Her observations in the Congress of Deputies on this subject are very eloquent:

For many years we have strongly held the view that parents should participate as such in the education of their children and should maintain with the teachers and instructors all the contacts required for their individual education [...]. I should like to stress that I do not see how the participation of the parents and of all those involved in the construction of the educational community can be effective if there is no co-ordination between all the sectors involved.⁸

At that time, the Congress was debating the Law on the Status of Educational Institutions, which in 1980 provided for parents' participation in educational institutions and set up school councils as bodies through which teachers, parents, students and the administrative and supervisory staff could participate in the management of the educational establishments.

Subsequently, the government of the Generalitat built on this legislation and among the bodies that it set up was the Consell Escolar de Catalunya—the highest body representative of the educational community, involving teachers, parents, students, educational administrative staff, trade unions and business organizations sponsoring private schools, with the aim of advising the governmental authorities on education. Maria Rúbies was its first president during the period 1986–89 and, in that capacity, guided the discussions leading up to the introduction of educational reform in Spain that was implemented under the General Education Law of 1990.

Institutional changes in the education system

Maria Rúbies was in favour of a decentralized education system that would be able to respond to the social and cultural needs of each of the peoples making up the Spanish State. On more than one occasion she expressed her regret that the Spanish Constitution, debated and approved by the parliament (*Cortes Generales*) when she was herself a member, and promulgated in 1978, did not recognize the exclusive competence of the various autonomous communities in the field of education.

The Statute of Catalonia recognized the centrality of the Catalan language on an equal footing with Spanish, the other official language. Subsequently, Catalan was established as the language to be used in schools. Maria Rúbies, together with many other teachers, fought hard and took initiatives to ensure that teachers would receive retraining in the knowledge of the Catalan language and of Catalan culture, which had been strongly repressed. Many of the

teachers born in Catalonia spoke the national language, but had been prohibited from using it in schools. Others, who came from other parts of the Spain, did not know it at all. She organized, through the Institute of Educational Sciences of the Autonomous University, the provision of Catalan language courses in the province of Lleida.

Maria Rúbies promoted the establishment of experimental centres that would act as catalysts for pedagogical innovation. In this connection, it is worth mentioning the establishment of the pilot centre ‘Ribot i Serra’ in Sabadell, to provide practical training for student teachers and, in her capacity as a deputy of the Catalan parliament, the promulgation in 1984 of the Law on Experimental Centres. In her view, the quality of education and assessment were inseparable. As she put it in another statement to the Education and Culture Commission of the Congress: ‘How can quality be achieved in the education system if there is no assessment or monitoring? If we, as teachers, have no system of assessment, and nor do the teaching centres or the education system as a whole, how can we measure the progress achieved?’⁹

During what we might term the trial period prior to the introduction of educational reform, Maria Rúbies took on the responsibility of chairing the Technical Evaluation Commission for Educational Reform (1989–1990) which, as its name indicates, was intended to study the results of the experiments carried out in pilot centres and make recommendations on the changes that might be necessary and on the additional measures that the educational authorities should take so as to achieve the planned objectives.

The importance of her contribution

Summarizing the contribution by Maria Rúbies to education is a difficult task, since she was a charismatic personality, who undertook both personal and collective responsibilities at a time of great change. For many teachers and for citizens in general, it seems surprising that a woman—a teacher—should exercise so much influence in directing educational and social changes.

About the person of Maria Rúbies herself there is general agreement among those who knew her at the different stages of her life and in the various aspects of her professional, social and political activities: everybody describes her as an intelligent person able to break down barriers, who showed great sensitivity towards the concerns of her fellow citizens and of all those who, from all walks of life, fought for greater justice.

She always acted with determination and realism, with great respect for those who held different opinions, with a moral and ethical commitment to serve in the reconstruction of her country, shattered after a civil war and a dictatorship which had undermined the identity of Catalonia and its cultural and economic dynamism. She devoted much effort to defending the use of Catalan in school, in education in general and in the various fields of social life.

Her concerns led her to work in various kinds of schools, in different social and educational institutions and in equally diverse areas of political life. All these widely differing fields of action, together with her own particular way of advancing her projects, help to explain the extent and importance of the image she acquired as a woman, educator and citizen.

In everything she did, she acted with intelligence, conviction and hope, knowing how to create the synergies and broad consensus that are always necessary, but even more so at times of great change. Her personal approach and manner enabled her to get close to people's real, concrete problems and she was never sparing in her efforts to find solutions.

As a good teacher herself, she always showed a great capacity for personal, in-depth communication, being very clear and honest in both her agreements and disagreements. Her involvement in projects far-reaching in their scope and of a certain historical significance never caused her to lose sight of the value of everyday experience and become cut off from the most common aspects of everyday life. Her decisions to take on or refuse responsibilities were always taken freely and with a sense of the ethical implications.

As we look back over the ten years that have elapsed since her death and the efforts undertaken since then in Europe and throughout the world to put wars and conflicts behind us, to construct democracies and improve co-operation, we are able to appreciate her contribution even more. This is especially true about her awareness of the importance of trying to solve social conflicts arising from the question of the identity of different peoples and their capacity to live together in harmony.

Furthermore, her action in education also encourages us to continue to strive towards achieving a higher quality of education, ranging from the improvement of practices in the classroom to the effective organization of schools and of the education system as a whole.

Notes

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continuing teacher training and the evaluation of the education system. Between 1982 and 1989 she coordinated various working groups on curriculum development for pre-school and primary education. From 1989 to 2000 she participated in the preparation of the Continuing Teacher-Training Plan and for various training programmes. She is currently executive secretary of the Consell Superior d'Avaluació, the body responsible for the evaluation of the education system in Catalonia.

1. Statement by Maria Rúbies in the plenary of the Congress of Deputies, 11 March 1980.
2. Maria Rúbies, Autobiography in: *Les dones i la política (14 Autobiografies d'alcalduesses i regidores)* [Autobiography in: Women and politics (fourteen autobiographies of women mayors and councillors)], Barcelona: La Magran/Edicions 62, 1989.
3. Maria Rúbies, *Fem matemàtica: Guia per a l'educador* [Let's do mathematics: a teacher's guide], Barcelona: Editorial Teide, 1974.
4. Departament d'Ensenyament, *Curriculum de la Educació Primària* [Curriculum for primary education], Barcelona: 1992.
5. Maria Rosa Mira Casterà, whose doctoral thesis was directed by Maria Rúbies, provided me with information relating to this section during an interview.
6. Statement by Maria Rúbies to the Education Commission of the Congress of Deputies, 16 October 1980.
7. Statement in the plenary of the Congress of Deputies, 18 October 1979.
8. Statement in the plenary of the Congress of Deputies, 12 March 1980.
9. Presentation to the Education and Culture Commission, Congress of Deputies, 1 April 1982.

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