

## Verse Schools

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### The Term

The term *bertso-eskola*, or “[verse school](#),”<sup>1</sup> consists of two words, *bertso* (verse) and *eskola* (school). To understand the nature and work of these verse schools, it is best to consider the concept behind each of these words. *Bertso* does not refer only to lines of verse and the rules of versification, nor when we say *eskola* do we mean simply a place where classes are given. The *bertso-eskola* should not be thought of as a mere school.

The Basque word for verse, *bertso*, evokes above all two closely linked ideas: *bertsolaritza*, the Basque cultural phenomenon of traditionally improvised verse; and verse creation as a form of creative communication. *Eskola* conveys the pedagogical notion of a place for the cultivation of values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed in human development, while at the same time attempting to teach the importance of teamwork and to constitute a group of friends united in a leisure activity. The purpose, then, is to go beyond the level of imparting knowledge towards a fuller sense of education, underlying which are four central concepts: learning to know, learning to do, learning to coexist, and learning to be.

Essential to the *bertso-eskola* approach is what we could call an “ecological educational model,” wherein the immediate context and social life inside the classroom are both basic day-to-day principles. This methodology is founded on constructivism; verse school methods have always been based on meaningful learning and the construction of knowledge.

### History of the Verse Schools: Origin and Development

It is hard to say exactly when the *bertso-eskola* movement started, since it did not begin as a single, united movement at all. Verse schools began to spring up independently in different parts of the southern Basque Country, responding to the features of society at the time. (For the purposes of this article, 1980 has been chosen as a convenient starting point from which to analyze the development of the verse schools.)

Only a few years after the death of the dictator Franco, the Spanish state and the countries it ruled were in the middle of a transition period. The Basque Country bore the scars of a 40-

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<sup>1</sup> For photographs associated with this article, click on link.

year-long dictatorship: its language and culture were in serious danger, neglected and despised, and almost entirely excluded from the school system of the time.

Feelings that had long been smothered rose to the surface after Franco's death, and one idea in particular took on great force: many, many parents, seeing that the schools in this period denied their children a Basque-language education, set out to create alternative structures of their own. This was the origin of the *ikastola*, the Basque-language education movement.

The emergence and spread of verse schools was almost an automatic consequence of the birth of the *ikastolak*. It was only natural for the *bertso* tradition to flourish in a school system centered on Basque language and Basque culture. Verse enthusiasts saw their chance and began teaching Basque oral poetry to boys and girls as an after-school activity. That was how the first children's verse schools got started more than 25 years ago.

In the early 1980s, as society evolved so did the place of *bertsolaritza*, making the leap from its original rural setting in taverns and cider houses to the stage. In this new environment, transmission to future generations was no longer a foregone conclusion. Thus began the earliest courses for adult verse lovers. Groups met in every town; fueled by their passion for the Basque language and verse singing, they gathered to learn traditional verses and to discover and study their techniques. From the courses organized by these large and varied groups arose the adult verse schools.

Thus the verse schools did not come into being for the purpose of manufacturing or producing *bertsolariak*, but simply to have fun with verses and to pass on this folk tradition to the next generation. But it wasn't long before the first new *bertsolari*s started to emerge, particularly from the children's verse schools. The motivation and dedication of *bertso* teachers and the theoretical and practical literature published during the period had a lot to do with this phenomenon. Xabier Amuriza and Juanito Dorronsoro made important contributions to teaching methodology and provided teachers and students with written materials, as did the subsequent Ikastola Association.

From there on the road ahead lay open. Guided by intuition and common sense, the verse schools have been growing since the 1980s. Their goals are the enjoyment of verse, learning to make verses, and the transmission of the *bertsolari* heritage to new generations. Over the years, each of the country's schools has pioneered its own development and evolved its own mission and function. It has to be remembered that the schools have been built on a foundation of volunteer work; usually it is a local group of verse enthusiasts, making up the verse school's kernel, who have taken the trouble to search for one or more teachers and have assumed a shared responsibility for the school's administration. Hence, the verse school phenomenon is not so much a single, structured movement as a range of independently run individual *bertso-eskolak*.

The Verse Society (Bertsozale Elkarte) has played a significant part in the schools' recent development. The Society has always treated the transmission of *bertsolaritza* as one of its chief concerns, and has consequently given priority to the verse schools. It has made great efforts to provide them with teaching resources, to train teachers, to create and maintain a communication network and relations among schools, and to get verse schools started in areas where there were previously none.

The outward profile of the verse schools has not greatly changed over the past 25 years. There are verse schools for adults, youth, and children. Different schools and groups each have

their own character resulting from their particular background. Some are more informal, while others adopt the specific aim of preparing and training future *bertsolaris*. While some are fully independent, others depend more on the initiative of the teacher, and still others have been established under the auspices of the Verse Society. Yet internally there has been change—or perhaps not so much change as evolution, particularly in teaching approaches. The verse schools themselves have made substantial progress in the area of pedagogy; moreover, society has become more and more demanding in this regard, and there is a growing call for professionalism in the management of verse schools.

In the wake of this trend, another concept related to the *bertso-eskola* that has been making headway of late is that of verse-making as a leisure activity. The verse school is increasingly seen as a place and activity for people's free time. This new perspective entails a need for such schools and promoters to adapt their structures, organization, and resources to the new demand. Of course, this must be done without losing sight of the special nature of their activity, continuing to serve as a center for the practice and enjoyment of verse improvisation as a group activity and a central pillar holding up the cultural dynamic centered on the tradition of *bertsolaritza*.

### **Verse Schools as Centers for the Transmission of *Bertsolaritza* and Culture**

The countrywide *bertso-eskola* movement represents one of the most important initiatives in *bertsolaritza* throughout the Basque Country in recent decades. Culture and language are basic to a people's identity, and if we know how best to pass these on to coming generations we shall have sown our people's future. In the Basque Country, *bertsolaritza* has been an important cultural manifestation permanently linked to the country's language and folk culture. But many cultural manifestations are commonly affected by a generation gap, and *bertsolaritza* is no exception. This is even more notable in the case of a minority culture, and the culture that surrounds the Basque language is precisely that. The Basque language community is small, with only 600,000 speakers, but the main difficulty is that the Spanish and French states apply laws and policies that are constantly creating obstacles to the advancement of Basque culture. That is why, from the viewpoint of the Basque language and cultural movements, it is so important to support initiatives such as the verse schools, whose goal is the preservation and continuation of Basque cultural expressions.

Nowadays the verse schools involve many of those who will be centrally responsible for *bertsolaritza* in the future: *bertsolariak*, experts, masters of ceremonies, organizers, *bertso-eskola* teachers, judges, and promoters. Of the 38 *bertsolaris* competing in the 2005 Championship, only one had not been to verse school, and most of the participating judges also had verse-school connections. These institutions are the cornerstone of the contemporary edifice of *bertsolaritza*, whereby youngsters can learn, have fun with, and absorb the art of singing Basque verses in a context of teamwork and play, leading to and consolidating affective, cultural, social, and professional engagement. In the verse schools two-way transmission ultimately takes place—while youngsters learn to love and come to participate in the verse tradition, by doing so they also incorporate *bertsolaritza* into their own contemporary lives and culture.

### Map of Verse Schools and Plans for the Future

After 25 years of growth and development of the movement in response to contemporary social needs, there are currently about 90 verse schools across the length and breadth of Euskal Herria's seven provinces, with an enrollment of about 800. As a faithful reflection of the present sociolinguistic and political situation, there are naturally more verse schools in those areas where the language has the most support.

		Araba	Bizkaia	Gipuzkoa	Nafarroa	Lapurdi	Nafarroa beherea	Zuberoa
Verse schools		5	15	45	20	6	1	2
Students	Men	13	75	235	74	22	8	11
	Women	17	39	186	83	32	1	0

Looking toward the future, we face two big challenges. One of these challenges is the very continuation of the verse tradition and its transmission, and this now depends on the verse schools. Even in the present age of globalization, it is to be hoped that future generations will still have an opportunity to be acquainted with and enjoy the rich heritage that minority folk traditions and cultural movements represent.

The second challenge is also a response to social realities. The original pattern of volunteer work in the verse schools is now starting to give way to salaried posts. There are two reasons for this change: an increasing demand for trained teachers, and the apparent crisis of volunteer work in our society. This is precisely the challenge; we see the verse schools as a grassroots movement in the present and future, since that is where their greatest contribution lies. To maintain the movement's rich diversity and quality in the future, a balance must be found between militancy and paid work. Forcing the verse schools into a top-down organizational structure would threaten the richness, vitality, and value of each *bertso-eskola* and end up quashing their individuality and weakening the movement in the long run.

The major short- and medium-term challenges, however, are pedagogical. There is a very important project underway, under the aegis of the Verse Society, to develop a verse school curriculum. Improving the quality of the verse schools is a day-to-day task calling for constant thought and reflection, which involves, among other things, developing such a curriculum, as well as allowing for ongoing teacher training, the creation of new teaching materials and resources, innovations in methodology and content, and the promotion of new research.