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Bringing democratic governance into practice: policy enactments responding to neoliberal governance in Spanish public schools*

Òscar Prieto-Flores , Jordi Feu , Carles Serra  and Laura Lázaro 

Institute for Educational Research, University of Girona, Girona, Spain

ABSTRACT

This article explores different ways in which public primary schools sustain democratic governance structures created beyond those mandated by law in Spain. These new institutional designs, while not opposed to policy text requirements of having a governing body with representatives of parents, teachers and public administration, are being carried out against the grain of the hegemonic neoliberal managerial approach. The objective was to observe the different ways that some schools apply other institutional paths to the current governing bodies by aiming at widening decision-making not only to legal representatives but to all agents. Data come from focus groups, in-depth interviews and observations carried out in four public schools during fieldwork lasting two academic years. The findings show that while some schools are broadening current legal governing bodies, others generate ad hoc bodies transforming legal ones into new institutional arrangements.

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In recent decades, neoliberal policies have placed emphasis on school competition and New Public Management strategies as mechanisms aiming to improve public school performance and accountability in many countries (Ball, 2007; Ranson, 2008). Representatives of parents play a limited role, carrying out bureaucratic tasks and accountability measures, and are perceived more as consumers rather than citizens (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2014). While this is the hegemonic trend in many countries, other work has focused on how schools can confront dominant neoliberal policy by analysing different cases of schools or city councils (Apple & Beane, 2007; Flecha, 2015; Gandin & Apple, 2002). The aim of this study is to select and analyse what Wright (2010) identifies as *Real Utopias*, that is to say, new forms of emancipatory and workable structures that are an alternative to dominant forms of social organisation. We present empirical data from schools that demonstrate the practice of school governance, regardless of the intentions of policy texts promoting neoliberal school management in Catalonia, Spain. To this end, some schools recontextualise policy texts

CONTACT Òscar Prieto-Flores  oscar.prieto@udg.edu

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by institutionalising new microstructures for governance. Practitioners in these schools promote greater opportunity for giving voice to different parent and student constituencies through the creation of new ad hoc structures, or by endowing already existing structures with a sense of democracy. When we speak of schools carrying out democratic governance we are referring to those schools that open the process of governing and decision-making to parents, students and other school staff beyond the power the State gives to teachers and head-teachers in the Spanish context. To do so, these schools auto-generate governance structures aiming to include these educational agents or new mechanisms that make the pre-existing governing structures such as the *Consejo Escolar* more dynamic and plural. The *Consejo Escolar* is the main governing body in public schools where representatives of parents, teachers and the community are elected for a period of four years. Accordingly, we look at experiences from four public primary schools that have developed especially significant democratic governance experiences. We were able to observe what they have in common and the different existing ways in which policy texts are enacted as an act of resistance to neoliberal managerial logic.

Neoliberalism and school governance

Neoliberalism is defined as ‘a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2007, p. 22). In this regard, the role of the state in creating and maintaining these markets in order to restore class dominance of the wealthiest has been relevant and is presented as an alternative democratic radicalisation (Hatcher, 2012). However, Ong (2007) argues that besides this Neoliberalism with a capital ‘N’, conceptualised as a dominant structure condition, we can also define neoliberalism not as structure or culture but as global flows of ideas and technologies. This neoliberalism with a small ‘n’ is not a fixed set of attributes with predetermined outcomes but a logic of governing that migrates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts’ (Ong, 2007, p. 3). For a more accurate conceptualisation, Ong and Collier (2005) use the term *global assemblage* to identify how malleable and flexible global technologies are in adapting to situated political regimes when describing neoliberal policy adaptations in several contexts, especially in Asia.

These economic and societal changes, together with the emergence of information and communication technologies, have altered the boundaries of nation-states. States have ceded power and sovereignty upwards, downwards and multilaterally (Castells, 1997). This process of transformation towards greater interdependence between governments and other actors in decision-making is affecting the ways governments govern. Similarly, Rhodes (2007) defines *Governance* as the process of governing through interdependence between organisations, with a ‘broader government’ that includes non-state actors, blurs boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors and has a significant degree of autonomy from the state. Ball and Junemann (2003) also differentiate *Governance* from *Government*. While the former is developed through interactions taking place in diverse and flexible networks, the latter is carried out through hierarchies and bureaucracies. Existing processes of creation and maintenance of these flexible policy networks in advanced capitalist societies are characterised by horizontal interdependence, instead of preservation of the hierarchy of state-centred

bureaucracies. These changes have been promoted from a neoliberal proposition arguing that ‘market forces and partnership-based forms of governance’ are inevitable for impeding the failure of the state (Jessop, 2002, 2004). In the last decades, these *heterarchical* ‘networks’ of governance have grown through the creation of new public–private partnerships (PPPs) in which the role of businesses, social enterprise and philanthropy in educational delivery and policy is relevant (Jones et al., 2007; Hill & Kumar, 2009; Robertson, Bonal, & Dale, 2001). Many of these PPPs in education are enhanced by educational experts who work for international organisations. This is especially prevalent in developing countries where the granting of international aid is conditioned by adoption of this education privatisation policy (Verger, 2012).

According to Hatcher and Hirtt (1999), these neoliberal dynamics have been introduced in education systems through *exogenous and endogenous neoliberalism*. The first corresponds to the introduction of market or quasi-market logic that entails the defence of parental choice, the cutting of public funding for educational services, and privatisation of schooling in educational systems (Ball, 2007). The second refers to the introduction of neoliberal regimes of school administration and accountability promoted by different governments. Along these lines, together with the drive towards decentralisation of educational policy and the offer of greater autonomy to schools, *new policy technologies* redefine the roles played by the different actors when schools are held to account. This educational reform introduces a New Public Management and performativity in schools ‘aligning public sector organizations with the methods, culture and ethical system of the private sector’ (Ball, 2003, p. 216). These policy technologies have displaced those of the older regime of professionalism and bureaucracy based on the professional accountability developed by autonomous professional communities in their schools. Ranson (2003) argues that, far from strengthening public accountability, the different understandings of accountability in the enactment of neoliberal governance, namely *consumer, contract, performative or corporate*, have strengthened market logic between parents and schools at the expense of the public sphere. Their development has also brought different forms of institutionalisation and structuration of school governance depending on the context or territory. For example, in a later study, Ranson, Arnott, McKeown, Martin, and Smith (2005) identified the evolution of different forms of school governance that has taken place in different UK regions since the school governance reforms led by the Thatcher government in the 1980s. This policy decentralised and deregulated schools by promoting the introduction of volunteer citizens as governors. It opened the door to inclusion of new agents in the decisions and monitoring of schools, which could be inductees of the state or could respond to local needs of the school. In this analysis, they concluded that the different forms of school governance they identified continued to have difficulties in connecting with parents and especially with the most disadvantaged families. More recently, Wilkins (2015) discusses the way in which increased autonomy of schools and monitoring mechanisms created by the state in the last decades have promoted a series of disciplinary tools and internal and external training tools designed to make school governors comply with the role of control suggested by the State. His research analysed how the assessment of *good governance* is managed. He noted that the government and Ofsted¹ require the governing bodies to act as professional experts and possess skills and knowledge on how to evaluate the performance of schools. He also observed the process by which third-sector organisations have emerged that provide advice and training to governors, transforming them not into a counterpoint to government policy,

but into accomplices of an administration that promotes and legitimises the interests of the State, which is that schools be administered under the tenets of corporate accountability and contracts in the same way as businesses (Wilkins, 2015).

In other contexts, this type of implementation has not been developed in the same way or is in an incipient form. In Switzerland, for instance, the processes of decentralisation and the granting of greater autonomy to schools have been carried out under the logic of increasing accountability processes and professional leadership of school direction. Hangartner and Svaton (2014) analysed how policy reforms enacted since the 1990s have given more power and relevance to the role of head-teachers or principals by exploring how managerial rationalities of the New Public Management have influenced school governance. They argue that these policies have been 'cutting the competences of the school council boards, questioning their legitimacy and functions and pushing these boards into a liminal status' (2014, p. 294), as occurs in other contexts such as Mexico (Olivo, Alaniz, & Reyes, 2011) or Spain, as we shall see next.

In order to resist these neoliberal school management assemblages, teachers and other agents are interpreting and developing creative ways to struggle in their everyday spaces. Today, there are teachers who, together with parents, are implementing acts of collective struggle inspired by the discourses and practices of resistance towards more radical democratic schools (Apple, 2013, Fielding & Moss, 2011). Drawing on Habermas's communicative action, Ranson (2003) argues that democratic governance can take place in schools when accountability functions as a process of internal deliberation where participants reach agreements through communicative narratives. This type of governance can take place:

... when members of the community of practice (embracing the public as well as the profession) recognize and draw upon the authority of standards, which they can trust for evaluating performance because they have been tested in deliberation. In the pursuit of excellence, internal goods replace extrinsic controls, agency supplants alienated routines. (Ranson, 2003, 462)

In this article, we shall focus specifically on analysing how some schools in Catalonia, Spain shun the neoliberal and managerialist logic of school governance, how they create new democratising ad hoc structures and how they explain their democratic governance. Rather than being perfect and rationalised, these structures stem from the desire and the situated interactions present in different school settings.

School governance in Spain and Catalonia

In Spain, the current State of the Autonomies was constituted during the transition to democracy (1975–1978), after almost 40 years of the Franco dictatorship, following negotiations between different actors in Spanish society. Some of these groups and individuals considered the territorial distribution of the *Comunidades Autónomas* (Autonomous Communities) as a political system with regional parliaments and governments halfway towards a federal state. For others, this system has consisted of decentralising and contextualising the legislation and policies designed by state institutions. This political situation has been perceived as an incomplete process by some political actors in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia where separatist support has grown in recent years. With regard to education policy, legislative competences are shared. However, in this case, only the State legislates on structural issues of great importance while the Autonomous Communities

execute the laws enacted by the State, although they also have the authority to legislate on minor and peripheral issues.

Neither Spain nor Catalonia is free from the above-mentioned neoliberal dynamic even though this has its historical and territorial specificity (Serra, Paludarias, Llevot, & Garreta, 2013). Some authors consider the Spanish case to be special, both because of the tension that exists between the policies of the conservative right and those that characterise the new liberal right (Viñao, 2012), and the rapid succession of educational reforms that have been implemented from the end of the fascist dictatorship to the present (Bonal, 2000). However, we can also identify how in Spain the presence of discourses and policy texts of a neoliberal nature have exerted considerable influence beginning with the 1985 Education Act (LODE²). This helped initiate a series of regulations that promoted a quasi-market in education, allowing the funding of private schools. Of significance in the Spanish case are the advances in this neoliberal logic that have been accentuated in recent years by generating greater school autonomy, school choice and accountability. This process has been more pronounced in some Autonomous Communities, such as in Catalonia, than in others (Alegre, Rambla, & Valiente, 2009; Olmedo, 2013).

In relation to the governance of schools, according to Feito (2014), there are two regulations that were established by agreement between the main political parties concerning which bodies and procedures should serve as the framework for involving parents and families in schools. This agreement, based on the 1980 and 1985 Education Acts (LOECE³ and LODE), has endured until the present. The essence of the Spanish legal framework, which replicates the structure of representative democracy in the governing bodies of schools, continues to be the same though. The *Consejo Escolar* (School Governing Board), is where all representatives are elected. Students from primary schools do not have formal representation in this body, only those from secondary schools. The *Consejo Escolar* discusses and monitors the annual plan of the school and its management, while some of the members take part in the selection of the school principal and other tasks. In many cases, proposals to the *Consejo* are first elaborated and agreed upon by teachers, as the governing role of this body is weak in terms of decision-making. For example, one of the most contentious issues surrounding decisions is curricular and instructional. In many cases, these issues are taken up in the *Claustro* (teachers' governing body) and the *Consejo Escolar* is informed of the actions already agreed upon, as the existing belief among some teachers is that these matters should be decided by them alone, and not in tandem with parents (Feito, 2014). This power imbalance limits this body to being a place of consultation and dissemination of information on decisions previously made by teachers in their meetings. However, in recent decades these structures of representative participation have been devalued in favour of granting more power to the head-teacher and her/his team to develop New Public Management strategies. For example, the 1995 Education Act (LOPEGCD⁴) weakened the *Consejos Escolares*, leaving them devoid of competences, and promoting the managerialist figure of the school principal (Olmedo, 2008). This model of managerialist direction was expanded and enhanced by the legislation of the 2002 and 2006 Education Acts (LOCE⁵ and LOE⁶), which were promoted by conservative and socialist governments respectively. These legislations expanded and accentuated the managerial functions in schools and promoted specialised training for principals. Some of these courses train principals in New Public Management strategies of governing schools with private sector methods. More recently, the 2013 Education Act (LOMCE⁷) established the completion of a course in managerial functions imparted by the

Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports as a requirement (not as a merit) for becoming a principal. Although from 1985 to 1995 principals governed schools jointly with the *Claustro* (teaching faculty) and the *Consejo Escolar*, subsequent legislative changes after 1995 promoted a greater role for school principals and their directive team.

In many schools, parents' perception of the functions performed by the *Consejo Escolar* is blurred. Only half of the surveyed parents know the role of their representatives in the body (48%) and only one-third know their representatives as family members in this body (38.5%) (Parra, García, Gomariz, & Hernández, 2014). This scarce knowledge is translated into parents' level of participation in School Council elections. The participation rate in Spain for the 2012 elections to each school board was only 12.2% (Consejo Escolar del Estado, 2014).

Specifically in Catalonia, governance of public schools follows the same lines as the Spanish regulations, while the 2009 Catalan Education Act (LEC⁸) increased school autonomy. Although it may seem contradictory, empowering schools with greater autonomy was in fact promoted by the leftist government in power at that time in Catalonia as well as by Catalan Pedagogical Renewal Movements⁹, which had been defending school autonomy since the democratic transition of the 1970s and maintained this position until the passing of the 2006 National Pact for Education. The aim was to promote the improvement of public school quality relative to the existing level of quality of private schools:

The Consell Escolar de Catalunya [School Council of Catalonia] as well as educational reform movements and other sectors of the education community have persistently called for a significant increase in the autonomy of public schools, understanding that this is an essential tool for improving quality and equity in the education system. (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2006, p. 47)

Some professional organisations of teachers, for example, Rosa Sensat, also defended the autonomy of schools in the context of policy influence as an opportunity for promoting new forms of democratic administration:

For us, autonomy is what fosters recognition of the positive value of singularity, that which is constructed and responds to each specific reality; and consequently, autonomy is linked to participation. Autonomy demands a deepening of democratic governance, in which it will be necessary to recognise the important contribution of families in education. (Associació de Mestres Rosa Sensat, 2008)

This demand for school autonomy can turn into a double-edged sword, on the one hand promoting democratic practices, but on the other enhancing managerialisation, and may give more power to directive teams (which is what the Catalan autonomous government has actively promoted in recent years)¹⁰. These strategies are explicitly present in the curricula or manifested in the type of institutions that deliver these courses (ESADE business school for example¹¹). Other examples of this government ideology are the granting of greater powers to intervene in the definition of the teaching staff of schools¹², and making salary increases dependent on teacher performativity.¹³

However, as the Spanish and Catalan legal framework gives broad autonomy to schools to organise themselves beyond the above-mentioned structures, in practice, schools enact policy texts by rejecting, selecting out or ignoring parts of these texts (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992). In the following cases, they also circumvent those compulsory structures or procedures the State requires them to develop by broadening current governing structures such as the *Consejo Escolar*, or by institutionalising new governance structures that are substitutive or complementary to the *Consejo*.

Methods and data sources

This article presents the main results of a multi-case study analysis from data gathered in the research project funded by the Spanish National Science Plan entitled *Blinded for Peer Review* (Ref: EDU2012-39556-C02-01/02). One of the aims of this research was to identify how primary schools institutionalise new forms of democratic governance by re-contextualising the existing neoliberal guidelines in Spanish and Catalan education policy. As an analytical strategy to understand policy enactment in schools, the team analysed the different contexts of the policy cycle (influence, policy text production and practice) where policy is discussed, created and recontextualised (Bowe et al., 1992). After a policy analysis of the Spanish and Catalan legal framework of school governance since the 1980s (with prior debates and texts), the team observed and sought to identify how policy is enacted, not as it was intended but as democratic governance in school contexts, using the multi-case study method. This method was used to address the challenges and possibilities that exist for schools in their efforts to practise democratic governance, which could include the participation of all parent constituencies. The aim of the article is to demonstrate how policy texts are recontextualised in some schools and how some alternative governing practices can emerge within. The object of using this method was not to conduct an in-depth examination of the specific nature of each school but to focus analysis especially on the existing commonalities and differences between them (Thomas, 2011). This halfway method of analysis permitted us to grasp the replicability and idiosyncrasy of the microstructures of governance these schools have created. This method provided the possibility to contrast these cases with the ideal types of governance and accountability theorised in the education policy literature (see Ranson, 2003, for example). It also helped us to analyse differences in understandings, dilemmas, intersubjective agreements or dissent that occurred between the actors regarding the need to broaden or to create new ad hoc governance structures.

Although our approach was mainly qualitative, we created a purposive and convenience oversample from 30 public schools that emphasised democratic governance as one of the key elements in their *school educational projects*. This micro-policy document states a school's educational objectives, mission and orientation, as well as detailing its pedagogical and organisational structure. From the oversample, we ultimately selected four cases from the results of a semi-structured questionnaire given out to the 30 schools. This technique helped us to target a specific population of interest that is sometimes not easy to identify (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Through phone calls and informal meetings with informants (principals, teachers or parents) we were able to ensure that, beyond the rhetoric of *involving everyone, and counting on everyone*, these schools were indeed developing practices in democratic governance that were maintained and institutionalised over the years. The team did not seek a representative sample of all schools. Rather, the idea was to gather a number of alternative strategies being developed in schools as forms of social life management different from the hegemonic models. The research team includes researchers with different ideological positions, but we all share the conviction that democracy is an asset that must be protected and strengthened. It follows, then, that it is important to provide visibility to alternatives to neoliberal managerialist models; thus, we introduced ourselves to the different actors we interviewed in the fieldwork.

The four public schools selected were located in Catalonia in north-eastern Spain. Beginning in 2007, and continuing to the present, the economic recession has had a

significant impact on Catalan and Spanish society and schools. As in many countries, students' welfare needs have increased and public schools have suffered substantial budget cuts (Freelon, Bertrand, & Rogers, 2012). This economic recession encompasses a demographic drop in the fertility rate in Catalonia, which at 1.33 was one of the lowest in Europe in 2013 (IDESCAT, 2013). In some areas of Catalonia, student enrolment rate in primary schools remains stable thanks to migration. The immigrant student rate in public schools remained unchanged at 17% from 2007 to 2013 (Departament d'Ensenyament, 2015). However, in other areas many public schools need to create new projects and reach out to families in order to increase their enrolment rates to avoid classroom reductions or school closures. Although an immigrant population is present in the majority of towns in the territory, there is residential segregation of this population in some neighbourhoods. In some public schools in these segregated areas more than 80% of the student body is of immigrant background. Schools selected for this research represent this demographic and geographical diversity in order to draw upon a substantial variety of cases and information for effective study of the same phenomenon in several different settings (Stake, 2006).

Of the four primary schools selected, one is situated in a rural setting where all enrolled students are from white families with different socioeconomic backgrounds. *Themis School*¹⁴ relies on very close relationships between teachers, parents and students because it is a rural school. It only has 23 students and shares some teachers with other rural schools nearby. Relationships with parents and the community are based primarily on proximity and trust. The second school, *Aristotle School*, is located in a town and has an enrolment of 270 students predominantly from lower middle-class families. The number of immigrant students is average for public schools in Catalonia. When the school was built, the school management, with the explicit aim of fostering democratic processes, requested construction of an agora in the centre of the building. This has become the place where discussions are held on collective aspects of the school. One of this school's core projects is promoting the civic education of students through their engagement in assemblies. Of the two schools in urban settings, the first is a segregated school situated in a minority-majority city in a metropolitan area with almost all students coming from low-income families of immigrant background (95%), mainly from Morocco and Gambia. In *Huma School*, a minority-majority school with 150 students, we were able to observe how a facilitator hired by the centre helped a group of mothers to work on issues that concerned them in their meetings. This was not a strategy to obtain support from mothers to attend to the needs of the schools, rather, central issues were debated in these sessions. The fourth school we chose, *Simourgh School*, has an enrolment of 370 students and is a *Learning Community School*. It is located in a lower middle-class urban suburb with low levels of migrant resident population. This school has a higher rate of immigrant and ethnic minority students (mainly Romà) than the average (around 40%), due to the school desegregation policy implemented by the city council.

Data gathered from the fieldwork come from 12 focus groups conducted separately with teachers, students and parents (in order to obtain natural and constructed groups), five in-depth semi-structured interviews with principals and associate principals, and observations carried out throughout the duration of the fieldwork. Guidelines for the focus groups aimed to identify the type of discourses, processes and structures present in these schools concerning existing democratic practices in a variety of school spaces. The focus groups also sought to identify the main points of agreement and dissent on the key factors that sustain their participatory models and help form workable governance structures. We also aimed

to identify whether a shared belief existed among teachers that school decision-making should involve parents and students to the greatest possible extent, and how they facilitated this participation.

After carrying out the fieldwork, we coded the information into categories that helped us to identify the nature of the democratic practices taking place within the schools. Some of these categories were tools developed in the spheres of (a) governance, (b) teacher methods, (c) curricular contents on civic education, and (d) other explicit actions promoted to reinforce democracy and involvement. We also took into account whether participation in decision-making processes extends to other people beyond the representatives in the governing bodies the law foresees (i. Symbiotic transformation), or, finally, whether schools developed new ad hoc decision-making structures that are neither recognised by law nor in contradiction with it (ii. Interstitial transformation). Lastly, we considered when coding whether schools try to involve all parent and student constituencies in decision-making processes (Otherness) (Feu, Prieto-Flores, & Simó, 2016). After the coding process, the team conducted follow-up interviews with school principals and their assistants to gather more direct information on how governing structures (paying specific attention to *Consejos Escolares* and other ad hoc structures) were managed in the school. These data helped us to finish the triangulation within each school while also providing relevant information to compare and to discern what is common with other schools as well as their particularities (Denzin, 2006).

Multiple institutional paths in developing democratic school governance

This analysis provides empirical data on how schools either implement specific interpretations of already existing decision-making bodies established by law – *Consejos Escolares* – or create sustainable governance structures that open up participation to include students, parents and school staff other than those who are their representatives. The data also show how these schools have created different institutional paths for developing democratic governance despite having similar credos in terms of building a democratic community. By school credo, we refer to the set of values and beliefs shared by different agents in a school, specifying how ‘Education’ should be experienced. This credo is usually made explicit in the school educational projects required for every school in Catalonia. In fact, this variety of forms in developing governance exists because of the complexity and creative ways schools bring policy texts into play in their context of practice (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012).

In the case of the schools selected, the creation of school educational projects as micro-policy texts represented the institutionalisation of the discursive practices present in those schools since the origin of these practices, in some cases 10 years ago and in others 15 years ago. The discourses present in each school regarding participation vary, as well as whether or not those in positions of power (mainly head-teachers, their associates and/or other teachers) have opened the possibility to participate in the generation of the discourse to other agents. These processes were diverse in each case. For example, in *Themis School*, it was the head-teacher who individually established the discourse of democracy because of her own pedagogical creed but also because she wanted to have a good relationship with her neighbours. In the other cases, the reasons differ in function of the various needs of the school and its staff. In the case of *Huma School*, these needs include enrolling more students to avoid the menace of school closure and to increase the participation of minority parents. In the case of *Aristotle School*, the need is to improve communication between parents and

reduce parent–teacher conflicts. In reference to *Simourgh School*, the former head-teacher, now retired, fostered a deliberative process with parents and students on how to create a deliberative community. She explicitly aimed to give voice to those excluded by the system, specifically minority and low-income parents and students.

Extending the participation of the existing governing bodies

Huma School uses the *Consejo* as most schools do but expands participation in this body to include fifth- and sixth-grade students, although these grades are not considered by law to have student representatives. The school principal highlights that this situation also compels them to carry out an adequate follow-up of the meetings and a shared decision-making process:

Interviewer: Do they actively participate in the *Consejo Escolar*? [referring to parents]

María: Yes, they participate actively in the *Consejo Escolar*; there are representatives of parents and students and they attend regularly. It is also good for us that there are students because this compels us to hold very pedagogical School Council meetings, such as, for example, when budgets are presented and have to be approved. (Teacher at *Aristotle School*)

In the same school, two of the participating parents highlighted the openness of the *Consejo Escolar* gatherings in accepting their proposals, such as the one dealing with changing the method of socialisation of academic books to another that is more respectful of cultural diversity. They also remarked on the expectations and role of teachers in opening decision-making to the whole community and in delegating shared responsibilities:

Rashida: Over the past two years we have formed an interesting group of parents in terms of the number of mothers and fathers involved, which has made quite a few proposals. For example, how to rethink the socialisation of books among many others....

Fatoumata: The teachers have a high degree of social awareness and political commitment. They are people who you also find in other forums. (Parents at *Huma School*)

These practices gave the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes to individuals who are usually not represented in the governing bodies (primary school students and minority and low-income parents, for example). Nevertheless, the degree of these effects varies among the schools. Some are more contradictory than others concerning ‘who can where’ and ‘who decides what’. For example, in *Aristotle School* students do not participate in the *Consejo Escolar* but teachers say they try to bring in their voices and demands when needed. Civic education values are of key importance in this school, according to the teachers. Students express their agreement on the structures so they can express their opinions and deliberate but teachers tend to have the leading voice in the assemblies:

In class, but especially when we have assemblies. And not so much in the general assembly because the teachers tend to speak on our behalf. (Student at *Aristotle School*)

With regard to decision-making on several issues, teachers in this school agree with the need to broaden and augment decision-making bodies as they have done, but they express the opinion that students do not need to participate in certain decisions, such as those related to time schedules, as affirmed below:

Yes, because there are issues that are better left to adults. They can intervene in the majority of topics but there are some in which they cannot. For instance, students cannot have a say on school schedules. (Teacher at *Aristotle School*)

Developing ad hoc structures

On the other hand, the cases of *Themis* and *Simourgh* schools go beyond *Consejos Escolares* as governing bodies. They have generated new governance structures (the Assembly and the *Gestora*) providing voice and deliberation to a wide range of actors, and ensuring and institutionalising new paths for governance in the Spanish context. Both schools continue to use the structures mandated by law, but in a different way. They also fabricate fictitious minutes of the *Consejo* that are later incorporated in school documentation so as to avoid the scrutiny of inspectors. The dual structure employed by *Themis School* consists of an operational body (the Assembly) and another mandated by law (the *Consejo*). Meetings of the *Consejo* are merely a bureaucratic performing act, where representatives gather to sign the agreements reached in the Assembly. The sole purpose of these meetings is to ratify decisions already made in parent–teacher assemblies, as expressed next:

Everyone perceives the *Consejo Escolar* only as a formal meeting that has to be held, and not as a place where decisions are actually made. (Parent at *Themis School*)

Decision-making and deliberation are transferred to another ad hoc structure they call ‘assembly’. Meetings are held every three months and the parents’ representative is merely another attendee, so the existence of the representative becomes a technocratic formality for complying with legality. This role is expressed in the following quote from the parents’ discussion group:

Joana: The parent representative in the *Consejo Escolar* is just one more person.

Magda: Yes, the exchange of opinions between parents and teachers is important.... So, the fact that we have this joint meeting is an added value. (Parents at *Themis School*)

Students do not participate in the *Consejo* as envisaged by law. They have their own assemblies and their decisions tend to permeate the parent–teacher assembly. The school principal affirms that having the student assembly and taking their voices into account is a curricular duty to generate citizens, as stated in the following quote:

We don’t have assemblies just for the sake of it; we have them because we are convinced that the school belongs to all of them [students]. They must learn to express their opinions and we have to provide them with the tools to be able to work in assembly. (Teacher at *Themis School*)

The case of *Simourgh School* is slightly different. Two general assemblies are held called *Plenario* (Plenary), one at the beginning of the academic course for deciding the main guidelines of action, and another at the end for evaluating the year. However, their main governance body, known as the *Gestora*, is the operational governance structure of the school responsible for bringing into practice the broad decisions reached in the general assembly. Parents, teachers, volunteers, student delegates from first to sixth grade and anybody else who wants to attend can participate in these meetings. They are held once or twice each trimester with the minutes being produced after the main meeting, as if these were the minutes of a meeting of the *Consejo*, so as to avoid any possible administrative conflict

or confrontation. This would be an example of interstitial transformation of the hegemonic school governing body. In the following quote the principal and her assistant explain how they do not duplicate structures and how they transform a technocratic space reserved for representatives, who have the right to vote (the *Consejo*), into a space where decisions are made by consensus. They avoid voting because it would generate power imbalances between actors, and this situation would go against the ethos of the school and of the project they take part in. This inequality in representation and vote is due to the nature of the power differentials established by law:

Aida: Our approach is called the *Gestora*.

Coral: In reality, it's similar to the *Consejo Escolar*. (Teachers at *Simourgh School*)

Aida: What happens is that we expand it. Student representatives – the class delegates – come from the intermediate and upper school cycles, but this is not envisaged for primary school students. Mothers representing each class attend as delegates, but anyone who wishes to do so may attend, not only the representatives. People also come from the mixed committees and there are other individuals as well, because it is open to everyone. This is a decision-making body. The plenary session is for accountability and for presenting proposals, while the *Gestora* is more for managing day-to-day concerns and is more agile.

Coral: Each commission explains their progress and we approve school documents and activities. The nice thing about this *Gestora* is that we've always been able to reach a consensus and we've never had to vote. (Teachers at *Simourgh School*)

In all schools, both teachers and parents have identified elements of fragility and incertitude in sustaining these governance structures, despite the fact that they are rooted in the schools' credo. For example, these structures require more time and intensity because they need to be developed in addition to the daily tasks that a school requires. Another element would be the arrival of new teachers whose ideas do not converge with these democratic practices and who prefer, and are more comfortable with, a managerial style of school administration. We were also able to observe that the practices developed in these structures are not in clear opposition to the head-teachers and their teams or to the Department of Education. We do not know what might happen in the event of an overt conflict within the school or between the school and the Department. Nor can we predict what would happen if these schools were to perform below what is expected of them on standardised tests. It also remains unclear whether teachers would share decisions with parents and students as they usually do, and whether inspectors would 'continue to look the other way', as they have done thus far, or generate institutional pressure to put an end to these structures.

Discussion and conclusions

While school educational projects were promoted by the Catalan government for the purpose of providing autonomy to schools 'to restore the authority' of the head-teachers and to promote New Public Management strategies, the schools we looked at connect these micro-policy texts more with the debates held in the context of policy influence on the need to deepen new forms of democratic administration in schools as demanded by Catalan social movements, such as *Rosa Sensat* or *Pedagogical Renewal Movements* among others. Table 1 displays the variety of governance structures created in the four case studies. Two of

Table 1. Governance structures.

	Governance structures (starting year, frequency)	Who participates in ad hoc structures and what type of decision-making is undertaken	How they use the legally mandated governing body (<i>Consejo Escolar</i>) for decision-making
<i>Themis School</i>	<i>General Assembly</i> (2000, three times each academic year) <i>Student Assembly</i> (2000, every two weeks)	Parents and teachers They decide on all school matters (curricular issues, etc.). Students and teachers They discuss and decide on daily matters concerning students (coexistence, relationships, etc.)	The <i>Consejo Escolar</i> gathers three times each academic year and meets separately from the General Assembly Students are not represented in the <i>Consejo</i> but their voices are heard
<i>Huma School</i>	Non-specific governance structure	Not applicable	Representatives of parents, teachers and administration meet in the <i>Consejo Escolar</i> , which also includes representation of student delegates despite the fact that the law does not contemplate their participation
<i>Aristotle School</i>	Non-specific governance structure	Not applicable	The <i>Consejo Escolar</i> gathers three times each academic year and teachers try to discuss and take into account all the decisions students have made in student assemblies. They also actively support parent participation in the <i>Consejo</i> meetings.
<i>Simourgh School</i>	<i>School General Assembly – Plenary</i> (2006, twice a year) <i>Management Committee – Comisión Gestora</i> (2006, every three months) <i>Mixed Committees</i> (2006, every week)	Students, parents, teachers and school staff They discuss, decide on and evaluate the main action guidelines Students from third to sixth grade, teachers, parents and school staff They operationalise and decide on the daily management of the school Parents, teachers and students organised in five committees for the purpose of transforming decisions into action and proposing new actions	They use the <i>Comisión Gestora</i> as the meetings of the <i>Consejo Escolar</i> , transforming this space of representative democracy into a space of direct democracy. It is open to everyone who wants to attend and decisions are formalised with formal representatives of the <i>Consejo</i> . The only limitation to participation in these meetings is for students below the third-grade level (7 years of age and younger)
	<i>Student Delegate Assembly</i> (2006, twice a year before the <i>Plenary</i>)	Student delegates from first to sixth grade gather and discuss decisions and proposals made in each class assembly. They also decide what issues they will bring to the <i>Plenary</i> as students	

these case studies reflect what Wright (2010) identifies as *symbiotic transformation* (when processes or strategies extend current governing structures of social empowerment provided by dominant capitalist societies), while the other two reflect what he recognises as *interstitial transformation* (seeking new forms of social empowerment beyond those established, but not confronting the dominant). On the one hand, the first two schools generate and expand the current *Consejo Escolar* by either bringing the voice of students, expressed in the different assemblies in which they participate, to the *Consejo* (*Aristotle School*), or by enhancing the participation of minority parents and students (*Huma School*). On the other hand, *Themis* and *Simourgh* Schools are developing new governance structures in substitution for the *Consejo*, aiming to reach all parent and student constituencies but not contradicting dominant structures envisaged in law.

They all carry out these practices and implement these structures against the grain of State and Autonomous Community policy. Their challenges are to be able to maintain these structures of participation over time despite changes in direction and the growing importance that the system attaches to the figure of the principal. Thus, principals and their teams can apply New Public Management strategies more ‘autonomously’, much as they are instructed in training courses given by the state or autonomous governments in accordance with their standards of performativity. This also occurs in parallel with devaluation of the role of governing bodies representing different educational agents (Olmedo, 2008). This trend is similar to what is occurring in Switzerland (Hangartner & Svaton, 2014) and has some parallels to what is taking place in the UK, albeit with certain differences. In the latter case, school governors are trained to act as ‘inspectors’ of the State from within (Wilkins, 2015). However, the cases presented show how, despite the pressure and adaptability of neoliberal policies in different contexts, there is room to generate enclaves of resistance taking advantage of systemic structural holes from which alternative ways of democratic governance may flourish. If these realities can be found in Spain, they may also be developed in other contexts with similar or different forms. We also want to highlight that these stories are not the norm, but rather the exception in the context analysed. As shown, the possibilities for these schools to implement democratic school governance within this system are fraught with complexities. They can develop these micro-policies and be immune to the neoliberal trend, to the extent they do not openly confront the governing bodies established by law. Another fact to take into account is that thus far inspection is not yet as incisive in school governance in Spain and Catalonia as in other contexts, as long as the results of standardised tests do not fall below expected levels.

All four schools successfully managed a process of internal deliberation whereby participants reach agreements through communicative narratives, identified by Ranson (2003) as democratic governance. These practices of democratic governance, as they undermine the naturalness with which managerialist administration of schools is presented and in turn generate other practices, are bringing to the table a particular act of collective struggle. This does not mean that there is not a plurality of voices, contradictions and ambiguities among teachers and parents when it comes to implementing these practices; but, notwithstanding, it was possible to create, develop and sustain them.

The more extensive the empirical data are that we gather on how schools develop and maintain democratic school governance, the better we will be able to understand the complexities and difficulties schools and agents have in implementing these practices in the age

of neoliberal policy. The paths these schools follow could provide us with cross-national comparative school research that would be useful for theory building as well as for policy (Carnoy, 2006; Carter, 2012). Further multi-level analysis could also be conducted to show contradictions and connections between the effects of national and regional policies in school governance. This can also be connected with European and international policies and treaties aimed at promoting young people's civic participation. In Bhabha's (2014) terms, the heart of the question is how states or schools can fail to protect the right to narrate of those who were silenced or, conversely, how they can create spaces for enabling the right of all parent and student constituencies to be heard, recognised and represented.

Notes

1. Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.
2. *Organic Law* 8/1985, of 3 July, regulating the Right to Education.
3. *Organic Law* 5/1980, of 19 June regulating the Schools Statute.
4. *Organic Law* 9/1995, of 20 November, on the Participation, Evaluation and Governance of schools.
5. *Organic Law* 10/2002, of 23 December, on Education Quality.
6. *Organic Law* 2/2006, of 3 May, on Education.
7. *Organic Law* 8/2013, of 9 December, for the Improvement of Education Quality.
8. Law 12/2009, of 10 July, on Education in Catalonia.
9. The Pedagogical Renewal Movements were social movements made up of education professionals whose objective was to improve public schools from a leftist political perspective.
10. As of 2010, the leftist government that promoted the National Education Pact was replaced by a centre-right coalition of Christian Democratic and liberal inspiration.
11. http://www.edu21.cat/files/continguts/Centers_Educatius_11.pdf
12. Decree 39/2014, of 25 March, regulating the procedures for defining the profile and provisions of teaching places. DOGC, 6591, 1–25.
13. ORDRE ENS/16/2016, of 3 February, amending the Order ENS/330/2014, of 6 November, on teacher promotion procedure by stages. Retrieved on 5 March 2016 from: <http://portaldogc.gencat.cat/utillsEADOP/PDF/7056/1474008.pdf>
14. Fictitious names have been used to maintain anonymity.

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ORCID

Òscar Prieto-Flores  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4162-6109>

Jordi Feu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1395-2409>

Carles Serra  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5159-4887>

Laura Lázaro  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3469-4883>

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