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# **The School Improvement Maze.**

## **A Multi-level Analysis of Educational Reform in Catalonia**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the adoption, implementation, and effects of educational improvement policies in Catalonia, a region of Spain, where large-scale reforms have focused on driving school improvement by strengthening school autonomy and accountability frameworks. On the autonomy side, the reform initially emphasized decentralizing managerial aspects, particularly staffing, budgeting, and organizational structure. School principals were the primary targeted actors, given greater decision-making power, especially over teacher selection and leadership roles. While the emphasis on pedagogical autonomy and innovation remained limited at the beginning, it has recently become the focus of educational reform through the promotion of instructional leadership and competence-based, student-centered teaching practices. On the accountability side, Catalonia adopted a low-stakes assessment framework designed to promote continuous improvement without punitive measures. Standardized tests and inspectorate evaluations were framed as tools for diagnosing performance and encouraging school actors' reflection. Similar to many reforms implemented globally, these efforts aim to stimulate improvement at the school level and enhance educational quality and efficiency by encouraging schools to better align with local needs while being held accountable for their outcomes. However, the enactment of these policies is particularly complex due to their broad, multi-dimensional nature, comprising areas from teaching practices to governance structures. Large-scale reforms aimed at promoting school improvement often face challenges in implementation, resulting in both intended and unintended outcomes due to resistance, misinterpretation, or capacity issues. Moreover, the interaction between different policies can overlap, conflict, or complement one another, with success heavily reliant on how schools perceive and integrate them into their specific contexts.

The primary objective of this study is to explore how educational improvement policies are adopted and enacted in Catalonia, focusing on both policy-level discourses and legislative developments, as well as on-the-ground implementation within schools. To achieve this, the research employs a qualitative case study approach, integrating multiple methods and data sources to capture the layered processes involved in policy design and school-level practice. To study the adoption of improvement policies, the research combines a document analysis of policy-relevant documents, to examine the official stance and context of policymaking, along with interviews with policymakers to uncover informal processes and human factors. To analyze implementation, interviews with teachers and headteachers are the primary method used to explore how they interpret, negotiate, and enact these policies within their specific contexts. These interviews are complemented by a quantitative analysis using survey data from a larger sample of school actors, which serves both to test issues identified qualitatively and, combined with administrative

records, to further characterize school contexts. The combination of different methods and the wide range of data sources employed allows for unpacking how and why improvement is framed in policymaking processes, as well as how schools respond to overlapping and sometimes conflicting policy demands.

The findings reveal that the concept of educational improvement in Catalonia has evolved over time. Initially focused on results through managerial autonomy, it later expanded to also include instructional innovation through pedagogical autonomy, and, to a lesser extent, inclusion. These overlapping mandates have led to the diversification of responses from schools. Varying responses are strongly influenced by school-specific contexts—both institutional and socio-economic. While the autonomy that schools enjoy when decoding educational reform allows necessary adaptations, it also raises concerns about equity and consistency across the system. A system-wide approach to promoting improvement may not effectively achieve equitable instructional enhancement, as disparities in school capacities remain unaddressed by the autonomy framework. Additionally, the lack of comprehensive teacher training necessary for implementing certain changes makes progress highly dependent on individual schools' ability to navigate their conditions. Moreover, the accountability framework, designed to promote improvement, does not seem to trigger reflexivity and data use at the school level, as it depends on many school characteristics, and often produces unintended consequences, such as an overemphasis on standardized testing and a narrowing of the curriculum. Under pressure to meet targets, schools may focus on test preparation at the expense of broader educational goals. Although intended as formative and reflexive, accountability mechanisms are frequently seen as bureaucratic burdens rather than as effective tools for improvement.

Regarding policy implications, the dissertation identifies a key issue with the predominant notion of school autonomy: it assumes all schools have the same capacity to leverage this freedom effectively. In practice, autonomy can exacerbate inequalities by placing the burden of improvement on schools, many of which lack the necessary resources. While autonomy may encourage improvement, it also shifts responsibility away from educational authorities. The study further finds that broad, vague policy mandates often lead to unintended outcomes, as unclear objectives and incentives result in varied interpretations and, in some cases, rejection of implementation. Without adequate support and training, the improvement mandate depends heavily on individual schools' ability to manage and adapt existing policy instruments to their circumstances.

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## Introductory Chapter

Since the turn of the millennium, education has been posited as the keystone of social and economic progress, prompting states to implement profound changes aimed at adapting compulsory education to the needs of the 21st century. Worldwide, large-scale educational reforms have been fundamentally driven by the goal of making educational improvement flourish across schools. While the notion of improvement has a longstanding history in educational policy and practice—and is often seen as a core, intrinsic goal of education itself—it remains a multi-faceted concept that permeates various levels and dimensions of schooling.

Educational policies aiming for improvement often cover two interconnected dimensions: instructional and governance. The instructional dimension seeks to directly influence pedagogical practices by fostering innovative teaching methods and materials, enhancing the pedagogical autonomy of schools, and, more broadly, reworking curricula toward competence-based frameworks. Meanwhile, the governance dimension aims to establish the organizational conditions necessary for improvement by developing the managerial autonomy of schools and empowering leadership teams to make strategic decisions about resource allocation, staffing, and organizational development. It also incorporates external evaluation mechanisms to monitor progress and incentivize further improvement. Together, these policies create a comprehensive framework that integrates both pedagogical and managerial dimensions, enabling schools to develop unique educational projects tailored to their students' specific needs and fostering a virtuous cycle of continuous, context-responsive improvement.

Yet, the concept of educational improvement and the policies designed to achieve it are puzzling for several reasons. First, improvement is a broad and multi-dimensional concept that comprise various aspects of schooling, from enhancing teaching and learning processes to redefining organizational and governance structures. Consequently, its interpretation can vary significantly among different actors, such as policymakers, school leaders or teachers, each of whom may prioritize different dimensions based on their perspectives, goals, and contexts. Second, large-scale educational reforms aimed at fostering improvement may be challenging to implement, and thus may result in both intended and unintended consequences. These reforms can face resistance, misinterpretation, or lack of capacity at different levels, from policy design to school-level practice, which complicates their enactment and the realization of their goals. Finally, the interplay of the policies mentioned may be particularly complex, as they can either overlap, conflict, or complement one another. This imbrication is amplified by the fact that the success or failure of these policies heavily depends on how schools, as the ultimate implementers, perceive, adapt, and integrate them into their unique contexts. Given these, the main objective of this dissertation is to examine the adoption and enactment of educational improvement policies in

Catalonia, with a dual focus on the discursive and legislative developments at the policy level and the processes of implementation at the school level. This dual focus allows for a nuanced understanding of how improvement policies are conceptualized and operationalized by policymakers and received and experienced across schools.

This introductory chapter begins by exploring the notion of improvement within the educational field, tracing its evolution and focusing on recent developments. It then examines the key contemporary educational policies designed to foster school improvement, focusing on school autonomy and accountability while also considering, though to a lesser extent, market-driven measures. Following this, it shifts to the context of the research case—Catalonia—offering a brief overview of recent policy measures adopted to promote improvement. With this foundation, the chapter outlines the study’s aims and research questions grounded in the literature reviewed. The chapter then discusses the theoretical considerations and analytical frameworks employed in the two strands of the research. Finally, it concludes with an overview of the study design and the methodological approaches used in the study.

## **1.1. The Ever-present Educational Improvement**

Improving education—inputs, processes, outcomes—is one of the most debated topics in the education-related literature. We can trace back academic and public discussions around the need to outpace and improve established schooling practices at least to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the time that mass school systems were being consolidated in Western societies, today well-known authors such as Dewey, Montessori, or Ferrer i Guàrdia arose as critical voices against the ‘traditional’ form of schooling and defended a profound correction to it (see, e.g., García-Yeste et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 1997; Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008). Focusing on the pedagogical side of improvement, mainly on teaching methods, the point shared was that the educational systems were based on an industrial, standardized, one-size-fits-all model that not only was unable to bring about authentic learning and development to children but in fact impeded it. In response, and with minor differences among their perspectives, they urged for several instructional changes around the ideas of student-centered and experimentation-based teaching methods. Their contributions were loosely packed under the *progressive education* label (Reese, 2001), and although they were not consistently, nor extensively, incorporated in school systems at the time, their ideas remained and were revisited by the end of the century as a way to modernize and improve educational practices.

The following decades witnessed Western states’ efforts to expand educational access to further segments of the population and to build solid primary and lower-secondary systems (Meyer et al., 1995), but with little questioning of the ‘grammar of modern schooling’, which prevailed largely

unchanged (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, in the last decades of the century, in countries with well-established educational systems, researchers and policymakers gradually increased their interest in improving the work of teachers and schools as well as learning outcomes<sup>1</sup>. Flowering almost simultaneously, constructivist ideas and the school improvement and effectiveness movements seized the educational field.

On the one hand, so-called *curriculum* (Dalin, 1978) or *pedagogical* reforms (Sack, 1981), concerned with shaping the teaching-learning processes occurring within classrooms, started to be rooted in the nascent constructivist approach<sup>2</sup>. Developments in the fields of psychology and cognitive sciences about how humans learn made constructivism appealing for those working in education. The core assumption of *active cognitive processing* in the constructivist theory of learning paved the way to thrust student-centered and active-based instructional practices (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002)<sup>3</sup>. Curriculum reforms of the last quarter of the past century testified to the consolidation of constructivism as the new pedagogical paradigm (Fischetti et al., 1996; Phillips, 1995). Nevertheless, altering well-established pedagogical conceptions proved to be unattainable through top-down reform, as shown by the overall failure that characterized these efforts (Cuban, 2013; Fullan, 2000).

Afterwards, at the beginning of the 2000s, competence-based education (CBE)<sup>4</sup> in primary- and secondary-level curriculum reforms would pick up the baton of student-centered and active-based approaches. Based on conceptual oppositions between traditional and ‘contemporary-needed’ instructional practices, CBE has been increasingly adopted by countries, particularly in Europe, to better fit their educational systems to ‘21<sup>st</sup>-century needs’<sup>5</sup> and improve their quality and

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<sup>1</sup> This text by Papadopoulos (1980) is a faithful example of the discursive turn in educational reform towards the pedagogical work of teachers, as he speaks of the ‘unfinished business’ of the ‘pedagogical revolution’ started in the 1970s. In his words: “whereas the main concern in the 1960s was to develop new post-secondary structures on a system-wide basis in response to the pressure of numbers, the effort in the 1970s was more directed at the implementation and consolidation of change and the consequences of this on the internal functioning of the various parts of the system and its different institutions” (p. 164).

<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, is conceptually linked to the progressive education ideas that were being revisited at that moment (Shapiro, 1984; Dale, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Worth mentioning, although out of the scope of the dissertation, ‘active cognitive processing’ has been somewhat misunderstood or lost in translation entering the educational field. As Mayer (2009) puts it: “it is inappropriate to assume that active cognitive learning requires teaching methods that promote hands-on behavioral activity during learning—such as discovery methods. Similarly, it is inappropriate to assume that passive instructional methods—such as multimedia presentations—cannot promote active cognitive learning” (p. 184). For Mayer, this constitutes the *constructivist teaching fallacy* and has not stopped constructivism from being prescribed for instruction.

<sup>4</sup> CBE emerged in the vocational education and training field in the 1990s after being born in the corporate sector in the 1960s. During the 2000s, international organizations embraced and deepened the notion of competences in compulsory education, generating policy frameworks, recommending member states to adopt CBE reforms and developing international large-scale assessments based on competences or skills such as PISA (Gardinier, 2021; Valle & Manso, 2013). Yet, despite wide adoption in compulsory education, CBE did not advance without critique (Lum, 1999; Wheelahan, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> There are several buzzwords and catchphrases to express—and legitimate—this ‘imperative’ to reform education. They tend to combine the terms ‘21<sup>st</sup> century’ or ‘contemporary’ with ‘needs’, ‘demands’, or

outcomes (Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2021; Tchiboza, 2010; Voogt & Pareja-Roblin, 2012). However, competence-based curricular approaches have not advanced without debate. They have stimulated heated ideological discussions between proponents of subject-based curricula and advocates of competence-based approaches (see, e.g., Hoadley, 2024). This controversy may be due to the lack of empirical evidence supporting CBE, coupled with its implementation in the educational sector as a broad systemic solution to improve learning (Lassnigg, 2017)<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, the school improvement (SI) and school effectiveness (SE) movements were successful in placing schools' leadership and teaching practices as the master key to improving learning outcomes. Starting precisely from the realization of top-down failure, academics within the SI strand emphasized organizational innovation, schools' self-evaluation, outcomes-oriented leadership, professional development, or the 'ownership of change' (Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001, p.459) if any improvement was to be achieved (Hoachlander et al., 2001; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). In parallel, SE scholars, countering the then-widespread conception that schools inevitably reproduced outer inequalities, urged the famous 'schools make a difference' (e.g., Good & Weinstein, 1986) and brought forth school-level factors, such as professional leadership, monitoring performance, or home-school partnership, allegedly capable of neutralizing external constraints and enhancing results (Luyten et al., 2005; Sammons et al., 1995).

As school improvement and school effectiveness movements joined, the combined SESI movement rose rapidly, both in academic and policy circles (Reynolds, 2010). The joint venture spread throughout the educational field and rapidly became the hegemonic paradigm in thinking about school improvement and effectively framed the school as a quasi-autonomous, self-managed institution capable of advancing improvement and raising learning outcomes against all odds<sup>7</sup>.

The SESI discourse's heavy emphasis on student learning outcomes has arguably sidelined the focus on equity and inclusion. The equity-oriented faction of the SESI movement emphasizes that the purpose of school improvement should be 'a sound education for every child,' rather than simply enhancing results. Adopting a more comprehensive and context-sensitive approach, scholars within this orientation argue that schools alone cannot fulfill this task; instead, it requires collaborative efforts between schools, leadership focused on equity indicators, and attention to

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other synonyms. For example, 'contemporary needs', 'contemporary demands', 'new societal demands', '21st century demands', etc.

<sup>6</sup> As Lassnigg (2017) argues, this systemic approach to improvement in the educational sector stands in stark contrast to other public sectors, such as health, where it is typically applied on a smaller scale and usually accompanied by a program evaluation designed in advance.

<sup>7</sup> Despite the predominance of SESI in educational literature, some scholars have warned about significant shortcomings, such as the poor evidence in terms of program evaluation produced within the movement (Coe, 2009) or the fact that most improvement research tended to overlook "wider forces which impact on schooling and the ways in which injustice is re/produced" (Wrigley, 2013, p. 38).

structural inequities (Ainscow et al., 2012). However, this equity strand has tended to target its discourse primarily towards disadvantaged schools rather than addressing the entire system (e.g., Florian & Rouse, 2001; Muijs et al., 2004). As a result, equity and inclusion have been somewhat relegated to the background.

More recently, innovation has progressively become central to the narrative of educational improvement. Over the past decade and a half, the term has been increasingly adopted by national and regional governments in educational reform processes (see, e.g., Greany, 2018) and international organizations have also emphasized it (OECD, 2015a). This comes as no surprise, as innovation is inherently desirable (Hodgson, 2012) and connects with broader social and economic reform trends. In the field of economics, innovation is often praised as a key driver of growth and a solution to persistent economic stagnation (Vinsel & Russell, 2020). This perspective has partially permeated the educational field. According to Looney (2009) four trends drive the push for innovation in education: social and economic pressures to raise achievement levels and ensure greater equity of outcomes; changes in work, social, and family life; rapidly advancing technologies; and the need to motivate and engage students.

Yet, educational innovation is a conceptual minefield<sup>8</sup>. Despite its central role in contemporary educational discourse<sup>9</sup>, the concept of educational innovation lacks a single, universally agreed-upon definition. Approaches to innovation in educational research tend to be broad, even ambiguous. For instance, Serdyukov (2017) describes it as “a new pedagogic theory, methodological approach, teaching technique, instructional tool, learning process, or institutional structure that, when implemented, produces a significant change in teaching and learning, which leads to better student learning” (p.8).

Broad definitions allow for a wide range of practices to be considered innovative. Most literature focuses on classroom and instructional work, where curriculum plays a significant role, but innovation is often taken for granted without proper conceptualization<sup>10</sup>. Tacitly, however, innovation is focused on teaching practices, frequently mentioning student-centered approaches, competence-based instructional practices, and cross-curricular learning, and are aimed at enhancing learning outcomes (Ellis & Bond, 2016; Paniagua & Istance, 2018). These attributes theoretically stand in contrast to the so-called ‘traditional’ pedagogical practices, which are

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<sup>8</sup> See Kotsemir et al (2013) for a thick, historical analysis of the concept of innovation.

<sup>9</sup> The most critical argue that the discourse on educational innovation acts as an *ideology*. As educational discourse is always ideology-laden, “a technical-centered pedagogy based on know-how is by no means immune to ideological load” (Santos-Gómez, 2019, p.1). For this author, “excessive value is placed on innovations in educational processes and settings. Innovations, it is assumed, should be put into practice in a continual movement of ideas, methodological changes, new technologies, and transformations in approaches; accordingly, one must always innovate, outdo oneself. (...) Thus, teachers and schools alike feel obliged to push ahead without stopping to reflect on what has been achieved and stabilized; all justified by necessarily adapting to a society in constant change” (p.1)

<sup>10</sup> See an exception in Pedró (2023)

characterized as teacher-centered and subject-based (Mascolo, 2009; Young, 2010). Often, rather than being intrinsically defined, educational innovation is portrayed as a counterpoint to traditional education.

Along the advance of innovation in the educational literature, key international educational stakeholders have also emphasized the necessity for schools to become adaptable and resilient institutions, capable of navigating uncertainty and delivering innovative approaches (Kools et al., 2020; Reimers & Operti, 2021). The OECD has been a leading advocate for educational innovation, mobilizing knowledge based on data from PISA and TALIS<sup>11</sup> with the aim of measuring educational innovation across countries (OECD, 2014). Similarly, UNESCO (2021) and the European Union (European Commission, 2018) have promoted innovation as a means to adapt education systems to new societal and economic realities.

In sum, improvement remains central to educational discourse and reform. However, the focus has often prioritized measurable outcomes at the expense of equity and inclusion. While equity-oriented approaches have called for a wider focus, they have often been limited to disadvantaged schools, leaving systemic issues of equity and inclusion under-addressed. Meanwhile, innovation has gained significant attention in recent years as a means to modernize instructional practices and respond to contemporary demands, positioning itself as a key strategy in the broader improvement agenda. Despite these shifts in emphasis, and the differential weight of focus placed on them, innovation, equity, and performance all contribute to the ongoing pursuit of educational improvement and should be understood as coexisting elements within this broader framework.

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<sup>11</sup> The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation within the OECD develops the project *Measuring Innovation in Education*, which periodically measures the levels of innovation within educational systems worldwide (OECD, 2014; Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019; Vincent-Lancrin, 2023). This project follows the *OECD Innovation Strategy* (OECD, 2010), which calls for measures of innovation in the public sector under a narrative of efficiency. Initially, they promoted the (*educational*) *innovation imperative* (see, e.g., OECD, 2015b; 2016), but they have progressively softened this ‘imperative’. For example, in the latest publication of *Measuring Innovation in Education 2023*, the innovation imperative does not appear at all. In parallel, the *OECD's Innovative Learning Environments* project developed a framework for innovation with seven 'learning principles' and three 'dimensions of innovative organizations,' aiming to raise performance and improve equity in education systems (OECD, 2015a).

## 1.2. Governing School Improvement: A Post-Bureaucratic Approach

The contemporary educational discourse is definitively marked by the omnipresence of improvement<sup>12</sup> along with other keywords such as quality and efficiency (Overbey, 2023; Rawolle et al., 2016). Surely, SESI and CBE narratives must have played a role in bringing these terms to the forefront of the field and prioritizing them over others, but they have been accompanied and embraced by the rise of the New Public Management (NPM) policy era. The NPM movement aims to make public sector organizations more business-like and market-oriented, emphasizing efficiency, performance measurement, cost reduction, and customer satisfaction. It involves decentralizing organizational structures, implementing performance management systems, and prioritizing managerial skills and methods over traditional professional competencies (Diefenbach, 2009; Tolofari, 2005).

In the educational sector, throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, market-based arrangements, decentralization, and accountability policies gained prominence<sup>13</sup>, making NPM the hegemonic policy paradigm. This shift occurred first in Western—particularly English-speaking—and loan-dependent countries, but it quickly spread to other peripheral states (Verger et al., 2019). All these large-scale reforms incorporated improvement as a first-line expected outcome of systemic interventions. Performance improvement measured in standardized tests was the preferred indicator of improvement, but the theories of change of all these policies also mentioned improvements in terms of quality, innovation, and equity in schooling. However, the level of operational clarity to trigger and measure such other improvements was not as evident as with student performance.

The following sections explore the key large-scale policies aimed at fostering school improvement. The first sub-section focuses on decentralization and school autonomy policies, which are intended to diversify and improve the offer side by enabling schools to better align their practices with local needs and contexts. Complementing autonomy by focusing on the demand side, the text then provides a brief overview of market-based reforms, which suggest that competition among schools will drive improvement and boost performance. Finally, the section

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<sup>12</sup> This has progressed to the extent that some scholars are recently advocating for the merging of *improvement science* with *educational studies* (LeMahieu et al., 2017; Lewis, 2015) or even for the establishment of an emerging disciplinary field such as *educational improvement science* (Li, 2023)

<sup>13</sup> There have been various ways of conceptualizing and organizing the global spread of educational reform policies. For instance, Sahlberg (2016) calls this the *Global Education Reform Movement*, framing it as an educational orthodoxy and governance policy paradigm. Volansky (2023), meanwhile, names it *The Standards Movement Wave*, situating it as the second in a series of three waves of educational reform over the past century, following the progressivist reform wave and preceding the new learning skills wave.



examines accountability frameworks, often seen as a necessary counterbalance to autonomy, ensuring that schools are held accountable for their outcomes and thereby incentivizing continuous improvement.

### **1.2.1. Decentralization and School Autonomy: The Core Levers of Improvement**

In the context of the large-scale reforms of the 1990s based on NPM principles, decentralization policies in education were largely adopted alongside market arrangements because it was a necessary feature to ‘liberate’ schools to compete. However, the rationale for decentralizing decision-making in education was not confined to market purposes—especially outside early adopters of market policies—and was justified under at least three other arguments: to redistribute and share state authority, to enhance cost-effectiveness through efficient deployment and management of resources, and to make educational content more sensitive to local contexts (Weiler, 1989). Among the numerous elements that can be decentralized in the educational sector and the intermediate and end-of-chain institutions to which they can be transferred (Florestal & Cooper, 1997; McGinn & Welsh, 1999), the devolution of organizational, economic, and pedagogical decisions to schools for their self-management has been privileged.

*School-based management*<sup>14</sup> policies, adopted mainly by the late 1980s and during the 1990s, gave schools more control over budget allocation, staff hiring, and curriculum development (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). However, they resulted in little enhancement, particularly in student performance. Research suggests this was due to schools' overemphasis on governance and administrative issues to the detriment of focusing on instructional improvement (Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003; de Grauwe, 2005). This conclusion became the foundation for the new wave of autonomy reforms in the 2000s, which placed attention on instructional matters at the same level as organizational and economic concerns. While SBM policies were mostly concentrated in the private school sector and certain public-school experiments, these renewed autonomy policies extended largely to the public sector, fueled by the rise of NPM (Honig & Rainey, 2012)

Now mostly referred to as *school autonomy*<sup>15</sup> policies, these initiatives renew the discourse on the devolution of powers to schools. They strongly emphasize the quality of teaching and learning and meeting learning standards—this is why they are usually adopted alongside accountability

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<sup>14</sup> Other terms commonly used to describe SBM-like policies include decentralized school management, site-based management, independent school operation, school self-governance, school-based governance, and school self-management.

<sup>15</sup> Worth noting, school autonomy has historically referred to the academic freedom of teachers. However, as the focus shifted towards regulating school management, the meaning of the term has gradually evolved and been displaced (Eurydice, 2007).

measures to monitor quality (Verger et al., 2019). Based on the mechanisms of empowerment and flexibility—particularly for headteachers—, autonomy policies are expected to trigger improvement processes by allocating decision-making powers to schools, allowing them to be responsive to their local environment and to tailor their practices accordingly (Arcia et al., 2011; Caldwell & Spinks, 1992).

School autonomy has become the silver bullet of school improvement. However, the extent to which autonomy produces improvement in student outcomes and teaching practices is questioned, as the evidence is still inconclusive. One reason for this is that school autonomy is not a closed, defined policy package but rather an umbrella concept that embraces quite different policy designs. In the education policy literature, it is commonly broken down into the capacity to allocate budget and resources, manage staff, and decide upon curricular and instructional elements—sometimes student admission is added to the list too. These are referred to as *economic*, *organizational*, and *pedagogical* autonomy, respectively (e.g., Eurydice, 2007; Maslowski et al., 2007; Neeleman, 2016).

Nonetheless, except for the pedagogical aspect, which can be shared with teachers, this categorization speaks mainly of the economic and organizational autonomy granted to school principals, who are usually responsible for leading these tasks. This pack is frequently called *managerial autonomy* (e.g., Arcia et al., 2011; Bjørnholt et al., 2022; Han & Wang, 2022). Unpacking the theory of change of managerial autonomy, granting school leaders organizational and economic leeway is supposed to foster the efficient and innovative management of human, material, and financial resources. On the other hand, pedagogical autonomy should empower principals—and teachers—to develop unique educational projects tailored to their students' needs. For some, both dimensions of autonomy are linked, as effective staff management is essential in creating cohesive teams capable of driving innovative and context-relevant projects (Greany & Waterhouse, 2016; Hasim et al., 2021). Altogether, granting autonomy in these matters should lead to the introduction of new instructional practices and an improvement in learning outcomes. But there are other relevant agents in schools to whom autonomy can be passed. Leaving aside school governing bodies<sup>16</sup>, the categorization presented clearly overlooks the role of teacher autonomy. In this regard, Frostenson (2015) develops an approach to teacher autonomy that better accounts for the internal dynamics of school life and the tensions between managerial autonomy and *professional autonomy*, which is divided into *general professional autonomy*, *collegial professional autonomy* and *individual professional autonomy*. General professional autonomy

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<sup>16</sup> School boards, school councils, and similar governing bodies are the least favored elements in school autonomy designs, despite their potential to promote democratic and participatory improvement processes. As a result, they remain the least researched aspects of these reforms (e.g., Gobby & Niesche, 2019).

refers to teachers' authority to define their professional duties, including decisions on school organization, entry requirements, teacher training, and curricula. This form of autonomy requires teachers to be organized into professional bodies recognized as legitimate actors by educational authorities. Collegial professional autonomy denotes the collective capacity of teachers to influence and make decisions about key strategies and practices within the school, both organizational and educational. Achieving this type of autonomy requires cooperation and mutual support to be core principles of school policy. Individual professional autonomy pertains to the ability of teaching staff to define their instructional practices and strategies, including the choice of teaching materials, pedagogy, and working conditions. This form of autonomy demands a high level of trust among teachers, schools, and educational authorities.

Overall, the evidence on the relationship between school autonomy and improvements in student outcomes remains mixed. First, it appears country-sensitive, with high-income countries that have implemented school autonomy measures showing a tendency to improve results and low-income countries demonstrating the opposite (Hanushek et al., 2013). Beyond this dichotomous and somewhat simplistic categorization, some studies find a clear positive relationship between granting more autonomy and enhancing learning outcomes (e.g., Hindriks et al., 2010), some find no significant associations (e.g., Maslowski et al., 2007), and others find variegated effects across countries, with some reducing and others deepening performance gaps between student groups (e.g., Buerger et al., 2023).

Perhaps the lack of theorizing autonomy designs and better differentiating among capacities devolved is the reason behind this mixed evidence. Recently, some studies have gone further and tested different dimensions of autonomy, finding that pedagogical autonomy is correlated with improving student outcomes, but managerial autonomy is not (e.g., Hossain, 2023; Luschei & Jeong, 2020), although these studies are still few.

The evidence on the capacity of school autonomy policies to foster innovation and instructional change mirrors the inconclusiveness found in performance improvement. Once again, the lack of theorizing the conceptual links between the type of autonomy granted and the kind of innovative practices generated makes the evidence landscape unclear. However, the few studies<sup>17</sup> addressing this topic indicate that merely adopting a systemwide school autonomy policy does not necessarily lead to instructional improvement and innovation (Caldwell, 2016; Greany & Waterhouse, 2016). As Hashim et al. (2021) argue, this may be because “the degree of autonomy afforded to schools is less important for organizational effectiveness than *how* [emphasis in original] organizations achieve fit between their internal and external environment” (p.206). Thus, the ability of

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<sup>17</sup> As a matter of fact, the OECD's large-scale project on measuring innovation in education does not correlate school autonomy levels with educational innovation indicators (OECD, 2014; Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019; Vincent-Lancrin, 2023)

autonomy policies to generate instructional innovation depends heavily on a complex set of intermediate factors within the autonomy provided, such as the degree of autonomy perceived by principals and teachers, the capacity of leadership teams to foster collaborative and supportive school climates, and the level of instructional support from educational authorities (Cobb et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2023; McCharen et al., 2011; O’Shea, 2021). As evidenced, it is difficult to establish a straightforward, positive correlation between autonomy and instructional improvement.

As the evidence points out, school autonomy policies appear to be extremely context-sensitive, not only at the school level but also at the regional and national levels, most likely because of their strong dependence on how school actors interpret the autonomy granted and the cultural and historical traditions of principalship and teacher professional identities (Heikkinen et al., 2021; Paulsrud & Wermke, 2020). All in all, this has not prevented managerial autonomy from becoming the preferred form of autonomy by governments worldwide, rising alongside school accountability measures within NPM.

#### ***1.2.1.1. Demand-side: Improvement through Competition***

Market-based reforms<sup>18</sup> in education are expected to trigger school improvement processes based on the traditional market mechanism of competition. Advocates for these kinds of policies argue that increasing competition among schools to attract families to fill their seats creates the necessary incentives for schools to develop improvements and be better positioned within the marketplace, ultimately leading to quality enhancement (see, among others, Chubb & Moe, 1990). Beyond improving student results as the ‘best’ indicator of school quality, competitive pressure should also lead schools to develop innovative pedagogical projects and practices as an intermediate outcome (Lubienski, 2003). Nonetheless, the evidence regarding the impact of market-oriented policies on student performance improvement indicates a trade-off with equity, and the effects on innovation tend toward null effects at best, when not simply impossible to link.

The impact of introducing competitive schemes on school performance appears mixed. In some cases, there is evidence that it has had a positive effect on increasing school performance (e.g., Hennerdal et al., 2020; Himmler, 2009; Wößmann, 2007), but usually not equally across schools. Frequently, schools’ responses to competitive incentives involve screening and selecting students, resulting in advantaged pupils being selected and concentrated in certain schools, and thus these schools raise their performance mainly because of student composition (Zancajo, 2020; Guul et

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<sup>18</sup> Although treated here as a single reform package for synthesis purposes, market-based reforms (also referred to as market-oriented, market-driven, or quasi-market reforms) in education comprise a heterogeneous group of policies, including vouchers, charters, and subsidies (see Lewis, 2017).

al., 2021). Ultimately, market-based policies seem to be generating a trade-off between improving equity and academic achievement (Musset, 2012; Verger et al., 2020).

On the other hand, despite being less investigated, competitive schemes do not seem to have produced significant school innovations. Although much of the evidence is concentrated in the UK and the US<sup>19</sup>, it suggests no greater instructional or organizational diversity due to competition (Glatter et al., 1997), and where diversification is found, changes are mostly cosmetic and do not alter pedagogical practices (Lubienski, 2003). Upon closer analysis, the diversification outcome reflects more schools resorting to superficial changes to contest in the marketplace rather than profound or structural innovations altering elements of the grammar of schooling (Jabbar, 2015; Lubienski, 2006; Preston et al., 2012). Because of this, it is claimed that competition is not as straightforwardly related to improving teaching and learning processes as it is often assumed (Waslander et al., 2010).

### **1.2.2. School Accountability: The Necessary Counterbalance**

Advocates of school accountability argue that autonomy without accountability has no additional effect on student learning; therefore, one should not be adopted without the other (Demas & Arcia, 2015). However, just like autonomy, school accountability is not a clear, defined policy but an umbrella for different policy designs aimed at ensuring schools meet their obligations and respond to their audiences<sup>20</sup>. Adapting the *accountability regimes framework* (Bovens, 2007), Verger and Parcerisa (2017) systematize traditional ways of holding schools accountable, which include: (a) *political accountability*, i.e., politicians and school board members must stand for election and publicly answer for their decisions; (b) *legal accountability*, i.e., school actors must operate according to legislation, with citizens able to bring legal complaints against violations; and (c) *bureaucratic accountability*, i.e., educational authorities establish rules for education delivery, and inspectors ensure norm compliance. More recently, in line with the developments of global education policy, other forms of accountability have gained prominence: (d) *professional accountability*, i.e., adherence to professional standards, peers, or organizations, particularly designed for teachers; (e) *market accountability*, i.e., schools being accountable to families through choice and competition policies; (f) *participative (or social) accountability*, i.e., engagement with families and communities through governance structures; and (g) *managerial*

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<sup>19</sup> Particularly due to the widespread adoption of charter school programs in the U.S. and the academies program in the U.K. (see Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005; West & Bailey, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> For a thorough account of the range of possibilities in designing school accountability systems, see the pioneering work of Benveniste (1985)..

*accountability*, i.e., holding schools accountable based on outcome indicators, particularly standardized tests and other performance metrics.

With the rise of NPM, managerial, market, and a renovated bureaucratic accountability gained prominence. Shifting the focus towards schools' outcomes required reliable sources and indicators on which to base judgments and make decisions; thus, national large-scale assessments (NLSA) were increasingly adopted worldwide—or refined in countries where they already existed—to monitor and evaluate learning outcomes (Verger et al., 2019). NLSA are the core instrument of the so-called *test-based accountability* (TBA) or *performance-based accountability* (PBA); two terms to name a form of managerial school accountability prominently based on standardized test results.

The theory of change behind TBA policies posits that setting clear standards and expectations for student performance, measuring learning through standardized tests, and holding schools accountable for results will generate the necessary incentives for school actors to improve their practices, ultimately leading to enhanced systemwide educational outcomes (Elliott & Hout, 2011). The mechanism sustaining the expectation that TBA—and market and bureaucratic accountability—can trigger improvement processes is pressure<sup>21</sup>, usually operationalized through material and symbolic sanctions and rewards (Figlio & Loeb, 2011; Loeb & Byun, 2019), the so-called *stakes*<sup>22</sup>. Directed towards schools, principals, or teachers—or a combination of them—the consequences attached to the results obtained in the standardized tests are critical to how actors respond to the incentives.

Among the advocates of tests, particularly in the early stages of TBA reforms, *high stakes* are considered a necessary condition to keep school actors aware of their performance and act accordingly (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005). High-stakes common designs include the publication of standardized test results, financial incentives for schools or teachers, and career and promotion implications for both teaching and administrative staff based on the results, even closing underperforming schools (Au, 2008). These kinds of measures were adopted primarily in Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g., Hursh, 2005; West, 2010).

However, in other parts of the world, despite adopting LSA, the consequences attached to them have not been as stringent. Although less researched, *low-stakes* TBA—also named *soft accountability*—systems use external assessments as a thermometer, evaluating the educational system and individual schools while providing constructive feedback. Any sanctions or administrative interventions are mild and typically reserved for exceptional cases (Maroy &

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<sup>21</sup> Others, more critical, would argue that is 'threat' rather than mere pressure (Taylor & Williams, 2001; Webb, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Worth noting, stakes are not endemic to TBA; traditionally, bureaucratic accountability through school inspections has also involved consequences, though usually of a different nature (Ehren et al., 2015).

Voisin, 2017). These systems, often designed to be ‘reflexive’ or ‘formative,’ are expected to incentivize instructional change and innovation, mainly under the assumption that schools will use the data to trigger continuous self-improvement processes (Maroy & Pons, 2019). Without the threat of negative consequences from poor standardized test results, it is believed that these results should help principals and teachers identify gaps in student learning and tailor interventions to meet their needs (Schuyler-Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007).

The evidence that school accountability can trigger improvement processes and enhance student outcomes is still being debated. High-stakes TBA systems have been under intense scrutiny, initially showing positive effects in bettering student performance (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005; Wößmann et al., 2007). Yet, more recent views suggest that this form of TBA can improve performance in certain schools under specific conditions, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Torres, 2021), but it often falls short of producing a significant systemwide performance enhancement (Supovitz, 2009). Additionally, the pressure from high-stakes TBA appears to hinder instructional improvement. Under high pressure and potential sanctions, teachers often rely on familiar practices and avoid innovative approaches to protect school performance (Knight, 2020; Mausethagen, 2013; Solomon & Lewin, 2016). Moreover, data from standardized tests rarely seem to be used to improve or change ineffective educational practices (Farley-Ripple et al., 2020).

More concerning than the unmet goals of TBA policies are their negative impacts on principals and teachers, which far outpace the minor benefits (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). High-stakes TBA lowers school staff morale (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020) and job satisfaction (Smith & Holloway, 2020), increases stress (Jerrim & Sims, 2022), damages trust among teachers, and raises burnout rates (Dworkin & Tobe, 2014). Furthermore, it encourages low-quality teaching practices such as overemphasizing test preparation—*teaching to the test or teaching to the rating*—(Jennings & Bearak, 2014; Reback, 2008), focusing too narrowly on subjects assessed in the test—*curriculum narrowing*—(Au, 2011; Crocco & Costigan, 2007), or assisting students with test answers or discouraging underperforming students from attending school on test day—*cheating*—(Amrein-Beardsley et al., 2010; Battistin, 2016; Hibel & Penn, 2020). These actions aim to minimize the potential harm of low test results and avoid sanctions, but ultimately have highly detrimental effects on equity (Voisin, 2021).

Stakes and sanctions might be behind the unfulfilled promises and undesired effects of high-stakes TBA policies. However, and despite less researched, countries and regions with soft accountability systems show stunning similar evidence. Counterintuitively, perceived pressure to perform is high, even though the threat of being sanctioned is either inexistent or minimal (Levatino et al., 2024). Most likely this explains why side effects are very much alike, as practices such as teaching to the test, cheating or diverting resources to tested subjects and grades are also

found in these contexts (Feniger et al, 2016; Ferrer-Esteban & Pagès, 2024; Jäger et al., 2012; Thiel et al., 2017).

Regarding the expectation that low-stakes TBA will be a catalyst for school improvement, the evidence, though limited, diverges. For instance, a study in Norway found that while national assessments provide valuable insights into student performance, they do not offer new information for improving instruction (Hatfield & Soløst, 2024). Similarly, in Israel, teachers reported that test results do not drive pedagogical changes to enhance learning outcomes (Arviv-Elyashiv & Avidov-Ungar, 2023). In Spain, research indicated that test data is rarely used for instructional improvement (Pagès, 2021). This may be due to teachers' perceptions of assessments; even without significant consequences, the mere act of evaluation can make them cautious about using these tests to enhance instruction and learning (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). Despite its intentions, soft TBA, like high-stakes, does not seem to incentivize educational change on its own.

Despite the predominance of TBA—whether with hard or soft consequences—most educational systems exhibit a blend of managerial, market, and bureaucratic accountability, typically featuring at least one large-scale assessment. TBA has significantly elevated the role of these assessments, making standardized tests a central and unavoidable tool in educational governance worldwide. In fact, market and bureaucratic systems have integrated performance data in their action courses. In choice and competition policies, NLSA data is primarily used to provide parents and students with objectified, comparable school performance data, often in the form of ratings and rankings (Garn & Cobb, 2012; Verger et al., 2016). In bureaucratic accountability, results have been increasingly incorporated into school inspection models to monitor and evaluate schools, complementing traditional rule-compliance methods (Richards, 2001; Bezem et al., 2024). As evidenced, NLSA is a highly versatile policy instrument<sup>23</sup>.

### **1.3. Case Context: Catalonia**

The region of Catalonia in Spain offers a valuable case for analyzing the adoption, implementation, and effects of educational policies focused on school improvement. As one of

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<sup>23</sup> Neal (2013) argues that the fundamental error of test-based assessment systems is the attempt to use standardized tests for two objectives: measuring student learning and holding schools and teachers accountable. For Neal, a single test cannot fulfill both objectives because “modern psychometrics does not address the question of how to create performance metrics that serve as incentive mechanisms for educators because psychometricians are not trying to design systems that direct the efforts of educators. Psychometricians are trying to build assessment systems that measure student achievement in a coherent way while taking as given the methods that educators employ to prepare students for exams. In contrast, the designers of accountability systems are, by definition, trying to influence how teachers teach” (p.350).



the decentralized regions—*Comunidades Autónomas* (CA)—within Spain’s *quasi-federal*<sup>24</sup> structure (Moreno, 1993), Catalonia holds a certain degree of political, administrative, and economic independence but remain under the overarching framework of national legislation and ultimately depend on the central government. In the educational sector, regions have significant leeway over key areas such as funding, resource allocation, teacher training and recruitment, school governance and leadership, equity and inclusion, school choice, and parental and community involvement, among others, despite having to maintain the structure of the central system. Curricular responsibilities are shared almost equally between the central government and the regions.

The *sui generis* nature of Spain’s federalism (Hueglin & Fenna, 2015) is particularly relevant given that the country contains several *stateless nations* (Keating, 2001), some with high levels of nationalism, particularly the historical regions of Catalonia, Euskadi, and Galicia. The combination of these nations' self-governance aspirations and their decision-making powers over educational matters provides fertile ground for developing idiosyncratic educational systems with distinct policy trajectories, although these are influenced by the central government (Bonal et al., 2023).

The historical evolution of educational reform in Spain and Catalonia is detailed in publications one and two of this dissertation. However, the following subsections offer a brief overview of recent developments in Catalan education policy that ground the relevance of this study.

### ***1.3.1.1. The First Education Reform Act: School Autonomy and Accountability***

Catalan educational reform has placed school autonomy as the cornerstone of the system and a key driver of school improvement. The *Llei d'Educació de Catalunya* (LEC), the region's first education reform act, rooted in NPM principles, emphasized decentralization, strategic planning,

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<sup>24</sup> Although mostly termed quasi-federal, Spain has also been described as *semi-federal* (Gibbons, 1999) or *federal-like* (Agranoff, 1993). However, beyond the terminology, as Grau (2000) puts it, “in Spain, although the powers of the *Comunidades Autónomas* (CAs) have increased, their participation in central government policy-making processes is weak and very poorly structured. Accordingly, Spain may not be considered to be a completely federal state” (p.56). Yet, although beyond the scope of this dissertation, there are critiques of this view. Sala (2014) argues that the “reluctance to consider Spain as yet another federal system and the tendency to focus on its specific traits and *sui generis* institutions derive from its uncertain and complex path towards federalism. (...) The federal character of Spain lays in the fact that its political authority is divided between two levels of government, each of which can make final decisions on the policy areas that are given to them in the constitution. It is constitutional recognition what turns decentralization into a federation, as decentralization becomes the rule of the game, rather than a concession of will. Decentralization in Spain may have been the result of post-constitutional agreements in stages, but it is equally constitutionally entrenched. I argue that Spain’s idiosyncratic institutions are precisely what turns it into a federation, rather than what makes it depart from it, as they prevent the reversibility of the process” (p.110).

and results-oriented management as fundamental elements of the autonomy framework (Verger & Curran, 2014).

Central to this framework, the Decree of School Autonomy expanded school leaders' decision-making powers in areas such as budget management, staff selection, and organizational structure. It emphasized leadership by positioning school principals as the primary decision-makers. While the decree granted limited autonomy in pedagogical aspects, it allowed schools to tailor their projects to meet local community needs within established curriculum boundaries (Gairín, 2015). Complementing this, the Decree of School Leadership further clarified the roles of school principals, establishing them as public authorities and reinforcing their leadership. Among other measures, it introduced the *leadership project*—a strategic plan aligning the school's organizational structure with its educational goals, which also serves as a tool for evaluating a principal's performance (Collet, 2017). Additionally, the Decree of Teaching Staff Management, passed later, further empowered school leaders by extending their influence over teaching staff selection, allowing them to define specific teaching profiles and manage interim staff based on the school's project (Verger & Pagès, 2018). Overall, Catalonia's school autonomy policy integrates organizational, managerial, and pedagogical autonomy to empower schools—and especially principals—in addressing their unique contexts.

The LEC also emphasized school accountability as a fundamental pillar of the educational system. It established an assessment framework designed to ensure quality and transparency, reinforcing accountability as a key strategy for educational improvement. A central element of this framework was the proposed creation of an autonomous Evaluation Agency with financial independence. However, due to budgetary constraints and a lack of political support, this agency was never realized. Instead, the existing, government-dependent *Consell Superior d'Avaluació del Sistema Educatiu* (CSASE) continued to oversee evaluations (Bonal & Verger, 2013).

CSASE has been responsible for administering standardized tests that assess students' proficiency in mathematics, language, and science competencies at the end of primary and secondary education. These tests serve both as a monitoring tool for the educational administration and a formative one for schools, providing insights that inform educational strategies and improvement plans. The results are intended to stimulate reflection among teachers and encourage the adoption of effective practices. Schools are expected to use test data to evaluate their achievements, compare them against regional averages and similar schools' performance, and implement targeted improvement measures (Verger et al., 2020). However, school accountability in Catalonia extends beyond tests. The inspectorate, a central authority in the educational system, has evolved from an advisory role to more actively evaluating and guiding school performance. New assessment and monitoring tools, including those based on standardized test results, have been integrated into inspectors' work to provide a comprehensive evaluation of school effectiveness

(Segura et al., 2021). Overall, Catalonia's approach to school accountability integrates standardized testing and inspectorate monitoring to foster a culture of continuous improvement. By embedding these elements into the governance framework, it ensures that schools are both autonomous and accountable for their educational outcomes, driving systemic improvements in education quality.

### ***1.3.1.2. A Turn Towards Educational Innovation***

Since 2015, Catalonia's educational policy has increasingly prioritized innovation—and, to a lesser extent, inclusion—as a key element of school improvement within a broader shift towards competence-based and student-centered education. The emphasis on educational innovation gained momentum after a civil society campaign in 2016 criticized the Catalan educational system as outdated (Torrent & Feu, 2020), prompting the government to modernize educational practices.

The curriculum reforms of 2015 and 2022 were central to this policy shift. The 2015 reform initiated the transition to a competence-based curriculum (Pàmies et al., 2015), which the 2022 curriculum further developed by emphasizing personalized, transversal learning. Schools were encouraged to move beyond traditional subject-based structures towards more integrated and student-centered teaching methods. This reform also increased schools' pedagogical autonomy, enabling them to innovate in curriculum design and instructional practices to better address student needs. Here, competence-based, student-centered teaching is seen as essential for enhancing both the quality and equity of education.

The Department of Education has actively supported the transition to 'contemporary' educational methods through 'Innovation Programs' that provide schools and teachers with training and resources. These programs are firmly rooted in the autonomy framework, leveraging distributed leadership and school networks to share best practices and foster system-wide innovation. Innovation has also been integrated into the accountability framework, encouraging schools to document their practices and undergo evaluations for official recognition through the 'Innovation Certification'. Although obtaining these certificates is incentivized, it remains optional rather than mandatory. Overall, Catalonia's post-2015 educational policy is characterized by a strong emphasis on innovation, driven by a commitment to modernizing teaching practices and improving education quality and equity.

### ***1.3.1.3. A Note on the Catalan Public-Private Partnership and Educational Market***

The evolution of autonomy and accountability policies in Catalonia is backgrounded by a long-standing public-private partnership and a solid educational market structure. The so-called *historical public-private partnership* (Verger et al., 2016) in Spain and Catalonia dates back to the first Spanish democratic education reform act in 1985. This reform institutionalized the dual public-private system by regulating conditions under which private schools could receive public funding through the ‘*concierto educativo*’ (school contract), making these schools known as *concertadas*<sup>25</sup>. Under this system, private schools receive state subsidies if they meet certain conditions, such as offering free schooling, maintaining non-selective admissions, and ensuring community participation in school governance (Bonal & Zancajo, 2018). This system remains in place today with minor modifications. In Catalonia, *concertada* schools account for up to 30% of the market share on average, and in urban areas like Barcelona, this percentage exceeds 50% (Zancajo et al., 2021). The public-private divide in Catalonia's educational system has been extensively studied, particularly concerning school segregation and equity issues. Over the years, these schools have charged fees disguised as ‘voluntary contributions,’ creating economic barriers that exclude low-income students (Síndic de Greuges de Catalunya, 2020).

Catalonia's educational market structure is closely tied to the public-private partnership but extends beyond it. The market structure varies significantly across municipalities, especially between rural and urban areas. Urban areas, which concentrate most of the population and schools, are where the market plays a more prominent role. Key features of the educational market in Catalonia include: (a) a combination of relatively broad parental choice with regulated admission criteria<sup>26</sup> (Calsamiglia & Güell, 2018); (b) the design of catchment areas, which vary significantly by municipality, ranging from favouring choice to limiting it (Alegre et al., 2008); and, particularly in large urban areas, (c) a wide range of school options, including both public and publicly subsidized schools<sup>27</sup> (Zancajo, 2020).

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<sup>25</sup> *Concertadas* are privately run schools that receive public funding. Though they may resemble *charter* schools, they are not the same. Charter schools are designed to generate competitive pressure and improve achievement by granting schools nearly full autonomy. In contrast, *concertadas* were historically established as a subsidy-based policy to ensure access to education when the public sector could not expand rapidly enough. As a result, *concertadas* lack the clear theory of change found in charter school models. In any case, *concertadas* are beyond the scope of this dissertation, as their autonomy regulations differ, and the focus here is on the public sector.

<sup>26</sup> In 2022, the Department of Education passed a new Admissions Decree aimed at addressing the equity shortcomings that had emerged in the admission system over the years. However, this is not discussed here, as the fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted prior to this legislative change.

<sup>27</sup> Fully private schools are usually excluded from market analysis due to their small share of enrollment, averaging around 2% of the system and being almost exclusively oriented toward elite students..

This *controlled school choice* system (Bonal et al., 2020) is intended to offer extensive parental choice within a regulated framework to balance equity and freedom of access. However, research indicates that schools in urban areas are highly stratified by socioeconomic composition, as the market structure tends to favor certain families. The unequal distribution of schools across neighborhoods, combined with the ability of wealthier families to navigate the choice system and secure access to schools with more advantaged social compositions, deepens educational inequalities. Although the system includes admission criteria intended to equalize choice, its market-driven approach often fails to reduce segregation. Instead, it reinforces disparities through the interaction of family resources, school availability, and residential patterns (Benito et al., 2014; Scandurra et al., 2021)

Although the Catalan school market policy is not explicitly designed to generate school improvement through competitive pressure, the fact that schools operate within a marketplace, de facto subjects them to market pressure, significantly influencing any policy implemented within them.

#### ***1.3.1.4. Relevance of the Case***

The region's approach to school autonomy—characterized by a managerial emphasis—and its unique blend of accountability measures, which combine soft test-based accountability with bureaucratic oversight through the inspectorate, represent an understudied model of school governance. Moreover, the recent emphasis on educational innovation as a means of driving school improvement is particularly distinctive internationally. In this regard, studying the Catalan case can provide valuable insights that connect with various strands of academic literature. On the one hand, it relates to the capacity of school autonomy and accountability to foster educational innovation and improvement. Unpacking the specific types of autonomy and accountability adopted and linking them to improvement practices can contribute to clarifying and explaining a mixed evidence landscape. On the other hand, examining the conceptualization of improvement at both the policy and practice levels can help clarify a term that is currently central in the educational field. Moreover, exploring how school-level actors understand improvement can add to the growing literature on education policy implementation by showing how teachers and principals make sense of a loosely conceptualized term. Additionally, studying Catalonia within a quasi-federal state can contribute to the limited literature on educational policymaking in federal contexts. While most studies on federal tensions with stateless nations focus on language and identity, exploring other educational policies can enhance our understanding of regional singularization efforts.

## 1.4. Study Aims and Research Questions

Building on the considerations outlined in the previous sections, this study seeks to both gain a deeper understanding of the case of Catalonia and provide insights that extend beyond its specific context. While the growing body of literature on educational improvement often focuses on normative evaluations—assessing the effectiveness of specific improvement efforts and identifying factors associated with them—other critical aspects remain underexplored. In particular, the ways in which improvement is conceptualized during policy adoption, as well as the contextual factors that influence their implementation, require further investigation.

This research departs from the premise that there is a limited understanding of how educational improvement policies are conceived and operationalized. Moreover, the effects of these policies on actual school-level practices and the extent to which they truly foster improvement are not well understood. Addressing these questions has broader implications beyond the Catalan context, which is why this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how to foster educational improvement through policy. This concept is malleable and multifaceted, making it difficult to define and implement uniformly across educational settings. Such versatility poses significant challenges for policymakers attempting to create frameworks that effectively promote and sustain improvement practices within schools. By examining how these challenges manifest in the Catalan context, this research offers valuable insights into the process of translating broad improvement goals into actionable and context-specific policies.

The main objective of this study is to examine the adoption and enactment of educational improvement policy in Catalonia, with a dual focus on policy-level discursive and legislative developments and school-level implementation processes. This objective is pursued through an exploration of the factors influencing both the adoption of these policies and their practical implementation in schools. This overarching objective opens up two sets of aims and hypotheses.

### Research Objective 1: Policy Adoption

The primary objective at this level is to examine how discursive and legislative developments related to educational improvement, innovation, school autonomy, and accountability have been shaped within the Catalan educational context. The goal here is to understand how these developments are framed and operationalized into policy, while also exploring the roles of both state and non-state actors in driving and influencing the policy trajectory.

The specific objectives at this level are as follows:

- 1.1. To examine the discursive and legislative development of educational improvement.
- 1.2. To analyze the discursive and legislative development of school autonomy and accountability policies in relation to improvement.

1.3. To explore the role of state and non-state actors in relation to both developments.

The hypotheses derived from these specific objectives are the following:

- Educational reform in Catalonia has defined improvement in various ways and emphasized different instruments to achieve it, depending on the specific notion of improvement.
- The operationalization of school autonomy in Catalonia lacks clarity in how it is intended to trigger improvement processes at the school level.
- The accountability system in Catalonia is weakly linked to fostering instructional and organizational change within schools.
- Non-state actors have played a significant role in driving the incorporation of educational innovation into the political agenda in Catalonia.

#### Research Objective 2: Policy Implementation at the School Level

The primary objective at this level is to analyze how the educational improvement mandate is enacted within Catalan schools, with particular attention to the school governance framework. This analysis aims to uncover how, and to what extent, policies such as autonomy and accountability enable or inhibit improvement processes at the school level.

The specific objectives at this level are as follows:

- 2.1. To analyze how the improvement mandate is received, understood and enacted at the school level.
- 2.2. To identify which factors related to the school autonomy and accountability framework enable and hinder innovation and improvement in schools.
- 2.3. To examine the role of contextual features in relation to innovation and improvement in schools, with a focus in disadvantaged contexts.

The hypotheses derived are the following:

- Due to the broad nature of the concept, schools interpret improvement in different ways
- Most schools that self-identify as innovative do not show substantial changes in their educational practices.
- Schools that perceive greater pressure to perform on standardized tests tend to innovate less.
- Schools that feel greater competitive pressure use innovation as a differentiating element in their local educational market.

- Schools with a more favorable socioeconomic composition tend to develop a more innovative ethos.

## **1.5. Theoretical and Analytical Considerations**

While improvement is omnipresent in educational literature, much of the research on the topic often takes a normative approach. Many studies focus on evaluating the success of specific improvement efforts or identifying best practices at the school level. While this kind of studies offers valuable insights, they often overlook how improvement is defined and understood within policy frameworks. This is a significant gap because paying attention to the concepts, as well as the reasons and processes behind their adoption, is crucial for comprehending how and why policy changes occur. Researching this area can provide deeper insights into key terms within contemporary educational reforms and the challenges involved in putting these ideas into practice.

Regardless of how precisely or vaguely terms and concepts are defined, school-level actors interpret them in diverse ways, making their actions far more complex and context-sensitive than policymakers might expect. Yet, there are few studies that explore how school-level actors understand improvement and how this understanding relates to the outcomes achieved. Addressing this gap is thus relevant for understanding how and why these key concepts of contemporary educational reforms are enacted in practice and why they may succeed or fail across schools.

Third, despite recognizing the importance of federalism and decentralized policymaking in shaping educational reforms, there remains an important gap in the literature regarding these dynamics—with the exception of the US. In federal systems, where the interplay between different levels of government and regulations influence educational policy adoption and implementation, the interaction between different levels of policymaking is underexplored. Investigating these federal dynamics is therefore relevant, as it can reveal how interactions between governance levels shape educational reforms, offering valuable insights into the broader processes of policy change in decentralized countries.

Taking into account these considerations, this chapter addresses the three key areas of the theoretical and analytical approach of this dissertation: the policy cycle and multi-level frameworks, the policy sociology perspective on policy adoption, and the institutional approach to policy implementation. Together, these frameworks form the theoretical and analytical foundation for analyzing how innovation and improvement policies are adopted and implemented in Catalonia.



### 1.5.1. A Policy Sociology Approach to Policy Adoption

The sociological perspective is a highly valuable standpoint from which studying the adoption of educational policies. Standing out within this realm, the *policy sociology* approach offers a strong theoretical lens. Now a well-established approach, policy sociology emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to the dominant rational and technical analyses of education policymaking. To name a few, the seminal works by Apple (e.g., 1978), Ozga (e.g., 1987), and Ball (e.g., 1993) shifted the focus to the broader social, political, economic and cultural contexts in which policies are produced. They emphasized the importance of contextualizing educational policies to better understand why and how they are adopted, stressing the need to uncover the power relations, ideologies, and social structures that shape policies and their outcomes.

With the rise of globalization, the policy sociology approach increasingly turned its attention to the transnational forces that influence educational policies, both directly and indirectly (Dale, 2000). As global interconnectedness grew, policies were no longer shaped solely by national or local contexts but were increasingly influenced by global policy networks, international organizations, and transnational policy discourses (Lingard et al., 2013). Furthermore, national educational systems are now under growing pressure to address global problems, the solutions to which often require international coordination through forums such as international organizations (IOs). Researchers in the field of policy sociology have thus examined how these transnational dynamics impose educational norms and practices across different countries (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006).

This growing focus on the global-national interplay led to a relative decline in attention to within-national forces in the study of educational policies. However, this shift in focus is not unique to education; broader policy and political studies have similarly downplayed the role of state actors (Schmidt, 2009). Today, the policy sociology approach is advancing toward a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between international and national actors (Engel & Burch, 2021). The concept of *policy mobilities* exemplifies this trend. This approach examines how education policies are transformed in a globalized context, with particular emphasis on how they mutate as they move across borders (Gulson et al., 2017).

There are, however, competing approaches within contemporary policy sociology. For instance, the *policy trajectories* approach places greater emphasis on the role of national actors and institutions in shaping educational policies (Maroy & Pons, 2021). This approach focuses on how national and subnational actors recontextualize international discourses and push forward their own policy agendas. Despite ongoing debates over the weight of influence of international, national, and subnational forces, the field continues to emphasize the importance of sociological theory and methods in analyzing educational policies.

To analyze the adoption of improvement policies in Catalonia, this dissertation includes two publications that are theoretically based on the policy sociology lens, numbered 1 and 2. Publication 1 combines the analytical framework of *policy trajectories* with notions of *federal policymaking* to trace the historical development of educational policy in the Catalan region, emphasizing the interactions between the Spanish and Catalan governments. Publication 2 combines the *multiple streams* and the *discursive agency* frameworks to examine the adoption of the innovation policy in the Catalan region. While each publication develops its own theoretical and analytical frameworks, the following subsections provide a brief overview of these frameworks and their suitability for studying the Catalan context.

#### **1.5.1.1. Federalism and the Politics of Education Policy**

In federal or highly decentralized states, education policy is closely linked to the dynamics and interactions between governments, adding a key layer to consider in policymaking. Federalism, as both a political and administrative structure, opens new routes for creating or adapting educational reforms. These often arise from interactions at various levels—nationally, between regions, or even across borders. Such multi-scalar interactions are decisive in shaping education policies, allowing regions to blend global and national ideas with local needs and priorities (Wallner et al., 2020).

The decentralized nature of federal systems enables regions to be active players in producing their educational agendas, not just passive recipients of national policies. Regions frequently engage in borrowing and adapting policy ideas from other regions or countries, thereby enriching their discourse on education reform beyond national schemes (Kerber & Eckardt, 2007). This dynamic presents regions as creative adopters and potential contributors to the national policy framework (Savage, 2016).

Federalism also fosters a form of policy struggle and differentiation among regions. Each region operates with its own priorities and interests, leading to cooperation, negotiation, and sometimes power struggles within the federal framework. These often result in regions asserting their autonomy in certain matters and thus creating unique policy pathways, not necessarily convergent with the national government (Swenden et al., 2006). Beyond partisan politics, these differentiation acts might be particularly driven by identity politics and historical territorial conflicts, as seen in regions like Catalonia (Gallego et al., 2017).

Educational policies can also serve as a means of asserting political agency. Regions use control over policy areas not only to meet local needs but also to gain recognition on the international stage. Frequently, regions aim to establish themselves as distinct actors in the global policy space (Peck, 2002). This is further strengthened by strategies to engage with international organizations

and networks bypassing national actors and promoting their political interests globally in search of independent political relevance (Kuznetsov, 2014).

Considering the particularities of education policymaking in federal contexts allows for a deeper understanding of how Catalonia leverages its autonomy. Decentralized governance permits it to tailor educational policies that balance its cultural and political identity while navigating the broader Spanish framework. Focusing on regional political agency can therefore provide valuable insights into how Catalan policymakers adopt education policies, whether as local adaptations or as strategic assertions of Catalonia's distinct identity within the federal system, thus achieving a deeper view of the Catalan educational reform.

### ***1.5.1.2. Unboxing Policy Change: A Focus on Discursive Agency***

Policy change is driven by the convergence of multiple factors, a process effectively analyzed by the *multiple streams framework* (MSF). The MSF suggests that policy change occurs when three streams—problems, policies, and politics—align at a critical moment, creating a window of opportunity for new policies to be adopted (Kingdon, 1984). This convergence is not merely the result of rational planning; it often relies on the ability of policy entrepreneurs to navigate the complex landscape of policy discourse and strategically position their ideas (Jones et al., 2016).

A valuable framework to be combined with the MSF is *discursive agency* (DA) (Leipold & Winkel, 2017; Winkel & Leipold, 2016), which emphasizes the role of discourse in shaping the identities and actions of policy actors. DA refers to the capacity of actors to influence policy by engaging strategically with dominant discourse, constructing persuasive narratives, and aligning with specific policy positions. This concept challenges the traditional view of policy actors as merely reactive to discourse, instead highlighting their proactive role in shaping the policy agenda through strategic actions (Winkel & Leipold, 2016).

In educational reform, policy actors employ discursive strategies to construct, legitimize, and institutionalize specific agendas. These strategies often involve forming coalitions of like-minded actors, organizing governance structures to support their goals, and crafting narratives that resonate with broader societal values and concerns. The success of these strategies depends on both the coherence of the narrative and the actors' ability to navigate the interplay of material, legal, political, and cultural factors. Establishing credibility and influence within the policy discourse is crucial for gaining traction and driving change (Leipold & Winkel, 2017).

Focusing on the role of ideas, narratives, and the strategic actions of policy actors in shaping educational reform, the DA offers a deeper understanding of how policy changes occur. By emphasizing the performative nature of discourse, this perspective sheds light on the processes

that lead to significant policy shifts, particularly in contexts where multiple actors and interests converge (Herweg et al., 2015).

Combining the MSF and DA frameworks offers a useful tool for analyzing the Catalan educational reform due to its emphasis on the interaction of ideas, narratives, and strategic actions in driving policy change. For the analysis of Catalonia, the MSF can help understand how the alignment of problems, policies, and politics has created opportunities for educational innovation and improvement to emerge as priorities. Combining this with DA further deepens the analysis by exploring how policy actors in Catalonia strategically construct and promote narratives that resonate with societal values and political agendas. This approach aids in examining how policy actors not only respond to but also actively shape the education policy narrative, using discourse to influence the adoption and implementation of reforms. Together, these frameworks provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics driving educational policy change in Catalonia, emphasizing both the structural opportunities and the strategic actions that trigger reform.

### ***1.5.1.3. Educational Reform Evolves Over Time: Policy Trajectories***

The evolution of educational reform can be examined through a *policy trajectories* lens, which looks at how policies develop and change over time. This approach emphasizes the importance of historical decisions and institutional structures in shaping policies through three mechanisms: *path dependence*, *bricolage* and *translation* (Maroy & Pons, 2021). Path dependence explores how reforms are often shaped or constrained by earlier policy choices and the institutional structures established over time (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009).

In federal contexts, regional education systems often develop unique policy approaches, even when exposed to similar external pressures and regulatory frameworks. The development of this uniqueness can be examined through bricolage, which refers to how policymakers creatively combine existing policy elements to address new challenges. Rather than starting from scratch, they frequently assemble policies from a mix of old and new elements, adapting them to fit the current context and meet the needs and priorities of the various stakeholders involved in the reform or the public to who the policymakers aim to address (Maroy et al., 2017).

Policy translation seek to explain how policies evolve as they move across different jurisdictions, sectors, or regions. Policy translation involves more than just technical adjustments; it requires the active reinterpretation and modification of policy ideas to fit the specific needs and preferences of regional and local actors (Mukhtarov, 2014). As policies are translated, they often undergo significant changes, which reflects the influence of local contexts and the agency of the actors involved (Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021).

The policy trajectories approach offers a valuable framework for analyzing the Catalan educational reform because it merges structural and agentic mechanisms shaping policy evolution, which is a valuable lens to study a quasi-federal system. It helps examine how past decisions influence current reforms and how regional actors creatively adapt and reinterpret policies to meet local needs and priorities. It allows a comprehensive view of how Catalonia builds its education policy path within the broader Spanish context, balancing regional priorities with national influences.

### **1.5.2. Researching Policy Implementation through Institutional and Constructivist Lenses**

The study of policy implementation has gained significant attention in public policy research in the last decades. Since the late 20th century, scholars have increasingly recognized that implementation is neither straightforward nor apolitical, but rather a complex process where policies often undergo substantial changes due to political, social, and organizational factors (Matland, 1995). Understanding how and why these modifications occur is crucial for bridging the gap between policy design and outcomes, making policy implementation research essential for enhancing our understanding of the public policy process.

Early theories viewed implementation as a technical, linear, top-down process, but this perspective has been challenged by newer approaches that emphasize discretion, contextual factors at various levels, and the inherently political nature of implementation (Hill & Hupe, 2002). This shift towards recognizing the discretionary aspects of implementation has led to more sophisticated theories that account for the many factors influencing the process (Sager et al., 2024).

In the field of education, research on policy implementation has primarily focused on compulsory-level schools<sup>28</sup>. Initially, education policies were studied like other public policies, with an emphasis on the technical aspects of implementation. However, as the complexities of school settings became clearer, research shifted towards the specific challenges of implementing policies within schools (Honig, 2006). Today, focusing on how educational policies are put into practice within the social, cultural, and organizational contexts of schools is the prevailing approach (Coburn, 2016).

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<sup>28</sup> Education policy implementation is not confined to the study of compulsory-level schools. However, other educational levels, such as early childhood, vocational, and higher education, are less researched from this perspective. Similarly, key areas of the educational system's administrative structure, such as the inspectorate or administrative units involved in implementation, remain under-explored. As a result, primary and lower-secondary schools continue to be privileged in policy implementation studies, likely because they are the oldest and most regulated institutions in the educational system.

A key development in this field has been the recognition of the crucial role played by school-level actors, particularly principals and teachers, and their policy beliefs. Researchers such as Spillane et al. (2002), Honig & Hatch (2004), Coburn (2006), and Ball et al. (2012) have made significant contributions in this area, advancing an institutional and constructivist approach to studying education policy implementation. While these contributions differ in certain aspects, they share the understanding that implementation involves substantial cognitive and interpretive work at both the individual and collective level, and that these processes are deeply influenced by contextual and organizational aspects. The primary focus in these approaches is on how school-level actors exercise discretion in their daily work, shaping the enactment of policies on the ground.

These theoretical advancements are further enriched by developments in organizational theory, which are highly useful to explain how schools, as institutions, navigate and shape external pressures. As presented below in more detail, Diehl and Golann's (2023) work systematize the institutional approach to policy implementation and combines it with organizational theory to refine the mechanisms driving how schools respond to complex and often conflicting demands. This builds on earlier theories of decoupling, which suggested that schools often separate formal structures from everyday practices to manage external pressures.

To analyze the implementation of innovation and improvement policies in Catalonia, this dissertation includes two publications, numbered 3 and 4. Both build a theoretical and analytical framework that draws on concepts developed from the institutional approach, though each emphasizes different aspects. Publication 3 focuses more on the organizational aspects and external pressures that schools face when implementing improvement mandates and how they respond as organizations. Publication 4 centers on the interpretative work of school-level actors as they engage with the educational innovation discourse, highlighting the role of contextual factors in this process. While each publication presents its own analytical framework, the following subsections provide a brief overview of the analytical lenses and concepts used, as well as their relevance to the Catalan context.

#### ***1.5.2.1. Agents at School: Contexts, Filtering and Adaptation***

Policy implementation within schools is an intricate process that extends beyond mere compliance with external mandates. It involves continuous interpretation and adaptation, shaped by the specific contexts in which schools operate. In this regard, the conceptual developments of *sensemaking*, *school contexts*, and *filtering* and *adaptation* provide valuable analytical tools for studying the implementation of educational policies.

The *sensemaking* process, as discussed by Coburn (2005) and Spillane et al. (2002), is a useful concept for understanding how school actors interpret and enact policies. Sensemaking emphasizes that policies are individually and collectively reconstructed in ways that resonate with the actors' experiences and beliefs<sup>29</sup>. This interpretative process inevitably molds educational policies as they are enacted within diverse settings. While the focus is on cognitive processes, these authors also acknowledge the important role of contextual dimensions in shaping how sensemaking occurs.

The *school contexts* conceptual tool by Braun et al. (2011) provides a deeper exploration of the factors involved in policy implementation beyond the individual level. They develop the *situated*, *professional*, *material*, and *external* contexts to analytically separate the contextual factors that shape policy enactment. Each context comprises different key aspects for understanding the variations in implementation across schools, including characteristics such as geographic location and demographics in the situated context, staff values and experiences in the professional context, economic resources in the material context, or perceived pressures from external actors in the external context, to name a few.

Diehl & Golann's (2023) framework further deepens these understandings by highlighting how policies are *filtered* and *adapted* within schools. Schools are not passive recipients of policy but active sites where policies interact with established routines, networks, and organizational logics. As a result, the unique culture of each school plays a crucial role in shaping how policies are enacted, leading to varying outcomes even when the same policy is implemented across different schools.

Applying this approach to policy implementation is particularly effective for researching the implementation of improvement policies in Catalonia, as it enables a detailed examination of how schools shape these policies. By focusing on the interplay between institutional factors and the agency of school actors, this approach helps to understand how and why improvement policies result in different outcomes across schools, even within the same regional policy framework. It also aids unpacking the specific dynamics within Catalan schools—such as their responses to autonomy and accountability measures and the influence of market pressure—that drive the varied enactments of improvement and innovation, providing deeper insights into the effectiveness and challenges of these educational reforms.

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<sup>29</sup> The concepts of *interpretation* and *translation* by Ball et al (2012) closely resemble this sensemaking process.

### ***1.5.2.2. The Issue of Policy Accumulation***

Policy *accumulation* refers to the layering of multiple, often overlapping policies over time, which creates a complex and sometimes contradictory policy environment. This phenomenon arises when new policies are introduced in response to emerging challenges without replacing or integrating them with existing ones (Adam et al., 2019). As a result, public organizations often navigate a dense landscape of policies that may pull them in different directions, complicating the implementation process and potentially leading to unintended consequences (Knill et al., 2024). While policy growth is often viewed as a necessary response to the demands of modernizing and diversifying societies, it also carries the risk of overburdening bureaucracies, muddling the institutional structure of the state and reducing the effectiveness of policies (Hinterleitner et al., 2024). To avoid these issues, the expansion of rules and policies must be matched by an increase in administrative capacities. Without this balance, there is a risk of empty rule growth, where policies exist without the necessary support for effective implementation, which might lead to administrative overload and further complicate policy implementation (Limberg et al., 2020; Lourenço, 2023).

The concept of policy accumulation is highly useful for analyzing educational improvement efforts in Catalonia, where a variety of policies aimed at school improvement have been introduced over time. This layered policy environment requires schools to navigate a complex and sometimes conflicting landscape. The accumulation of policies with divergent goals, or those demanding significant changes without sufficient support, can overwhelm schools, complicating their ability to develop improvements effectively. This challenge is further intensified by the differences in how schools across Catalonia are equipped to enact improvements, depending on their contexts, resources, and capacities. Therefore, taking into account policy accumulation within Catalan schools allows for a more nuanced understanding of how these educational policies interact, how they are implemented, and ultimately, how they shape outcomes.

### ***1.5.2.3. A Note on the Language of Policies***

The language and specificity of a policy are key factors influencing its implementation. Policies that are vague or lack clear directives can lead to highly varied interpretations among implementers and resulting in diverse outcomes. The degree of prescription in a policy—i.e., whether it is mandated, strongly recommended, or merely suggested—affects how it is enacted at the school level (Sidney, 2007). While less specific or prescriptive policies allow for greater flexibility and adaptability by school actors, they also pose challenges in ensuring consistency and fidelity in implementation (Hill, 2006). Policies aimed at promoting innovation and improvement, particularly those that emphasize the instructional dimension, often rely on broad,



aspirational language, such as ‘student-centered’ or ‘competence-based education’, without providing concrete guidance on how these goals should be achieved (Bremner, 2020; Clément, 2020). The vague language of a policy can lead to what Maguire et al. (2013) term *policy dissipation*. This occurs when, despite certain policies being high-profile—or even dominant—if they are not well operationalized, lack specificity, or simply lack guidelines or frameworks, these policies may end up not being implemented at all within schools.

When analyzing the interpretative work of school actors and organizational responses to policy, it is crucial to consider the language, specificity, and level of prescription of that policy. Thus, examining the language of policies adopted in Catalonia taking into account this perspective can enrich the analysis of how schools implement these policies and help explain their outcomes.

## **1.6. Methodological Design**

As previously mentioned, the concept of improvement is ubiquitous in educational literature, yet much of the research in this area tends to adopt a normative approach. This often leads to research designs that are either descriptive or impact-oriented, with few studies aiming to unpack the meanings and processes behind the adoption and implementation of these terms and policies. To address this gap, a research design is needed that emphasizes the discursive dimensions while also effectively capturing the structural and material aspects of these processes. Such a design must be inherently qualitative, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the 'how' and 'why' questions that are central to understanding and unpacking policy processes.

Therefore, this dissertation employs a qualitative case study approach that integrates multiple methods and data sources. This approach is well-suited for a comprehensive examination of the policy stages from multiple angles, providing insights into both the formal policy narratives and the on-the-ground realities of implementation. This section displays the suitability of the qualitative case study approach and the added value of combining multiple methods and instruments to study policy adoption and implementation.

### **1.6.1. A Qualitative Case Study Approach**

The case study approach is a well-established methodological approach with numerous developments that, while diverse in some respects, share common core elements (Yazan, 2015). Despite some critiques that dismiss case study research as providing weak evidence, it remains a valuable—yet underutilized in certain fields—method for offering insights into context-specific

phenomena and causal mechanisms, particularly when addressing and unpacking complex, non-linear pathways between interventions and outcomes (Paparini et al., 2020).

A case study, as defined by Yin (2002), is an empirical inquiry that focuses on addressing the *how* and *why* questions regarding a particular phenomenon. Merriam (1998) adds to this by highlighting its distinctive methodological traits: it is *particularistic*, focusing on specific situations or events; *descriptive*, providing rich, detailed accounts; and *heuristic*, aiding in the understanding of the phenomenon under study taken as a whole. Yet, Yin (2002) notes that case studies do not have a rigid, ‘codified design’, thus allowing for flexibility in their application.

Stake (1995) identifies three types of case studies: *intrinsic*, *instrumental*, and *collective*. An intrinsic case study explores a unique phenomenon, while an instrumental case study uses a specific case to gain broader insights. A collective case study involves multiple cases to generate a wider understanding of an issue. However, as Crowe et al. (2011) argue, these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive; a case study can be both instrumental and collective, such as when a set of organizations is studied as exemplars of a general phenomenon.

Yin (2002) emphasizes that case studies are particularly suited for understanding complex causal links and pathways that are not easily captured through other designs, such as experimental studies. Thus, they are especially suited for program evaluation, as they offer a comprehensive approach to gain insights into policy adoption and permitting identifying gaps and challenges in implementation (Pal, 2005). Aligning with this, Stake (1995) argues that case studies are most effective when studying programs and people, making them valuable for examining the interconnection between policy and practice.

For Yin (2002), defining the case requires careful formulation of research questions informed by existing literature and theoretical considerations. Clear boundaries, including scope, time period, and relevant social groups or geographical areas, help in focusing the study and guiding data collection and analysis. Additionally, as Stake (1995) argues, in an instrumental case study, the selection of a ‘typical’ example following these boundaries allows for broader insights beyond the phenomenon under study.

The case study can serve both *exploratory* and *explanatory* purposes and is used accordingly for theory building or theory testing (Eisenhardt, 1989; George & Bennet, 2005). In theory building, it typically involves a single case where a unique, insightful phenomenon is explored in depth from multiple perspectives or sources of information—although it is not confined to single-case studies. This approach allows researchers to formulate theories based on observations without controlling or manipulating variables (Woodside & Wilson, 2003).

In theory testing, case studies often involve multiple cases, as cross-case analyses enhance theoretical and practical implications and help substantiate a theory. A case study directed towards

theory testing typically examines the same phenomenon across multiple cases until the theory is confirmed or disconfirmed (Løkke & Sørensen, 2014). Against the critiques that theory building and testing through case studies may seem subjective, Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) argue that well-conducted case studies tend to produce objective results when researchers remain closely aligned with the data collected. In a similar way, Hillebrand et al. (2001) argue that case research, when grounded in well-developed hypotheses, a logical and systematic design, and combining different methods and data sources, can overcome criticisms of subjectivity and methodological rigor.

As perhaps noted implicitly, the case study approach is inherently qualitative and typically employs multiple methods to gather and analyze data. According to Tasci et al. (2020), a ‘proper’ case study involves crafting a detailed narrative about something special or interesting related to individuals, processes, programs, or institutions. The case study methodology is expansive and tends to incorporate various sources of evidence, such as documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, and surveys (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Among the possibilities of case study designs, instrumental case studies are particularly effective in exploring the nuances of policy processes. Following Basseches et al. (2024), qualitative case studies enhance the understanding of policy dynamics in four key ways. First, they generate rich, detailed accounts of policy development that refine or extend existing theories by uncovering mechanisms connecting explanatory factors to outcomes. Second, they capture the complexities and nuances of the policy process that are challenging to quantify, such as procedural rules, decision-making customs, and shifting power dynamics. Third, they aid in revealing the substance and intentions behind policy content, often obscured by politically motivated labels or keywords, while exploring how policymakers interpret these contents. Finally, qualitative case studies provide a platform for examining how policy interpretations and implementations evolve over time, reflecting shifts in the political, social, or economic context, making them invaluable for understanding the fluid and dynamic nature of policy processes. Focusing on the US, they continue to argue that state-level—i.e., regional—case studies can uncover mechanisms and processes often missed in federal-level—i.e., national—, and thus, conducting a qualitative case study at the regional level offers a powerful and more nuanced tool for understanding the policy cycle. The primary benefit of this approach is its ability to delve better into the "box of causality" (Gerring, 2007) as it clears up the layers involved in the policy process.

A great deal of policy research relies on single country case studies—or a series of cases—as units of analysis, which is unsurprising given the prevalent focus on capturing causality. In educational and social policy literature, the use of case studies has significantly increased alongside the rise of qualitative methods (Heck, 2004). In comparative education, country case studies have long been the preferred approach (Broadfoot, 2000). These studies often focus on analyzing the ‘scales’

or ‘levels’ of educational governance. The renowned Vertical/Comparative Case Study (V/CCS) developed by Bartlett and Vavrus (2016; 2017) arguably represents the most comprehensive framework in this regard. V/CCS emphasizes three key ‘axes of comparison’: the vertical axis examines interactions across micro, meso, and macro levels; the horizontal axis compares how policies are implemented in different contexts at the same level; and the transversal axis traces the historical adaptation of these policies across time. In their oft-cited work on learner-centered pedagogy in Tanzania (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014), the macro, meso, and micro levels in the case study are conceptualized as international, national and local—schools—respectively. This focus on scales is a common feature in comparative education studies, sporadically including the regional level (see, e.g., Maroy & Pons, 2019).

Taking into account these considerations, this dissertation adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the adoption and implementation of educational policies in Catalonia. The case approach is chosen for its suitability to answer the how and why questions related to policy processes. For the policy-level analysis, the approach is instrumental, using Catalonia as a case to gain broader insights into the development of innovation and improvement policies. For the school-level analysis, the case study becomes both instrumental and collective, focusing on a set of schools within Catalonia to explore the broader phenomenon of policy implementation in depth. The approach leans towards explanatory and theory-testing purposes, as it aims to unpack the links between policy adoption, implementation, and outcomes, thereby enhancing the theoretical understanding of educational reform.

Following the V/CCS approach, the structure of the case study is organized as follows: the primary unit of analysis is the Catalan region within the quasi-federal context of Spain over the past ten years. Spain and IOs are considered broader, non-core units of analysis. Next, a set of schools within Catalonia is analyzed, adding depth to the overall unit of analysis. These schools are nested within the broader case of Catalonia, while actors are also nested within schools, allowing for an in-depth examination of how regional policies are implemented at the school level. This nested structure aids in analytically differentiating levels and units of analysis and enables a detailed exploration of both the regional context and the specific dynamics within individual schools, offering valuable insights into the multi-layered nature of policy processes.

### **1.6.2. Analytical Model**

The analytical model presented in Figure 1 serves to visually organize the various theoretical and analytical tools employed to examine the processes of policy change and implementation. In line with the theoretical foundations and the case study design, the model accounts for various levels of analysis, contextual factors, mechanisms of change, and expected outputs. These elements are

integrated into the framework as forces that influence how policies are adopted and how schools respond to them. However, not all factors and levels of analysis are explored equally. The study's primary focus rests on two levels: the regional and the institutional, which are unpacked in detail. The international, national, and individual levels are acknowledged as influential, yet they remain less explored. The international level includes transnational discourses and policy recommendations, which permeate national borders and influence lower-level contexts. The national level is more directly relevant. Here, political autonomy and inter-scalar tensions are highlighted as key factors influencing regional policy change. Other broad cultural, economic, social, and political factors are also recognized but are not unpacked within this framework.

At the regional level, the model delves deeply into the process of policy change, using the discursive agency framework and the multiple streams framework as central analytical tools, as explained in previous sections. These frameworks help illuminate how certain policy ideas emerge and take shape. Political actors, through coalition building, discursive strategies, governance maneuvers, and organizational tactics, actively shape the policy landscape. These strategies are crucial in organizing and entrenching the three heuristic streams of problems, policies, and politics, which may converge to create a critical moment leading to policy adoption. Once policies are adopted, however, they do not remain static. Instead, they may follow complex trajectories influenced by mechanisms such as path dependency, bricolage, and translation. These mechanisms either enable or constrain further policy changes, adding layers of complexity to how policies evolve over time, beyond their initial adoption.

Once a policy has been adopted, it transitions into the institutional level, where the focus shifts from the macro-regional processes to on-the-ground implementation within schools. In Figure 1 intermediate levels of policy governance are ignored to concentrate specifically on schools, which are the primary focus of this study. Within the policy implementation box, several analytical tools are combined to explore how policies are enacted within schools. School contexts play a key role in this process, though they are not fully unpacked to keep it simple. These contexts, categorized as situational, material, professional, and external, shape how policies are filtered into schools. Once inside the school, the policy interacts with sense-making processes, organizational routines, and social networks. These factors interact dynamically, further shaping how the policy is implemented at the school level. Contexts and inner-school dynamics are analytically separated here but they must be thought of working altogether. Although the model acknowledges the individual level, it does so only in terms of individual beliefs and preferences, recognizing that personal agency plays a role in shaping policy outcomes. However, individual-level factors are not fully explored in this model but are understood as influencing how sense-making, routines, and networks interact within the school setting to shape the ultimate implementation process.

School responses, shaped by the interplay of institutional and individual factors, are the ultimate output of this process.

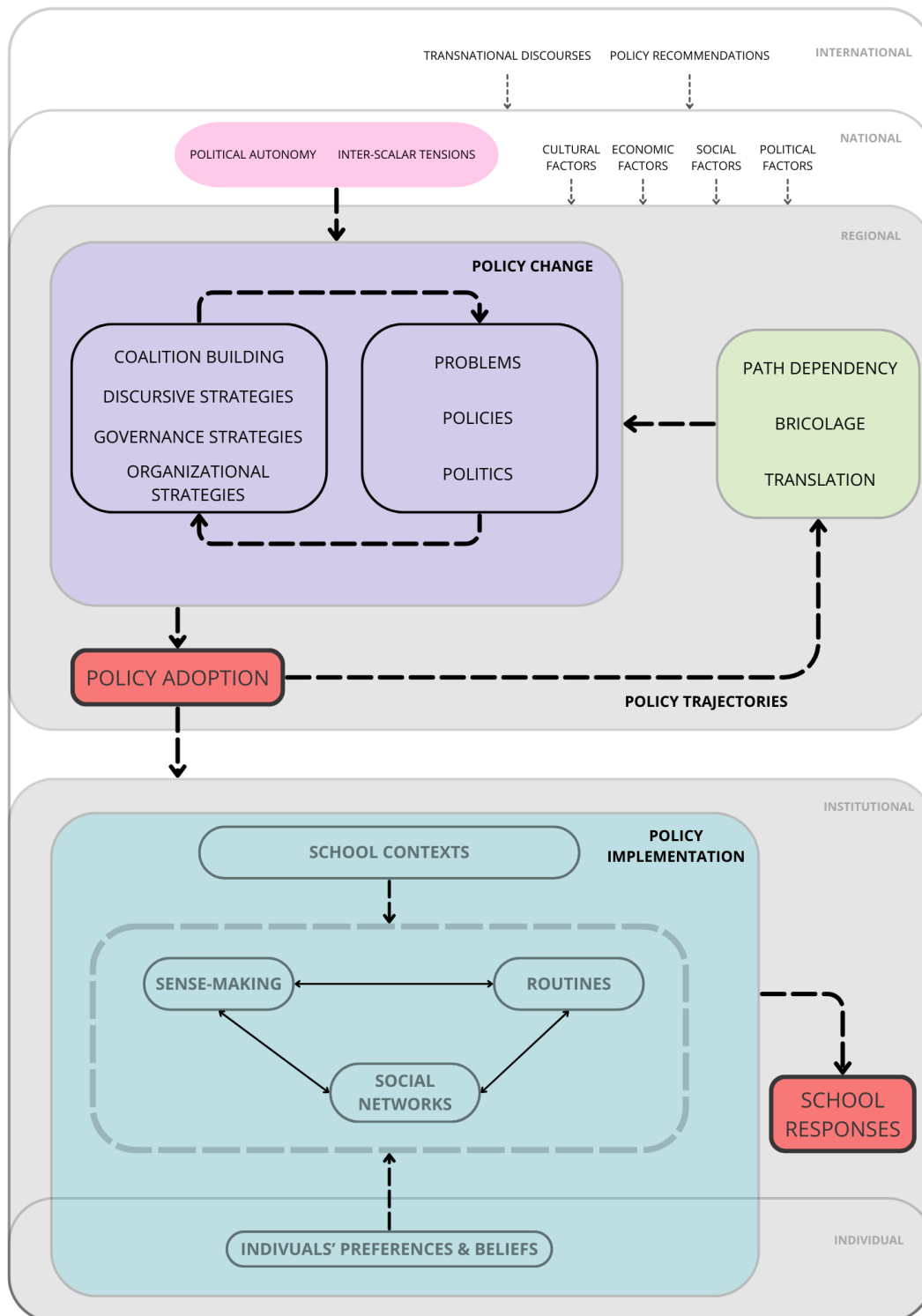


Figure 1. Analytical Model. Own elaboration based on Winkel & Leipold (2016), Maroy et al. (2017), Braun et al. (2011) and Diehl & Golann (2023).

### 1.6.3. Multiple Methods and Data Sources

Using diverse methods and data sources allows for a more robust understanding of the case, with triangulation methods ensuring both construct validity and internal/external validity. Such a multi-method approach is particularly advantageous when studying complex, context-specific phenomena, where engagement is crucial to grasp the diverse variables and their interrelationships (Plano-Clark et al., 2023). The studies included in this dissertation employ various methods and data sources for different research purposes. Everything is organized under a *case study-mixed methods design* (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018), in which “a parent case study (...) includes a nested mixed methods design” (p.902). Although the specific methods and data sources are detailed within each publication, this subsection briefly outlines the rationale for using these diverse tools within the overall case study design and its twofold analytical structure of adoption and implementation. Besides, given that this dissertation derives from a broader research project, some of the methods and instruments are shared with it.

#### 1.6.3.1. Policy Adoption: Document Analysis and Interviews with Policymakers

For the study of policy adoption in publications 1 and 2, this research employs a qualitative mixed method design. Despite the ongoing debate about whether combining qualitative methods can be labelled *mixed* methods, as Morse (2010) argues,

when qualitative data types, levels of analysis, or participant perspectives are different enough that it is necessary for the two methods to be handled differently and to be kept apart, we have the rationale for using mixed method design. When one of the components is complete and forms the theoretical base and the other component supplements the core component, we have a qualitative mixed method design (p.491)

Using the terminology by Morse (2010), in the study of the policy adoption stage, document analysis is the ‘core component’ and the interview with policymakers is the ‘supplementary component’.

Document analysis offers a systematic approach to examining a wide range of materials central to understanding the policy process, including government reports, legislative bills, committee documents, and institutional papers and declarations (Morgan, 2022). This method is particularly valuable because it provides stable data that reflect the official narratives and decisions made by policymakers at the time the documents were produced and without the interaction with the researcher. Document analysis helps uncovering the underlying ideologies, priorities, and intentions embedded in policy texts, which might not be immediately apparent through other research methods (Dalglish et al., 2020). By analyzing documents, the research can identify

discrepancies between stated objectives and actual policy implementation, offering a comprehensive view of the formal aspects of policy adoption (Cardno, 2021).

Interviews with policymakers complement the document analysis by providing direct access to those involved in the policy-making process, thus capturing the informal dynamics often absent from official records. Through interviews, the research gains insights into the motivations, priorities, and constraints that influenced policymakers' decisions—as they make sense of them—offering a deeper understanding of the nuances of policy adoption. Interviews are particularly effective in revealing the behind-the-scenes negotiations, strategies, and challenges that shaped the final form of policies. They also allow for clarification of ambiguities found in documents and exploration of issues in greater depth, providing a richer perspective on the policy-making process (Beyers et al., 2014). The interviews with policymakers follow the protocol described in Fontdevila (2019) and were developed in the context of the Reformed Project.

The combination of document analysis and interviews with policymakers offers a comprehensive approach to studying policy adoption. Document analysis provides a solid foundation for understanding the official stance and context of policymaking, while interviews fill in the gaps by uncovering the informal processes and human factors that influenced decision-making. This triangulation of data sources not only enhances the validity and reliability of the research findings but also ensures a comprehensive exploration of the policy adoption process. By integrating these methods, the research captures both the macro-level formalities and the micro-level interactions that drive policy change, resulting in a deeper and more nuanced analysis of how policies are adopted (Gibton, 2015).

### ***1.6.3.2. Policy Implementation: Interviews and Survey with School Actors, and Administrative Records***

For this part of the study, the methodological design follows a mixed-method strategy where qualitative methods dominate, and quantitative data serves to triangulate and contextualize the findings, what Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009) conceptualize as a *partially mixed concurrent dominant status design*. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a deeper exploration of individual experiences and perspectives while situating these within broader contextual frameworks through quantitative data. In educational settings, where policy implementation is often contingent on everyday practices within schools, a mixed-methods design provides a more complete picture than either method could alone, thus enhancing the validity and depth of the research findings.

The qualitative component is the core element to this strand of the study. In-depth interviews with school-level actors are well-suited for exploring how individuals interpret, negotiate, and enact



policies within their specific contexts. They allow researchers to capture not just observable behaviors when answering but also the narratives, representations, classification systems, and cultural ideals that influence how policies are understood and implemented (Manzano, 2016). This method is invaluable for revealing the subjective dimension of policy implementation that is often invisible in quantitative data. By engaging directly with school actors, the research uncovers the challenges they face, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate the demands of policy implementation. The interviews with policymakers follow the protocol described in Parcerisa & Verger (2023).

Interviews also offer advantages over other qualitative methods, especially in the context of policy implementation research. For instance, while ethnographic methods provide detailed observations of social interactions, it often requires prolonged engagement with the object of study, which can limit the ability to make systematic comparisons across different contexts. In contrast, interviews enable researchers to systematically compare different cases by varying the situations, contexts, and types of respondents (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). This flexibility is crucial for understanding how policies are implemented across different schools and regions, allowing for the identification of patterns and variations in implementation practices. Additionally, interviews can delve into participants' conceptualizations of their roles and responsibilities within the policy framework, offering insights into how these personal beliefs intersect with official mandates.

Although qualitative interviews are central to this study, quantitative data from surveys<sup>30</sup> and administrative records are also incorporated to provide a broader context and to test the categories and themes identified through the interviews. This mixed-methods approach ensures that the qualitative findings are not isolated but are instead situated within a larger empirical framework that includes statistical and contextual data. On one hand, surveys are useful to quantify the prevalence of certain attitudes, behaviors, or challenges identified in the interviews, allowing for the generalization of findings to a larger population. On the other hand, administrative records provide data on school performance, resources, and other relevant indicators, which can be used to contextualize the qualitative data and explore potential correlations between policy implementation practices and measurable outcomes and contexts. The integration of these data sources enhances the robustness of the research by allowing for triangulation, ensuring a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of policy implementation (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009).

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<sup>30</sup> See Levatino (2021) for a thorough account of the survey design and implementation within the Reformed Project.

## 1.7. Structure and Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured around four publications that examine the adoption and implementation of educational improvement policies in Catalonia. Although these topics have been presented broadly beforehand, each publication contains its own specific literature review, analytical frameworks, and methods.

The first two publications focus on the adoption of improvement policies. Publication 1 employs the policy trajectories framework alongside federal policymaking concepts to trace the historical evolution of educational policy in Catalonia, with particular attention to the interactions between the Spanish and Catalan governments. Publication 2 combines the multiple streams and discursive agency frameworks to analyze the adoption of innovation policy in the region. The next two publications examine the implementation of these policies through institutional and constructivist lenses. Publication 3 emphasizes the organizational aspects and external pressures that schools face, exploring how they respond to improvement mandates. Publication 4 highlights the interpretative work of school actors, focusing on how they engage with innovation discourse within their specific contexts.

Following the publications, a concluding chapter summarizes the key findings, outlines the contributions to the literature, discusses policy implications, and suggests further avenues for research.

### 1.7.1. Compendium of Publications

Publication 1. Verger, A., Quilabert, E., Moschetti, M.C. (2023). Multi-scalar Interactions and Educational Reform: The Trajectory of School Policy in Catalonia Within the Spanish State. In: Krejsler, J.B., Moos, L. (eds) (2023). *School Policy Reform in Europe: Exploring Transnational Alignments, National Particularities and Contestations* (159-184). Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-35434-2\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-35434-2_8)

Publication 2. Quilabert, E., Moschetti, M., & Verger, A. (2023). Del discurso pedagógico a la política: la irrupción de la innovación educativa en la agenda pública. *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria*, 35(2), 57-79. <https://doi.org/10.14201/teri.31221>

Publication 3. Quilabert, E., Verger, A., Moschetti, M. C., Ferrer-Esteban, G., & Pagès, M. (2024). The obstacle race to educational improvement: governance, policies, and practices in disadvantaged schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 45(6), 934–956. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2024.2376596>

Publication 4. Quilabert, E. (2024). An Ambiguous Aspiration: School Actors Making Sense of Educational Innovation Policy. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*,

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# **Publication 1. Multi-scalar Interactions and Educational Reform: The Trajectory of School Policy in Catalonia Within the Spanish State**

## **Introduction**

Education policy in Spain has been the object of an avalanche of change since the end of the long Franco era (1939–1975). This includes the professionalisation of teaching, the widening of educational expansion and system comprehensiveness, the constitution of a large-scale Public-Private Partnership (PPP) for educational provision, and a profound, yet multi-speed territorial decentralisation process. These structural reforms, initiated in the 1980s, evolved in parallel to a double rescaling shift in the policy process: upward re-scaling through increasing integration of the Spanish state into European transnational collaborations on schooling, and downwards through the more active participation of Spanish *Comunidades Autónomas*—i.e., regions—in educational policy activity.

Catalonia, with other so-called ‘historical regions’, got its competencies in education devolved earlier than other Spanish regions. As a territory with strong national identity, language, and self-government aspirations, Catalonia has been eager to define its own education governance approach. In the 2000s, as part of this singularisation process, Catalonia pioneered, within the Spanish context, the adoption of a broad range of regulatory changes inspired in the tenets of New Public Management (NPM). The first Catalan Education Act, passed in 2009, featured ideas such as school-based management, professionalised school leadership, and the promotion of strategic planning and a stronger evaluation culture within schools. More recently, public education policy in Catalonia has emphasised the promotion of pedagogic innovation as a main policy framework. Innovative teaching practices in the Catalan education system have been strongly encouraged by non-state actors’ initiatives, echoing policy discourses and recommendations from international organisations. These initiatives have been very successful in terms of school reach and media impact and quickly scaled up after being absorbed by the public administration as a vertebral educational policy. In this context, educational innovation has become a catch-all policy that has allowed the Catalan government to do school policy by, for instance, promoting new school improvement logics and curricular change. As a programmatic idea, and despite recent but increasing opposition by teachers’ organisations, the innovation narrative has seduced an important number of key education stakeholders and fed the singularisation of Catalan education policy.

The objective of this chapter is to analyse the trajectory of school policy reform in a context subject to intense multi-scalar interactions, such as the Catalan context within decentralised Spain. Specifically, we are interested in analysing how and to what extent, Catalonia has been able to use its margin of political and administrative competencies in the educational sector within the Spanish (quasi)federal structure to promote a singular approach to educational policy, and how inter-scalar interactions have shaped such trajectory.<sup>1</sup> The chapter shows that the Catalan education policy trajectory is shaped by an incomplete decentralization process in which the division of competencies between the federal and the regional level is ambiguous and constantly renegotiated. The chapter also argues that the singularisation of the Catalan policy model is politically contingent. Despite the Catalan education system has been rethinking itself for a long time, its ‘desire to be’ is especially evident in periods when territorial conflict and political disagreement with the Spanish state intensify. The territorial conflict has direct effects in the singularisation process, but also important indirect effects such as facilitating the emergence of new influential policy actors and ideas.

Methodologically, we draw on interviews with key informants, especially to better illuminate the most recent reform processes, and a thorough document analysis. Ten interviews were conducted with key actors from across the education sector in Catalonia, including incumbent and former government officials from the Department of Education and representatives from civil society organisations with a say in education. The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire that included questions organised into five modules: interviewee background, policy formation, enactment and implementation, ideational sources and narratives, and a closing section (see Fontdevila, 2019 for more details). The document analysis included a detailed examination of 39 normative policy texts and 5 policy briefs produced between 2009 and 2021 by the Catalan and Spanish governments. All data were analysed following a flexible coding strategy (Deterding & Waters, 2021), which allowed us to use both theoretically informed categories defined a priori and emergent themes identified during the analysis.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, we present a theoretical framework that combines theories of policymaking in federal states and policy trajectories’ theory. We then examine the period 1980–2021 with a focus on the last two decades. To this end, we distinguish between four different school reform stages: (i) the restoration of democracy and the democratisation of education in Spain (1980s and 1990s); (ii) the regulation of NPM (2000s); (iii) the conservative modernisation approach to educational policy (2010–2015); and (iv) the pedagogic innovation policy stage (2016–ongoing). In the last section of the chapter, we discuss our findings and conclude.

## **Theoretical Framework: The Politics of Education Policy in Multi-scalar Systems**

School reform is increasingly subject to multi-scalar dynamics and, as such, needs to be seen as the product of intra-, inter-, and supra-national interactions. Globalisation has contributed to consolidating a policy scenario that is highly conducive to cross-national policy movements and the configuration of transnational policy networks. In this context, a wide range of actors can play a relevant role in structuring education agendas and influencing policy decisions on school reform. In the case of federal—or highly decentralised—states, these dynamics take a new direction. Federalism, as a form of state organisation, opens new spaces to intervene in external reform pressure and interpret and adapt global policy ideas (Savage & Lingard, 2018; Wallner et al., 2020).

Previous research on federal education policy views federalism as a political organisation that is prone to countries engaging, internally, in policy transfer, borrowing and lending (Kerber & Eckardt, 2007), and adopting new policy instruments for central steering (Savage, 2016). More than mere policy transmitters, regions are spaces of policy struggle and singularisation that often engage in conflicting scalar interactions within the federal government. From this perspective, regions and, more specifically, their governmental and non-governmental institutions operate as political subjects with their own policy priorities and interests, who relate to different political scales through cooperation, but also negotiation strategies and power games. Indeed, federalism is conducive to dynamics of political differentiation and decoupling of different administrative units and scales (Swenden et al., 2006).

Conducting policy research in federal systems means looking at how scalar policymaking is produced by different forms of agency with different political logics and to what extent certain policy actors aim to use—or even produce—scalar tensions to their own advantage (Papanastasiou, 2017). Inter-scalar tensions may be the result of ideological reasons and partisan politics—for instance, when governments at each level have clashing political ideologies. This type of tensions tends to exacerbate and transcend party politics in countries with a background of territorial conflicts. Competition dynamics tend to be longstanding in decentralised contexts where identity politics permeate scalar interactions. In countries such as Spain, contemporary territorial conflict cannot be disentangled from a long history of political competition, contestation, and the construction of policy boundaries (Gallego et al., 2017). Such tensions, which are particularly tangible in relation to historical regions with self-government aspirations such as Catalonia, permeate and give new meaning to the politics and economics of educational reform.

Regions can develop their political agency by advancing singular policy approaches, but also by actively looking for the recognition of the international community. The concept of ‘paradiplomacy’ has been coined to depict how stateless nations tend to develop their own international public relations and networks, usually for political reasons (Lecours, 2002). Not coincidentally, regions with national, linguistic, and cultural singularities, such as Quebec, the Basque Country, Catalonia, or Flanders, tend to be more active in international fora. In increasingly globalised policy spaces, these regions resort to scale-jumping strategies, not only in the search for better policy solutions, but also to gain political legitimacy and power (Peck, 2002; Peck & Theodore, 2010). Thus, despite the self-government aspirations of some regions being frequently challenged by the strong interdependences generated with globalisation, the global polity also provides them “with new opportunities for the promotion of their peculiarities at the international level” (Kuznetsov, 2014, p. 77).

## **Education Policy Trajectories in Multi-scalar Settings**

In federal countries, regional educational systems have the capacity—and often political incentives—to develop their own and singular policy approach, despite being exposed to similar reform pressures, regulatory frameworks and policy discourses. The analysis of the development of educational policies in these settings requires capturing the complex interplay between policy agendas, institutions and actors operating at multiple scales, and thus the potential factors, forms of agency, and related contingencies affecting policy. The concept of policy trajectories can contribute to disentangling how these dynamics shape policies over time.

A trajectory perspective aims to elucidate how and why certain policy options are chosen at a particular moment and how the instruments, techniques, and tools related to these policy options evolve as relational, contingent, and bounded processes (Bezes, 2007; Kassim & Le Galès, 2010). In this vein, Maroy et al. (2017) operationalise the concept of policy trajectory, which they see as constituted by three main interrelated mechanisms. The first mechanism is path dependence, which means that any reform attempt depends on past decisions, institutions, and legislation in force. Preceding decisions forge the path, either restricting or widening the spectrum of future choices. Due to the path-dependent nature of educational systems, educational reform tends to advance through layering and sedimentation processes, in which old and new policy instruments coexist and combine in novel ways. Arrangements previously in place tend to be (re)negotiated and (re)signified over and over rather than being totally dismantled and replaced (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009).

This is related to the second mechanism, bricolage, which considers that policymaking, rather than a purely innovative process, usually evolves as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements

that are not necessarily designed to be fixed together (Maroy et al., 2017). Through bricolage, “existing elements are combined inventively and oriented by an instrumental logic of efficiency and/or by a symbolic search for legitimacy and social acceptance” (Maroy et al., 2017, p. 4)—e.g., to satisfy or content relevant actors.

The third mechanism is policy translation, that is, the way policy ideas are modified when crossing jurisdictions, sectors, and/or territories (Mukhtarov, 2014). Translation entails the reinterpretation of external concepts and their hybridisation with existing institutions and instruments (Maroy et al., 2017). Translators are policy actors who, while brokering between different policy spaces and/or political scales, are involved in the construction of a common understanding of policy proposals to make them transferable in new contexts (Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2019). Translation, as it happens with bricolage, is far from technical or neutral. The policy actors involved in translation transform, distort, and/or modify the meaning of policy according to their own preferences, agendas, and interests—whether political, professional, and/or economic.

In what follows, we apply this perspective to analyse education reform in a quasi-federal polity where inter-scalar conflict has fluctuated but mainly followed an incremental trend in the last decades. To capture the nature and direction of recent policy developments in the Spanish and Catalan educational contexts, we organise our data into four different historical stages. Although the first stage is important for understanding the main governance features of the Spanish education system, we present in greater detail the changes that have occurred since the turn of the millennium.

## **Stage 1: Structural Reforms After the Democracy Restoration (1980s and 1990s)**

### **An Intermediate Decentralisation Process within a Large-Scale Public-Private Partnership**

During the dictatorship period (1939–1975), the educational system in Spain was highly centralised and regional self-government aspirations were totally suppressed. The centralisation of power was an inherent feature of the authoritarian regime in its attempt to use education as an instrument of social control (Hanson, 1997). School governance was also hierarchical and non-participatory, with school principals being directly appointed by Franco’s dictatorship for many years. However, at the same time, and somehow paradoxically, the state did not have a proactive role in education delivery and delegated this responsibility to other institutions—mainly the Catholic Church. It also invested poorly in education and devoted little regulatory effort to

administer the educational system (Bonal et al., 2023, forthcoming). Yet, in the last stage of Francoism, the regime adopted a more technocratic orientation and was more open to the international community. The human capital theory was flourishing, and the idea of increasing economic competitiveness through the improvement and massification of education gained currency (Gómez-Escalonilla & Martín García, 2021).

With the democratic transition in the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, a structural reform process created the backbone of the Spanish contemporary education system. This reform geared around two main pillars: the adoption of a public-private partnership (PPP) scheme for educational delivery and the decentralisation of the educational system. The role of the Catholic Church in school provision was central to the educational debates of the democratic transition, which would derive in the adoption of one of the widest-scale PPPs in education in Europe. In fact, the first federal education reform act (ERA) passed with the restoration of democracy mainly focused on keeping the scheme of public funding for private schools and protecting religious education (LOECE, 1980). This law, which was approved with the votes of all the conservative parties in the Spanish Parliament, including the Catalan conservative party, never came into force, but reflected that all conservative groups agreed on the protection of freedom of instruction and private/religious school provision (Sevilla Merino, 2016; see Table 1).

Table 1. Spanish Educational Reform Acts since the restoration of Democracy<sup>31</sup>

Education Reform Act	Governing Party/coalition in Spain [years in power]	Vote of Catalan parties in the Spanish Parliament		
		Voted in favour	Abstentions	Voted against
LOECE/1980 (Never entered into force)	Conservative party (UCD) [1977-1982]	Catalan conservative party		
LODE/1985	Social-democratic party (PSOE) [1982-1996]	All Catalan parties		
LOGSE/1990, complemented by LOPEG/1995		All Catalan parties		
LOCE/2002 (Repealed in 2004)	Conservative party (PP) [1996-2004]			All Catalan parties
LOE/2006	Social-democratic party (PSOE) [2004-2011]	Catalan left-republican party	Catalan conservatives (although voted initially in favour <sup>32</sup> )	
LOMCE/2013 (Partially repealed in 2016)	Conservative party (PP) [2011-2018]			All Catalan parties
LOMLOE/2020	Social-democratic party (PSOE) & left-	Left-republican party	Catalan conservatives	

<sup>31</sup> We focus on the laws that refer to compulsory education.

<sup>32</sup> They changed their vote because the law incorporated a last-minute change to introduce more public control in PPP schools.

	wing progressive party (UP) [2018-now]			
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Source: Own elaboration.

In 1985, an important federal education reform act was passed, but this time with the government of Spain in the hands of the social-democratic party (LODE, 1985). In the debates prior to the reform, many progressive voices were in favour of dismantling the system of subsidies for Catholic schools, which they saw as anachronic in a country pretending to be laic, and a barrier to educational modernisation. However, the social-democratic government saw the PPP alternative as a pragmatic way to achieve a much-needed educational expansion cost-efficiently, as well as to comply with the principle of ‘freedom of instruction’ included in the recently approved Spanish Constitution (1978) (González-Moreno, 2019; Olmedo, 2013). As a result, the Catholic Church and other private education entities would be acknowledged as legitimate school providers through long-term contracts with educational authorities.

The decentralisation process in Spain was part of a state modernisation agenda and was also seen as a way to overcome the authoritarian state model that prevailed with Francoism (Erk & Gagnon, 2000). The process started with the regions with historical national and self-government aspirations, the so-called ‘historical regions’: Catalonia and the Basque Country, followed by Galicia and Navarre (Máiz & Losada, 2010). Other regions went through a much slower decentralisation track and did not get their educational competencies devolved until the 2000s. Currently, all the 17 Spanish regions have similar educational competencies. The main difference is that historical regions have had more than 40 years to develop their own educational institutions and policy approaches.

Nonetheless, the devolution of competencies to regions has not been full, which is the reason why Spain has been characterised as an ‘intermediate decentralisation model’ (de Puelles, 1993). In education, the competencies transferred to the regions are those related to the administration and funding of the system; ownership of public schools; planning of the educational supply, including the creation, expansion, or suppression of school units; and the selection, training, and appointment of teachers, principals, and other managerial positions (Hijano & Ruiz, 2019). In its part, the central government retains responsibility for establishing the general legislative framework of the system, defining the system architecture—including educational levels,



modalities, stages, cycles, and specialties of teaching—and setting the basic structure and content of the national curriculum<sup>33</sup> to be developed together with the regions (de Puelles, 2002).

To a great extent, the Spanish educational decentralisation process has advanced much more in terms of the administration of the system than in terms of political control. The distribution of some competencies has been intentionally ambiguous, and this ambiguity has contributed to some authors considering that Spain is a *sui generis* federal state (Erk & Gagnon, 2000). Although this ambiguity was a necessary condition to make decentralisation politically viable in the turbulent transition period, it has also been a source of constant tension, especially in periods of mistrust and territorial conflict in Spain.

## **Devolution of Educational Competencies in Catalonia: From Reform Fidelity to the First Conflicts**

In January 1981, educational competencies were transferred to the Catalan government, which faced the challenge of managing a system with important deficits at all levels—i.e., infrastructure, personnel, teachers' training, coverage—(Pedró et al., 2008). During the 1980s and the 1990s, the Catalan government was uninterruptedly in the hands of the Catalan nationalist conservative party-coalition. Despite the different political orientations of the Spanish and Catalan governments in that period, school governance regulations in Catalonia did not differ substantially from those prevailing at the Spanish level. The 1985 federal ERA promoted a mix of bureaucratic and democratic perspectives on school governance (LODE, 1985). Among other measures, there was an attempt to promote democratic and horizontal school governance, with active family participation in the school board, and the principal being a *primus inter pares* among the teaching staff. This regulatory commitment to democratic and horizontal school governance was seen as a reaction to the authoritarian approach that had prevailed during the Franco era (Viñao, 2004). Nonetheless, the new participatory approach was combined with highly bureaucratic governance features such as the centralised allocation of teachers, and an inspection system that mainly focused on rule compliance and on helping nonprofessional principals to manage the school, in detriment of its school evaluation function (Tiana, 2018).

In Catalonia, the most emblematic educational policy in the 1980s was the adoption of Catalan as the language of instruction with the objective of avoiding the concentration of students with different mother tongues in different schools. The implementation of this linguistic policy had very broad political support at the time of its adoption, but later would become an arena of

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<sup>33</sup> Historical regions are allowed to define a higher proportion of the school curriculum, especially for linguistic reasons.

ideological struggle (Bonal et al., 2023, forthcoming). The Catalan government also resorted to the emerging Spanish PPP framework to encourage private school provision, and it did so with more emphasis than in other Spanish regions. It was indulgent to provide public subsidies for private schools, even elite private schools—some of which segregate students by sex.<sup>34</sup> Paradoxically, despite the linguistic policy of the Catalan government being seen as a success when it came to avoiding segregation for reasons of language, its PPP policy exacerbated social and sexual segregation between schools.

Education reform in the 1990s focused on the expansion and democratisation of education and the building of a more comprehensive educational system. A new federal ERA, passed in 1990, altered importantly the architecture of the educational system, and made all students follow a single track of compulsory education until the age of 16 (LOGSE, 1990). The educational reform also emphasised pedagogic and curricular change, with the embracement of constructivism as the official pedagogy and the promotion of school and community involvement in curricular adaptation. LOGSE (1990), once complemented by another federal law (LOPEG, 1995), also covered aspects of school leadership and evaluation that were not included in the previous laws. The reform approached school evaluation as a quality assurance and accountability instrument, and conceived it as a multidimensional process that goes beyond learning outcomes (Tiana, 2018). These reforms were implemented with high fidelity in Catalonia. Key Catalan education stakeholders supported the main elements of the reform, and the Catalan Minister of Education at that time even secured extraordinary public funding to implement it (Pedró et al., 2008).

This climate of cooperation changed in 1996 when the Spanish conservative party (Partido Popular) took over the government of Spain. The first clash of great significance between Catalonia and Spain occurred in 1996, when the Spanish government tried passing the so-called ‘Humanities decree’ to recentralise how history was taught in Spanish schools. The Spanish conservative party also attempted to advance a controversial ERA that aimed to impose Spanish as the vehicular language of instruction in all regions (LOCE, 2002). The conservative reform also promoted other policies, such as early tracking and religious education. Neither the decree nor the law prospered, but these reform intentions would inaugurate a time of great mistrust between Spain and several historical regions, including Catalonia.

## **Stage 2: Experimenting with New Public Management Ideas in Education (2000s)**

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<sup>34</sup> See <https://portaldogc.gencat.cat/utillsEADOP/PDF/723/9630.pdf> and <https://tinyurl.com/2p9zb7bt>

## **The Pendular Dynamic, Yet Equity-Driven Legacy, of Educational Reform in Spain**

The contemporary education reform in Spain has evolved into a highly pendular and ideologically charged process. Seven federal educational laws have been promoted since the restoration of democracy, with these changes almost relating to perfection with the alternation of the dominant parties—conservatives and social democrats—in power (see Table 1). Nonetheless, the reforms that have enjoyed more political support and have been sustained for longer have been those approved by socialdemocratic governments. For this reason, the Spanish legal educational framework tends to be perceived as equity oriented. Nonetheless, in the 2000s, economic competitiveness and school effectiveness became central drivers of reform in Spain. The influence of international organisations, such as the EU and the OECD, especially through the PISA programme, penetrated official discourses and thus started to permeate legislative initiatives (Bonal & Tarabini, 2013; Engel, 2015). Ideas such as school-based management and results-based accountability started gaining traction and bi-partisan support in that decade.

Competence-based education was one of the main contributions of the ERA approved by the Spanish social-democratic government in 2006 (LOE, 2006). This reform was strongly informed by European Commission recommendations on “key competences” and the EU Lisbon Strategy 2010, which aimed to convert the EU in “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (Toribio, 2010). In curricular terms, this reform eliminated the obligation for schools to offer religious education hours.

Despite Spanish-level regulations are not prescriptive in matters of school governance, the federal legislation passed in 2006 encouraged regions to adopt the necessary measures to favour school autonomy in different areas—pedagogy, organisation, and budget—and to overcome what was seen as an excessive level of uniformity among public schools. The Spanish legislative framework also opened the possibility for public schools to receive more funding if they had special educational projects or open job positions with specific teacher profiles (Estruch, 2012). Some of these policy ideas fit uneasily with previous reforms that forged a school governance approach that combines bureaucratic and horizontal rationales. One of the main features of this approach is that public schools’ principals do not have the capacity to influence the choice of the school teaching staff, and that teachers, together with other members of the school community, democratically elect the school principal among the teaching staff. Against this background, however, New Public Management (NPM) policies have penetrated some Spanish regions (Olmedo, 2013), with Catalonia being one of the regions that has gone the furthest along this pathway.

## **A Historical Political Shift, and the First Catalan Education Law**

In 2003, a broad progressive coalition—including social-democrats, left-wing greens, and left-wing Catalan nationalists—took over in Catalonia, after 23 years of uninterrupted regional government in the hands of the Catalan nationalist conservative party. This power shift coincided with the adoption of a new Catalan Statute of Autonomy in 2006. With the new statute, Catalonia sought to reinforce its identity and cultural particularities and to obtain a greater degree of self-government in areas such as culture, taxation, and education. The process towards the approval of the new autonomy statute encouraged intense and multi-stakeholder educational debates. The high level of participation in these debates was partly motivated by the ambition to rethink the educational model, but also by the growing concern with the course adopted by the Spanish educational policy since the conservative Popular Party had taken over the Spanish government. Against this political scenario, key stakeholders in Catalonia saw the need to think about education policy “from a radically different approach” (Farré, 2009, p. 20). This period of educational debates concluded with the approval of the National Agreement on Education in 2006, a document signed by numerous teachers’ unions, families’ associations, so-called “pedagogic renovation movements”, and private sector entities, and endorsed by the government. Among other lines of action, this agreement emphasised the importance of promoting school autonomy and the involvement of local governments in education as ways to modernise the Catalan educational system and make it more equitable.

The National Agreement on Education provided the foundation for what would be the first Catalan Education Reform Act (LEC, for its acronym in Catalan), which was passed in 2009. The LEC (2009) expanded on the ideas of autonomy and evaluation that had a great acceptance among the educational community but were ambiguously defined, so the Catalan ERA was able to give these principles a new managerial perspective. The Catalan Minister of Education at that time—Ernest Maragall—and his closest advisors openly embraced the main principles of NPM in education, advocating results-oriented and hands-on management in schools, and being openly critical of the civil service and hierarchical nature of public education (Longo, 2007; Maragall, 2009). The central articles of the LEC would thus focus on strengthening the governance of schools through the promotion of NPM-like ideas, such as schools becoming more autonomous managerial units, the professionalisation of school leadership, strategic planning and strengthening the evaluation system.

Although the LEC received important input from domestic debates and local stakeholders—among them, an association of school principals that actively lobbied for the professionalisation of school leadership—it was also inspired by OECD ideas on school governance, accountability,

and distributed leadership, and, in fact, benefited from the direct technical advice of OECD staff. This was the era in which PISA results had the largest media impact, and many of the decisions taken had the improvement of Catalonia's PISA results as a main benchmark (Verger & Curran, 2014). It was also the time when the OECD more strongly advocated coupling school-based management with performance-based accountability as a main driver of educational effectiveness, based on PISA data (see, for instance, OECD, 2011).

The LEC foresees the creation of an independent evaluation agency that should be able to evaluate a broad range of dimensions of the educational system, many of which have not yet been systematically evaluated, including teacher performance (Bonal & Verger, 2014; Collet-Sabé, 2017). In 2009, the same year that the LEC was passed, census-based standardised tests started being administered more systematically. The main goal of these tests is to measure the basic skills of students in core subject areas to improve and inform instruction and policy (Resolution EDU/1037/2009). These instruments have become, *de facto*, a way to evaluate schools, although are not conceived to entail generalised consequences, and the publication of school scores is discouraged by the LEC itself.

Other important innovations of the law include a commitment to increase educational funding by 6% of the GDP and strengthen the role of local governments in education. The most controversial aspect of the law—which was strongly criticised by teachers' unions, but also by the left-wing green party—was the role of the private sector in school provision. The LEC acknowledges the public-private mixed nature of the Catalan educational system and favours the equivalent treatment between public and subsidised private schools as a way to advance towards a more genuine type of PPP. For this purpose, the private sector is expected to adopt public sector values such as equity and inclusion by enrolling a higher percentage of vulnerable students, whereas public schools—through the renovated emphasis on school autonomy and hands-on professional leadership—are expected to adopt managerial techniques and logics from their private counterparts. However, whereas the 'endogenous privatisation' of public education has been clearly developed through a wide number of decrees and other legal instruments, the 'publification' of subsidised private schools started much later, and only timidly (Zancajo et al., 2022).

Overall, the LEC was conceived as a set of instruments to reinforce both the effectiveness and equity of the educational system, but also to advance its singularisation within the Spanish context. However, this singularisation was far from being approached confrontationally. As stated in the white paper of the LEC, the law was expected to "assume and develop" the legal provisions included in the Spanish educational laws, "without repeating them unnecessarily" (Departament d'Educació, 2007, p. 10). This resulted in the Catalan education law assuming the main principles of the Spanish regulatory framework, and in developing some of them, among which the school

governance model stands out, with much more level of detail and in line with the postulates of NPM. Despite this, the conservative party took the LEC to court for breaching the Spanish Constitution and, as a result, 10 years later, 10 articles of the law would be withdrawn. The Catalan linguistic model was part of the complaint, but the court did not declare it unconstitutional.<sup>35</sup>

### **Stage 3: The Conservative-Modernisation Agenda (2010-2015)**

#### **The Selective Implementation of NPM in a Period of Budget Cuts and Conservatism**

The LEC (2009) met the fierce opposition of teachers' unions—which organised several massive strikes before its approval—and even the green-left party, which was part of the government coalition, did not vote for it in Parliament due to its flimsy support for public education. In contrast, Catalan conservatives, in the opposition at that time, voted in favour. This meant that the law was approved by the largest left-wing and right-wing parties in Catalonia at the time. In contrast to the polarisation that Spanish educational laws have tended to exhibit, the process of defining the Catalan law, by securing wide partisan support, had legal stability in its sight (Farré, 2009).

Nonetheless, the ambition to enact a legal framework that lasts in time came at the cost of political definition. The LEC operates as a 'hinge law', in the sense that it accommodates interests and preferences from different ideological groups. The Act is broad in coverage and allows governments to selectively develop its dispositions. This is precisely what happened when the Catalan Conservative party regained power in 2010. The new government discouraged the adoption of some of the LEC's most important initiatives, as for example creating an independent Education Evaluation Agency, deconcentrating power in local governments, and the distribution of disadvantaged students across public and private subsidised schools. In contrast, the conservative government advanced those policies that required less budgetary effort and that fitted better with its 'conservative modernisation' agenda—a policy approach combining pro-market and managerial ideas in the domain of governance, and conservative notions of teaching and pedagogy (see Apple, 2009). Among other measures, they continued to strengthen the figure of school principals by giving them a greater say in staffing matters. Decree (39/2014) allowed principals to choose part of the teaching staff through a selection process that included job

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<sup>35</sup> The court ruled against some of the LEC articles because invaded Spanish competencies, but, paradoxically, against other articles because they reproduced the Spanish legal framework too faithfully and without incorporating any novelty. See: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20190425/461855186936/tribunal-constitucional-avala-regimen-linguistico-lec-ley-de-educacion-cataluna.html>

interviews, something that in a highly centralised system of teacher allocation, was a major change. All teachers' unions opposed it, which they saw as undermining democratic governance in schools, and opening the possibility of nepotism.

The Catalan government also modified the school direction decree in a way that reinforced school principal qualifications and removed the priorities given to teachers to become principals in their own schools (Decree 29/2015). These were changes that pleased the Catalan association of school principals, which by that time had become very influential in the Catalan education policy. This association was very active in the promotion of educational debates at the dawn of the LEC approval, and some of its most relevant members were appointed influential positions in the Catalan Department of Education (Verger & Curran, 2014).

The Catalan government applied severe budget cuts in education following the global financial crisis and encouraged by a Spanish decree aimed at promoting austerity in public-sector spending (Decree 20/2012). This meant an increase in pupilteacher ratios and a drastic reduction in professional development resources for teachers and support staff.<sup>36</sup> Despite the severe cuts, one of the slogans of that period was the promotion of 'educational success' and, for this purpose, the Catalan government recentralised control through instructional and assessment interventions. Among other initiatives, it promoted common curricular standards in mathematics and literacy; inspection services acquired new areas of competence in school assessment through new programs aimed at intervening underperforming primary schools and promoting merit-based policies for teachers and principals (Verger et al., 2020). Arguably, the reluctance of this government to create a separate evaluation agency is also in line with its ambition to maintain a more direct control of national assessments. The conservative government also introduced new school admission criteria, including enrolment preference for the children of alumni—a policy discriminating against immigrant populations and newcomers—and encouraged the expansion of catchment areas in cities such as Barcelona, as a way to promote school choice (Bonal & Verger, 2014).

Finally, one of the last changes brought forth by the conservative government during this period was the competence-based reform of the curriculum. With this, the Catalan government attempted to develop and shape the pedagogical dimension of school autonomy and re-direct teachers' pedagogical practices towards a more competence-sensitive way of teaching core subject areas. The legislative text was aligned with the Spanish federal education act (LOE, 2006), although it rather substantiated in the European Union's recommendations on core competences (2006/962/EC; 2009/C 119/02; European Commission, 2012).

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<sup>36</sup> Between 2010 and 2015, the budget for teacher professional development was reduced from €8 million to €100,000. From 2016 onwards, an attempt was made to recover this item, setting it at €2.5 million. Since then, it has been progressively increased to 5.3 million euros in the 2022 budget.

## The Conservative Modernisation Agenda in Federal Reform

At the beginning of the 2010s, the conservative modernisation reform agenda had also penetrated the Spanish regulatory framework with a new federal ERA, approved by the government of Spain, in the hands of the conservative Popular Party since 2011 (LOMCE, 2013). This federal law, among other changes, promoted managerial forms of school autonomy and the professionalisation of schools' management teams. It also shielded the public-private partnership scheme by establishing the obligation for the state to subsidise private schools if there is demand for them. And it advanced the creation of a national assessment framework and encouraged the publication of schools' test scores to inform parental choice (Bernal & Vázquez, 2013; Parcerisa, 2016).

The reform also gave full academic validity to the teaching of religion,<sup>37</sup> leaned for the recentralisation of the curriculum, and attempted to reduce the use of regional languages in schools as the language of instruction. Another main 'curricular battle' consisted in the Spanish government trying to monopolise the content of subjects such as history and geography, since it considered that some regional governments were using their curricular autonomy to promote a biased version of history and generate disaffection with Spain. The Minister of Education at that time, José Ignacio Wert, made a famous statement in the Spanish parliament in which stated that the reform was intended to 'Hispanicise' Catalan children.<sup>38</sup> To contextualise these controversies, this was the era in which tensions between Catalonia and Spain had started to accentuate. The Catalan conservative party started to embrace proindependence ideas for the first time under the argument that, in the context of the financial crisis, independence would drive economic prosperity. The Popular Party—which had a marginal presence in the Catalan Parliament—did not have any interest in defusing the conflict because it received substantive electoral gains in Spain by repressing any claims of self-government in Catalonia.

The LOMCE (2013) reform was highly controversial. Not only did all parties in the opposition vote against it, including all Catalan parties in the Spanish Parliament (see Table 1), but it was also contested by many civil society actors and by a large part of the educational community—including the most representative teachers' unions. The Catalan government was critical of the reform, especially with the curricular and linguistic changes implied. However, it also spotted in some aspects of the reform an opportunity to continue transforming schools' governance along the lines of the 'conservative modernisation' agenda. The approval of the above-mentioned 'staffing decree' that reinforces the role of school principals as chief of staff is a good example of

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<sup>37</sup> To do so, it incorporated grades in religion into the students' academic record.

<sup>38</sup> See [https://elpais.com/sociedad/2012/10/10/actualidad/1349859896\\_604912.html](https://elpais.com/sociedad/2012/10/10/actualidad/1349859896_604912.html)



the opportunities that the new federal regulatory framework offered to reinforce school-based management in Catalonia.

## **Stage 4: Governing Schools Through Pedagogic Innovation**

### **A Bottom-Up Initiative that Became a Core Public Policy**

In this last stage, still in progress, public education policy in Catalonia has placed an unusual emphasis on discussing pedagogy and instructional improvement under the umbrella of educational innovation. In fact, some of the most emblematic managerial instruments of the previous period, such as the auditing of underperforming schools, pro-school choice measures, and the evaluation of teachers' productivity, have been either abandoned or reframed using the language of innovation. The rapid innovation shift in Catalan education policy has been produced by the Department of Education in the hands of the left-wing nationalist party, which governs in coalition with a new political party that includes the pro-independence faction of the former Catalan conservative party.<sup>39</sup>

This policy shift was forged in 2016, when an alliance between a Catalan NGO associated with UNESCO, a private foundation that promotes equity in education, the philanthropic organization of a bank, and an online university launched the Escola Nova 21 program (EN21), an initiative that aimed to function as a 'catalyst' to modernise the Catalan educational system and align it with the so-called '21st century skills' framework (e.g., Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). The program advocated for a radical change in a system that was portrayed as pedagogically outdated and in urgent need of a clearer focus on competence-based teaching practices and assessment. The EN21 pedagogic discourse also stressed the importance of schools engaging in the adoption of the necessary organisational changes to put children at the centre of learning processes, and the importance of enacting school autonomy in all areas—pedagogical, managerial, and organisational. The program relied on the idea that 'good innovation practices'—drawn from a core group of already 'advanced' both public and private subsidised schools—could be disseminated across the system by means of school networks (Vallory, 2019).

The launch and initial steps of the initiative were strongly endorsed by the local media and loud-voiced throughout the educational community, with almost 500 schools from all over Catalonia—representing 25% of the total—applying to join the program during its first year. Different conjunctural factors intervened in EN21 gaining this unprecedented momentum. To start with, the severe budget cuts in education, which were particularly impactful in teacher professional

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<sup>39</sup> As we were writing this chapter, in October 2022 the coalition of nationalist parties governing Catalonia broke up, leaving only the left-wing party in the coalition to govern alone.

development, contributed to EN21 gaining legitimacy by generating numerous spaces for pedagogic debate and training among teachers. Furthermore, in those years, the political tensions between the Catalan and Spanish governments had exacerbated, with the Catalan government unilaterally organising an independence referendum, and the Spanish government decided to stop such event from happening by all means.<sup>40</sup> During this turbulent period, the public action of the Catalan government was monopolised by the territorial conflict, and thus, sectoral policies such as education were totally side-lined. Worth noting, the Catalan Minister of Education at that time resigned, only to be substituted by a new minister with the single purpose of opening the schools as vote centres for holding the independence referendum. This policy vacuum left by the Catalan government opened a window of opportunity for non-governmental actors such as EN21 to engage in education policymaking and gain visibility.

From its inception, the EN21 program drew on transnational educational discourses and international organisations' recommendations. The program responded to UNESCO's call for the participation of all sectors in an "inclusive process of improving education".<sup>41</sup> Apart from the Incheon Declaration, which was unusually referenced in an industrialised country, one of the international documents more frequently cited was UNESCO's Rethinking Education, which urged policymakers to redefine "the purpose of education and the organisation of learning" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 10). However, to operationalise how innovation should be understood and achieved, EN21 mainly relied on OECD sources. Of particular relevance was the Innovative Learning Environments report (OECD, 2015), which developed an actionable framework for innovative organisations aimed at raising school performance and improving equity in education systems. EN21 also forged its *raison d'être*, as well as argued for its viability, by arguing that its proposal fits well within the prevailing Catalan regulatory framework, and particularly with the school autonomy and leadership policy promoted by LEC (2009) and the competence-based curriculum approved in 2015.

In 2017, while EN21 was in full swing, the Catalan Department of Education published a document attempting to conceptualise innovation in education along the lines of competence-based and student-centred learning (Departament d'Ensenyament, 2017). Not content with assuming EN21's discourse, by the end of 2019, the Education Department absorbed the entire EN21 program and, since then, 'educational innovation' consolidated as a flagship educational policy. The Department's political priority in this period has consisted in achieving 'the transformation of the system', advanced particularly through innovation programs aimed at reworking schools' educational projects, fostering networking between schools, and through open

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<sup>40</sup> The referendum ended up being carried out on October the first 2017, but it was harshly repressed. See: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/01/europe/catalonia-spain-independence-referendum-result/index.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.escolanova21.cat/escola-nova-21-en>

calls to officially certify teachers' and schools' innovative practices. It is worth noting that the innovation turn is advanced by different administrative units within the Catalan Department of Education, which have been renamed after the innovation and transformation mottos in an arguably performative tour de force. The administrative unit in charge of the curriculum, for instance, has also been allocated under the general directorate for innovation.<sup>42</sup>

Apart from educational innovation, other areas of intervention have been school inclusion (Decree 150/2017) and distributing vulnerable students more evenly across publicly funded schools (Decree 11/2021). The Department also aims to relaunch the idea of creating an independent education evaluation agency, promoting digitalisation, and launching a teachers' induction program as a way of instilling 'new teaching methodologies'—i.e., student-centred, competence-based—and signalling new forms of school organisation—i.e., schools as learning organisations. School inspection processes have also been revisited to better accommodate the innovation mandate, and the promotion of 'innovation plans' among low-performing schools. Against this background, school-based staff recruitment, as contemplated in the 2014 staffing decree, is considered essential to enable principals to build more cohesive teaching teams, an allegedly necessary condition for schools to sustain educational innovation approaches in time.

Notably, however, the promotion of school autonomy through different innovation programs and legislative initiatives faces bureaucratic and political obstacles. The enactment of school autonomy regarding staffing decisions is challenging not only because it fits unwell with the governance tradition in public schools, but also because some schools perceive it as administratively cumbersome, it meets regulatory barriers and legal complaints, and the recent massive stabilisation of teaching staff – mandated by the EU – reduces principals' margin to choose from the pool of temporary workers.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, recent innovation interventions are challenging the very idea of teacher autonomy because of their strict prescription of the appropriate teaching methods. Thus, the fact that 'innovative' pedagogies are being intensively conceptualised, legislated and somehow standardised contributes to some teachers perceiving their professional autonomy as increasingly constrained. This is especially the case among secondary school teachers, who have a more academic discipline-based background and are more inclined to use teacher-centred pedagogies.

## **Re-aligning Education Policy, But Tensions Between Catalonia and Spain Do Not Vanish**

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<sup>42</sup> See <https://educacio.gencat.cat/ca/inici/nota-premsa/20220331-decret-reestructuracio>

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, <https://diarieducacio.cat/el-tsjc-anulla-alguns-articles-del-decret-de-plantilles-que-el-departament-considera-que-regulen-temes-menors/?hilite=decret+plantilles>

The passing of the latest federal ERA in Spain in 2020 by a progressive government coalition has decompressed the tensions between the Catalan and Spanish governments in education (LOMLOE, 2020). The new federal ERA, among other characteristics, encourages a more ambitious approach to competence-based education in the curriculum, multidisciplinary and innovative approaches in education, and favours stricter regulation of private education—which are all, as we saw, policy priorities of the Catalan government. In addition, religion, as a subject, has stopped counting for the average grade of the academic record. The progressive coalition governing Spain is also more open to linguistic diversity in the education domain. It considers that all students in Spain have the right to be taught both in Spanish and in other co-official languages, but does not impose Spanish as the vehicular language of instruction. However, rather than disappearing, the linguistic conflict has moved from the government to the legal sphere. Instigated by Spanish nationalist right-wing parties in the opposition through lawfare and, in fact, based on the interpretation of the new ERA, the Catalan Supreme Court has ruled in favour of an increase in teaching hours in Spanish—something that the Catalan government and many other key stakeholders see as a frontal attack on the Catalan linguistic model, in place since the 1980s. In response, the Catalan government has required higher levels of Catalan language qualifications for teachers, and the enactment of more sophisticated linguistic plans and linguistic coordination tasks in schools.

As summarised in Table 2, this specific conflict in language affairs contrasts with the absence of tensions and contradictions in other dimensions of educational governance regulations between Catalonia and Spain. In relation to school autonomy, accountability, instruction, and curriculum, contemporary policy—but also in previous stages—in Catalonia is strongly aligned with the Spanish education regulatory framework, as well as with international recommendations on educational reform.

Table 2. Educational policy trajectories and relationship between Spain and Catalonia

Ruling parties in:	Stage 1: Structural reforms (1980-2000)		Stage 2: New Public Management (2000-2010)	Stage 3: Conservative modernisation agenda (2010-2015)	Stage 4: Innovation as school policy (2016-ongoing)
<b>Spain</b>	Social-democratic party (PSOE) (1982-1996)	Conservative party (PP) (1996-2004)	PSOE (2004-2010)	PP (2010-2018)	Progressive Coalition (2018-ongoing)
<b>Catalonia</b>	Catalan conservatives (1980-2003)		Progressive coalition (2003-2010)	Catalan Conservatives (2010-2015)	Pro-independence coalition (2015-ongoing)
<b>Interactions in education</b>	<p>Alignment in school governance policy</p> <p>Adoption and expansion of the PPP in school provision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adoption of Catalan as language of instruction</li> <li>- High reform fidelity and low-level of political conflict in education until 1996, when tensions over the curriculum and language of instruction emerge</li> </ul>		<p>Alignment of overarching school governance policies</p> <p>Catalan reform adopts and develops concepts and instruments included in the Spanish legal framework, such as school autonomy and evaluation, and impinges them with an NPM emphasis</p>	<p>Incremental territorial conflict</p> <p>Spanish conservatives recentralised education and diminished regions' competencies in curriculum policy</p> <p>Language of instruction as an arena of struggle</p> <p>But conflict domains are selective since the Catalan government: a) applies strict budget cuts in education, as encouraged by Spanish regulations (and the EU), and b) uses new Spanish ERA to consolidate NPM-inspired education policies such as reinforced school leadership</p>	<p>Burst of territorial conflict. Catalan government holding an independence referendum in 2017 forbidden by the Spanish state</p> <p>Education policies realign afterwards, but conflict over language of instruction continues through lawfare</p> <p>The innovation emphasis of Catalan education policy finds echo in new federal regulations</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

## Conclusions

### **Sui Generis Spanish Federalism and Education Policy**

Spain's incomplete decentralisation process—or, as Erk and Gagnon (2000) call it, *sui generis* federalism—has important implications for educational governance and policy. The quasi-federal structure offers a singular topography for educational politics and educational reform, which acquire a specific dynamic in a context characterised by a long history of territorial tensions, as the one analysed in this chapter.

When analysing the education policy trajectory of Catalonia, within the broader Spanish educational context, we have identified different reform stages in which the main policy emphases and priorities vary. With the turn of the millennium, Catalonia became an early adopter of policies on school autonomy, accountability, and competencebased curriculum within the Spanish context, and, more recently, it has actively promoted innovative teaching methods at compulsory education levels. This policy trajectory has been shaped by the complex interaction between Catalan and Spanish regulatory efforts in a context in which the division of competencies is ambiguous and constantly negotiated. Nonetheless, these scalar tensions do not necessarily result in diverging policy approaches. Policies on school autonomy, evaluation, leadership, and competence-based education have been contemplated in—and, in fact, encouraged by—the Spanish legislative framework since the 1990s. The singularity of Catalan education policy within the Spanish system relies more on pioneering the instrumentation and calibration of these policy ideas and on the NPM emphasis that impinges on them – rather than on offering an alternative policy approach to school governance. In education, the conflict between the Catalan government(s) and the Spanish state mainly crystallises in the domain of the language of instruction and, at specific junctures, in relation to politically sensitive curricular contents. However, the educational conflict is mainly tangible when the interlocutor in Spain is a government in the hands of the conservative Partido Popular – although, it is worth noting that this party, in several occasions, has also been able to tense Catalan education policy through lawfare even when in the opposition (see Table 2).

The evolution of the Catalan conservative party's role in federal education reform is illustrative of the main triggers of territorial cooperation and conflict in Spanish education. The Catalan conservatives, together with the Spanish conservatives, supported the first Federal ERA of the democratic period in what was a natural alliance to promote freedom of instruction and private/religious schooling. However, soon after, the Catalan conservatives distanced themselves from the Spanish conservatives and got closer to the education reforms of the Spanish social democrats. Despite the latter tend to introduce stricter regulations for private schools and limit

the presence of religious education—something that apparently goes against conservative ideals—, they are also more open to territorial and linguistic diversity. The Catalan conservative party has thus given priority to the territorial cleavage over the ideological cleavage in federal education debates and turned its back to the reforms the Spanish conservatives have unfruitfully attempted in the last two decades (see Table 1).

## **A Policy Trajectory in Constant Search of Singularity**

The current education policy framework in Catalonia is the result of the layering of different policy instruments that do not always fit easily. Some policy ideas have been tried but selectively enacted or soon abandoned for governments to join the next trend. However, instead of being replaced, the instruments in question remain in the regulatory framework for an eventual reframed revival. In the latest reform stage identified, ‘educational innovation’ has become a catch-all policy program that allows the Catalan government to promote school-level changes through broadly engaging and normatively desirable, yet more discursive than wellresourced. In this process, the Catalan government, together with other key stakeholders—including non-state actors, which have played an unusual and unprecedented role in agenda-setting —have actively engaged with international policy discourses and networks to build legitimacy.

The escalation of the political conflict between the Catalan and the Spanish governments in the mid-2010s had an important indirect effect in the promotion of educational change and, in turn, in the singularisation of Catalan education policy. By monopolising the political attention and reducing governmental action on education policy to the minimum, the territorial conflict opened a wide political opportunity window that a non-governmental campaign advocating pedagogic innovation took advantage of. This critical juncture contributed to education policy in Catalonia taking a new course of action. At this juncture, an NPM trajectory—which was already more erratic and politically contingent than incremental—deviated towards a scenario in which educational innovation has been portrayed as both the main goal of educational reform and the key solution to main educational problems. The contemporary emphasis on educational innovation does not represent a path-departing policy change but rather an ingenious exercise of bricolage between ideas and concepts coming from the management, governance, and pedagogic fields. In fact, the emphasis on educational innovation provides the Education Department with a renewed policy framework to continue along the path of some of the NPM ideas embraced with the first Catalan ERA (LEC, 2009), such as school autonomy in hiring teachers, management by objectives, and professionalised school leadership, in a way that might be more sound to the teaching community. This bricolage between the management and pedagogic fields in turn contributes to reinforcing the singularity of Catalan education reform within the Spanish context.

Nonetheless, this trajectory may soon shift towards new horizons. On the one hand, pedagogic innovation has emerged as a key component of the federal government's current curricular policy. This shift favours a closer alignment between the Spanish and Catalan education policy frameworks. In fact, if this new curricular policy successfully promotes pedagogic innovation as a desirable standard, it could attenuate the singularity of Catalan education policy in the instruction domain. On the other hand, innovation, as a school governance approach, is meeting increasing opposition, and not only from conservative parties. Educational experts and teachers' unions advocating traditional (teacher-centred) forms of teaching and more discipline in the classroom have gained unusual popularity—especially among secondary education teachers. Teachers' opposition to the innovation push can also be interpreted—and some have expressed it this way—as a consequence of an accumulation of excessive top-down government interventionism in core areas of the educational process, which is something that directly contradicts the very idea of school autonomy. The emergence of an anti-innovation coalition is challenging what appeared to be a consensus in the field of education—i.e., the desirability of competence-based curriculum and active learning methods. Future research needs to analyse how this new source of conflict is politically managed and with which implications for future policy developments. Indeed, depending on how the conflict is addressed, certain meanings and forms of school autonomy will prevail over others, and this can have long-term implications for both the teaching profession and the trajectory of educational policy.

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## **Publication 2. Del discurso pedagógico a la política: la irrupción de la innovación educativa en la agenda pública**

### **Introducción**

La innovación pedagógica ha jugado un rol primordial en la construcción de los sistemas educativos contemporáneos. Desde la consolidación de la profesión docente, la innovación ha devenido un elemento estructurante de la práctica educativa. En el discurso pedagógico, la innovación ha tenido un carácter predominantemente bottom-up: es impulsada por un profesorado que, haciendo valer su margen de autonomía profesional, buscan introducir mejoras en su práctica con las que enfrentar nuevos retos y escenarios educativos. Así pues, la innovación es un rasgo inherente de la práctica educativa, con un componente importante de autorregulación profesional. Más recientemente, sin embargo, se ha considerado también que la innovación se puede promover desde la acción política gubernamental y la regulación pública—esto es, de manera top-down. Distintos gobiernos han impulsado reformas educativas que giran alrededor del motto de la innovación con el objetivo de 'modernizar' sus sistemas educativos y mejorar sus resultados (e.g., Mentini y Levatino, 2023; Wubbels y van Tartwijk, 2017). Mientras que organismos internacionales como la OCDE, con una larga tradición de investigación educativa en el marco del CERI<sup>44</sup>, han impulsado recientemente un conjunto de proyectos con los que identificar, evaluar y difundir prácticas innovadoras en educación a escala internacional (véase OCDE, 2014; Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019).

En el marco de los procesos de reforma educativa, se asocia cada vez más la innovación a la idea de “enfoques nuevos o significativamente mejorados para la enseñanza, el aprendizaje y la evaluación en el aula” (Looney, 2009, p. 6), así como a un conjunto restringido de prácticas como son la enseñanza centrada en el alumno, la educación competencial y el aprendizaje globalizado (Ellis y Bond, 2016; Serdyukov, 2017). No obstante, la naturaleza de los procesos de formación de estas políticas no ha sido todavía objeto de estudio sistemático. En este artículo reforzamos esta línea de investigación mediante el estudio del caso de Cataluña, donde la innovación pedagógica ha devenido el eje vertebrador de la política educativa en los últimos años. Poniendo el foco en el período 2015-2022, analizamos cómo el discurso pedagógico de la innovación se ha instaurado en la agenda de política educativa catalana y ha logrado cristalizar en un entramado normativo que procura modificar las prácticas docentes y organizativas. El análisis se basa en un

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<sup>44</sup> Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI).

enfoque analítico-metodológico del rastreo del proceso (o process tracing) (Berkovich, 2019), y en la conjunción de diferentes teorías del proceso de políticas (Kingdon, 1984; Leipold y Winkel, 2017).

El artículo se estructura de la siguiente manera. En el apartado siguiente, presentamos la perspectiva de análisis que, como decimos, gira en torno a diversas aportaciones de lo que se conoce como el 'análisis del proceso de políticas'. Seguidamente, se describe el contexto político que antecede al período de reforma analizado, destacando la imbricación de las agendas de política educativa a nivel estatal y autonómico, y de qué manera ello configura el proceso de reforma educativa en Cataluña. El cuarto apartado presenta los métodos de recogida de datos y las distintas fuentes<sup>45</sup> del estudio, a la vez que explicita la estrategia analítico-metodológica. La sección de resultados se divide en tres apartados que, siguiendo la tradición de los estudios de rastreo de procesos (Beach, 2017; Berkovich, 2019), procuran reconstruir de manera detallada el proceso de irrupción de la innovación en la agenda política: promoción inicial, adopción formal y cristalización en medidas concretas. En la última sección discutimos los resultados, prestando especial atención a las estrategias discursivas de los agentes que han protagonizado el proceso de cambio.

## **Marco analítico: establecimiento de agenda y cambios en las políticas públicas**

Desde la publicación de *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, de John Kingdon en el año 1984, el marco analítico de las 'corrientes múltiples' (MSF por sus siglas en inglés: *Multiple Streams Framework*) ha inspirado numerosos análisis del proceso de políticas (Jones et al., 2016). Kingdon propone una heurística para estudiar el proceso de establecimiento de la agenda pública basada en tres corrientes: (a) la corriente del 'problema', que incluye las percepciones de los problemas públicos sobre los que el gobierno debe actuar - se trata de problemas que se pueden visibilizar a partir de eventos dramáticos—e.g., crisis—, pero también de procesos más convencionales como la evaluación de programas que llaman la atención de la opinión pública; (b) la corriente de las 'políticas públicas' (*policy*), que incluye las propuestas de analistas y expertos—de dentro o fuera del gobierno—que examinan los problemas y proponen soluciones; y (c) la corriente de la 'política' (*politics*), que incluye los factores que influyen en el cuerpo político—e.g., los vaivenes del 'estado de ánimo nacional' o las campañas de defensa de los grupos de interés.

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<sup>45</sup> Dado el volumen de normativa mencionado y analizado en este artículo, se ha recogido todo en un apéndice que se referencia al final del artículo.



La tesis central de Kingdon es que un cierto nivel de acoplamiento entre estas tres corrientes—que a menudo fluyen de manera independiente—es necesario para que un tema se establezca en la agenda pública. Concretamente, para que la política pública aborde un tema, las tres corrientes deben converger “en determinados momentos críticos”—i.e., ‘ventanas de oportunidad política’ (*policy windows*)—, lo que genera que “las soluciones se unan a los problemas, y ambos se unan a las fuerzas políticas favorables” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 21). Estas ventanas de oportunidad pueden ser desencadenadas por eventos externos aparentemente desconectados de los problemas—e.g., crisis, accidentes—, por la presencia o ausencia de ‘emprendedores de política’ (*policy entrepreneurs*<sup>46</sup>), tanto al interior como al exterior del gobierno, o por eventos ‘institucionalizados’ como son las elecciones o las fechas límite de plazos presupuestarios. Ahora bien, el modelo no contempla una secuencia concreta en el proceso de acoplamiento, por lo que es habitual que haya tanto problemas en busca de soluciones como soluciones en busca de problemas.

El MSF asume que los actores, más que poseedores de una información y racionalidad perfectas, acostumbran a tener preferencias poco claras respecto a la mayoría de los temas. Por lo tanto, la incertidumbre es una variable clave en todo proceso de políticas, sobre todo en épocas de crisis y de cambio social. A su vez, la capacidad de los emprendedores de influir en la agenda depende de las condiciones estructurales del contexto—e.g., sociales, culturales, económicas, políticas—, la capacidad de movilización, legitimidad e influencia de las instituciones de las que forman parte, y la dependencia de la trayectoria política seguida hasta el momento (Rawat y Morris, 2016).

En última instancia, la hipótesis general del MSF es que “el cambio de agenda es más probable si (a) se abre una ventana de oportunidad, (b) las corrientes están listas para el acoplamiento, y (c) uno o varios emprendedores de política promueven el cambio de agenda” (Herweg et al., 2015, p. 443). En el proceso de definición de la agenda, Kingdon (1993) enfatiza la importancia de las ‘ideas’ tanto en la construcción de un problema como en el planteamiento de una solución plausible. De hecho, como detallamos a continuación, el análisis de los discursos y del rol de las ideas ha ido ganando terreno en el estudio de los procesos de políticas públicas.

## **Discurso y política en el establecimiento de agendas**

Desde perspectivas como el constructivismo crítico y el institucionalismo discursivo, más que la capacidad de los sujetos de producir discurso se ha tendido a acentuar la capacidad del discurso a

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<sup>46</sup> Para Kingdon (1984) los emprendedores de políticas son “personas que están dispuestas a invertir sus recursos en impulsar sus propuestas o problemas de preferencia”, por lo que se encargan “no sólo de que las personas importantes [i.e., policymakers] presten atención, sino también de acoplar las soluciones a los problemas y de acoplar tanto los problemas como las soluciones a la política” (p. 21).

la hora de producir sujetos. Con el objetivo de superar esta dicotomía y de incorporar la agencia de los actores que participan de los procesos de generación de políticas, Winkel y Leipold (2016) construyen un marco analítico que enfatiza la ‘agencia discursiva’ y una noción de ‘discurso de políticas’ que enfatiza el poder performativo del discurso, pero también su dimensión construida—y como proceso en construcción:

un discurso de políticas es, por un lado, un esquema interpretativo (una estructura) que transforma las experiencias en “verdad” y, como tal, ejerce poder mediante una percepción dominante de la verdad. Por otro lado, tiene una dimensión de proceso. Se produce a través de agentes y, en consecuencia, está constantemente sujeto a cambios. Este doble carácter de un discurso como estructura y práctica—y la tensión resultante entre estabilidad (estructuras) y dinamismo (prácticas)—es la esencia del concepto de discurso de políticas (Winkel y Leipold, 2016, p. 112).

Según las autoras, los agentes que participan de los procesos de políticas no pueden ser aislados del contexto discursivo—estructural—en el que operan ya que “no están ‘ahí’ con una identidad estable e incuestionable, sino que necesitan constantemente (re)definir quiénes son y por qué son una voz relevante en un discurso político” (Winkel y Leipold, 2016, p. 121). La agencia discursiva se concibe así como la “capacidad de un actor de convertirse en un agente relevante en un discurso concreto al tomar constantemente decisiones sobre dónde, cuándo, cómo y si identificarse con una posición de sujeto concreta en líneas argumentales específicas dentro de este discurso” (Leipold y Winkel, 2017, p. 524).

En su intento por poner en valor la agencia de los actores involucrados en la construcción de discursos políticos, Leipold y Winkel (2017) destacan una serie de ‘prácticas estratégicas’. Estas prácticas “tienen como objetivo la creación (e institucionalización) de una verdad [de] política concreta sobre un tema y la posición de uno en relación con éste” (p. 525). Se trata de prácticas con un valor intrínseco, ya que se encuentran situadas material, legal, política, social y culturalmente. Ello implica que “incluso la línea argumental más coherente y convincente sobre un tema difícilmente tendrá éxito político si es sugerida por actores que se consideran incapaces de una acción política significativa” (p. 524) u ocupan una posición periférica en el campo de acción. Entre estas prácticas estratégicas encontramos: (a) la *construcción de coaliciones*, caracterizadas por argumentos y discursos compartidos, que son más bien fluidas en su afiliación y no necesariamente se coordinan más allá de compartir una línea argumental similar; (b) las *estrategias organizativas*, que cuestionan la organización estatal y la administración y gestión de determinadas políticas, es decir, ponen en entredicho la configuración de las instituciones políticas; (c) las *estrategias de gobernanza*, enfocadas a reestructurar el proceso de formulación de políticas y a construir arreglos de gobernanza en los que algún agente particular salga beneficiado; y (d) las *estrategias discursivas*, que incluyen todo el lenguaje y las actividades simbólicas que tienen por objetivo crear (o impedir la creación de) necesidades que precisen de una intervención política.

Dentro de las estrategias discursivas, Leipold y Winkel (2017) distinguen, a su vez, (i) la *producción de líneas argumentales y contra-argumentales*, destinadas a construir interpretaciones de eventos que sean consistentes con el discurso que se pretende defender; (ii) la *racionalización y cientificación o la emocionalización y la polarización de los debates políticos*; (iii) las *estrategias de exclusión* con el objetivo de desplazar u obviar a algún agente, problematización o política determinada; (iv) las *estrategias de deslegitimación* del discurso del oponente político valorando como errónea o inapropiada su línea argumental; (v) *emplear el poder normativo*, lo cual implica la conexión lógica de determinados conceptos, agentes o políticas con conceptos que tienen una fuerte connotación positiva—i.e., cooperación—; (vi) la *re- y des-interpretación*, que incluye la re- y des-conexión de un tópico con una intervención específica; y (vii) *dividir y conquistar*, que se refiere a la división de (grupos de) agentes que conforman el campo de juego, y a la asociación de cada uno de ellos con valores sociales positivos o negativos, en función de a quien se quiere (des)legitimar.

Leipold y Winkel, (2017) han puesto de relieve que su perspectiva de análisis del discurso de políticas tiene numerosos puntos de conexión con el MSF, ya que permite profundizar en las prácticas discursivas de los actores involucrados en el establecimiento de la agenda. En este estudio aplicamos esta integración entre el MSF y el análisis del discurso político al proceso de reforma educativa reciente en Catalunya.

## **El marco normativo de la política educativa catalana: antecedentes y situación actual**

Durante los años 2000, se produjo en Cataluña un intenso debate en la comunidad educativa sobre los fundamentos de una ley de educación propia, que debería ser impulsada en el contexto de la inminente aprobación de un nuevo estatuto de autonomía. Las ideas de autonomía escolar y rendición de cuentas estuvieron muy presentes en el debate y acabaron ocupando un lugar central en la que sería la primera Ley de Educación de Cataluña (LEC, 2009)<sup>47</sup>. El gobierno del momento abrazaba abiertamente los postulados de la llamada Nueva Gestión Pública (NGP), abogando por una gestión orientada a los resultados y nuevas formas de liderazgo escolar de carácter más gerencial, a la vez que criticaba abiertamente el carácter funcionarial y jerárquico del sistema público (Verger y Curran, 2014). En cierta medida, la LEC profundizaba en las propuestas de la Ley Orgánica de Educación (LOE) de 2006, que ya contemplaba reforzar la autonomía escolar, la figura del director de centro y la rendición de cuentas basada en resultados (Bolívar, 2010). En el ámbito curricular, la ley catalana reproduciría la organización del currículum proveniente de la

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<sup>47</sup> Véase Apéndice I para una cronología de la normativa más relevante entre 2003 y 2022.

LOE, cuyo rasgo más novedoso había sido la incorporación de la educación basada en competencias (Tiana, 2011). En ese período, numerosos estados de la Unión Europea, entre ellos España, estaban reformando sus currículums a partir del marco de competencias clave propuestas por el Parlamento Europeo y el Consejo de Europa (Recomendación 2006/962/EC; Halász y Michel, 2011; Anderson-Levitt y Gardinier, 2021).

La LEC puede calificarse como una ley bisagra en el sentido que puede dar cabida a inquietudes y preferencias de diferentes grupos políticos. La ley es lo suficientemente amplia como para que distintos gobiernos, en función de sus preferencias ideológicas, puedan desarrollar selectivamente una parte de las disposiciones legales mientras ignoran otras. De hecho, el gobierno conservador que estuvo en el ejecutivo entre 2010 y 2015 paralizó la implementación de algunas medidas que impulsaba la ley, como la distribución de alumnado vulnerable entre centros públicos y concertados, mientras que reforzó la profesionalización de la dirección escolar y amplió sus competencias en ámbitos como la selección de personal (Collet-Sabé, 2017). Estas medidas, que se dieron en el contexto de los recortes presupuestarios profundos derivados de las políticas de austeridad adoptadas como consecuencia de la crisis financiera internacional, entroncaban con aspectos centrales de una nueva ley educativa—la Ley Orgánica de Mejora de la Calidad Educativa (LOMCE)—promulgada por el gobierno conservador español (Jover et al., 2017). Además de la profesionalización de los equipos directivos, la LOMCE pretendía favorecer la publicación de resultados en pruebas estandarizadas para informar la elección escolar de las familias, la creación de una prueba externa a nivel estatal y una planificación educativa basada en la demanda—de la que, en muchos contextos, se beneficiaría la oferta concertada (Parcerisa, 2016). Asimismo, se actualizaron los decretos curriculares, a través de los cuales se enfatizaron sobre todo las competencias más instrumentales (Bernal, 2015).

## **Nuevo giro progresista de la política educative**

El gobierno conservador catalán fue crítico con la LOMCE porque restringía su autonomía en materia curricular y lingüística, pero también vio en la nueva ley una oportunidad de profundizar en algunas de las líneas de su agenda política, como por ejemplo la aprobación de los nuevos currículums alineados con el marco curricular español (Decret 119/2015; 187/2015). No obstante, la LOMCE nunca acabaría implementándose completamente ya que con el cambio de gobierno en 2019 fue derogada y se impulsó una nueva ley orgánica (LOMLOE<sup>48</sup>) que reconduciría el marco legislativo en educación a la orientación previa al intento de reforma conservadora. La LOMLOE, vigente desde el año 2020, se caracteriza por una apuesta todavía más ambiciosa en

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<sup>48</sup> Ley Orgánica 3/2020 por la que se Modifica la LOE.

lo que respecta a la educación basada en competencias en el ámbito curricular, favorece la gratuidad en educación y una regulación más estricta de la enseñanza concertada, rechaza la segregación segregada, y está más abierta a la diversidad lingüística en los territorios con lenguas cooficiales.

Mientras tanto, en el sistema educativo catalán, después de una época de fuertes recortes en el sector educativo y de un selectivo despliegue de la LEC, la innovación educativa empezaría a adquirir un gran protagonismo (Torrent y Feu, 2020; Martínez-Celorrio, 2020; Quilabert y Moschetti, 2022). Concretamente, desde el año 2018, la innovación educativa ha ido ganando peso en la agenda del Departament d'Educació, que ha impulsado la creación de programas de innovación destinados a los centros y lanzado convocatorias abiertas para certificar oficialmente las prácticas innovadoras de profesores y centros. Con la legislatura que empezó en el año 2021, el gobierno catalán ha intensificado su apuesta por la innovación, la cual ha ido más allá de lo que prescribe la LOMLOE en el ámbito curricular y ha incidido en diferentes ámbitos de la gobernanza educativa. En este artículo explicamos cuales han sido las condiciones y factores que han favorecido que se haya producido este giro tan pronunciado en el sistema educativo catalán.

## Métodos y datos

Para reconstruir el proceso de formulación de políticas de innovación en Cataluña, hemos analizado el discurso y las prácticas de diferentes actores involucrados en dicho proceso. Las fuentes que informan este análisis son documentos y entrevistas. Por un lado, se analizan documentos de diversa índole<sup>49</sup> (n = 35): veinte textos legislativos, seis documentos textuales y audiovisuales publicados por diferentes actores—gobierno catalán y sociedad civil—y siete publicaciones de organizaciones internacionales—OCDE, UNESCO y Unión Europea. Los textos legislativos corresponden a una búsqueda de palabras claves<sup>50</sup> relacionadas con la innovación en el Diari Oficial de la Generalitat de Catalunya, y una búsqueda intencional de todos los decretos aprobados durante el período estudiado—i.e., 2015-2022—de los que se han seleccionado manualmente los más relevantes para el estudio. Respecto a los documentos no-legales, se han incorporado tres publicaciones oficiales—entre las que se incluye un texto de prioridades que el Departament envía a las direcciones de los centros escolares al inicio de cada curso y una publicación del ejecutivo catalán en la que se trazan las líneas estratégicas de la legislatura—y tres documentos relacionados con la alianza Escola Nova 21<sup>51</sup>, un actor determinante en la

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<sup>49</sup> Véase apéndice II.

<sup>50</sup> Los términos clave son: “innovación”, “innovación educativa”, “innovación pedagógica”, “transformación educativa”, “transformación pedagógica”.

<sup>51</sup> Pese a la abundante producción discursiva y documental de esta alianza, se ha optado por seleccionar los tres documentos que se han considerado de mayor relevancia para analizar su discurso: el acto de lanzamiento del

promoción de la innovación educativa en el contexto catalán. Por último, las publicaciones de organizaciones internacionales han sido seleccionadas a partir de las referencias que aparecen en los documentos mencionados arriba.

Si bien el núcleo del análisis lo constituyen los documentos seleccionados, complementariamente, se han realizado 13 entrevistas semiestructuradas a informantes clave—policymakers—de la política educativa catalana<sup>52</sup> a fin de triangular y constatar o rechazar interpretaciones. Para seleccionar a los entrevistados se ha seguido una estrategia de muestreo intencional (Teddlie y Yu, 2007), identificando a actores estatales clave de la reforma educativa catalana desde la aprobación de la LEC y a actores no estatales de la órbita de la alianza Escola Nova 21. El guion de las entrevistas tiene por objetivo recoger los problemas del sistema educativo que los actores identifican, así como sus propuestas de política pública para abordarlos, los elementos que consideran relevantes en el proceso de adopción e implementación de las políticas, y las fuentes ideacionales de las que se nutren (Fontdevila, 2019).

La estrategia que seguimos para el análisis y la presentación de los resultados está basada en el enfoque del rastreo del proceso (process tracing; cf. Beach, 2017; Meegdenburg, 2023). Estudios recientes consideran que la combinación del enfoque del rastreo del proceso y el MSF permite identificar vínculos causales complejos en los procesos de cambio en el ámbito de la política educativa (e.g., Berkovich, 2019; Malandrino, 2023). Si bien hay numerosas aproximaciones al rastreo de procesos, en este artículo tratamos de explicar las causas del resultado específico de un proceso en un caso único (Gerring, 2006), por lo que no se buscan inferencias. Así, desde este enfoque, buscamos reconstruir cronológicamente y de manera detallada la secuencia de eventos y sus vínculos causales a partir del rastreo del discurso enunciado por diferentes actores relevantes (LeGreco y Tracy, 2009). La codificación tanto de documentos como de entrevistas ha seguido un proceso de codificación flexible (cf. Deterding y Waters, 2021) a partir del marco analítico de las corrientes múltiples. Concretamente, se han construido categorías referentes a las diferentes corrientes, a las prácticas estratégicas de los actores y a los principales ejes de la política educativa catalana. De esta manera, hemos podido identificar la secuencia de eventos que se presenta a continuación.

## **Resultados: confluencia entre problemas, soluciones y política**

En los años posteriores a la crisis financiera que estalló en 2008, las políticas de austeridad en el sector público marcaron la política educativa y el debate público en educación. Se produjeron

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programa (Fundació Bofill, 2016), el acto de cierre (Fundació Bofill, 2019), y el documento de evaluación (Martí y Tarrasón, 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Realizadas en el marco del proyecto de investigación Reformed (ref. ERC 680172).

recortes presupuestarios importantes que se ensañaron particularmente con las condiciones laborales del profesorado—aumento de ratios, incremento de horas lectivas, congelación salarial y desinversión en políticas de desarrollo profesional<sup>53</sup>—y con la calidad educativa—eliminación de la sexta hora lectiva—(Bonal y Verger, 2013). Posteriormente, a raíz del conflicto territorial entre Cataluña y España que estalla en 2012, pero que es particularmente agudo entre los años 2016 y 2019, la política educativa catalana se mantuvo en un segundo plano y, en cierta manera, en suspenso. La centralidad del proceso de independencia de Cataluña—que culminaría con un referéndum de independencia en 2017 y la inmediatamente posterior intervención de la autonomía por parte del gobierno central—monopolizó la actividad política, la agenda mediática y el debate público. Dicha coyuntura abrió espacios de acción política a agentes no estatales y no convencionales en el ámbito educativo.

## **Crisis, vacíos y agentes no-estatales en la promoción de la innovación**

En el año 2016, se configura una alianza de organizaciones privadas<sup>54</sup> para promover un programa de innovación educativa llamado Escola Nova 21 (EN21). El lanzamiento y los primeros pasos de la iniciativa fueron ampliamente cubiertos por los medios de comunicación y tuvieron eco en la comunidad educativa, con casi 500 escuelas de toda Cataluña solicitando unirse al programa durante su primer año (Aznar, 2016). Con el objetivo de demostrar que las escuelas podían transitar de un modelo de ‘educación tradicional’ a un modelo de ‘escuela avanzada’, la iniciativa planteaba dos objetivos complementarios: por un lado, sensibilizar a la comunidad educativa catalana sobre la necesidad de introducir cambios sustanciales en el sistema educativo y, por otro lado, implementar un programa de innovación en un grupo impulsor de escuelas que pudiera ser escalable y, eventualmente, alcanzar a todo el sistema.

En el lanzamiento de la iniciativa, su director justificaba la necesidad de “un cambio de paradigma [...], iniciar un camino de no retorno hacia el sistema educativo avanzado que nos hace falta” mediante la construcción del “marco de escuela avanzada hacia el que tenemos que hacer tender a todo el sistema” (Fundació Bofill, 2016). El modelo de ‘escuela avanzada’ estaría caracterizado por cuatro puntos: un propósito educativo orientado a proporcionar competencias para la vida; unas prácticas de aprendizaje basadas en los principios del aprendizaje personalizado e inclusivo;

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<sup>53</sup> Entre 2010 y 2015, el presupuesto dedicado a la formación permanente del profesorado se redujo de 8 millones de euros a tan solo 100.000 €. A partir del año 2016 se intentó recuperar esta partida, estableciéndola en 2,5 millones de euros. Desde entonces se ha ido incrementando progresivamente hasta los 5,3 millones de euros de los presupuestos del año 2022.

<sup>54</sup> La Fundación Bofill, la UNESCOcat—ahora llamada CATESCO—, la Fundación laCaixa, y la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya.

un sistema de evaluación alineado con el propósito de la educación competencial; y una organización escolar autónoma, abierta y en actualización constante (Fundació Bofill, 2016).

A la hora de operacionalizar la propuesta de la innovación educativa, EN21 se basó en fuentes de la OCDE sobre el tema (e.g., OCDE, 2013; 2015; 2017), pero también en modelos de cambio y liderazgo organizacional provenientes del campo de los business studies, como el de Kotter y Rathgeber (2016). La iniciativa también forjaba su legitimidad y viabilidad en la legislación educativa catalana vigente y, en particular, en los decretos de autonomía escolar (Decreto 102/2010) y de currículum por competencias (Decreto 119/2015; 187/2015) aprobados después de la LEC. La alianza abogaba por profundizar en la vertiente competencial del currículum a partir de los ‘siete principios del aprendizaje’ sintetizados en documentos de la OCDE (Dumont et al., 2010; OCDE, 2013), que son: poner el aprendizaje en el centro del proceso educativo; entender el aprendizaje como proceso social y colaborativo; la importancia de las emociones y la motivación para aprender; la atención a las diferencias individuales; un nivel de exigencia adecuado; la importancia de una evaluación formativa; y la conexión horizontal entre las diferentes actividades y áreas de aprendizaje. EN21 organizó conceptualmente su propuesta en base a estos principios, que servirían “como directrices de referencia para el diseño de toda actividad y relación en entornos de aprendizaje” (OCDE, 2013, p. 16), y reforzar la eficacia de dichos entornos. En gran medida, a la hora de elaborar su propuesta, la alianza EN21 realizaría una labor de recontextualizar recomendaciones de organizaciones internacionales, principalmente de la OCDE, aunque en un plano más normativo, recurriría a menudo a los productos de la UNESCO, como el informe Repensar la Educación.

El marco conceptual de la alianza EN21 acopló exitosamente las corrientes del problema y de las políticas públicas. En un momento en el que discurso oficial sobre política educativa estaba poco elaborado, la alianza consiguió mover el foco de los problemas de financiamiento y de recortes que habían ocupado la centralidad del debate en los años anteriores hacia la problematización del sistema educativo catalán como ‘pedagógicamente anticuado’, por lo que era necesario iniciar una “actualización disruptiva” (Fundació Bofill, 2016). Ello fue posible gracias a una intensa labor de ‘*advocacy*’ que giraba en torno a una línea argumental sencilla, a la vez que lo suficientemente amplia como para acomodar las perspectivas y expectativas de diferentes actores. El discurso de la alianza se caracterizaba también por una cierta cientifización—puesta de manifiesto particularmente al recurrir a la evidencia producida por la OCDE—y emocionalización del discurso—por ejemplo, al vincular la propuesta de la innovación a los derechos infantiles y a los valores de la Agenda 2030 de las Naciones Unidas. Además, la propuesta tenía un tono marcadamente normativo y propositivo, aludiendo constantemente a la necesidad de cambio, avance y cooperación. Algunos observadores de la administración educativa entrevistados atribuyen parte del éxito de la campaña al estilo de comunicación de la campaña, que importaba



elementos de la *advocacy* norteamericana, y que resultaba llamativo y disruptivo en el contexto catalán.

La iniciativa llenó así un vacío de acción política que el gobierno catalán, entregado al proceso independentista, había dejado en el campo educativo. Además, la alianza surgió en un momento en el que los severos recortes presupuestarios derivados de la crisis financiera todavía hacían mella. Como se ha mencionado, estos recortes se ensañaron en particular con la política de desarrollo profesional y capacitación docente. En este escenario, EN21 generó numerosos espacios de debate y formación pedagógica que fueron bien recibidos por muchos docentes y directores ante la decaída de la oferta formativa pública. Por lo tanto, la alianza encontró otra oportunidad política también en el ámbito de la formación y desarrollo docente.

## **Adopción de la propuesta de la innovación por parte de la administración**

Hasta 2017 la administración educativa catalana no había articulado una política explícita en torno a la innovación, al menos en los términos planteados en el marco de la campaña de EN21<sup>55</sup>. Tanto el Departamento de Educación como las administraciones locales disponían de programas destinados a impulsar iniciativas y prácticas innovadoras en las escuelas, pero como parte de una amplia variedad de programas de apoyo a los centros educativos. En 2017, sin embargo, cuando EN21 estaba en pleno apogeo, la administración educativa comenzó a dar señales de acercamiento al posicionamiento de la campaña por lo que respecta al diagnóstico de los problemas del sistema educativo y al potencial de la innovación como principal solución a los mismos.

Dicho acercamiento se evidenció, en un primer momento, con la publicación de un documento que, a pesar de no tener poder prescriptivo, marcaría un punto de inflexión. Con el Marco de la Innovación Pedagógica en Cataluña, el *Departament* pretendía conceptualizar lo que la administración entendía por innovación educativa (Departament d'Ensenyament, 2017). En el documento se observan intertextualidades recurrentes—aunque sin referenciar—con el marco discursivo de la alianza EN21, y se compartían referencias a informes de organizaciones internacionales, e incluso a la literatura sobre liderazgo e innovación empresarial. Igual que EN21, el documento sitúa el sistema educativo ante un ‘cambio de paradigma’:

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<sup>55</sup> Cabe decir que antes de cerrar la legislatura en 2015, como se ha comentado anteriormente, el gobierno catalán tramitó nuevos currículums de educación primaria y secundaria, que mezclaban la organización por contenidos y materias con una ligera profundización competencial (Decret 119/2015; 187/2015) en línea con la legislación curricular estatal aprobada en 2014 (Real Decreto 126/2014; 1105/2014). También se aprobó una orden de reconocimiento de la innovación pedagógica, que desarrollaba los artículos 84 y 85 de la LEC (Ordre ENS/303/2015) y en la que se expresaba la necesidad de construir un marco de la innovación para poder acreditar las prácticas innovadoras.

[...] hoy en día nos encontramos en un contexto que pide afrontar los retos que nos propone nuestra sociedad actual; una sociedad dinámica, compleja, sometida a cambios constantes y donde la gestión del conocimiento ha devenido un aspecto de importancia capital. Nos encontramos inmersos en momentos de cambio de paradigma social, económico, tecnológico y científico. Este cambio de paradigma lo siente y recoge, especialmente, el mundo educativo (Departament d'Educació, 2017, p. 3)

El documento del *Departament* también concibe la innovación pedagógica como solución a los principales retos que enfrenta el sistema educativo catalán, por lo que ésta “debe estar al alcance de todo el mundo, como proceso de transformación y mejora del sistema educativo” (Departament d'Educació, 2017, p. 5). Así pues, se “apuesta por la innovación como instrumento de transformación sistémica y de mejora estructural del sistema” (Departament d'Educació, 2017, p.4). De forma general, el documento suscribe la propuesta de los ‘entornos de aprendizaje innovadores’ y el imperativo de transformar las escuelas para adaptarlas a las ‘necesidades del siglo XXI’ (OCDE, 2013; 2017; UNESCO, 2015; 2021).

Las referencias al legado catalán de la innovación educativa, que a menudo se remonta a principios del siglo XX, también están presentes en el discurso oficial a la hora de fundamentar el énfasis actual en el tema. Concretamente, el legado histórico de la renovación pedagógica<sup>56</sup> justificaría el impulso contemporáneo a la innovación. Aunque de nuevo, la referencia al ‘pasado renovador’ de la educación catalana se encuentra también presente en la alianza EN21. De hecho, el concepto mismo de “Escola Nova” es una referencia directa a un movimiento pedagógico de finales del siglo XIX, que pretendía impulsar una educación activa y combatir el formalismo, la competitividad, el sistema memorístico, la pasividad del alumnado y la desatención de sus intereses que predominaba en la educación de la época.

En gran medida, con el Marco de la Innovación Pedagógica en Cataluña, el Departament comparte la identificación del problema y la consecuente alternativa política articulada por EN21. Emerge así una *coalición pro-innovación*, que aglutina actores públicos y privados en una misión compartida<sup>57</sup>. Ahora bien, entre los años 2017 y 2019, el acoplamiento entre las corrientes del problema y de las políticas, por un lado, y la corriente de la política, por el otro, no fue total debido en parte a las reticencias del Conseller d'Educació de la época, Josep Bargalló (2018-2020), quien no consideraba la innovación educativa como su principal prioridad. Como veremos a continuación, si bien en el marco de su mandato se asumió convertir la propuesta de EN21 en una

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<sup>56</sup> Para un análisis sobre la sustitución del término renovación pedagógica—de gran importancia para los movimientos de lucha por la educación pública durante el franquismo y el posfranquismo—por el de innovación, véase Besalú (2019) y Pérez (2022).

<sup>57</sup> Esta relación se intensificó en el contexto de Barcelona. En 2017 el *Consorci d'Educació de Barcelona* (CEB)—la autoridad educativa de la ciudad—impulsa una alianza público-privada liderada por el CEB en que la que formaban parte Escola Nova 21, pero también entidades con mucho más bagaje en la promoción de la innovación educativa como son la Asociación de Maestros Rosa Sensat y el Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación de la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (Díaz-Gibson *et al.*, 2022; Quilabert y Moschetti, 2022).

política pública, el Conseller daría este paso más por motivaciones políticas que de convencimiento con la propuesta.

Aun así, desde su publicación, el Marco de la Innovación Pedagógica derivó en un goteo de programas de innovación a través de numerosas resoluciones<sup>58</sup>, en su mayoría de participación voluntaria, y permitió abrir convocatorias anuales para la certificación de prácticas innovadoras dirigidas a escuelas de todos los niveles<sup>59</sup>. A fines de 2019, el Departament d'Educació absorbió EN21. Según distintos informantes clave, el programa era percibido en el *Departament* como una fuente de competencia a sus propios programas de innovación y los desarrollados por otras administraciones locales. La absorción, si bien fue proclamada por parte de la coalición pro-innovación como un éxito de la campaña de EN21, fue también una manera de neutralizar la alianza y recuperar el liderazgo en la materia por parte de la administración pública. La toma de control de EN21 se promulgó a través de una iniciativa de I+D+i dentro de la administración pública y fue financiada por Fondos Europeos. La estructura resultante ha sido denominada 'Laboratorio de Transformación Educativa' (LTE) y su objetivo es desarrollar un modelo de mejora y transformación de todo el sistema. Entre las funciones del LTE está la implementación del Programa de Aceleración de la Transformación Educativa (PACTE), que resulta de la absorción del programa diseñado e implementado por EN21. No obstante, la innovación no devendrá una política educativa insignia hasta la siguiente legislatura.

## **Articulación de una política centrada en la innovación educativa**

El 2020 fue un año de transición entre gobiernos y de cambio de conseller de educación, y que además estuvo muy marcado por la emergencia educativa generada por la pandemia. En el año 2021, sin embargo, con la entrada del nuevo gobierno, la prioridad política del Departamento pasa a ser, de forma decidida, la 'transformación educativa'. Así, se impulsan programas de innovación destinados a reelaborar los proyectos educativos de las escuelas alineándolos con los objetivos de la innovación, se fomenta el trabajo en red entre escuelas y se abren convocatorias para certificar oficialmente las prácticas innovadoras de docentes y escuelas. El giro a la innovación lo impulsan diferentes unidades administrativas dentro del Departament, que incluso han sido reorganizadas y renombradas para incluir las palabras 'innovación' y 'transformación' en sus denominaciones. Destaca por ejemplo que la Secretaría de Política Educativa pasa a denominarse Secretaría de

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<sup>58</sup> Resolució ENS/881/2017; Resolució ENS/1363/2017; Resolució ENS/2094/2017; Resolució ENS/2185/2017; Resolució ENS/1769/2018; Resolució ENS/2037/2018; Resolució ENS/2038/2018; Resolució EDU/423/2019; Resolució EDU/1464/2019; Resolució EDU/1635/2019; Resolució EDU/597/2021.

<sup>59</sup> Por ejemplo: Resolución EDU/3415/2021, o Resolución EDU/3348/2022

Transformación Educativa. Además, la unidad administrativa a cargo del currículum también ha quedado subsumida en la dirección general de innovación (Decreto 251/2021; 59/2022).

En la etapa anterior, las propuestas de innovación educativa circularon o bien por fuera de la administración—EN21—o en forma de documentos cuasi-legales producidos por administraciones educativas, pero sin poder prescriptivo para las escuelas. Hasta ese momento, el Departament d'Educació había mantenido una línea discreta pero sostenida de oferta de programas de innovación de adscripción voluntaria para las escuelas. A partir de 2021, sin embargo, se formaliza y da más visibilidad y estatus legal a la política de innovación a través de diversos decretos y resoluciones que prescriben cambios pedagógicos y organizativos en las escuelas, a la vez que se incrementan las acciones de formación a docentes y equipos directivos para acompañarlos en el proceso de cambio hacia nuevas metodologías y formas de organización y liderazgo.

La política de innovación, como se desprende de la legislación aprobada, requiere de la profundización de la autonomía escolar—tanto pedagógica como organizativa—, el impulso de nuevas metodologías de aprendizaje, un énfasis en el liderazgo pedagógico de los equipos directivos, y el fomento de la colaboración inter-escolar a través de redes de escuelas. En el marco del programa de la innovación se considera imprescindible avanzar, por un lado, en la desburocratización de la gobernanza del sistema educativo, y, por el otro, en la personalización del aprendizaje y en una pedagogía que sitúe al estudiante en el centro del proceso educativo. En el documento marco actualizado que se envía a las direcciones de los centros a principio de cada curso lectivo, el Departament enfatiza esta última idea:

[...] el objetivo prioritario del sistema educativo catalán es desarrollar un modelo educativo [...] que se basa en el trabajo competencial, con una capacidad de adaptación a los cambios constantes, que sitúe los y las alumnas como protagonistas activos de su proceso de aprendizaje (Departament d'Educació, 2021, p. 66).

Sin duda, uno de los elementos más llamativos de esta nueva etapa es el hincapié en la regulación pública de las metodologías de enseñanza y aprendizaje. El énfasis en que los docentes modifiquen las prácticas pedagógicas e incorporen metodologías 'activas' y 'personalicen el aprendizaje' es especialmente recurrente. Por ejemplo, en el mismo documento, el Departament prioriza prácticas pedagógicas centradas en el alumno/a entre las que destacan "las metodologías de aprendizaje integradoras de carácter vivencial y experimental que favorecen el desarrollo de las capacidades y competencias del alumnado" (Departament d'Educació, 2021, p. 48). Asimismo, en el marco de los currículums recientemente aprobados se considera un principio pedagógico clave la personalización del aprendizaje entendida como "métodos que tengan en cuenta los diferentes ritmos, la variabilidad del aprendizaje y los estilos cognitivos de los y las alumnas, que favorecen la capacidad de aprender por sí mismos y promueven el trabajo en equipo" (Decreto 175/2022, p. 6). También son principios pedagógicos centrales el aprendizaje

competencial y la transversalidad de los aprendizajes, que apuntan a formas de hacer converger diferentes materias y áreas, típicamente a través del trabajo por proyectos, diluyendo así el peso del ordenamiento por materias. En última instancia, el Departament plantea un ‘horizonte común de cambio educativo’ que, a través de instrumentos como el LTE, ayude a los centros y a otros agentes educativos “a actualizar cíclicamente” sus prácticas educativas, de evaluación y organizativas de acuerdo con “el paradigma de la mejora continua” (LTE, 2021, p. 4)

En cuanto a la formación y acompañamiento en la ‘transformación de los centros educativos’, destacan el Programa de Aceleración de la Transformación Educativa (PACTE), dedicado exclusivamente a esta cuestión, y el programa Magnet, que vincula la innovación educativa a objetivos de reducción de la segregación escolar. Estos programas, que forman parte del goteo de programas de innovación mencionados anteriormente, son implementados mediante resoluciones legislativas<sup>60</sup>, y ponen en valor la apuesta por la política de innovación. Según el Mapa de Innovación Pedagógica, en el período 2015-2020 (última actualización), existen en las escuelas 295 proyectos de innovación reconocidos y 74 prácticas innovadoras han sido certificadas por el Departament d'Educació<sup>61</sup>. En el contexto de estos programas, se concibe la “transformación global del sistema educativo” como un “proceso planificado” que “se fundamenta en un aprendizaje centrado en el alumno que implica cambios significativos en los proyectos educativos de los centros que afectan las prácticas y metodologías docentes, la organización y el funcionamiento de los centros, en un escenario de autonomía, descentralización y corresponsabilidad” (Resolución EDU/1855/2021, p. 1).

Asimismo, el Centro de Recursos Pedagógicos Específicos de Soporte a la Innovación y la Investigación Educativa (CESIRE) constituye un órgano administrativo dependiente del Departament que, pese a haber sido creado en 2014 (Orden ENS/354/2014), adquiere más protagonismo en esta etapa. El CESIRE realiza formaciones específicas a docentes y libera numerosos recursos pedagógicos destinados a implementar el currículum competencial y otras prácticas innovadoras<sup>62</sup>. También se han actualizado las funciones de la inspección educativa con el objetivo de incorporar tareas de seguimiento y evaluación de la innovación en los centros escolares (Decreto 12/2021), y se fomenta que los planes de mejora escolar pasen ahora a llamarse planes de innovación. En este sentido, se pretende alinear también la política de evaluación y rendición de cuentas con el marco de la innovación.

En este último periodo, el acoplamiento de las corrientes del problema y de las políticas es mucho más evidente. La ventana de oportunidad generada por la nueva ley de educación estatal, la

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<sup>60</sup> Rango legal más bajo, solo necesita de aprobación de directores generales o secretarios de los departamentos. Están enfocadas a operativizar actuaciones de la administración pública.

<sup>61</sup> Véase <https://analisi.transparenciacatalunya.cat/Educaci-/Mapa-d-innovaci-pedag-gica/yrwq-ftxx>

<sup>62</sup> En su página web se encuentran tanto las funciones principales de este centro como los recursos que publica: <https://xtec.gencat.cat/ca/innovacio/cesire/>

LOMLOE, unida al compromiso del nuevo gobierno de la Generalitat con el marco de la innovación explica en gran medida que se produzca dicho acoplamiento. El proceso de institucionalización de la política de la innovación, no obstante, es tributario de las aportaciones de una multiplicidad de actores gubernamentales y no-gubernamentales y de relaciones que se suceden entre diferentes niveles de gobernanza—i.e., estatal y autonómico. De hecho, las nociones de la educación tradicional como problema y la educación innovadora como solución siguen conceptualizadas tal como lo propuso la coalición pro-innovación, sin matices ni añadidos por parte del nuevo gobierno. Más bien, desde 2021 la acción legislativa del Departament ha consistido en intentar poner orden y transversalizar la propuesta de la innovación—se incluye en objetivos relacionados con ámbitos de gobernanza tan diferentes como la dirección de centro o la inspección. También se ha puesto énfasis en certificar las prácticas innovadoras de los docentes y los centros y en regular aquellas propuestas con más solvencia y recorrido—como el programa Magnet. En este sentido, es particularmente relevante el hecho de que las medidas emprendidas— a través de decretos y resoluciones—no han necesitado de trámites parlamentarios, por lo que no han encontrado prácticamente resistencia política.

Ahora bien, el hecho de que la regulación pública y el discurso oficial hayan incidido de forma tan explícita y prescriptiva en el ámbito de la pedagogía ha sido recibido por un sector del cuerpo docente como una injerencia en su autonomía profesional y pedagógica. Concretamente, el hecho de que las pedagogías ‘innovadoras’ estén siendo conceptualizadas, fomentadas y legisladas con tanta intensidad está generando reticencias entre una facción del profesorado. Este es especialmente el caso del profesorado de secundaria, con una formación disciplinar más académica y más inclinado a utilizar pedagogías centradas en el docente. Se está forjando así una coalición anti-innovación que, por diferentes motivos, está adquiriendo creciente visibilidad en las redes sociales, en la esfera pública e incluso en sindicatos mayoritarios. No obstante, dicha coalición canaliza el malestar docente con una serie de políticas que incluyen, pero van más allá de la política de innovación, y cuyo recorrido político todavía es incierto.

## **Discusión y conclusiones**

El modelo del MSF ofrece claves interpretativas relevantes para analizar la irrupción de la innovación educativa en la agenda pública, así como su recorrido en el contexto educativo catalán. Para empezar, constatamos cómo un grupo de emprendedores de políticas—articulados inicialmente alrededor de la campaña EN21—tuvo un rol preponderante a la hora de desencadenar este cambio. La campaña contribuyó al acoplamiento de las corrientes del problema y de la solución, y aprovechó la apertura de una ventana de oportunidad política para fomentar el debate público sobre el tema de la innovación. En el marco de una crisis económica y política de gran

calado, el gobierno de la Generalitat, falto de propuestas y de una agenda de reforma propia, cedió un amplio espacio para que actores no-estatales generaran una propuesta de cambio que, sobre todo en una primera fase, la comunidad educativa recibió con gran expectación. La innovación educativa representaba un marco propositivo y positivo de transformación educativa en un sector que arrastraba años de políticas de austeridad y de reformas educativas poco ilusionantes y que, de hecho, generaron un gran rechazo entre miembros de la comunidad educativa, como la misma LOMCE.

La coalición pro-innovación constaba de un núcleo inicial de actores muy definido, pero tuvo un crecimiento exponencial y una capacidad de atraer personal docente, centros y administraciones educativas sin precedentes en ningún otro programa anterior. Las redes de trabajo, iniciativas de formación y talleres que se organizaron en el contexto de la campaña contrarrestaron parcialmente la desinversión pública en formación docente y atrajeron un volumen importante de profesorado ávido de formación. El impacto mediático también fue de gran calado, con apariciones regulares de los portavoces de la campaña en las principales televisiones públicas y rotativos. Ante la presión ejercida, el gobierno se vio obligado a darles respuesta y, en parte para contener el movimiento y recuperar el liderazgo del debate educativo, optó por hacerse suya la propuesta, inicialmente sin voluntad de profundizarla. En 2021, sin embargo, la coyuntura política permitió acoplar definitivamente las tres corrientes: problema, solución y política. La aprobación de la nueva ley de educación estatal—que obliga a las Comunidades Autónomas a adoptar un nuevo currículum—y la nueva Conselleria d'Educació—mucho más alineada con y convencida de la propuesta de la innovación pedagógica—inauguraron un intenso período de acción legislativa con la innovación educativa como eje vertebrador.

Más allá de las alianzas y de una buena articulación con las élites y con los medios, la estrategia discursiva de la coalición pro-innovación es clave para entender su éxito. En primer lugar, las líneas argumentales de la coalición eran claras y sencillas, e interpelaban al sentido común—e.g., adaptar la educación a los retos de una sociedad dinámica, compleja, y sometida a cambios constantes. El discurso fue persuasivo, aunque a menudo ello implicara recurrir a metáforas y dicotomías entre soluciones y problemas que sobre-simplificaban el fenómeno educativo—e.g., educación avanzada vs. tradicional, modelo competencial vs. memorístico-transmisivo, pedagogía activa vs. pasiva, entre otros. Cabe destacar que el mismo concepto de innovación tiene una fuerte connotación normativa, de deseabilidad social y de positividad—¿quién estaría en contra de aquello que se presenta como innovador, avanzado y superador?—. Es precisamente la asociación entre innovación y valores positivos la que dificultó que, al menos en sus primeros pasos, fuera difícil articular una respuesta o alternativa a la coalición.

En segundo lugar, la propuesta interpelaba a una multiplicidad de actores, expectativas y audiencias. Conectaba con la opinión pública—concretamente, con un creciente sector de la clase

media que aspira a una educación más estimulante para sus hijos e hijas—y enlazaba también con educadores en busca de ideas pedagógicas que les ayudasen a conectar mejor con su alumnado. De igual forma, atraía a policymakers partidarios de formas menos burocráticas de gobernar la educación. Y también con directores de centros que reclaman más capacidad de toma de decisión y margen de maniobra en sus proyectos educativos y de dirección.

En tercer lugar, el discurso apelaba a las emociones y a principios normativos socialmente muy aceptados—con referencias constantes a los derechos de la infancia, los objetivos de las Naciones Unidas y la necesidad de poner el alumnado y su bienestar en el centro del proceso educativo—, a la vez que se apoyaba en evidencia científica, sobre todo en aquella evidencia producida o compilada por organismos internacionales con un interés por la educación. En concreto, destaca el esfuerzo de EN21 por articular y hacer converger—a menudo por la vía de la simplificación— las propuestas de organismos internacionales con agendas educativas muy diferentes como son la OCDE y la UNESCO en un programa de reforma común.

Y, en cuarto lugar, la propuesta de la innovación se planteaba como incluyente, de aplicación viable y casi universal. Se proyectaba la idea de que la propuesta podría funcionar en todo tipo de contextos, con todo tipo de alumnado y en colegios con ethos y formas de organización muy diferentes—ya sean públicos o privados. Estas diferencias, que acostumbran a ser claves a la hora de entender la estructuración de los sistemas educativos, se desvanecían ante la universalidad del planteamiento. Daba así la sensación de que la innovación sería una política con la que todo el mundo ganaría y nadie tendría nada que perder, lo cual la convierte no solo en políticamente viable sino también en deseable. La propuesta resultaba, además, económicamente factible. Es más, puede ser implementada a coste casi nulo, sobre todo si se centra en fomentar que las escuelas ‘convencionales’ aprendan de y emulen las prácticas de las escuelas ‘avanzadas’, y en que el rol del gobierno se limite a facilitar relaciones entre centros y certificar buenas prácticas. Tampoco requiere de reformas legislativas de calado ya que la propuesta de la innovación se acopla bien con la apuesta por la autonomía de centro, los currículums competenciales y nuevas formas de liderazgo escolar que contemplan tanto la legislación educativa catalana como la española.

Todos estos componentes hicieron que la propuesta tuviera un carácter ilusionante y que aglutinara diferentes actores educativos, aunque lo hicieran desde perspectivas y posicionamientos políticos diferentes. Gracias a su aparente sencillez, pero también a la ambigüedad y amplitud del planteamiento, la idea de la innovación ha operado como un ‘coalition magnet’ con capacidad de organizar un amplio conjunto de actores gubernamentales y no-gubernamentales alrededor de una agenda de ‘transformación educativa’. Cabe decir, no obstante, que, aunque la agenda de la innovación ha ganado una gran centralidad en la acción pública, no la ha colapsado. Además de las políticas de innovación mencionadas, durante el período analizado



también se han aprobado medidas de equidad importantes como los decretos de inclusión (Decret 150/2017) y la regulación del proceso de admisión del alumnado (Decret 11/2021).

Ahora bien, a pesar del consenso que la agenda de la innovación generó en el período analizado, tanto en el campo político como en el pedagógico, su aplicación práctica genera importantes tensiones. Su regulación e intento de escalarla a nivel de sistema levanta voces discrepantes y de escepticismo<sup>63</sup>. La crítica más beligerante ha venido por el lado de un sector del profesorado, que percibe la innovación como un dispositivo desde el que gobernar el trabajo docente y resignificar la educación de calidad, lo cual cuestiona identidades profesionales muy establecidas—sobre todo entre el profesorado de educación secundaria. En la actualidad, al mismo tiempo que se está adoptando el nuevo currículum, se ha organizado una coalición antagónica que puede comprometer la implementación de la propuesta. Si bien el nuevo currículum valida muchas de las propuestas de la agenda de la innovación, también está generando nuevas tensiones en el campo educativo. Estas tensiones pueden resolverse del lado de la coalición pro-innovación, pero también pueden intensificar la distancia entre el marco normativo y el día a día de muchas escuelas.

## Apéndices

- Apéndice I: cuadro-resumen de los cambios normativos más relevantes en el sistema educativo catalán (educación obligatoria)
- Apéndice II: normativa citada y documentos analizados

Pueden encontrarse como apéndices de la tesis y descargarse del siguiente enlace: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7657554>

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# **Publication 3. The Obstacle Race to Educational Improvement: Governance, Policies and Practices in Disadvantaged Schools**

## **Introduction**

School improvement, like educational quality, has emerged as a core yet elusive mandate within contemporary educational reform. Improvement objectives cover a variety of areas, such as instruction, social inclusion, community engagement, educational innovation, and above all, learning outcomes. Over the past two decades, numerous governments have adopted policies to encourage schools to make autonomous decisions, while simultaneously holding them accountable for student attainment and other performance indicators. Allocating greater responsibilities at the school level enables schools to tailor the curriculum and the teaching body to singular educational projects—something considered essential for nurturing relevant, innovative, and situated teaching methods (Honig and Rainey, 2012). In turn, external assessments and accountability frameworks provide the necessary balance to autonomy by upholding uniform curricular standards and supplying data for strategic decision-making (Schildkamp, 2019). The combination of ‘autonomy with accountability’ is also expected to favour a more professional, hands-on, outcomes-focused approach to educational leadership (Cheong et al., 2016),

These governance measures create complex policy frameworks designed to engage schools in a continuous cycle of improvement benefiting every student, particularly those who are underperforming. However, the effectiveness of these approaches in driving improvement is not clear-cut (e.g., Hashim et al., 2023; Loeb and Byun, 2019). The evidence remains inconclusive and fragmented, largely due to the complex imbrication of school governance policies, which often operate as ‘policy mixes’. School governance involves multiple instruments working simultaneously, whose effects depend on their interactions, complicating the identification of specific mechanisms and their impacts. Additionally, the variability of local circumstances and organizational cultures further muddle definitive conclusions about the policies’ effectiveness.

The sensitivity of school governance policies to various contextual factors is especially tangible in schools serving socially disadvantaged populations. Schools catering students with greater social, economic, and educational challenges may find it especially difficult to use increased autonomy effectively to achieve the improvement goals set by governments, particularly those focusing on academic performance (Klein, 2017). Research on disadvantaged schools is thus

essential, not only because these institutions face greater obstacles to improvement, but also because they are often the primary focus of educational authorities' improvement efforts. Moreover, the policy interventions deployed in these settings tend to be uniform and overlook the unique circumstances, needs, and internal diversity within these schools (Chapman & Harris, 2004).

Given these complexities and acknowledging the importance of 'taking context seriously' (Braun et al., 2011), this paper seeks to understand how disadvantaged schools navigate policy mandates and thereby to offer insights into the varied logics and practices that shape schools' approaches to educational improvement. Specifically, the paper aims to examine how the unique contexts of schools—disadvantaged schools, in particular—shape their engagement with the improvement mandate, and how this may give rise to idiosyncratic logics of school improvement. The paper draws on data from disadvantaged urban schools in Catalonia, Spain, an autonomous region that, over the past fifteen years, has undergone a significant layering of school governance reforms. These reforms have resulted in a multifaceted policy landscape, where 'improvement' is likely to be variably interpreted, thus potentially leading to a wide range of policy implementation approaches.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by detailing the policy context of the research and, second, by introducing the analytical framework, which interweaves a set of key concepts to explore organisational responses in complex policy environments. Next, we describe the multi-method research strategy on which the study is based. In the findings section that follows we offer a qualitative analysis of ideal-type school responses, alongside an exploration of their practices using survey data. We conclude by discussing the main results and considering relevant policy implications.

## **The Catalan Educational Context: Different Layers of Educational Reform**

Since 2009, the Catalan education system has undergone various reform processes. Following the premises included in Catalonia's first education reform act (2009), the regional education authorities embraced school autonomy, assessment, and accountability as key pillars to establish a more efficient and responsive school system. With these policies, the educational authorities aimed at transforming a system perceived as too centralised and bureaucratic, and to ignite a virtuous cycle of self-sustained school improvement. While the degree of educational autonomy for teachers and schools was already high, the reform approach to school autonomy emphasized the professionalization of school leadership and granted school principals greater decision-

making capacity in resource management (Verger and Curran, 2014). This came with regular monitoring and assessment of schools' performance and the requirement for schools to include performance goals and indicators in their annual planning (Álvarez and Torrens, 2018). Schools were also required to keep records of all autonomous initiatives, such as changes in teaching methods and participation in new educational programs, in their planning documents. Largely, school plans, programs, and projects evolved into tools for monitoring increasing school autonomy (Collet-Sabé, 2017; Verger and Pagès, 2018).

In 2015, the educational policy agenda turned its focus to equity, inclusion, and innovation, adapting these priorities to fit within the accountability framework. In Catalonia, as in other regions of Spain (see Vigo-Arazola et al., 2023), the 2017 Inclusion Decree prompted teachers and schools to implement inclusive teaching methods to ensure learning for all students (Sabando et al., 2019), and emphasised the need for schools to incorporate detailed accounts of such practices in the so-called School's Educational Project, a document where each school is required to describe its educational approach, teaching methods, and organisational principles. Additionally, schools were required to include equity goals, attainment criteria, and metrics in their annual monitoring reports and to develop individualised learning plans for students as necessary (Baena et al., 2022; Miño and Lozano, 2023).

Although school autonomy was expected to foster innovative and customised educational practices already in the early 2010s, pedagogical innovation became a key policy focus in the educational agenda from 2016 onwards (Torrent and Feu, 2020). After a civil society-led campaign which effectively portrayed the Catalan educational system as 'pedagogically outdated', the government adopted several legislative initiatives to promote competence-based and student-centred education and, at a more organisational level, distributed leadership and networks to share 'best practices' among schools. In line with the trend towards centralised bureaucratic control, schools engaging in innovative projects are required to document their initiatives and evaluation criteria in ad hoc registers. Schools interested in obtaining recognition for their innovative work can also apply for an 'Innovation Certification,' which requires an additional evaluation based on an assessment of the schools' innovation track records by inspectors (Quilabert et al., 2023).

In a nutshell, educational authorities in Catalonia have adopted a broad range of school governance instruments, all aimed at enhancing school quality. The school governance framework has evolved in a fragmented and sometimes overlapping manner, producing a governance policy mix. This framework intertwines three improvement principles: inclusion—understood as improvement in equity—, performance—focused on learning outcomes—, and innovation—improvement in instructional and teaching methods. While academic performance is objectifiable through standardised tests' data, inclusion and innovation are much more challenging to assess

and, for this reason, more likely to rely on bureaucratic rule compliance and paperwork. Overall, the mandate for improvement is broadly defined and somewhat ambiguous, allowing schools to embrace various principles and dimensions through diverse approaches.

## **Analytical Framework**

In the described policy scenario, schools face multiple possibilities for interpreting and addressing improvement mandates. Their capacity to selectively engage with and adapt the policy mandate becomes essential in realising a variety of improvement logics. In this section we introduce the main concepts that help us capture, first, how school actors decode their policy environment, engage with the policy tools at their disposal, and transform them into distinct practices and routines, and second, how these dynamics are context-sensitive and deployed in schools distinctly.

## **Filtering and Enactment in An Era of Policy Accumulation**

Policy implementation research has abounded on the factors that explain why implementation practices tend to deviate from initial policy intentions. Nonetheless, the policy-practice gap has acquired a new dimension within current processes of policy accumulation. The tendency of many governments to continuously introduce new policies in response to expanding societal demands, often without replacing existing ones, is generating new challenges since implementation capacity does not reach the pace of policy growth (Adam et al., 2019). This scenario results in increasingly complex policy landscapes, characterised by overlapping and sometimes conflicting demands, that public organisations must navigate and that compel them to discriminate among their priorities (Knill et al., 2023).

A common strategy schools use to handle external pressure is to decouple structure from practice. Nonetheless, since current educational systems are increasingly subject to the scrutiny of assessment and accountability—by public authorities, families, the media, and so on—, decoupling is increasingly challenging. Diehl and Golann’s (2023) work offers valuable perspectives on how schools face and respond to a multifaceted terrain of institutional logics, external pressures, and policy mandates. For these authors, in a context of policy congestion, schools must filter external elements—and discard others—while finding ways to adapt the filtered elements into their daily operations. The significance of these processes becomes even more relevant when both resources and implementation capacity are limited, as is the situation in the educational system we are examining.



Routines, networks, and sensemaking are key elements in both policy filtering and adaptation processes (Diehl and Golann, 2023). Establishing new organisational routines is a way to address external demands. For instance, in response to performance accountability pressures, schools may establish new routines to closely examine performance data, assign specific staff members to handle data reporting, or create data-based decision-making committees (Spillane et al., 2011). These practices are not just procedural. They represent deeper shifts in how schools operate and prioritise tasks (Biesta, 2004). Furthermore, the networks that schools establish with other schools and key stakeholders, along with the collaborative networks among school staff, influence the importance given to external pressures relative to other school priorities. Additionally, these networks are instrumental in translating external pressures into diverse organisational routines (Diehl and Golann, 2023). Ultimately, the urgency attributed to policy measures and their prioritization often reflect the actors' beliefs about policy—and pedagogy. This is where sensemaking, understood as the cognitive processes through which school actors actively interpret and transform prevailing policy frameworks into mundane routines and activities (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015), intervenes in articulating school responses to external pressures.

Indeed, in public institutions like schools, where professionals have strong convictions about what constitutes 'good work' and effective practice, the gap between policy design and practice tends to be particularly pronounced. Therefore, policy performance is rarely the result of straightforward, top-down implementation, but a constant negotiation, whose resulting practices are shaped by 'prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and values embedded in the social context within which people work' (Ganon-Shilon and Schechter, 2017, p. 648).

## **School Contexts and the Improvement Mandate**

While we emphasise the ideational aspects of policy enactment, policies are not implemented in isolation from their environment, but are deeply intertwined with contextual materialities. As noted by Braun et al. (2011), in school settings, four key contextual dimensions are especially relevant: 'situated,' 'professional,' 'material,' and 'external' contexts. The situated context refers to factors like the school's geographical location, historical background, and student intake, with a particular emphasis on the dynamics of the local education market (LEM), which can lead to diverse practices and even exclusionary strategies, depending on the number of schools competing for similar student profiles (Lubienski et al., 2009). The professional context comprises the values, commitments, and experiences of teachers and leaders, as well as their (mis)alignment with policy mandates. The material context refers to tangible resources such as the school's infrastructure, technology, finances, and staffing. Lastly, the external context comprises pressures and

expectations from educational authorities and the community, which shape the schools' legal and normative frameworks.

The quest for educational improvement is present in many education systems in the shape of intricate policy mixes made of a wide array of instruments. These instruments are designed to shape how schools are governed, monitored, and how they deliver education. In navigating the improvement mandate, schools' filtering and adaptation work is inevitably shaped by the contextual layers previously outlined. These processes, moreover, vary depending on the organisational characteristics of schools, including their capacity to deal with pressures and expectations from the environment. As a result, even within similar social and policy environments, diverse approaches to educational improvement may emerge, reflecting the agency and creativity of school actors.

It is thus particularly relevant to identify how the dynamics described in this section unfold in disadvantaged schools as they face a twofold challenge. First, these schools tend to manifest performance issues and are the most directly impacted by improvement mandates. Secondly, they face evident constraints in their daily organisational life. Disadvantaged schools find themselves in a position of organisational vulnerability not solely because they serve populations that are themselves vulnerable, but also due to the heightened policy overload that authorities impose on them. Such overload often intensifies the challenges they face, making their experience of policy enactment uniquely demanding.

## **Methodological Design**

This study employs a multiple case study methodology to explore the range of context-bound responses that schools in disadvantaged settings enact in their attempts to improve (Yin and Davis, 2007). It is framed as an ideal type, based on multiple cases, aiming to identify patterns in school responses through an in-depth exploration of school actors' sensemaking (Stapley et al., 2022). We embrace a sequential mixed-methods approach that combines in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals with a descriptive analysis of survey data.

## **Sampling, instruments, and data collection**

The study is part of a larger comparative case study analysis of the adoption and enactment of school autonomy with accountability reforms in four different national settings (Reformed Project ). For this paper, we focused on the Catalonia data subset, specifically delving into the dynamics of disadvantaged schools. The research team has established relationships with various

stakeholders in the field, including schools, educators, and policymakers, who have provided valuable insights. The Catalonia subset includes, on the one hand, survey responses from teachers (n=852) and principals (n=155) across 78 schools, selected through systematic probability proportional to size sampling based on four stratification criteria, i.e., school provider, educational level, province, and municipality (Ferrer-Esteban, forthcoming) .

The qualitative study involved 20 primary-level schools. Schools were categorised based on two indices: their position in the local education market (LEM) and the perceived pressure for performance results. From the schools in Figure 1, we selected 9 public schools with high social vulnerability (Table 1). We then used purposive sampling for conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with principals (n=9) and teachers in charge of teaching tested (n=16) and non-tested subjects (n=11), totalling 36 interviews.

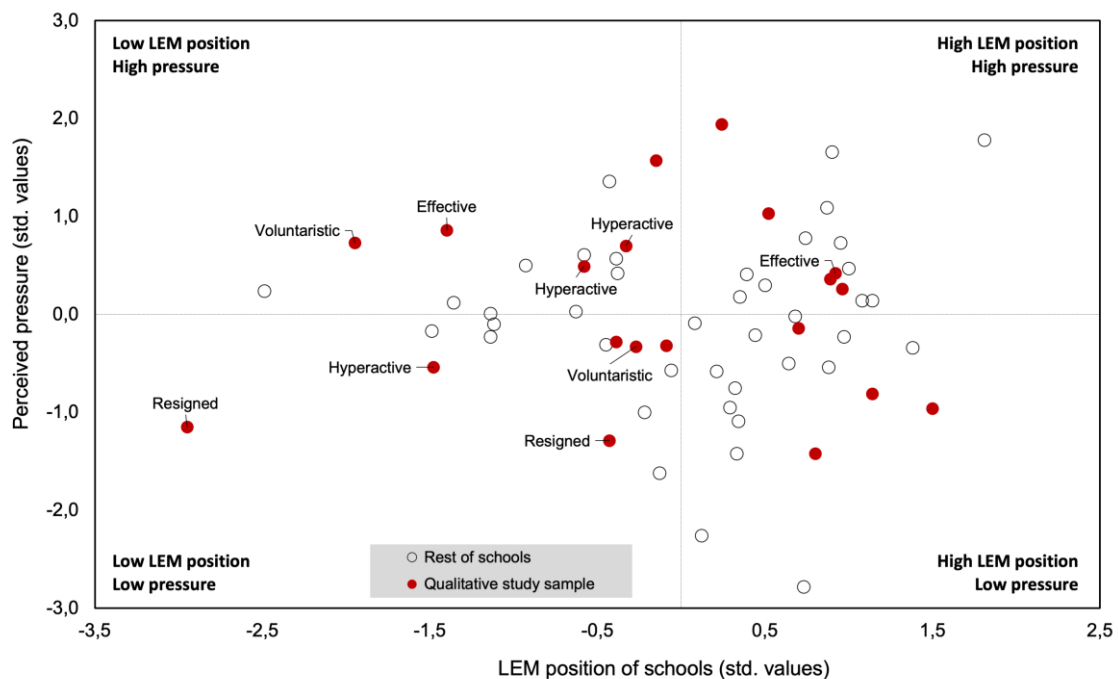


Figure 1. Distribution of schools according to LEM position and perceived pressure. Source: Reformed Project.

## Analytical Strategy

Analytically, we combined deductive and inductive reasoning, applying a predefined codebook for specific topics, and developing emerging categories to classify school responses as ideal types (Hendricks and Breckinridge, 1973). The paper develops an analysis of school responses as ideal types, understood as ‘representations of a social phenomenon that will never be identical with reality, but which will help to make that reality understandable’ (Stapley et al., 2022, p. 2), facilitating interpretation of phenomena across cases (Gerhardt, 1994). We opted for this kind of

analysis after finding recurrent patterns that could be grouped into distinct improvement logics. Following Stapley et al. (2022), we familiarised ourselves with the dataset and discussed the case reconstructions. We focused on schools as our units of analysis, noting that, overall, staff within each school shared improvement rationales and enactment perspectives. We summarised each school's improvement approach and constructed the ideal types by contrasting and grouping cases with similar experiences and perspectives. Heterogeneity between groups and homogeneity within groups were also tested and ascertained. We then identified optimal cases for each ideal type, serving as 'the orientation point to which the researcher compares all of the other cases within that type' (Stapley et al., 2022, p. 5). Based on the optimal case, we produced thick descriptions for each ideal type.

After identifying and describing the ideal types, we revisited the survey data to test the inductively built categories. We assessed the qualitative categories against survey responses of the entire school staff, ensuring the internal validity of the identified emerging types. Although primarily based on interview data, the ideal types were substantiated through survey responses, website analysis, and social media scanning, using triangulation as a strategy to test and reinforce the characteristics of each ideal type.

Table 1. Descriptive data for the schools sampled for interviews.

School	Ideal type	LEM position Index <sup>64</sup>	External perceived pressure Index	SES Index <sup>65</sup>	Performance <sup>66</sup>	% immigrant-background students	% higher education
School 1	Effective	Low	High	0.45	Med-high	18%	9.5%
School 2	Effective	High	High	. <sup>67</sup>	High	72%	.
School 3	Hyperactive	Low	Low	0.55	Low	29%	5.3%
School 4	Hyperactive	Low	High	0.6	Med-low	37%	12.3%
School 5	Hyperactive	Low	High	0.55	Med-low	19%	11.0%
School 6	Voluntaristic	Low	Low	0.6	Med-low	23%	6.6%
School 7	Voluntaristic	Low	High	0.2	Low	40%	3.2%
School 8	Resigned	Low	Low	0.45	Low	17%	4.5%
School 9	Resigned	Low	Low	0.2	Low	59%	2.0%

Source: Reformed Project and administrative records.

<sup>64</sup> The LEM position and external perceived pressure indexes have been built through an Exploratory Factor Analysis combining survey data and administrative records. The first one includes: (a) the schools' perceived reputation; (b) the ratio between available places and applications; and (c) the school performance. The second one includes: (a) the level of perceived pressure; (b) the perceived pressure from the inspectorate; and (c) the perceived pressure from the Department. Index values are turned into the categories Low, Medium, or High (see also Pagès et al., 2023).

<sup>65</sup> This index is built using Principal Component Analysis. It is based on administrative records: the % of students with parents with a higher education level degree, the % of students categorized as needing a special support for socioeconomic reasons, and the % of students enrolled that hold a non-Spanish nationality. In the urban areas analysed, the non-Spanish nationality is highly correlated with low levels of socioeconomic status. All the three components are aggregated at the school level. The index is normalized to range from 0 to 1, meaning the closer the value to 1, the higher the socioeconomic status of the school. The value has been rounded to 0.05.

<sup>66</sup> This variable corresponds to the performance of the school in the standardized test. The value is standardized and turned into the categories High, Medium or Low.

<sup>67</sup> This school lacks data on the number of parents with higher education and students with special needs. However, it has a 72% enrolment of first-generation migrant students, a value within the highest percentiles of this variable that is strongly correlated with a high level of segregation and vulnerability.

## **Schools Responses to the Improvement Mandate: A Typology**

The enactment of the improvement mandate manifests not only in diverse school activities but also in wider discourses and notions of quality education and school improvement. To capture how these different elements configure ideal response types, we structure the findings following a two-block presentation within each response typology: 1) Motto of the typology and main school characteristics—geographical location, school composition, performance level, sources of pressure and external reputation; 2) School improvement approach—the educational practices they develop and the reasons and rationales for enacting such practices vis à vis their perceptions of the external environment and the sources of pressure in each case.

### **Resigned Schools: ‘We Do What We Can’**

This category includes schools that feel they cater to extremely vulnerable populations without sufficient support—neither from the public administration nor from families—. This leaves them in a difficult position to deliver quality education, thus exhibiting a generalised attitude of resignation. A teacher synthesises this idea:

We do what we can [laughs]. The characteristics of the children we have here, considering that most of them are Moroccan, that they are immigrants from other countries, that they don't understand our language, that they don't speak it. We try to do the best we can and that they learn the best they can and we keep doing as much as we can. (Teacher, School 9)

Resigned schools are situated in hard-to-reach locations, usually at the periphery of mid-size or large cities within segregated neighbourhoods, enrolling high percentages of students with low SES and migrant-background populations, thus serving disadvantaged pupils almost exclusively (Figure 2). Schools in this category rank as the lowest in performance and are likely to perform below other schools with similar social characteristics.

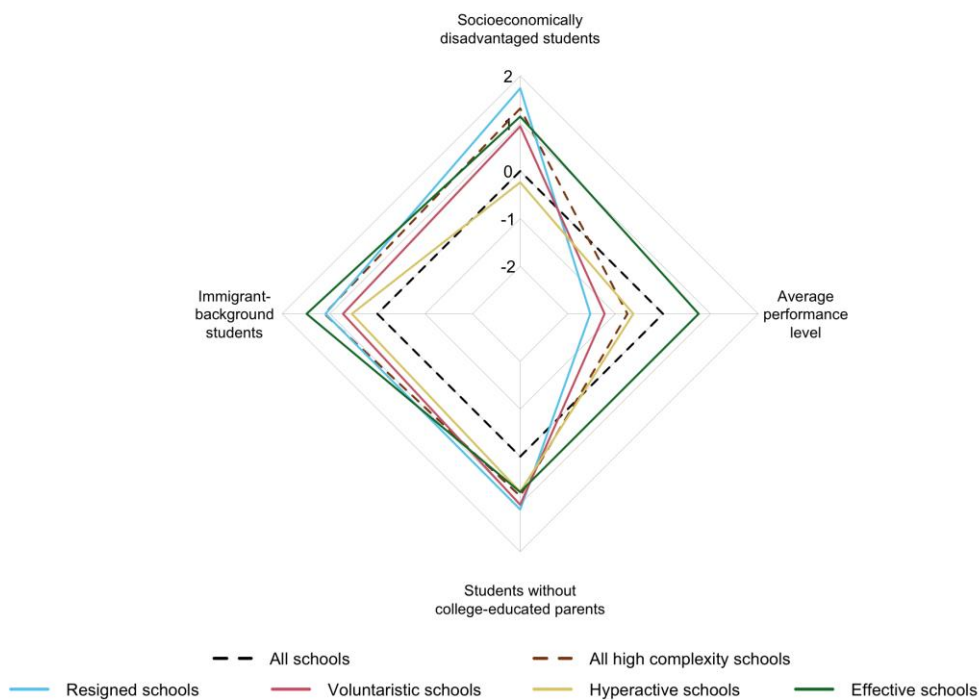


Figure 2. Composition and performance indicators, by ideal response types.  
Source: Reformed Project.

Resigned schools disregard standardised testing and the use of data from external evaluations since they consider that these instruments ‘do not fit’ with their school population. Presumably because of this, they experience the lowest pressure to perform well in standardised tests (Figure 3). Plus, teachers do not point out the leadership team as major source for such (low) pressure. Principals, similarly, do not feel significant pressure to perform from educational authorities. Principals and teachers recognize the schools’ poor reputation and middle-class families actively avoiding it.

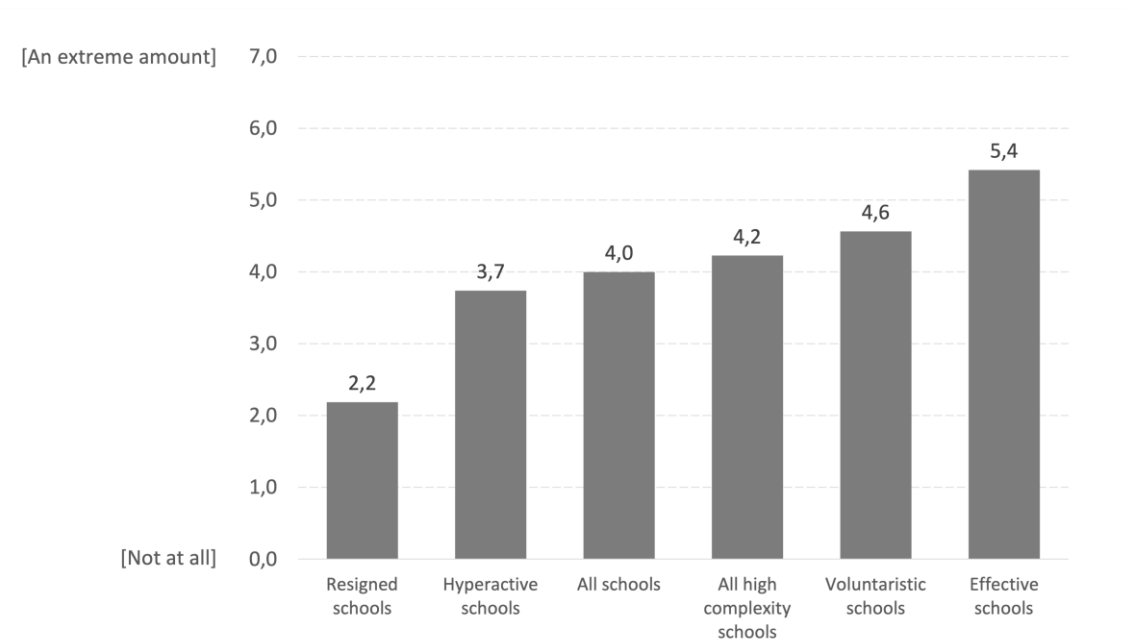


Figure 3. Levels of perceived pressure experienced by teachers and principals to get good results. Source: Reformed Project.

### School Improvement Approach

Resigned schools adopt a school improvement approach based on an inclusion-for-all motive. Teachers' survey responses also indicate a strong learning personalisation approach, where tasks are tailored to cater to both advanced students and those with academic difficulties (Figure 5). The staff's resignation to their school's circumstances contributes to a generally relaxed atmosphere. However, this also entails lowering expectations for students. They aim to meet basic literacy and numeracy standards set by authorities by focusing almost exclusively on basic skills, usually through 'canned' curriculum packages and standardised tests from previous years.

The response of such schools to the improvement mandate is mainly instrumental. Figure 4 shows that these schools do not significantly change their educational approach, such as by making curricular decisions based on the assessed skills or aligning with learning standards. Instead, they conduct test preparation and mock tests in the weeks leading up to external examinations. This is justified by the need for 'familiarisation,' arguing that children need to understand the tests' dynamics to avoid failure.

In resigned schools, performance data is mostly disregarded as a tool for improvement, and despite requests from educational authorities, leadership teams show little concern for the results. These schools rank among those least likely to use data for comparing their performance with other schools, building their reputation, or defining their school improvement plan (Figure 6).



Besides, they tend to avoid participation in external—department- or private-led—innovation or improvement programs. Lastly, apart from the notably high teacher turnover rate, a fundamental issue lies in student absenteeism. To address this issue, these schools hire extra teaching and non-teaching staff whenever public funding allows.

In essence, these schools believe they lack the necessary support to serve a highly disadvantaged student population. This leads them to adopt a somewhat resigned attitude, resulting in a focus on fundamental skills and setting null to modest expectations for improvement.

### **(Self-Proclaimed) Effective Schools: ‘Knowledge Is Power’**

The second category corresponds to the self-proclaimed ‘effective schools’. Despite facing challenging conditions, these schools embrace a ‘no excuses’ motto. Their main characteristic is the commitment to preventing the social difficulties of their students from limiting their academic results. The following quote illustrates such commitment:

What we tell new teachers who join is that, just because we are a school of maximum complexity, just because we have Roma or Maghreb children, we cannot fail to provide the same education to them, to all boys and girls alike, even if we think that they will never make it to university. Sometimes, we hear derogatory comments: ‘This one will end up selling at the flea market (...). But we say: no, no, the curriculum says that you must do this, it’s the same opportunities for everyone. Isn’t it true that in a midtown or concertada school they would do it like this? So we do so too, even more so. Our philosophy is to give more to those who have less.  
(Principal, School 2)

Effective schools are often located in segregated, extremely disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They serve a high concentration of migrant-background population and students who face severe economic difficulties. They reach high-performance levels considering their school composition—even when compared to more advantaged schools with higher SES students (Figure 2). This may be due to their strong academic orientation. The schools’ approach to meeting performance standards includes intensive teaching-to-the-test and narrowing the curriculum, which in turn are associated with increased results in standardised tests.

Both principals and teachers face high levels of pressure to deliver good results. Effective schools experience the highest levels of pressure, not only compared to the rest of the vulnerable schools but also to the whole sample (Figure 3). Teachers identify the management team and the inspectorate as the main sources of pressure—although they also consider pressure as self-imposed. Moreover, these schools tend to have a high reputation in the immediate neighbourhood due to their high performance and the expectations put onto students.

School Improvement Approach

Effective schools understand the improvement mandate as imperative for reaching performance standards and optimal results. To do so, they employ diverse strategies, mostly based on the intensification of teaching hours of core subjects—maths, language, sciences—, often outsourcing services to bolster these competencies and enhance overall performance.

Effective schools prioritise fostering a culture of high expectations among the school community, which is why family engagement in school activities is actively encouraged. According to survey responses, such schools stand out as being the most prone to engaging in intensive and year-long teaching-to-the-test practices, allocating resources to the teaching of subjects assessed by standardised tests, and using standardised test results to inform decisions about school curriculum. This greater propensity across all the accountability-related dimensions is evident not only compared to other school response types but also against average schools and those with similar composition (Figure 4).

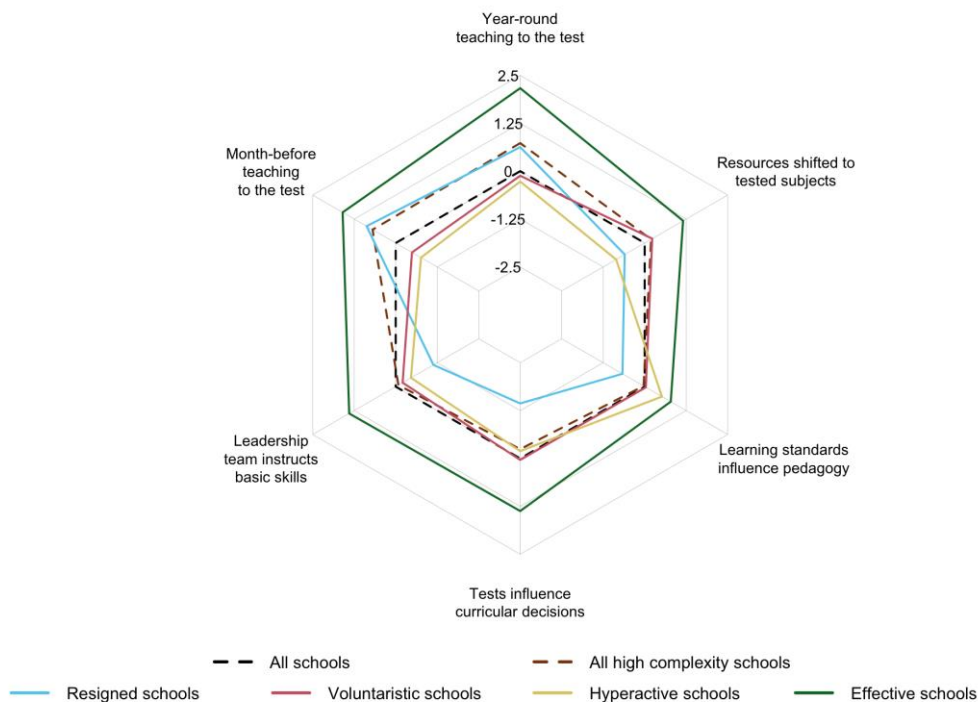


Figure 4. Accountability-related indicators, by ideal response types. Source: Reformed Project.

In line with their performance-oriented approach, effective schools see ‘teaching-to-the-test’ as a key instructional strategy for better results (Figure 4). Leadership teams encourage using previous years’ tests and data provided by educational authorities to ensure that the school curriculum aligns with core skills. Illustratively, one school introduced what they call ‘Test Fridays’ (School

2), a day in which all subjects evaluated in standardised tests are taught using previous years' and similar tests.

Effective schools avoid ability grouping for the sake of inclusion, as they want to provide all students with equal learning opportunities and foster a cooperative environment where higher-performing students can support their lower-performing peers (Figure 5). They do not perceive a trade-off between student performance and well-being, and stress that high performance is difficult to achieve without a positive climate. Despite adopting a mixed-ability collaborative approach, and a metacognitive, problem-based approach (Figure 5), they are sceptical about certain pedagogic innovation trends, which they see as a fad whose efficacy has not been proven.

Effective schools perceive external assessments and performance data as useful instruments that can help organise instruction and feed the annual improvement plan. This is particularly evident in the principals' survey responses (Figure 6). These schools show the highest values in data use to define and monitor the school improvement plan, adjusting the curriculum according to test data, informing parents, and building the school's reputation, surpassing both average and schools with a similar composition, as well as the rest of school types in this study.

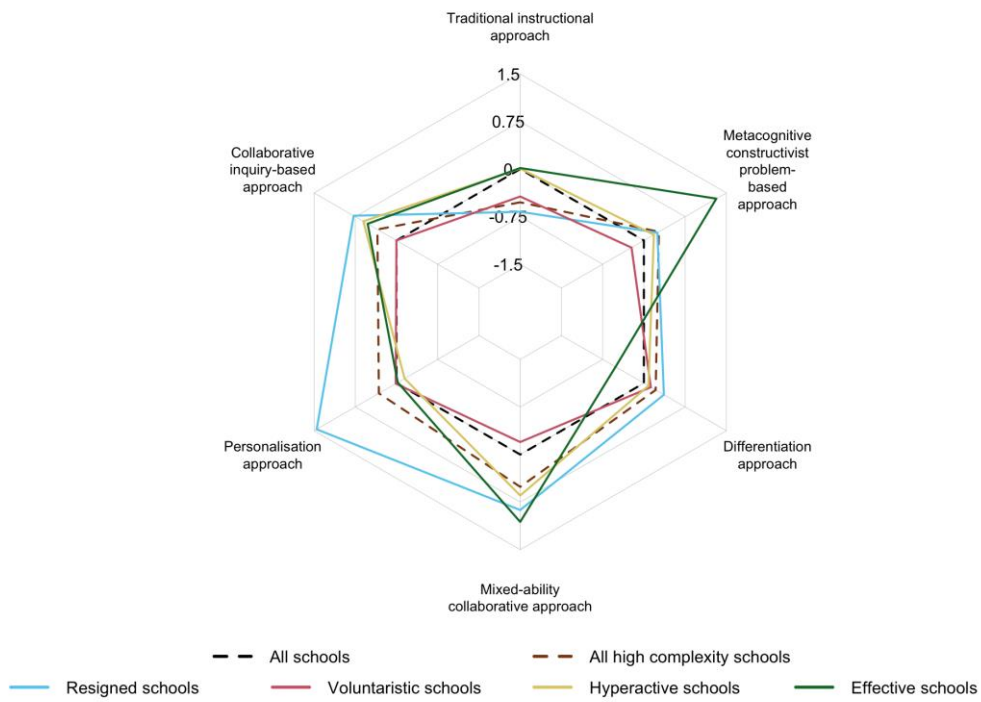


Figure 5. Teaching approaches and activities, by ideal response types.  
Source: Reformed Project.

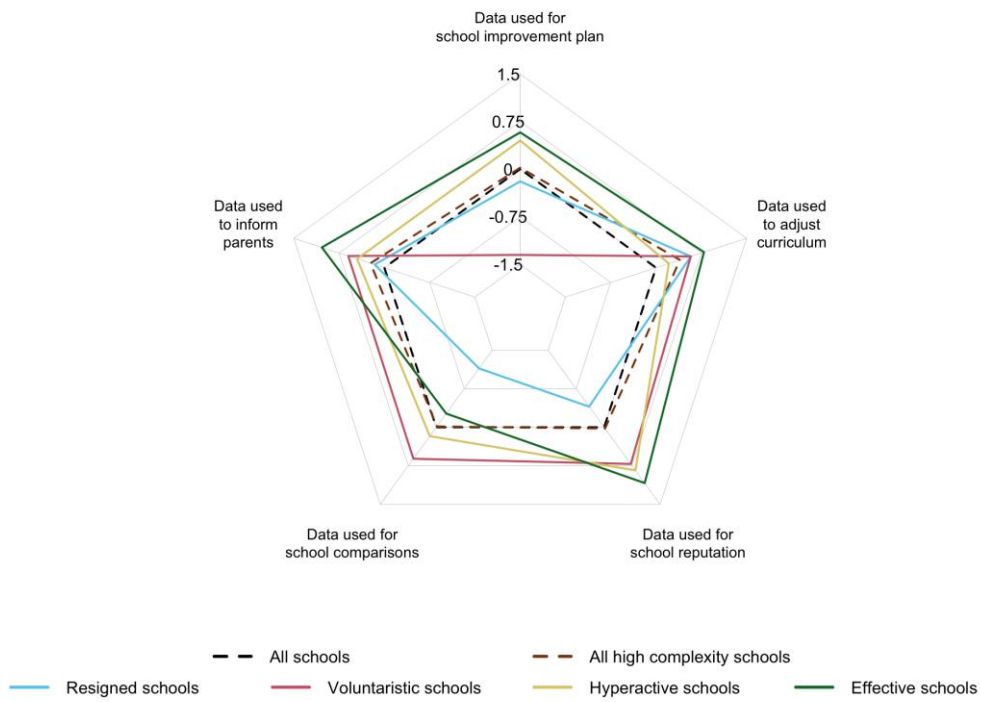


Figure 6. Use of test data, by ideal response types.  
Source: Reformed Project.

## Hyperactive Schools: ‘We Are in For Everything’

‘Hyperactive’ schools are found in heterogeneous urban areas and characterised by a slightly more diverse school composition, which includes low-SES students, both autochthonous and migrant-background, students with special educational needs, and some middle-class students. This heterogeneity results in a lower proportion of socioeconomically disadvantaged students compared to the other identified ideal types (Figure 2). Moreover, their performance aligns with that of schools with similar composition, falling slightly below the overall average yet above that of the most socially disadvantaged schools, such as the ‘Resigned’ and ‘Voluntaristic’ types.

School staff experience an average level of performance pressure (Figure 3), although it is unevenly distributed among the staff, as principals experience greater pressure. The sources of pressure come from both internal—i.e., principal and colleagues—and external actors—i.e., inspectorate and parents.

Hyperactive schools have an ambivalent external reputation. Despite not having high levels of reputation, they are perceived as on the road to improvement. In the quest of building such reputation, they use test data (Figure 6) and embrace a wide range of projects and innovation programs, often promoted in a bottom-up direction, at the proposals of teachers or parents. As described by a headteacher:

Many of the projects that we have are at the initiative of teachers or families. For instance, we started the Philosophy Project because a teacher took a related summer course and she loved it. She presented the idea, we asked for more information, and we joined. We are also a Magnet School because a mother told us: ‘Look, I saw something interesting...’ We asked for further information, and we liked it. The same happened with the Playground Project: two teachers suggested the idea, we loved it and we joined. (Principal, School 4)

Family participation is relevant but uneven, with some parents very engaged in school life and even suggesting innovation programs to join. The most active families in the school are middle-class, who are seen as allies to develop new educational projects and consolidate a distinctive character to improve external reputation and attract and retain different student profiles.

### School Improvement Approach

For hyperactive schools, change and innovation are seen as a seal of quality education per se. Therefore, the improvement approach is based on developing a different and unique offer through innovation, prioritizing innovative teaching methods and applying to new educational programs. However, the adoption of these practices frequently occurs without critical evaluation, with educational innovation being understood more as a goal in itself rather than a means for improving

student learning. As a result, a wide range of projects and programs are implemented, most without systematization or the necessary time for thorough implementation.

Ability grouping is not a distinctive feature among hyperactive schools. However, hyperactive schools may adopt ability grouping as a school policy to cope with student learning needs, especially in heterogenous schools' settings, a practice clearly absent in the other types. Staff in hyperactive schools perceive external assessment as contributing to identifying only broad areas of improvement. Still, the data usage reported by these schools is above both the average and that of high complexity schools, as evidenced by the principals' survey responses (Figure 6). Nonetheless, the use of standardised-test data is ritualistic—i.e., presentation of results in school staff meetings along with basic and general conclusions by the leadership team.

Hyperactive schools stand out in the way the external assessment influences their pedagogical approach, specifically by setting the learning standards that guide their teaching priorities (see Figure 4):

The work begins well before the test course, and in some way, it is true that [the test] helps as it sets out some basis on what the basic learning standards are, where we must arrive. I think it helps in this way, clearly knowing where we should get (Teacher, School 5)

In a nutshell, these schools seek to strike a balance between academic performance and student well-being, combining instrumental, basic skills with the cultivation of soft skills. These efforts are branded with the hallmark of innovation, yet they meticulously adhere to established learning standards to maintain improvement direction.

## **Voluntaristic Schools: ‘Keep Trying Against All Odds’**

The fourth school response type is the ‘voluntaristic school’. Its main characteristic is that the improvement narrative is built beyond—and sometimes against—test results and focuses on expressive goals such as offering every child in deprived neighbourhoods the same opportunities and experiences as students in middle-class settings. They aim to set up an inclusive learning environment where everybody feels comfortable, beyond what is strictly academic, in the hope that students' well-being will eventually improve performance. As described by a teacher:

Above all, we have a very wide educational offer so that everyone has a place, any type of intelligence, it's not the academic part, but understanding each other; we consider it important to offer sports, art, different types of activities, school trips, camps, experiences, which our children otherwise wouldn't have here in the neighbourhood. (Teacher, School 6)

These schools are in geographically isolated and segregated urban areas, often hard to reach due to the lack of public transportation or the existence of physical barriers—e.g., hills, motorways,

or rivers. As shown in Figure 2, voluntaristic schools enrol a high percentage of migrant-background and low-SES students. They also show medium to low performance on standardised tests and are likely to perform below other schools with similar social composition.

Teachers feel a medium-high level of pressure to deliver results and identify themselves as the main source of pressure to perform well in standardised tests. They also indicate educational authorities and the leadership team as sources of pressure—although to a lesser extent—which might explain their attempts to use test data to improve their learning achievement level (Figure 6). Plus, Voluntaristic schools have low levels of external reputation within their areas of influence, mostly due to their school composition and poor performance.

#### School Improvement Approach

Voluntaristic schools develop a mix of inclusion- and innovation-oriented school improvement approach. This is evident, for instance, in their willingness to participate in innovation programmes and activities that are not aimed directly at improving test results. The desegregation motive becomes apparent as these schools strive to appear desirable to middle-class families. The following quote is illustrative of this goal, but also of the awareness of the barriers they face to reach it:

We tried to get into the Magnet Program, but we couldn't because we're the worst of the worst. Well... okay, then I guess the Department will have to put some effort into making programs for these types of schools that don't even reach [the threshold], that are below of everything (Principal, School 7)

The expressive motive becomes evident in their offering of free extracurricular activities and experiences that may bring their students closer to the schooling experience of middle-class neighbourhoods. As an illustrative example, to make up for what they see as the cultural and social capital 'deficit' of their student population, a school developed an internal programme that consists of camps and visits to Barcelona<sup>68</sup>, arguing that 'many of our students have never been to the city centre' (Principal, School 6).

According to interview data, which survey responses confirm, there is a limited emphasis on test preparation activities. The frequency of test preparation is not only below the global sample average but is also remarkably lower compared to other vulnerable schools, which typically intensify test preparation (Figure 4). Only in the month leading up to the external evaluation they may conduct mock exams, and occasionally, resort to teaching-to-the-test. These practices are justified under an argument of 'familiarisation' with the test. Their disdain for the external test is in line with using the little extra funding they have for expressive extracurricular activities, rather than allocating it to activities focusing on basic skills. In addition to these practices, they also

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<sup>68</sup> The school is in a small city near Barcelona.

avoid ability grouping, naturally seen as contradictory to their commitment to inclusion and desegregation. Furthermore, they acknowledge the high rate of teacher turnover as a significant obstacle to improvement, perhaps the most substantial one.



Table 2. Ideal Types of School Responses.

		<b>Ideal Response Types</b>			
		<b>Resigned</b>	<b>Effective</b>	<b>Hyperactive</b>	<b>Voluntaristic</b>
<b>Motto</b>		‘We do what we can’	‘Knowledge is power’ ‘No excuses’	‘We are in for everything’	‘Keep trying against all odds’
<b>School Characteristics</b>	<b>Socioeconomic Composition</b>	High concentration of low-SES and migrant-background students, almost exclusively disadvantaged	High concentration of low-SES and migrant-background students, almost exclusively disadvantaged	Heterogeneous: low-SES, autochthonous, migrant-background, middle-class	High concentration of low-SES and migrant-background students
	<b>Performance Level</b>	Low	High	Average	Low
	<b>Performance Pressure and Sources</b>	Low All sources rank low	High Internal: Leadership team External: Inspectorate	Average Internal: Leadership team and colleagues External: Inspectorate and parents	Average-high Internal: teachers themselves and leadership teams
	<b>External Reputation</b>	Low	High	Ambivalent	Low
	<b>Family involvement</b>	Families detached; no consistent efforts from school	Families detached; school tries to engage with them	Middle-class families active and demanding; school engages with them	Families detached, no consistent efforts from school
<b>School Improvement Approach</b>	<b>Improvement Focus</b>	Inclusion-oriented Ensure everyone graduates	Performance-oriented Ensure everyone performs well	Innovation-oriented Develop a unique offer	Inclusion- and innovation-oriented Ensure equal educational opportunities and experiences
	<b>Improvement Practices</b>	Personalised learning Teaching to the test near exam dates	Curriculum narrowing Year-round teaching to the test Allocate resources to tested subjects	Innovative teaching methods Ability grouping when suitable	Teaching to the test close near exam dates Innovative teaching methods
	<b>Improvement Rationale</b>	Aim to tailor teaching to students’ needs Familiarisation with the test	Imperative to meet performance standards and achieve good results	Desire to attract and retain middle-class families	Familiarisation with the test Desire to attract and retain middle-class families

## Discussion

In a time of increasing and changing expectations in education, educational institutions face the challenge of navigating overlapping and often conflicting demands. The ambiguously defined school improvement mandate in Catalonia exemplifies these conflicting demands. This mandate is broad and multi-dimensional—it encompasses better performance, inclusion, and innovation. This broad scope widens the range of possible policy interpretations and responses at the school level. To address this diversity, the notions of filtering and adaptation, combined with a rigorous consideration of school contextual characteristics, prove useful in understanding policy implementation.

As our findings show, disadvantaged schools filter those aspects of the improvement mandate that better align with their perceived capacities, institutional priorities, and contextual features. As noted, even schools with similar characteristics, such as catering to vulnerable student populations, vary significantly in their improvement approaches. The four ideal types of school responses thus reflect such ‘dynamics of heterogeneity across organizations’ (Diehl and Golann, 2023, p. 302).

### Filtering Contexts

Contextual elements play a key role in the differing responses among schools. However, it is the combination of contextual elements with subjective factors that most clearly explains this heterogeneity. Indeed, despite all schools in our sample sharing the core feature of disadvantage (‘situated’ context), they relate differently to the types of students and families they serve. One factor explaining different school responses is schools’ perception of competition (Van Zanten 2009). In our case, ‘effective’ and ‘resigned’ schools, cornered in their local education market, acknowledge their segregated status, and do not engage in initiatives to alter their student composition—although adopt drastically different educational perspectives. Whereas ‘hyperactive’ and ‘voluntaristic’ schools seek to alter their composition by trying to attract middle-class students. Likewise, the four types engage differently with parents. Families in resigned and voluntaristic schools remain detached, and school staff do not show consistent efforts to change this situation. In contrast, effective schools tend to integrate families into school dynamics, while hyperactive schools prioritise middle-class parents’ engagement in innovation efforts and grant less participation to lower-class parents.

As an element at the intersection of the ‘professional’ and ‘external’ contexts, performance pressure is another key aspect illustrating the complex interplay between contextual and

subjective elements in producing diverging school responses. Headteachers often internalise the accountability system's pressure and channel it to teachers, a phenomenon highlighted in other studies (Kelly et al., 2018; Hardy et al., 2019). The role of leadership styles in this 'chain of pressure' is evident in the varying degrees of pressure across school types. While resigned schools experience minimal pressure, correlating with teachers' lack of perceived pressure from leadership teams, effective schools exhibit the highest pressure, with headteachers as the primary source.

Lastly, although only scratching the surface here, high staff turnover seems another crucial challenge for disadvantaged schools. As a central element of the material context, teacher attrition might be lowering cohesion among school staff and limiting the role of leadership teams, ultimately jeopardising the sustainability of educational projects (Ingersoll, 2001). In disadvantaged schools, where staff instability coexists with student absenteeism and social integration issues, the ability to engage in strategic, long-term planning is further limited.

## **Improvement Approaches**

The combination of an ambiguous policy mandate and high levels of educational autonomy contributes to the emergence of diverse improvement logics among disadvantaged schools. Effective schools prioritise academic performance, resigned and voluntaristic schools focus on students' well-being and social inclusion, and hyperactive schools emphasise innovation.

Diverging emphases and logics consequently lead to different improvement practices. First, the inclusion-oriented approach is characterised by practices of personalised learning and minimal emphasis on teaching to standardised tests, primarily for familiarisation purposes. Second, the performance-oriented approach is closely associated with practices of curriculum narrowing, allocating resources to tested subjects, and extensive, year-long teaching-to-the-test. Schools adopting this approach, therefore, experience a closer alignment with the performance-based accountability system. Third, the innovation-oriented approach is linked to practices centred around diversification and singularisation, in which teaching-to-the-test or curriculum narrowing are less prominent, as innovative teaching methods garner many improvement efforts. As a result, these different improvement logics ultimately give place to a greater horizontal differentiation in education, even within the school sector serving the most disadvantaged population.

Nonetheless, the performance-based accountability system in place pushes schools towards either a performance-oriented improvement approach or the more tactical development of teaching-to-the-test practices to mitigate the impact of poor results (see Biesta, 2004). As noted extensively in the literature on school accountability, overemphasising performance in the improvement

assessment of schools at the expense of other dimensions risks driving teachers and principals to focus excessively on test results, and in turn limits the overall quality of education (Mockler & Stacey, 2021; Voisin, 2021). If there is to be a school improvement mandate that aims to thrive the potential of schools, particularly disadvantaged schools, there must be a reconceptualisation and clarification of how improvement is understood and a close alignment with the school support system.

## **Conclusions and Policy Implications**

The study stresses the interplay between contexts and processes of filtering and adaptation in understanding how schools respond to external policy demands in a moment of growing policy complexity. We also unpacked the diverse nature of disadvantaged schools, often treated as a homogenous reality in both policy interventions and academic analysis.

The combination of school autonomy with accountability has often been implemented and analysed under the assumption of homogeneous responses. This policy approach is explicitly intended to produce school improvement, yet it often lacks clear articulation of the specific conditions and triggering mechanisms. Here, contextual variables are crucial in explaining the gap between policy mandates and actual practices. Our study deepens this discussion, demonstrating that even under similar structural conditions, the interplay of context with organisational and individual factors generates diverse enactments of autonomy and responses to accountability pressure.

While school autonomy can diversify and improve the quality of the educational offer, it may also compromise equity in learning opportunities across the public education sector. Ensuring equality in quality standards is critical. Targeted support policies must be implemented to bolster schools in socioeconomically challenged areas, providing them with the necessary resources to develop genuine, context-specific educational projects. Without adequate support, schools often resort to off-the-shelf solutions that may not suit their immediate contexts, contrary to the anticipated benefits of school autonomy, which assumes schools will tailor educational strategies to their students' needs and local environments.

Likewise, while the accountability system has the potential to monitor and incentivise the improvement of schools, it may also alter the relationships between school actors and educational provision. Disadvantaged schools often adopt limited actions to meet performance expectations, focusing on tested subjects and test preparation practices, perceived as the most feasible ways to boost student performance. This raises concerns about the unintended consequences of improvement approaches that overly focus on results while overlooking other educational

elements. While some schools take national assessments as their unique improvement benchmark, others treat them as annual rituals perceived more as bureaucratic burdens than as tools that can guide their practices.

The Catalan education system relies too heavily on school autonomy to address profound educational challenges, while its current assessment framework does not facilitate formative feedback and professional development. To address this situation, educational authorities should provide robust and contextualized support to schools operating in disadvantaged settings. This requires revisiting the current school autonomy with accountability framework by refining and adapting external assessments, inspectorate roles, and pedagogical support. These changes are necessary to address existing policy inconsistencies and enable more schools to thrive.

A note on the recent impact derived from PISA 2022

The recent PISA 2022 results displayed Catalonia's underperformance in all assessed subjects. This event has agitated the public conversation on school improvement and led to rapid policy shifts by the Catalan Ministry of Education. The core measures announced include reinforcing language and mathematics in the curriculum, offering teacher training and support programs for schools, promoting extracurricular activities with curricular content, and strengthening the role of the external assessment agency. These changes, mirroring reforms in other countries post-'PISA shocks'—arguably a back-to-basics turn—emphasise academic achievement and outcomes-driven policies. However, this strategy risks overshadowing alternative approaches to improvement that prioritise pedagogic innovation, inclusion, and well-being. This sends a policy message to schools that contradicts, for the umpteenth time, previous policy frameworks. Without adequate support and comprehensive policies, disadvantaged schools may continue to struggle with navigating external demands and expectations.

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# **Publication 4. An Ambiguous Aspiration: School Actors Making Sense of Educational Innovation Policy**

## **Introduction**

Contemporary pedagogical discourse highlights the need to adapt education to the demands of the 21st century. In the past ten years, and especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, key international educational players emphasized making schools adaptable, resilient institutions that can navigate uncertainty and deliver innovative approaches (Kools et al., 2020; Reimers et al., 2022). Although not new, the concept of educational innovation has recently become a surrogate term for describing educational change and improvement (Pedró, 2023). International organizations such as the OECD (2017), the European Union (European Commission, 2018), and UNESCO (2021) have championed educational innovation as a core policy goal. Many national and subnational governments view innovation as a core attribute of educational systems, leading to related initiatives gaining traction in policy agendas (see for instance, Greany, 2018). Recently, curricular and school governance policies have been widely adopted to give schools more autonomy to promote instructional change and innovation, while ensuring students achieve centrally defined learning standards and competencies (Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2021; Demas & Arcia, 2015; Hashim et al., 2021).

Despite its recent centrality, educational innovation remains a concept without a single, universally agreed definition. It has been used with various meanings, serving diverse objectives and educational agendas. Approaches to innovation in educational research tend to be either broad and general or lists of practices without clear inclusion/exclusion criteria (e.g., Ellis and Bond, 2016)—making them somewhat arbitrary. For instance, “educational innovations (...) include new or significantly improved approaches to classroom-based teaching, learning and assessment, as well as changes in the organization, or governance, of systems” (Looney, 2009, p.7). Similarly, “in education, innovation can appear as a new pedagogic theory, methodological approach, teaching technique, instructional tool, learning process, or institutional structure that, when implemented, produces a significant change in teaching and learning, which leads to better student learning” (Serdyukov, 2017, p.8). Most literature on innovation focuses on classroom and instructional work, where curriculum plays a large role. Therefore, innovation is often viewed as a matter of teaching practices. The common core elements of innovation include student-centered approaches, competence-based instructional practices, and cross-curricular learning (Ellis and Bond, 2016; Serdyukov, 2017). Theoretically, these attributes stand in contrast to more traditional pedagogical practices, which are characterized as teacher-centered and subject-based (Mascolo,

2009; Young, 2010). Often, rather than being intrinsically defined, educational innovation is portrayed as a counterpoint to traditional education.

Along with the inherent desirability of educational innovation (Hodgson, 2012), the broad and ambiguous conceptualization of innovation makes it a versatile signifier used in multiple reform initiatives—on the usefulness of ambiguity in politics, see Kertzer, 1988. For example, in market-oriented policies and school autonomy initiatives, innovation is often expected as schools with more autonomy and exposure to competition should be more responsive and develop high-quality education approaches (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). However, many scholars caution that assumptions about autonomy, innovation, and curricular change are fragile because their meanings mutate from policy formulation to implementation in real settings, where teachers and principals interpret and materialize these mandates. Particularly when these policies interact with others aimed at incentivizing competition and choice, they can trigger new and unexpected meanings (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Coburn et al., 2016). To explore the complex processes of policy implementation, it is necessary to unpack how school actors make sense of these policy mandates.

Drawing on the case of Catalonia, an autonomous region within the quasi-federal state of Spain, this paper examines how teachers and principals make sense of the innovation policy mandate. Specifically, I analyze their understanding of educational innovation and examine whether, and if so, how—these actors put innovative practices into action. I consider how schools' structural and material conditions shape the enactment processes, with a focus on the socioeconomic status (SES) of enrolled students.

The paper is organized as follows: after the introduction, I present the analytical framework, based on theories of policy implementation, sensemaking, and enactment. The third section presents the data sources and methods. Next, the findings are divided into three subsections. First, I explore the approaches to and definitions of innovation by teachers and principals. Second, I analyze the types of innovation reported by school actors. Third, I focus on the role of school contextual factors in shaping innovation practices. I conclude with a discussion of the results and the main conclusions.

## **The Enactment Approach to Policy Implementation**

Enactment and sensemaking theories are well-suited to exploring how school actors implement educational policy individually and collectively. Extensive literature stresses that the implementation of educational policies is profoundly contingent on various individual- and school-specific attributes. Teachers and principals often struggle with external policy mandates

that may not align with their established practices and norms. They filter policy messages through their own beliefs, assign meaning to policy texts, assess them as appropriate, legitimate, meaningful, or improper, unsuitable, untrustworthy, and adjust their behavior accordingly (McDermott, 2007; Spillane et al., 2011). This ‘sensemaking’ process involves actively reconstructing understandings of policy messages to fit with their pre-existing cognitive frameworks (Coburn, 2005).

However, cognitive aspects are not the only reason why policy mandates are often not followed with fidelity. Since teachers and principals are embedded in organizational settings, school context particularities are also key explanatory variables. Factors like geographical location, teacher turnover rates, school history, and instructional approach, among many others, are essential in how policy is reinterpreted and adapted within schools (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Ball et al.'s (2012) policy enactment framework is highly valuable for studying policy implementation. Enactment theories help unveil how contextual factors explain ‘interpretation’ and ‘translation’ processes. Using these concepts, Ball et al. illustrate how school actors turn policy language into specific practices. Of particular interest is the emphasis on school dynamics. For instance, individuals within schools influence each other, producing shared approaches to instructional practices (Supovitz et al., 2009). But beyond peer influence, schools as institutions have strong and complex path dependencies that shape practices. In the words of Diehl and Golann (2023)

each organization has a unique culture defined partly by a distinct configuration of routines, networks, and sensemaking processes that shapes how individuals navigate the relationships between institutional logics. The relationship between institutional logics is thus variable, dynamic, and locally instantiated. (p.3)

In essence, policies permeate existing institutional contexts and are inevitably mediated and recontextualized by an array of actors (Hupe & Hill, 2016). Nonetheless, non-compliance with or resistance to specific policy mandates is not the only reason for deviations from policy expectations among teachers and principals. For instance, the literature stresses the role of high levels of pressure as a mechanism for decoupling (Perryman et al., 2011). The greater the pressure exerted by policies on school actors, the more likely they are to resort to tactical or symbolic responses to manage and alleviate this pressure (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2016).

However, not all policies have the same level of clarity or operational specificity. While many educational policies outline their objectives and mechanisms to trigger expected outcomes or behaviors—often called presenting a clear theory of change—not all policies are equally prescriptive (Sidney, 2007). Discretion at the practice level is usually acknowledged in educational policy design and implementation. This recognition often anticipates deviations from policy expectations, the emergence of creative responses, and, at times, unintended or undesired practices within schools (Vedung, 2015). However, the policy mandate of educational innovation presents a complex landscape, making sense-making processes even more critical. On the one

hand, innovative teaching practices are often presented as desirable aspirations, not rigid prescriptions. On the other hand, the ambiguous nature of the innovation concept allows considerable interpretative work by school actors. Together, these factors give the policy a substantial normative burden while widening the actors' room for interpretation and maneuvering. Like the 'personalization of learning' policy in mid-2000s England, the innovation policy mandate in Catalonia is a "high-profile and wide-ranging policy, although with low imperative and low specificity" (Maguire et al., 2015, p. 326). This does not necessarily translate into a low-pressure policy environment. The opposite may be true, as the innovation policy conveys a normative message about the definition of quality education and the rationale for pursuing innovative practices (Vermeir et al., 2017). It sets expectations and new goals for schooling but does not clearly state what counts as acceptable means to achieve such aims or what specifically counts as innovation. Moreover, middle-class families are more likely to expect innovation from schools (Baena et al. 2021; Power et al. 2003), which may add pressure and reinforce the policy mandate. Consequently, the innovation policy discourse can exert considerable pressure on school actors. With these considerations as a foundation, this paper aims to understand how teachers and principals make sense of the innovation mandate and explore innovation practices. Before discussing methods, I present the case context of Catalonia.

## **Turning Innovation into a Policy Mandate: The Case of Catalonia**

The region of Catalonia provides a relevant context for investigating how school actors interpret innovation discourse. In 2009, Catalonia passed its first regional educational reform act. This reform introduced decrees aimed at structuring school autonomy and, to a lesser extent, school accountability. These decrees required schools to formulate their own projects and present them to their local community, with principals playing a pivotal role. The autonomy policy mainly focused on giving leadership teams more leeway in organizational aspects, such as timetables and teacher schedules, and in managerial aspects, including teacher selection and budget management. However, the pedagogical dimensions of teaching and leadership were largely overlooked. This approach to school autonomy persisted and intensified until 2015 (Verger & Curran, 2015; Verger et al., 2023).

From 2015 to 2020, a discourse cultivated by a consortium of private actors became central to the educational policy agenda. This discourse emphasized abandoning traditional memory-based educational practices and urged all schools to foster innovative classroom practices. Innovation was primarily seen as competence-based teaching and student-centered approaches, occasionally extending to cross-curricular methods. Additionally, there was considerable emphasis on developing unique, innovative school projects through nurturing instructional leadership, a

concept that remains highly opaque. Within this narrative, school networks were seen as key to creating self-improving schools and ensuring system-wide innovation, similar to what Greany and Higham (2018) described in England. Gradually, this discourse found its way into government initiatives. By 2021, the new government embraced this discourse and made it a policy mandate with measures to incentivize schools and teachers to change their teaching practices and projects accordingly. Among these measures, the new curriculum, passed in 2022, played a prominent role. This curriculum, rooted in competence-based education, prescribed pedagogical autonomy for schools for the first time, outlined procedures for merging subjects or student cohorts, and encouraged schools—i.e., principals—to develop distinctive and innovative projects. It also urged teachers to employ innovative methods, exemplified by the promotion of project-based instructional approaches (Quilabert et al., 2023).

Currently, the innovation policy mandate assumes that innovative practices and projects originate within schools, particularly through teachers' professional autonomy to develop competence-based, student-centered methods. To facilitate this transition, the Department of Education introduced various 'innovation programs' to support schools, assuming that teachers and principals need training to shift from 'traditional' to 'contemporary' practices. These 'public programs' cover a wide range of initiatives, from reforming organizational and pedagogical aspects of schools to specific programs targeting issues like bullying prevention, effective smartphone use in classrooms, or cultural heritage preservation. Other programs focus on subjects, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. School networks coordinated by public administration also fall under the 'innovation program' umbrella. These networks aim to facilitate the sharing of competence-based practices among teachers across different schools, which are typically geographically organized. Participation in these programs depends on the school's approval, particularly the endorsement of the leadership team.

## **Study Design, Data and Methods**

The study uses case study methods to explore how school actors make sense of and enact these policies within specific organizational settings (Yin & Davis, 2007). Table 1 lists the 17 schools analyzed, detailing key variables like SES, performance, school size, and perceived reputation. Data for these variables were obtained from a survey on a representative sample of the Catalan educational system, merged with administrative records. The survey was conducted from 2019 to 2021<sup>69</sup>, and the interviews were conducted from October 2021 to July 2022. All sampled schools

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<sup>69</sup> Fieldwork initially targeted completion in July 2020 but was delayed due to the pandemic, leading to rescheduling for 2021. Thus, it unfolded first from October 2019 to March 2020 and subsequently from January 2021 to July 2021.

are public, offering primary education and located in urban areas across the metropolitan regions of Barcelona, Girona, and Tarragona. Publicly funded private schools are excluded from this sample for two key reasons. First and foremost, the focus of the innovation policy mandate mainly targets the transformation of public schools, not private and publicly funded private institutions. Second, publicly funded private schools operate under a governance model that differs markedly from public schools. For example, leadership teams in private schools have greater autonomy, especially in hiring and firing staff and managing families' fees.

The headteacher was the main contact for interviews at each school. They then contacted four teachers for interviews. Although we could not interview all four selected teachers in every school, we interviewed at least one teacher from each school. We ultimately conducted one-hour interviews with 17 principals and 39 teachers. The interviews<sup>70</sup> followed a semi-structured script divided into six modules: biographical and background information, school context and history, opinions and perceptions of pressure, school responses to innovation and improvement mandates, and market and administrative accountability practices. Questions for leadership teams focused on school project creation and material, budget, and human resource management, while questions for teachers focused on teaching practices and pedagogical approaches (for more detailed information, see Parcerisa & Verger, 2023).

Analytically, I followed both deductive and inductive logic. Using a flexible coding approach (Deterding & Waters, 2022), I formulated deductive codes based on literature related to sensemaking and enactment, such as school history, policy interpretation, alignment, and resistance. New codes emerged from the analysis and existing codes were refined during coding.

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<sup>70</sup> Interviews were conducted in Catalan and translated into English by me.

Table 1. Case Schools

School	SES index <sup>71</sup>	Performance <sup>72</sup>	School size <sup>73</sup>	Perceived reputation <sup>74</sup>
School 1	0,6	Average	Small	Average
School 2	0,45	Low	Small	Low
School 3	0,5	High	Small	High
School 4	0,45	High	Small	Low
School 5	0,7	Average	Medium	High
School 6	0,2	Low	Small	Low
School 7	0,85	High	Medium	High
School 8	0,2	Low	Medium	Low
School 9	0,6	Average	Medium	Average
School 10	0,8	Average	Medium	High
School 11	0,65	Average	Medium	Low
School 12	. <sup>75</sup>	High	Small	High
School 13	0,75	High	Small	High
School 14	0,85	Average	Medium	High

<sup>71</sup> This index is built using Principal Component Analysis. It is based on administrative records, including the percentage of students with parents holding a higher education degree, the percentage of students needing a special support for socioeconomic reasons, and the percentage of students with non-Spanish nationality. In the urban areas analyzed, non-Spanish nationality is highly correlated with low socioeconomic status. All three components are aggregated at the school level. The index is normalized to range from 0 to 1, with values closer to 1 indicating higher socioeconomic status. Values are rounded to 0.05.

<sup>72</sup> This variable represents the school's performance in the regional external evaluation test. The value is standardized and categorized as high, average or low.

<sup>73</sup> This variable represents the number of teachers in the school, based on administrative records. The categories correspond to quartiles of school size. Data for private schools are not available.

<sup>74</sup> This variable, from survey data, represents the perceived reputation of the school within their local education market. It is aggregated at the school level and standardized.

<sup>75</sup> This school lacks data on parents' education levels and students with special needs. However, it has a 70% enrollment of first-generation migrant students, within the highest percentiles, which I use as a proxy for lower SES.



School 15	0,75	Average	Medium	High
School 16	0,55	Average	Medium	High
School 17	0,55	Low	Large	Low

Source: Own elaboration.

## Results: School Responses to the Innovation Policy Mandate

Educational innovation is a constant topic in Catalan schools. All schools in the sample engage with innovation to varying degrees and are enacting some form of innovation. The findings are organized into three subsections: first, I analyze the approaches and definitions of innovation held by teachers and principals; second, I explore the practices they consider innovative. In contrast to the first two sections, which present aggregated findings, the third section focuses on the differences between schools when clustered in terms of their socioeconomic contexts and the role that resources play in enacting innovation and how they affect schools differently.

### Making Sense of Innovation: Four Definitions

School actors approach educational innovation in different ways<sup>76</sup>. Some characterize it *intensionally* by naming necessary features and conditions, while others do so *extensionally* that by listing practices they consider innovative. It is also common to provide negative characterizations, contrasting with non-innovative practices, and functional characterizations, seeing innovation as a means to other ends. Nearly all interviewees characterized innovation as occurring primarily at the classroom level, with minimal reference to school-level practices. When school-level practices were mentioned (e.g., merging cohorts of students), the emphasis was on benefits for student learning, with organizational aspects largely overlooked.

First, some principals and teachers said classroom innovation involves 'placing the student at the center of instruction' and developing competence-based practices. Thus, they define innovation intensionally. For instance, the following teachers' quotes illustrate this perspective:

To me, educational innovation consists of new approaches where the student is increasingly the protagonist of a more meaningful learning. I think of it as more hands-on and experiential (Teacher 12, School 6)

For innovation, we understand it as seeking a pedagogical alternative to the needs of today. We always say it during our school open days. We have to work on competences for children that we don't know they will need when they grow up. Some jobs will disappear, so you have to ensure [working on] competences where, in my opinion, rote memorization or copying are not important. For us, innovation means more reflexive aspects, more critical thinking, more experiential, more experimental. (Teacher 30, School 15)

Second, some emphasize technology and teaching methods. These actors tend to define innovation by listing practices—i.e., extensionally. However, technology is mentioned far more frequently than specific teaching methods. Project-based methods are the main practice associated

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<sup>76</sup> I borrow the distinction between intensional and extensional definitions from linguistics and the philosophy of language and logic

with innovation. Other practices like blended learning or flipped classrooms are not mentioned. In contrast, specific software and platforms are frequently mentioned, making technology a standout classroom innovation. For example, removing textbooks is often portrayed as the first step in modifying teaching practices. After removing textbooks, teachers and headteachers turn to various 'technologies' as substitutes. These quotes illustrate the connection between textbook removal and technology integration:

I think that when we talk about educational innovation, it has been focused on textbooks. You bring a book in a classroom today, and you look like a teacher from 80 years ago (Teacher 20, School 9)

Educational innovation is about being able to understand these new technologies that will be part of our daily lives. I assume leaving aside books, which we no longer have, nor photocopies or anything like that. Instead, there are plenty of applications. For example, instead of making a poster with cardboard, we use Canva and explore these kinds of tools (Teacher 1, School 1)

Third, some school actors perceive innovation as essentially contrasting with traditional education. In this view, 'traditional' education is vaguely defined and often presented as a hazily identified problem—e.g., a teacher that 'explains'. Terms like memory-based education or teacher-centered instruction are identified as primary issues to be dismissed, with the belief that doing so will constitute innovation. Thus, teachers and principals approach innovation negatively, defining what it is not. For instance, the remarks of this headteacher illustrate this approach:

I don't know how to define it precisely, well... innovation are those programs or projects that depart a bit from the traditional education of the industrial era, with books and notebooks, and all children having to acquire the same knowledge at the same time. It's a bit of a departure from that (Headteacher, School 8)

Finally, some school actors see innovation as a way to improve student results. Although relatively infrequent, some school actors emphasize that innovation 'must work' in terms of performance. In doing so, some teachers and principals define innovation functionally, linking it to outcome improvement; that is, defining it as something that works. The following quote provides evidence in this regard:

Q: What do you understand by educational innovation? A: Searching for what's new... or not new, something that works. It's about asking ourselves what we are doing, and what we can improve in what we are doing. Not just to be more innovative or to adapt better to the times we live in, but so that the children are really learning, becoming more competent. (Teacher 26, School 13)

The four ways of defining educational innovation reflect a lack of consensus among school actors about its features. Beyond how teachers and principals make sense of innovation in the Catalan educational policy environment, there are also different types of innovative practices being enacted within schools.

Table 2. Definitions of innovation by school actors.

Type of definition	Innovation characterization	Main concepts and elements
Intensional	Identifying general features and conditions for educational innovation	Student-centered education Competence-based education
Extensional	Listing practices considered innovative	Specific technologies, softwares and platforms (e.g., google classroom, microsoft teams) Specific teaching methods (e.g., project-based, blended learning, flipped classroom)
Negative	Contrasting innovation with 'traditional education'	(Not) Memory-based education (Not) Teacher-centered education
Functional	To improve performance	'What works'

Source: Own elaboration.

## Enacting Different Types of Innovation

Enacting innovation in schools is a complex and multifaceted endeavor. Contrary to innovation policy mandate expectations that innovation would be an integrated, bottom-up process driven by school staff, reported practices tend to be externally driven, fragmented, and standardized. The most frequently reported innovation practices include (a) implementing public programs offered and overseen by educational authorities, (b) participating in school networks to share knowledge and best practices, (c) adopting curricular packages from private providers that are considered innovative, and (d) increasing the use of technology-based solutions. Instances where only one of these practices is reported are rare, as most schools engage in at least two types. Beyond these four common practices, two other types of practices more marginally: school-specific innovation projects or practices and school 'turnaround' projects.

The first four most common practices show innovation characterized by substantial involvement of external actors: educational authorities offering and supervising public programs and networks, and private providers offering products to support the transition to new practices. This last element suggests a notable economic niche.

Integrating technology-based solutions to enhance teaching is deemed innovative. Digital educational platforms—particularly Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams—are primarily adopted for micro-managing students, homework, and classroom activities. This resource became widely adopted, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, in school networks, engaging with teachers from different schools to discuss teaching methods and competence-based approaches is viewed as an innovative act. The acquired curricular packages are designed to replace traditional textbooks. These packages are often interactive and experimental, collecting personalized data from students to create individualized learning pathways using software. Typically focused on subjects like mathematics and languages, these packages are marketed by private companies, including for-profit ones. To acquire these, schools need to collect resources from families' fees, like textbooks. Thus, schools may want to incorporate these packages, but they need to justify it to families since families are paying for it.

Though less frequent, teachers and principals describe original, school-specific innovation projects or practices. These are typically subject- or competence-based initiatives proposed and led by individual or small groups of teachers. These practices are mostly confined to classrooms and involve methods such as project-based learning within a single subject. Finally, though very rare, some schools embarked on comprehensive 'school turnaround' innovation projects. These projects aimed to establish a unique 'school pedagogical approach', often centered on project-based or cross-curricular methods. Implementing such projects required significant organizational changes, including timetable alterations, abandoning subject-based curricular materials, and co-teaching in the same classroom.

## **A Matter of Contextual Factors**

Contextual factors, especially school socio-economic composition, play a key role in shaping innovative practices. In lower-SES schools, teachers and principals often introduce changes in teaching methods aimed at enhancing literacy and numeracy skills. Concerned about low performance in standardized tests, many turn to innovative curriculum packages from private providers for mathematics and languages to improve results. The following quote illustrates how a headteacher from a lower-SES school addresses performance pressure through innovation:

We are below the average of the most disadvantaged schools, and that's why, with the renewal of the leadership team, we have started these innovation projects. Because our goal is to reach, at least, the average of schools of this type, improving results in basic language and mathematics competences, and also to reduce absenteeism. (Headteacher, School 2)

However, innovation related to socioemotional aspects is also present in low-SES schools. The next quote shows that innovative practices are framed as a way to increase engagement among

students and families from disadvantaged backgrounds. But practices addressing socioemotional competences are mostly sporadic rather than integrated into the school project:

We also have a project which brings in artists. We have this woman, and she comes once a week or so to do theater and body expression. This promotes social cohesion, as well as the values and emotions I mentioned earlier. It's a powerful project we have at the school to foster this social cohesion and emotions. (Teacher 11, School 6)

Conversely, in higher-SES schools, while they also prioritize basic skills, they often go beyond just incorporating curriculum packages for literacy and numeracy. Instead, they focus on more elaborate practices. Their most notable feature is the frequent adoption of project-based learning that covers subjects beyond mathematics and language, including music, social sciences, and physical education, integrating socioemotional competences. Project-based methodologies stand out in the innovation landscape and are regarded as prestigious methods that more privileged schools are more likely to adopt. Most of these schools mentioned working through projects or transitioning to such approaches. The following quote illustrates this:

Since we've been in the management team, we've started two projects. One in maths, we call it 'Learning Paths'. The student has a work plan with proposed activities, some on paper, some manipulative, and the student decides where to start, what to do first, and has the whole week to do this work plan and organize themselves. In language, we do it more in groups. Then, both [projects] help us in two things: one, to gain autonomy, learning to learn, which in this sense, especially in mathematics, which in the end is an area that you either really like or have a lot of difficulty, the fact that they can choose which activity to do first and which one later, facilitates seeing the area differently. And in language, the activities were usually very paper-based or in books, and by introducing the computer and the manipulative aspect, has also improved (Headteacher, School 7)

In some cases, more advantaged schools go further by developing cross-curricular practices or globalized learning approaches. Although reported only a few times, this contrasts sharply with lower-SES schools, where these concepts are absent. The following quote from a headteacher of a higher-SES school represents this:

Additionally [to project-based methods in some subjects], we continue to apply the plurilingual project [a public program], which is about language work in non-linguistic areas. We conduct all physical education classes for fifth and sixth grades in English, and we also create math teaching units in English (Headteacher, School 7)

An important aspect of enacted innovation practices is the role of parents. Higher-SES schools, which tend to be the most reputed in their local contexts, identify project-based methods and globalized approaches as poles of attraction for middle- and upper-class parents. The following quote from a teacher illustrates this:

For innovation, we have been explaining the project-based approach a lot. In every meeting we have [with parents], we explain why we make each adaptation. We try

to explain it in a way that even someone who is not a teacher can understand why we are doing this. I suppose that if they continue in this school, it's because they truly agree with this innovation or with this way of doing things (Teacher 28, School 14)

Conversely, staff in lower-SES schools express that families are not attracted to any kind of innovation, except for certain technologies like providing a computer for each child. They stress that families are rather detached from school and must make huge efforts to increase their engagement. The following two quotes illustrate families' disinterest:

No, we don't do it [project-based learning], among other things because it would also be very difficult to explain it to the families (Headteacher, School 6)

Q: Do families, in any way, show interest in or request innovation at the school? A: They don't really request it nor are interested in it because they don't know, you see... It's true that they don't request anything because they already think we're doing very well. They see that their children read, write, and speak Catalan and Spanish, and that's already a lot for them. They are grateful: "thank you very much for everything you do, for how my children are learning". But they don't care whether they are learning through manipulative methods or from books, as long as they are learning, that's it. Especially the older ones who take exams, when the exam results arrive, they look at the score. If it's a 9: "great, great"; and if it's a 4: "they need to study more at home". They really don't understand the new methodologies. (Teacher 25, School 12)

There is a significant difference in parental engagement with innovative methods in schools. Thus, it is not surprising that higher-SES schools invest heavily in developing innovative practices and buying curricular packages. Economic resources coming from families' fees are the main support for innovation in higher-SES schools. With greater financial capacity, these schools can acquire more expensive curricular packages and fund tailored teacher training. The following quote from a teacher in one of these schools shows how her school offers a unique approach to mathematics by financing materials and adapted training for their staff:

Our digital training was conducted by this private company because the material we work with involves programming and manipulating this company's materials and robotics. The mathematics training is led by an expert in manipulative mathematics. We've received her training before, but it's one of those things that when you make a radical change in your working style, you need that person to return to after some time. You have doubts, it has generated an evolution, and you need that person to provide further guidance. The person who helped us improve our methodological work and projects was also an expert teacher from the Institute of Education who had experience as a schoolteacher (Teacher 27, School 13)

Economic resources may partially explain the differences identified between lower- and higher-SES schools. Not only in acquiring certain curricular packages but also in obtaining tailored training that educational authorities do not provide, and thus must be financed by school funds. This is especially important because most teachers consider professional development crucial for gaining the skills necessary to drive bottom-up innovation. When asked about the hindrances of innovation, higher-SES schools did not mention money as an obstacle. In contrast, lower-SES

schools consistently identified financial restrictions as a main obstacle. For example, this quote from a headteacher in a lower-SES school highlights the need for more financial support:

Q: Are there any obstacles you have encountered? A: Mainly the financial issue because, of course, we wanted to innovate, but we had to wait for the [public] funds to renovate the classrooms. This [the practice] can't be done in a corridor. Now we have the renovations done, but it's been two years since we asked for it. Basically, the problem we face preventing us from moving forward and doing more is the lack of funds. (Headteacher, School 2)

Another main obstacle that deeply affects innovation is teacher turnover. It plays a crucial role, primarily in sustaining any initiative rather than in the initial development of innovation. In lower-SES schools, the yearly turnover rate for teachers can reach up to half the staff. This challenge arises from two scenarios: either the original promoter(s) of the innovation have been relocated to another school, or a substantial portion of the staff is new and must familiarize themselves with and adopt the innovative practice. In this regard, more favored schools with lower turnover rates better preserve the stability of innovations. The following quote from a principal at a lower-SES school exemplifies the lack of continuity in certain innovative ideas:

Q: In this change you're talking about, are you moving towards competence-based teaching and assessment? A: Yes, yes, we are moving in that direction, but we have a big handicap because we don't have a stable staff, so every September is like starting from scratch, it's exhausting. We think about how to do it, and it's true that for new teachers who come, we spend several afternoons in early September [first month of the school year] explaining the school culture, the way we do things, but it's challenging (Headteacher, School 1)

In summary, school socio-economic composition significantly shapes the rationale and practice of innovation. Lower-SES schools tend to focus mainly on incorporating innovative practices and projects to improve basic skills, with socio-emotional wellbeing to a lesser extent. In contrast, higher-SES schools prioritize developing innovative projects and practices that are project-based and cross-curricular, going beyond basic skills to appeal to middle-class parents. These differences might be explained by contextual factors like teacher turnover, economic capacity, or reputation. Therefore, the innovation mandate is enacted quite differently across schools. Lower-SES schools face more difficulties in initiating and sustaining certain innovative practices, while higher-SES schools face fewer obstacles due to economic support from families. Thus, by inadvertently segmenting the educational offer, the innovation mandate could deepen inequalities among schools in the Catalan educational system.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Recent developments in Catalan education policy have positioned innovation as a core component of school improvement, promoting the cultivation of bottom-up innovative practices within



schools. The findings of this study show strong engagement of schools with the innovation mandate; however, this does not imply straightforward implementation at the school level. School actors define innovation in four ways: intensionally, extensionally, negatively, and functionally. In these definitions, some elements align with the innovation policy mandate, such as competence-based and student-centered education and the critique of traditional education, but other elements contrast, such as the emphasis on technology and new educational software. Controversy surrounds innovation features, which may explain why some teachers and principals approach innovation instrumentally and others expressively. For some, innovation is a means to achieve something else—usually to improve results, but also to attract parents or engage students—while for others, innovation is an end in itself. The broad and ambiguous nature of the innovation policy mandate allows school actors to deploy their own parameters and definitions of innovation.

Beyond teachers' and principals' interpretations of the policy mandate, all sampled schools have implemented multiple projects or practices considered innovative. However, contrary to policy expectations, bottom-up practices appear limited. The majority of schools manage the external pressure to innovate by engaging with one-size-fits-all programs developed by the Department of Education and purchasing curricular materials or technologies labelled as innovative. Schools also address the innovation mandate by participating in school networks to learn from the educational practices of other schools.

The range of practices deemed innovative by school actors can be categorized into two dichotomies: externally driven vs. internally driven, and fragmented vs. integrated practices. In the first dichotomy, most practices reported by school actors are driven externally. These practices are initiated, monitored, or supervised by educational authorities, or involve private providers designing and selling products to schools. In these cases, teachers primarily use innovations created outside the school rather than creating them themselves. In contrast, internally driven practices created by teachers or leadership teams within schools are less commonly reported. These practices include school-specific projects and initiatives, such as turnaround projects. Notably, when schools engage in bottom-up innovation, they can apply for a 'certificate of innovation' from educational authorities, serving as a 'seal of quality' that verifies the practice's innovativeness.

In the second dichotomy, most innovative practices reported by school actors are fragmented. These practices target specific subjects, activities, or competences, introducing innovative approaches to address these areas. They are typically isolated and do not modify schools' structural foundations; however, when accumulated, they may eventually impact the structural aspects of the school. In contrast, integrated practices aim to directly influence the core elements of the school—the school grammar. These practices typically involve all school staff. However,

implementing whole-staff practices can be resource-intensive, requiring training, and often encountering resistance, as reported in the literature on organizational and educational change (e.g., Fix et al., 2020).

Additionally, standardization of innovation is an emerging issue. Most reported practices are standardized, involving public programs, curricular packages, and technology-based solutions designed by experts or officials outside the school. Although there is room for creative adaptation and reinterpretation, externally designed innovation practices are typically offered and structured for replication by schools. Innovation is typically seen as opposed to standardization due to its intrinsic quality as a bottom-up, spontaneous practice (e.g., Paniagua & Istance, 2018). Nonetheless, most reported practices can be labelled as externally driven, fragmented, and standardized ‘innovative’ practices. This may signal that if innovation is pushed as a system-wide mandate, mostly dependent on schools’ work and resources, it cannot be a tailored, contextualized practice emanating equally from all schools.

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how school actors perceive innovation and its characteristics. This approach offers valuable insights into the cognitive frameworks and contextual factors shaping the implementation of innovative practices. However, the study's reliance on self-reported data on innovation practices has certain limitations. While the narratives of teachers and principals provide rich descriptions of innovative practices, they do not allow verification of actual implementation in classroom settings. Consequently, the gap between reported and tangible actions remains underexplored in this research. This distinction is critical, underscoring the need for further investigation into innovative teaching methods, potentially through direct observation or other empirical measures, to fully understand their implementation.

## **Coping with the Innovation Mandate**

Findings provide key insights into the role of school context in enacting innovative practices. Teachers and headteachers in lower-SES schools find it more difficult to implement school-specific innovation practices. This is mainly due to material constraints such as limited economic resources and high teacher turnover, which limit the development of genuine, bottom-up innovative instructional approaches. Despite the potential of new educational approaches to improve learning in disadvantaged schools, it is hard to imagine these schools developing relevant innovative practices when facing such challenges (see Prain et al., 2017). Moreover, families in these schools, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds, are less attracted to innovation than families in higher-SES schools. To cope with the pressure to innovate, teachers and principals in lower-SES schools tend to foster the socio-emotional and playful dimensions of education and use standardized curricular packages more, especially for basic skills training. Conversely, higher-

SES schools tend to develop more school-specific practices, including whole-school and turnaround projects, due to better teacher stability and greater capacity to collect economic resources from families' fees. The attention of higher-SES families is also an incentive for these schools to develop innovative, unique projects and practices. These findings are consistent with research emphasizing the importance of contextual factors in explaining differences in policy enactment (Braun et al., 2011).

Despite SES differences, schools generally seem to superficially incorporate elements of the innovation mandate to cope with policy pressure. Applying to public programs, participating in school networks, or adopting canned curriculum materials and technology solutions seem to be ways to respond to the mandate while minimizing potential challenges. However, teachers and principals are not fundamentally opposed to the innovation mandate. They seem willing to make substantial changes to their teaching methods and school organization, partly because they can adapt them to their educational preferences. This does not mean they fully align with the innovation mandate or actively promote new teaching methods. In fact, the concept of innovation has a strong normative connotation, social desirability, and positivity, which implicitly limits critiques—who would oppose what is presented as advanced? Despite this, in Catalonia, groups of teachers are self-organizing—both inside and outside the unions—and protesting against the innovation mandate and the new curriculum. This emerging counter-narrative suggests a potential area for further research. As opposition to innovation policies emerges in schools, it may lead to internal conflicts among staff members. These dynamics suggest the need for an in-depth micropolitical analysis of how staff relationships are influenced by the adoption of or resistance to innovation policies.

The innovation policy mandate compels schools to seek innovative teaching methods and showcase them to parents and educational authorities. This reflects how educational institutions grapple with many external demands and competing pressures. In this context, the innovation mandate may compete with other policies focused on performance-based accountability and market-driven dynamics. Research has highlighted the potential clash between accountability measures and innovation efforts, especially when external assessments overly emphasize performance in basic skills, or when innovations do not fit the external assessment framework (Knight, 2020; Watkins et al., 2020). Conversely, competitive environments may foster innovation as schools strive to differentiate themselves and establish a unique presence in the market (McGinity, 2015). While the exploration of these relationships is limited in this study, there appears to be a clear link between innovation, accountability pressure, and market forces. School actors report implementing practices aimed at enhancing performance and increasing their appeal to parents; however, a more comprehensive study is needed to understand these dynamics.

Further research is needed on how principals and teachers adopt external innovations in their school contexts. Given the prevalence of standardized, externally driven public programs and private curricular packages, we should investigate how teachers and school leaders individually and collectively construct meaning from these programs and engage in practice (Ng and Wilson 2017). Even when introduced from external sources, creatively adopting these standardized programs will result in a rich tapestry of diverse practices within each school.

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## **Concluding Chapter**

The concluding chapter of this thesis synthesizes the study's key findings, contributions to the literature, and policy implications. It begins by reviewing the findings, focusing on the shifting evolution of educational improvement as a policy goal, the policies designed to achieve it, and how their implementation is shaped by schools' internal dynamics and contextual factors. The chapter then discusses the contributions to the literature on educational reform and education policy implementation, offering new insights that extend current academic discussions. It follows with an outline of the policy implications, particularly emphasizing their significance for policymakers. Finally, the chapter suggests future research directions, identifying gaps and emerging areas that require further exploration.

### **6.1. Overview of the Findings**

This section focuses on how educational improvement in Catalonia has evolved over time and how schools navigate policy implementation within a complex and rapidly changing policy landscape. By examining the dynamics of policy adoption and implementation in Catalonia, the findings offer insights into the coexistence of varied improvement approaches—performance, innovation, and inclusion—and how these are enacted in diverse school settings. The section also highlights the challenges of balancing school autonomy with accountability, illustrating how the interplay of these factors affects schools' responses to policy mandates and ultimately impacts equity and educational outcomes.

#### **6.1.1. The Shifting Evolution of Educational Improvement**

Despite remaining a core aim of educational reform, the focus of improvement has evolved over the years. Initially, the emphasis was on a results-oriented approach that prioritized managerial aspects of autonomy. This focus later expanded to include a process-oriented perspective, centering on pedagogical autonomy and innovation. However, the initial emphasis on managerial autonomy was not abandoned; instead, both approaches have layered and now coexist. Over time, new instruments have been introduced, and existing ones adapted to align with emerging priorities rather than being dismantled. This thesis sheds light on how this reform trajectory has unfolded and the factors that have shaped it.

The quasi-federal structure of Spain significantly influences how policy is adopted within its regions. The decentralization process has allowed regions like Catalonia to gain substantial control over their educational systems, while key aspects, such as the structure of the educational

system, remain at the national level. This ‘intermediate’ model of decentralization enables Catalonia to advance its own proposals within the broader national framework. Catalan policymakers have strategically leveraged this semi-autonomous status to craft singular educational policies. The Llei d’Educació de Catalunya (LEC) is a prime example of such maneuvering, establishing Catalonia’s own path within Spain.

The LEC established school autonomy and accountability as core instruments for school improvement, with autonomy arguably being the cornerstone. The policy aimed to enhance managerial leadership by granting principals greater decision-making power over staffing and resource management, assuming this would make schools more responsive to local needs and capable of driving improvement. However, this approach relied heavily on managerial autonomy for headteachers without providing the necessary mechanisms, support, or resources to achieve the desired outcomes. Moreover, at that time, improvement was mainly defined in terms of school performance. Consequently, in addition to the existing school inspectorate, standardized tests were introduced as an external evaluation tool to balance the autonomy provided. Discursively, these accountability measures were strongly linked to the improvement narrative, yet weakly operationalized, serving basically to monitor performance. The 2003-2010 period that led to the LEC is marked by policy alignment between the national and regional governments. A social-democratic party governed at the national level, while a progressive coalition led Catalonia. The 2006 federal educational reform by Spain's left-wing government promoted school autonomy and accountability as key elements of educational improvement but lacked specific guidelines for implementation. The Catalan government built upon this general framework to develop its own, more detailed policies tailored to its regional context and priorities.

The focus of improvement later shifted from performance to instructional innovation. Beginning in 2016, Escola Nova 21 (EN21), a coalition of regional philanthropic organizations, led the effort to prioritize educational innovation on the agenda. These non-state actors effectively set the direction for reform by framing innovation as both urgent and necessary. Amid a financial crisis and with the Catalan government focused on independence efforts, these organizations filled a policy void by promoting instructional improvement as a solution to the perceived stagnation of the educational system.

A key factor in the successful adoption of the innovation agenda in Catalonia was EN21's strategic framing, which used transnational discourses and recommendations from the OECD and UNESCO. They positioned Catalonia as a forward-looking region capable of forging its unique educational reform in line with international trends, thus embedding the innovation discourse within a global movement toward instructional modernization rather than a purely regional initiative.

Beyond referencing international bodies, anchoring instructional improvement within the existing school autonomy framework was also crucial for the success of this discourse. Innovation was presented as a natural extension of the autonomy policy, portraying schools as potential innovation hubs empowered to adapt their pedagogical and organizational practices to better meet student and community needs. This alignment allowed the innovation agenda to be integrated into the existing policy framework without major legislative changes. However, much like the earlier focus on performance, instructional improvement was largely framed around the capacities of individual schools and their leaders rather than as part of a comprehensive, well-supported strategy from central or mid-level educational authorities.

The final key element of legitimation was the strategic use of positively connoted buzzwords such as ‘21st-century skills,’ ‘advanced schools,’ and ‘transformative education,’ contrasted with terms like ‘traditional’ or ‘outdated’ education. These terms created a compelling vision of progress and modernization that resonated widely across society. Such buzzwords generated broad approval and attracted a diverse coalition of supporters, including educators, parents, policymakers, and the media, minimizing early resistance. However, while these appealing terms and the emphasis on school-driven instructional improvement made the innovation discourse widely attractive, they also rendered it ambiguous and lacking in systematization.

While innovation gained significant attention, inclusion was comparatively sidelined. Following a government-led, multi-stakeholder process, a reform was enacted in 2017 to foster more inclusive school-level practices. Like innovation, it was rooted in the tenet of school autonomy, placing responsibility on schools to implement inclusive education strategies. However, this reform was accompanied by a designated budget. The timing of this initiative coincided with the peak of the independence movement, causing it to be largely overlooked. The subsequent years of political instability, marked by frequent elections and short-term governments, left the inclusion reform underfunded and plagued by implementation challenges. Although inclusion and innovation were introduced concurrently and promoted within the framework for improvement, they received contrasting levels of attention in the educational community, likely due to opposite media coverage.

After a period of minimal policy activity, a more stable government in 2021 enabled the passage of more substantive educational policies. The centerpiece of these efforts was the new curriculum, introduced in 2022, which built on the recent Spanish curriculum bill by further advancing a competence-based approach. The Catalan curriculum, however, takes this further by creating an improvement framework that strengthens the previously absent pedagogical aspect of school autonomy. It broadens principals' capacity to influence in school educational projects, strongly promotes innovative teaching methods, prioritizes enhancing student learning outcomes, and reinforces the curriculum's inclusive objectives. Alongside the new curriculum, the government

consolidated minor initiatives from previous years, such as innovation programs that schools can participate in and innovation certificates available to schools and individual teachers. Regarding accountability measures, the external evaluation system has remained unchanged since its inception, but a partial reform of the inspectorate in 2021 introduced roles to support and assess pedagogical innovation.

Since the early 2010s, improvement has arguably remained the central goal of educational reform, but its scope has expanded to include diverse narratives. Initially focused solely on performance, the concept of improvement has evolved to encompass innovation and inclusion, making it a more multi-faceted objective. However, the rationale and instruments to achieve these aims have largely remained unchanged, relying on school actors'—primarily principals'—ability to exercise the autonomy granted to them. Since the adoption of school autonomy, this policy has become the foundation upon which all improvement efforts are built. The challenge, however, lies in the fact that the autonomy policy has primarily focused on transferring organizational, economic, and pedagogical responsibilities to school principals without providing adequate support from educational authorities. As a result, improvement—regardless of its form—rests mainly on the shoulders of individual schools and their leadership teams.

### **6.1.2. Enacting Improvement: School Dynamics and Contextual Influences**

While policy implementation always allows for some discretion, the overlapping, threefold focus on improvement—i.e., academic performance, pedagogical innovation, and social inclusion—expands the possibilities for schools to engage with the mandate. Schools do not simply choose to comply with or resist a single focus, such as improving test results. Instead, the various emphases within the improvement mandate create flexibility and allow different practices to coexist as valid efforts toward improvement. Broadly, schools' improvement practices can be thus categorized into three orientations: performance-oriented, inclusion-oriented, and innovation-oriented. This variation in responses is shaped by how school actors interpret policy directives in relation to their preferences, the external pressures they face, and the socio-economic conditions in which they operate.

Schools that adopt a performance-oriented approach prioritize achieving high standardized test scores. They employ strategies like intensive teaching-to-the-test, narrowing the curriculum to core, externally assessed subjects, and outsourcing services to boost competencies in areas such as math and language. This focus on performance is closely linked to high levels of pressure experienced by both principals and teachers, who prioritize measurable outcomes. In contrast, inclusion-oriented schools emphasize equity, students' wellbeing and inclusive practices over

academic performance. These schools focus on creating an inclusive environment that goes beyond test scores, concentrating on extracurricular activities and social cohesion projects. Their aim is to provide a welcoming atmosphere for all students, prioritizing well-being and social integration. Yet, this approach is based on the belief that addressing students' socio-emotional needs and promoting a positive school climate will ultimately lead to improved educational outcomes. Meanwhile, schools that follow an innovation-oriented approach seek to develop a unique educational offer by adopting various projects, innovation programs or student-centered educational approaches. Change and innovation are viewed as indicators of quality education and as strategies to attract middle-class families. However, despite the emphasis on innovation, there is often a lack of systematic planning, with new practices being adopted without thorough evaluation.

Even when schools share similar contexts, such as a disadvantaged socio-economic composition, their internal cultures, leadership styles, and perceived demands from their communities and public authorities can lead to different approaches. Here, context is not just a backdrop; it is a causal force that interacts with the subjective interpretations and decisions of school actors, shaping how policies are enacted on the ground. For instance, schools that perceive themselves as cornered in a segregated educational market may adopt different strategies: some may resign to their status, while others may see an opportunity to attract more middle-class families by engaging in practices aimed at enhancing their reputation and appeal, such as innovative programs or extracurricular activities. This is not merely about the actual market position but also about how school leaders interpret it and decide which path to take within the margins of autonomy available to them.

Leadership style is thus another key factor that mediates policy pressures and how they are managed and internalized. Some headteachers internalize performance-based accountability demands and transmit this pressure to teachers, aligning the school's practices with standardized test results. Conversely, other leaders may feel less performance pressure or choose to resist it, prioritizing different educational goals that align with their philosophy or what they believe are their students' needs. Thus, the effectiveness of the 'chain of pressure' depends not only on the level of pressure exerted by the accountability system but also on how school leaders interpret and respond to these pressures.

Yet, some contextual elements are less open to interpretation. For example, high staff turnover disrupts continuity, forcing schools to repeatedly restart initiatives, which hinders the development of stable, context-specific strategies. Similarly, economic constraints limit the ability to adopt tailored improvement approaches, often pushing schools toward low-cost, standardized solutions. While school actors' willingness and skills can sometimes mitigate these



challenges, the reality of limited resources and unstable staffing often prevents schools from engaging in genuine improvement efforts.

As mentioned, the innovation and inclusion dimensions of improvement emerged later and received opposite levels of attention. In recent years, innovation has become the most emphasized element of the improvement mandate in Catalonia, positioning educational innovation as a key area to which schools must respond. Yet how this is understood and enacted varies across schools and actors. On the one hand, school actors define innovation in four main ways: *intensionally*, by identifying traits like student-centered and competence-based education; *extensionally*, by listing specific practices such as project-based learning or the use of digital tools; *negatively*, by contrasting it with traditional education; and *functionally*, by associating it with outcomes like improved student performance. On the other hand, the practices schools enact are diverse, ranging from integrating public programs offered by educational authorities to adopting private curricular packages and digital platforms.

However, innovation is often treated more as an end in itself rather than as a means to improve learning. The reported innovative practices are varied and include externally driven initiatives, such as public programs and private curricular packages, as well as internally driven efforts like school-specific projects and pedagogical shifts. Most innovative practices are externally driven and fragmented rather than integrated into a coherent, school-wide strategy. Yet, engagement with innovation is inconsistent across contexts, as schools approach innovation differently depending on their socioeconomic composition. For instance, lower-SES schools often rely on packaged curricula to improve basic skills. These packages are frequently marketed by private providers as innovative solutions but may not be fully aligned with the schools' broader educational goals or capacities. In contrast, higher-SES schools tend to adopt more elaborate project-based and cross-curricular approaches that cover subjects beyond core competencies. These schools benefit from greater financial capacity, often supported by family contributions, which allows them to fund tailored training and innovative materials. They also tend to have more stable teaching staff who can sustain long-term innovation projects. Unfortunately, the innovation mandate may inadvertently deepen inequalities among schools due to the lack of support and systematization. Without adequate backing, schools in disadvantaged contexts may continue to rely on off-the-shelf solutions that do not fully address their specific needs.

Schools are navigating a policy landscape with overlapping and sometimes conflicting demands for improving performance, inclusion, and innovation. The broad scope of these mandates allows for diverse interpretations and responses beyond mere alignment or decoupling, reflecting the varying contexts, resources, and priorities of schools. While this diversity can be a strength, enabling schools to tailor their practices to specific needs, it also highlights the challenges of ensuring equity and coherence across the educational system. The current policy landscape in

Catalonia emphasizes school autonomy to drive improvement and accountability measures to monitor it. However, the findings of this dissertation suggest that without adequate support and a more nuanced understanding of school contexts, these policies risk perpetuating inequalities rather than fostering genuine improvement.

## **6.2. Contributions to the literature**

This section outlines the contributions of the dissertation to the literature on educational reform and policy implementation. By examining the case of Catalonia, the research offers new insights into how educational reforms are shaped, negotiated, and enacted. It extends current theoretical frameworks by integrating temporal perspectives on policy evolution, highlighting the dynamic interplay between policy actors and structural conditions, and addressing the practical challenges of implementing soft policies and improvement mandates across schools.

### **6.2.1. Contributions to the Study of Educational Reform**

Educational reform has long been a central topic for education policy scholars. Initially framed through technical-rational analyses of reform processes, the study of educational reform has evolved to include political, sociocultural, and discursive dimensions, leading to a more nuanced analysis. The studies in this dissertation contribute to this strand of literature by delving into these elements and incorporating a temporal dimension. The Catalan case, as a decentralized and autonomous region, illustrates how historical and cultural legacies, political negotiations, civil society involvement, and global influences intersect to shape education reform. By examining the interactions among these factors, this research deepens the understanding of reform processes, particularly regarding the conceptualization of improvement, the strategic use of buzzwords in policy discourse, and the interplay between actors and structural factors in driving reforms.

First, like other key terms in educational policy discourse, improvement is often invoked to signal desirable goals without clear guidance on achieving them. In Catalonia, the concept of improvement has evolved, acquiring multiple meanings that have shifted according to policy agendas and political contexts. During the initial phase of the LEC, improvement was mainly conceptualized as enhancing test results and was framed as the outcome of leadership and managerial school autonomy measures. In contrast, the recent emphasis on innovation as a form of improvement reflects a policy shift toward enhancing instructional practices and institutionalizing pedagogical autonomy in schools. This versatility makes improvement a particularly valuable term in policy discussions, as it can be adapted to fit within diverse political and educational agendas, allowing policymakers to advocate for change without committing to

specific actions. This aligns with research on the strategic use of buzzwords in policy processes, which are often employed to build consensus and drive reforms without addressing underlying policy tensions or contradictions (Loughlin, 2002). The findings on the malleability and usefulness of improvement resonate with studies on other educational policy concepts, such as Stenersen & Prøitz's (2022) research, which concludes that

certain concepts that may function well in overall policy communication can be difficult to define and to operationalize for teachers and school leaders in education practice settings. Yet, a buzzword is short, catchy, and easy to remember. Hence, it might still have performed as an effective communicator and mobilizer for education change (p.204)

Similarly, while innovation is often portrayed as a transformative force, it tends to remain loosely defined. This creates potential risks associated with broad, aspirational language in policy documents. Despite its capacity to unite diverse perspectives and actors and effectively facilitate the advancement of policies, such language can lead to ambiguity and inconsistent application within schools (Maguire et al., 2013).

Second, adopting an evolutionary perspective on how the concept of improvement has changed over time offers deeper insights into policy discourse. This approach helps identify how policy ideas and concepts—here in particular improvement—evolve and are not simply replaced but instead layered upon one another, allowing old meanings to persist while new ones emerge. Such layering can create a complex policy landscape where multiple, sometimes conflicting ideas of improvement coexist. This cumulative process of educational reform involves both continuity and change. Extending the timeframe in policy studies beyond a snapshot view provides a more nuanced understanding of how policies come to be. Recent research in education policy increasingly explores the temporal dimensions of reform (e.g., Edwards et al., 2024; Maroy & Pons, 2021; Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024). This dissertation builds on this work by unpacking the evolutionary nature of policy concepts and showing how educational policies can appear stable while undergoing constant reconfiguration and adaptation to emerging challenges and agendas.

Third, the research sheds light on the interplay between policy actors' agency and structural factors in driving educational reforms. It emphasizes the significant role of different actors operating at different scales, particularly non-state actors, in setting the reform agenda and shaping policy change while also considering the structural elements that enable or constrain these efforts. This dual focus aligns with policy studies that seek to understand policy change without overemphasizing either the agency of policy actors or the weight of structural, material factors in how reforms emerge and evolve (e.g., Heinmiller & Hennigar, 2022; Malandrino, 2023; Verger et al., 2016; Winkel & Leipold, 2016). In the decentralized context of Catalonia, educational reforms are not merely top-down adoptions of central government directives; they emerge from a complex bricolage of local, regional, national, and international ideas, shaped by various

structural elements such as regulatory frameworks affecting both school provision and the public administration of the educational sector, a political context highly polarized around issues of educational governance and reform priorities, and uneven resource availability. The way non-state actors in Catalonia have constructed policy discourses that effectively package and legitimize their reform proposals around the theme of educational improvement is a relevant example in this regard. These actors have navigated a challenging political landscape, capitalizing on opportunities created by shifts in government, economic crises, and the broader socio-political context of the independence process to advance their agendas. This underscores the importance of discourse, coalition-building, and strategic action in the construction and negotiation of educational reforms while also highlighting structural factors such as timing and the region's political autonomy.

### **6.2.2. Contributions to the Study of Educational Policy Implementation**

Combining the institutional approach to inner-school dynamics with an analysis of school contexts as key elements in filtering processes offers a deeper understanding of the range of school responses when implementing policy. By considering both structural factors and agency-related elements, this approach moves beyond binary perspectives that frame policy responses merely as resistance or compliance. Instead, it reveals a spectrum of responses shaped by the interplay between institutional conditions and the subjective sense-making processes of school actors. The school-level analysis strand of this dissertation sheds light into how schools develop unique responses to improvement mandates, reflecting their organizational logics, interactions with their environments, and the perceptions of the individuals within them.

The implementation of soft policies is particularly challenging. As other scholars have demonstrated, the broad and non-prescriptive nature of such policies allows for extensive interpretative work by school actors and amplifies the role of contextual characteristics (Maguire et al., 2013; Chan, 2012). Thus, this study examines how school actors define core concepts within soft policies, such as innovation, and the key terms that emerge in these definitions. Analyzing these definitions deepens the understanding of policy implementation processes and the reasons behind observed patterns. The findings indicate that the broader and more ambiguous the policy mandate, the more school actors apply their own criteria to define and implement it. As the literature has shown, attempts to steer behavior through loosely defined policy objectives—hoping schools will interpret them uniformly—often result in diverse and unintended enactments (e.g., Russell & Bray, 2013; Spillane, 2004). This dissertation deepens this understanding by demonstrating that when education policies have an imprecise theory of change and unclear

incentive chains, the diversity of enactments multiplies, often leading to divergent interpretations and even rejection of implementation.

Building on this, system-wide educational reforms, particularly those targeting instructional improvement, such as the innovation mandate in Catalonia, face significant challenges. The findings suggest that a system-wide approach to promoting innovation may not be the most effective way to achieve equitable instructional improvement across schools. The disparity in school capacities—which the autonomy framework does not resolve but may arguably exacerbate—coupled with a lack of comprehensive teacher training to develop the necessary skills for the intended changes, makes implementation highly context-dependent and reliant on the willingness of school actors and capacities to navigate their structural conditions. These observations align with research on large-scale programs that rely on school autonomy and decentralization. As Parra (2022) notes, "we cannot isolate the analysis of JU [the policy evaluated, *Jornada Única*] from recent decentralisation reforms in the country, which have contributed to shaping the challenging institutional background in which the program currently operates" (p.10). This supports Cohen and Mehta's (2017) argument that successful system-wide reforms tend to require minimal deep changes in practice and extensive capacity-building, allowing for rapid and widespread scaling within existing educational structures and cultures. In this case, however, the opposite is true: the reforms require substantial changes in practice with minimal capacity-building. Consequently, system-wide mandates with these features may lead to coping responses characterized by superficiality—such as adopting standardized curricular packages and technology solutions, applying for public programs, or formally participating in school networks—rather than fostering genuine, context-specific instructional change across schools.

The interaction of different features within the policy landscape—such as autonomy, accountability, and the market-oriented design of the system—further complicates advancing educational improvement. Despite different conceptualizations of improvement, the longstanding emphasis on performance—reinforced by standardized tests and inspectorate oversight—creates a 'background pressure' that is consistently felt across schools. This pressure often drives schools, even those that prioritize inclusion or innovation over test results, toward undesired practices like teaching to the test. This aligns with studies showing that a common tension within schools, particularly for headteachers, is the short-term focus on improving results versus mid- and long-term instructional improvement (e.g., Cobb et al., 2018). Similarly, the structure of the educational market adds another layer of 'background pressure.' For example, consistent with previous literature on the topic (e.g., Lubienski, 2003; Jabbar, 2015), in urban areas where schools face greater market pressures, both well-positioned schools and disadvantaged schools seeking to change their composition tend to adopt innovative approaches to attract middle-class parents.

These findings suggest that examining the effects of different policies and how they interact helps to better unpack implementation processes and their outcomes. For instance, schools combining superficial changes branded as innovation with intensive teaching to the test might appear contradictory but can be better explained by the overlapping background pressures and the actions of school staff in response to them.

Lastly, improvement has long been a core concept in education, traditionally understood as a unidimensional focus on results (Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001; Wrigley, 2013). In this regard, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how improvement is perceived and operationalized at the school level. Rather than being a uniform concept, improvement is viewed through various lenses depending on the school's context, the perceived demands of external pressures, and school actors' preferences. This perspective offers insights into how improvement is enacted differently across schools, leading to a more refined understanding of how broad or ambiguous policy concepts translate into concrete actions and decisions within diverse school settings.

### **6.3. Policy Implications**

School autonomy and accountability are often presented as complementary forces capable of driving school-level improvement. However, the success of these policies largely depends on the specific conditions under which they are implemented and the support structures available to schools. Without the presence of these preconditions and an understanding of the contextual variables that influence policy implementation, autonomy and accountability can inadvertently exacerbate educational inequities rather than reduce them. This section outlines the policy implications of autonomy and accountability based on the findings of this dissertation and examines their potential to foster meaningful and equitable improvements across diverse educational settings.

A central issue with current policy frameworks is the assumption that all schools will respond uniformly to granting autonomy. This expectation fails to consider the varied socio-economic contexts, organizational cultures, and professional capacities that influence each school's ability to leverage autonomy for educational improvement. The findings of this study reveal that in settings where schools face higher concentrations of disadvantaged students, autonomy can worsen inequities. Schools in disadvantaged contexts often lack the resources to develop context-specific educational projects, leading them to adopt generic solutions that may not align with their needs. This challenges the premise that granting autonomy will almost-straightforwardly result in tailored educational strategies that meet the local needs of students and communities.

Similarly, while autonomy theoretically allows schools to improve according to local needs, it can also lead to inconsistent quality standards across schools. This inconsistency poses a significant challenge to achieving equity in public education. To address these potential pitfalls, targeted, context-sensitive support policies are needed to complement the autonomy framework. Such policies should provide schools—especially those in socioeconomically challenged areas—with the resources necessary for genuine and sustainable improvement. This support should include targeted funding, on-demand professional development tailored to specific school contexts, and access to pedagogical resources aligned with local needs. In this way, schools would be better equipped to develop and implement educational practices that are both of higher quality and responsive to their communities.

Autonomy is often presented as a definitive solution to trigger school improvement. However, the evidence here shows that when autonomy is under-theorized and poorly operationalized in policy documents, as seen in Catalonia, its theory of change becomes opaque, and its capacity to drive improvement remains unclear. Instead of functioning as an effective tool, school autonomy can shift responsibilities from educational authorities to individual schools. As a result, autonomy becomes a double-edged sword: while it offers schools the freedom to innovate and address their specific needs, it also places the burden of navigating challenges on their shoulders. Despite being framed as a tool for empowerment, autonomy can exacerbate inequality by assuming all schools have the same capacity to improve.

The accountability framework also presents its own set of challenges. In Catalonia, although designed to monitor and incentivize school improvement, it often results in unintended consequences that compromise the quality of education. School-level actors experience high levels of accountability pressure, which often leads them to narrow their focus to improving measurable outcomes like standardized test scores. This focus promotes practices such as teaching to the test and an overemphasis on tested subjects, often sidelining non-core subjects and soft skills. In the Catalan education system, despite designed as low-stakes and aimed at fostering reflection, the current accountability mechanisms do not adequately facilitate formative feedback or professional growth, reducing external assessments to bureaucratic burdens rather than actionable tools for improvement.

These shortcomings are further complicated by the lack of incentives within the system to encourage context-specific improvements. Professional motivation remains the primary driver for improvement efforts, as the policy framework does not offer substantial rewards or recognition for such initiatives. Paradoxically, the low-stakes system generates significant pressure without sanctions but also without incentives, resulting in an unproductive environment where schools focus on meeting annual testing requirements without fostering meaningful reflection or improvement. Although school improvement is presented as a core policy goal, without incentives

or rewards, it is left largely to the self-driven motivations of school-level actors, which often conflicts with the pressures of the accountability system.

Reducing the bureaucratic burden on school leaders is also essential. The decentralization of administrative tasks to schools has increased the workload of management teams, limiting their capacity to focus on pedagogical leadership. Simplifying administrative processes would allow school leaders to concentrate more on school improvement. Additionally, unstable staffing disrupts the development and sustainability of effective school projects; therefore, policies that promote teacher retention and continuity are necessary to sustain school improvement efforts.

Rethinking accountability measures is particularly important to ensure that external evaluations serve a formative, reflective purpose for schools. The case of Catalonia provides valuable insights for designing effective low-stakes accountability policies. It is crucial to distinguish between evaluations aimed at diagnosing system-wide issues and those designed to provide formative feedback to individual schools. Implementing a more targeted, sample-based approach for system-level assessments could reduce the high-pressure environment created by standardized tests and minimize negative effects, such as mechanical test preparation. Furthermore, offering schools detailed, actionable feedback based on diagnostic test results and qualitative assessments, aligned with curricular content and competencies, would enhance the relevance of external evaluations and make them more effective tools for fostering school improvement.

If educational improvement is to remain a core policy goal, it requires a systemic and integrated approach that acknowledges the complex interplay between autonomy and accountability tools and their highly contextual dependence, as well as the importance of clarity and guidance for core policy concepts. Policies must be designed and implemented with clear guidelines to ensure all schools, regardless of their socio-economic conditions, are equipped with the necessary resources, guidance, and support to improve. Only by aligning these policy elements coherently can we expect autonomy and accountability to work in tandem to drive meaningful and equitable improvements in education.

The recent political turbulence following Catalonia's underperformance in PISA 2022 highlights another shift in improvement aims. The focus has swung back to academic performance, with both the previous and current administrations announcing intensive programs targeting language and mathematics to reverse declining results. This pendulum-like dynamic, moving from a focus on results in the early 2010s, to innovation and inclusion later in the decade, and now back to performance, creates a complex layering of policies. This sends mixed messages to schools and generates uncertainty about priorities. To address this, more consistent and coherent policy frameworks that last in time are needed to support school improvement effectively.



## 6.4. Future Research Directions

This section outlines several lines of inquiry touched upon in the study but not fully explored, thus pointing to key areas for further research. The dissertation delves into the complex layers of educational reform across various governance levels and the roles of key actors in policy adoption and implementation, showing how regional and local actors shape policy narratives. However, further investigation is required to better understand issues like the influence of nationalism on federal reforms, the role of mid-range administrative units, and the micropolitics within schools. By identifying these gaps, this section lays the groundwork for future research to more thoroughly unpacking educational policy and practice.

The study examines the interactions between national and regional levels in educational reform, shedding light into how regional actors construct narratives by selectively drawing from regional, national, and international sources. This narrative-building process points to the intricate processes of policy adoption in decentralized contexts, where educational reforms are shaped by a diverse range of actors and ideologies. However, there remains a need for a deeper understanding of how nationalism and identity-related elements influence educational reforms in federal contexts. Regions such as Catalonia, Basque Country, Quebec, Scotland, and Flanders offer particularly rich cases for unpacking these dynamics due to their distinct self-government aspirations and how these intersect with their political autonomy. These regions present opportunities to study how educational reforms can both reflect and reinforce regional identity politics. This represents a relevant strand of research focusing on how educational policies are crafted and contested within these federal contexts, potentially contributing to a more nuanced understanding of reforms in politically and culturally diverse countries.

Competence-based curriculum and non-traditional teaching methods have emerged as core elements in contemporary educational reform, arguably as a quasi-consensus in the field of education. These approaches are generally perceived as essential for fostering the skills required in the 21st century, emphasizing student-centered and active learning practices. However, the findings suggest there is also an emerging anti-innovation coalition that challenges this apparent consensus, pointing to new conflicts and tensions in the policy landscape. Future research must delve into how this new source of conflict is politically managed and the implications it might have for future policy developments. The management of this conflict could determine potential long-term effects on the teaching profession and the overall trajectory of educational policy. This will require a closer examination of the discursive strategies, political maneuvers, and coalitions that emerge in response to these debates and their impact on educational reform processes.

Detailed insights into school-level implementation show how autonomy and accountability frameworks place significant emphasis on individual schools. However, there is also a need to

consider the role of mid-range administrative units, such as provincial or municipal education authorities, which may actively participate in the implementation of these policies and more broadly they have a role in the educational system functioning. More research is needed to understand how these mid-range units influence implementation processes and their potential to either mitigate or exacerbate pressures on schools. While current studies, particularly those focused on the US context, provide some understanding, a relevant gap remains regarding how these units operate in other contexts and with what effects. Investigating the interplay between mid-range administrative units and schools could offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of education policy implementation.

In addition to mid-range administrative units, other key actors are involved in policy implementation processes. In this dissertation, the focus has been primarily on the role of individual teachers and principals, but there is also a need to explore the influence of other significant actors, such as unions and teacher associations, in shaping these processes. The findings evidenced an anti-innovation coalition composed of teachers resisting the innovation agenda, which points to the importance of understanding these collective dynamics. Yet, the current study does not properly address this because it treats teachers and principals as individuals, without accounting for their political or union affiliations, which may be critical in understanding their positions and actions. Further research should explore how actors like unions and teacher associations negotiate, resist, or support policy changes, and how they influence the broader implementation process. This line of inquiry is essential to better understand the collective dynamics that shape educational practices and policies at the school level.

The findings unpack how the concept of improvement can be interpreted in varied ways at the school level. However, due to the sample characteristics and the over-representation of disadvantaged schools, it was not possible to identify clear patterns in these interpretations. It is likely that the ways in which schools conceptualize and enact improvement are not evenly distributed but rather stratified along socioeconomic status across schools. A working hypothesis could be that inclusion-oriented improvement is more prevalent in disadvantaged schools, where addressing educational inequities is a priority, while innovation-oriented improvement is more emphasized in schools with higher socioeconomic compositions that have the resources and parental backing to experiment with new practices. More research is needed to explore this possible stratification and to identify other potential orientations of improvement.

Much of the research in the educational field has focused on the micropolitics of educational reform implementation, examining how power dynamics, conflicts, and alliances within schools influence policy outcomes. Yet, the focus here is not explicitly on micropolitics, as is an analysis of the 'top-down' perspective through the interpretation and enactment processes. But the identified resistance among teachers to the innovation agenda raises the need for more focused

research into micropolitical processes within schools. When normative ideas such as that of innovation encounter established pedagogical beliefs, conflicts may arise, potentially leading to the formation of factions that align with or resist new policies. Future research should explore these internal school dynamics more deeply to understand how these micropolitical tensions shape the implementation process and to provide a clearer picture of how educational reforms are actually enacted on the ground.

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