The most important pedagogical initiative which emerged in Madrid during the years of the transition to democracy was Acción Educativa. It appeared in very different social and institutional contexts to those we saw in relation to trade-union mobilisation in the capital. Eventually it led to pedagogical innovation both in the private and the public sectors, but it clearly originated from a private chain of schools with clear Catholic origins. In this chapter we shall explore the environment from which the organisation developed and the social profile of the activists who founded it. We will also look at the extension of its activities and the organisation’s close relationship with the local authorities. We will conclude by attempting to evaluate the movement’s effects in some Madrid schools.

Despite the Ministry of Education’s efforts to ensure that schools supported the regime’s political agenda, there were educational centres that managed to avoid the authoritarian rules imposed by the government. Even in Madrid, the centre of the dictatorship’s political and military might, we can detect a few schools that worked according to different pedagogical ideas. The “Decroly” school, which since 1927 had been working according to the Belgian educator’s teachings, managed to survive the Civil War and continue providing its students with a secular, active, and personal education. Another, even better-known school was Colegio Estudio, founded in 1940 by alumni and teachers of the Instituto Escuela. The school wished to preserve the legacy of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (Free Institution of Education, hereafter ILE). Students were instrumental in deciding the contents of the class programme, and participated in the evaluation of their own progress. The educational process in the school was not based on the use of ready-made textbooks, but on the independent seeking of knowledge by the students. Girls and
boys studied together, although this contravened instructions from the Ministry. Colegio Estudio was a private school which served a small circle of left-wing intellectuals who had survived the Civil War and stayed in Madrid. It was an elitist school that was not easy to get into – admission depended mainly on contacts and parents’ ability to pay large sums of money for their children’s education.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, new educational opportunities emerged in Madrid for people who wanted their children to have an active, participative, and creative education. Three important schools set up at that time were Colegio Nuevo Equipo, Colegio Base, and Colegio Estilo. The founders of the latter also considered it to be the continuation of the ILE. Besides the free, modern, and European education which characterised the school, its founders attached special importance to the artistic content that was offered to students. However, in spite of these progressions, alternative education in Madrid remained elitist and costly, confined to the private sector and intended for limited social groups.

The lack of educational infrastructure in and around Madrid led groups of parents, residents associations, and charitable and private institutions, to set up schools in marginalised areas. Thus, in the early 1970s, a new phenomenon appeared on Madrid’s educational horizon. In most cases these newly founded schools provided education between the ages of 0 and 6, given that, other than religious schools, there were hardly any institutions for this stage of education. At the basis of these organisations was a two-fold necessity: the need to find an educational solution for children, and the desire to give them a secular education, which would place the child at the centre of the educational process. In some cases, these projects were extended to primary education, for children between 6 and 14. The best known of these schools was Colegio Siglo XXI, whose founders were influenced by the French pedagogue Célestin Freinet and by the movement he had inspired in Italy. The school opened its doors in 1970, offering its students a progressive and innovative education.

These private initiatives to set up schools often enjoyed the cooperation of the Ministry of Education. Due to its limited budget, it was unable to respond to all educational demands in the capital, and these kinds of initiatives enabled it to open educational centres at a lower cost to the state. Two such schools, created at the start of the 1970s, became well-known and innovative projects. One of these was the Colegio Trabenco, an initiative by residents of the Cooperativa de Viviendas Trabenco (Trabenco Housing Cooperative) in a suburb of Madrid called Leganés. The group of teachers who started that school decided to adopt