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**Anti-Standardization and Testing Opt-Out Movements in Education:
Resistance, Disputes and Transformation**

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**Why Do Opt-Out Movements Succeed (or Fail) in Low-
Stakes Accountability Systems? A Case Study of the Network
of Dissident Schools in Catalonia¹**

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Abstract: External and standardized assessments based on student results are a contested education policy among school actors. Movements of opposition have emerged in different countries, especially in those contexts with high-stakes accountability systems. However, this phenomenon has not been analyzed in soft accountability systems. The objective of this article is to study the opt-out movement in Catalonia, understood as an anti-standardization movement in a system of soft accountability. In order to do so, we adopt the case study approach as a methodological strategy, based on the triangulation of semi-structured interviews with activists ($n = 14$), key stakeholders ($n = 3$), and document and press analysis ($n = 25$). The results shed light on the emergence and nature of the movement, its opportunity structures, the discursive frames and the repertoires of collective action. Our results show how accountability instruments have a 'life of their own' beyond their policy design. In this sense, the opt-out movement in Catalonia identifies potential risks and adverse effects similar to those reported in high-stakes systems, developing a repertoire of collective action and discursive frames similar to other emerging anti-standardization movements in high-stakes contexts.

Keywords: opt-out movement; low-stakes accountability; standardized tests; social movements; education policy

¿Por qué tienen éxito (o fracasan) los movimientos opt-out en sistemas de rendición de cuentas con bajas consecuencias? Un estudio de caso de la Red de Escuelas Insumisas en Cataluña

Resumen: La evaluación externa de las escuelas basada en los resultados de los estudiantes es una política controvertida entre la comunidad educativa. En diferentes países han surgido movimientos de oposición a las pruebas estandarizadas, especialmente en aquellos contextos con sistemas de *high-stakes accountability*. Sin embargo, este fenómeno no se ha estudiado en sistemas de *soft accountability*. Este artículo analiza las razones que explican la emergencia y el éxito (o no) del movimiento de "escuelas insumisas" en Cataluña, entendido como un movimiento anti-estandarización en un sistema de *soft accountability*. Para ello, adoptamos el estudio de caso como estrategia metodológica, a partir de la triangulación de entrevistas semiestructuradas con activistas ($n=14$), actores clave ($n=3$), y análisis de prensa y documentos ($n = 25$). Los resultados arrojan luz sobre la emergencia y naturaleza del movimiento, su estructura de oportunidades, los marcos discursivos y los repertorios de acción colectiva. Nuestros resultados muestran cómo los instrumentos de rendición de cuentas adquieren 'vida propia' más allá de su diseño. De este modo, el movimiento de escuelas insumisas en Cataluña identifica riesgos y efectos adversos similares a los identificados en sistemas *high-stakes*, desplegando un repertorio de acción colectiva y marcos discursivos parecidos a otros movimientos anti-estandarización emergentes.

Palabras clave: movimiento opt-out; rendición de cuentas de bajo riesgo; pruebas estandarizadas; movimientos sociales; política educativa

Por que os movimentos opt-out em sistemas de responsabilização de baixa consequência são bem-sucedidos (ou fracassam)? Um estudo de caso da Rede de Escolas Desobedientes na Catalunha

Resumo: Avaliações externas e padronizadas com base nos resultados dos alunos são uma política educacional contestada entre os atores da escola. Movimentos de oposição surgiram em diferentes países, especialmente em contextos com sistemas de *high-stakes accountability*. No entanto, esse fenômeno não foi analisado em sistemas de responsabilização *soft*. Este artigo analisa as razões que explicam o surgimento e o sucesso (ou não) movimento *opt-out* na Catalunha, entendido como um movimento anti-padronização em um sistema de *soft accountability*. Para tanto, adotamos a abordagem do estudo de caso como estratégia metodológica, a partir da triangulação de entrevistas

semiestruturadas com ativistas ($n = 14$), principais stakeholders ($n = 3$) e análise documental e de imprensa ($n = 25$). Os resultados lançam luz sobre a emergência e a natureza do movimento, sua estrutura de oportunidades, as estruturas discursivas e os repertórios de ação coletiva. Nossos resultados mostram como os instrumentos de responsabilidade têm uma 'vida própria' além de sua concepção de política. Nesse sentido, o movimento de *opt out* na Catalunha identifica potenciais riscos e efeitos adversos semelhantes aos relatados em sistemas de alto risco, desenvolvendo um repertório de ação coletiva e estruturas discursivas semelhantes a outros movimentos anti-padronização emergentes em contextos *high-stakes*.

Palavras-chave: movimento de opt-out; prestação de contas de baixo risco; testes padronizados; movimentos sociais; política educacional

Why Do Opt-Out Movements Succeed (or Fail) in Low-Stakes Accountability Systems? A Case Study of the Network of Dissident Schools in Catalonia

In recent decades, the diffusion of standardized assessment tests and accountability systems (AS) on a global scale has intensified (Ball et al., 2017; Holloway et al., 2017). However, in some countries the adoption of these instruments has triggered resistance from the educational community. Among other initiatives, the use and intensification of standardized assessment tests has facilitated the emergence of new social movements led primarily by families, such as the so-called *opt-out movement* in the United States² (Lingard & Hursh, 2019; Wang, 2017) and the *Let Our Kids be Kids* campaign in England (Sibley-White, 2019). In Chile, the anti-standardization movement was organized by academic-activists that fostered the *Alto al SIMCE* campaign (Campos-Martínez & Guerrero, 2016; Montero et al., 2018; Pino et al., 2016). This article aims to examine the factors that have favoured and/or hindered the emergence, consolidation and success (or failure) of the opt-out movement in a context of low-stakes accountability.

In contrast to the above-mentioned countries, which have a long history in the use of standardized tests associated with high-stakes AS (Falabella & Ramos Zincke, 2019; Santori, 2020), Spain, and in Catalonia in particular, is characterized by a shorter and erratic history and by low-stakes AS. The recent adoption of these external mechanisms of accountability in Catalonia is linked to a more far-reaching global reform with respect to governance of the education system, inspired by New Public Management (NPM) (Verger et al., 2015). This reform includes assessment of student results through a standardized test that is applied annually to all primary and secondary schools. In this context, during the 2014-2015 school year, the Network of Dissident Schools (XEI, after its initials in Catalan), which managed to organize boycotts in more than 80 schools and the support of over 1700 families (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2020). Contrary to the growing research on resistance movements against standardized tests in countries with high-stakes AS (Campos-Martínez & Guerrero, 2016; Currin et al., 2019; Johnson & Slekar, 2014; Supovitz et al., 2016), those that emerge in countries like Spain with *soft* accountability systems have not been explored very much.

² Based on a 47-state survey of 1,641 respondents, Pizmony-Levy and Green-Saraisky (2016) note that, in the US, the typical social profile of opt-out activists is white, married, highly educated, “politically liberal, whose children attend public school and whose median household income is well above the national average.” In the US, people who participate in the opt-out movement protest against high-stakes accountability systems but also as a sign of rejection of their undesired effects on teaching and curriculum as well as to protest against the increasing privatization and commercialization of education (p. 6). Beyond the boycott, participants are also characterized for their activism on and through social media and for engaging in persuasion and lobbying campaigns (Pizmony-Levy & Green-Saraisky, 2016).

Thus, Rogero-García et al. (2014) studied Marea Verde (Green Tide), the social movement against cuts in education that emerged in the early 2010s, present especially in the Community of Madrid. In a similar vein, Saura et al. (2017) analyzed their network communication strategies to oppose the commodification, privatization and standardization of education. In Catalonia, some research explored the motivations of families to participate in the boycott of tests following a Foucauldian approach (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2020). Unlike previous research, this study seeks to shed light on the phenomenon from the perspective of political process theory (Della Porta & Diani, 2011; McAdam et al., 2003), which integrates different perspectives that enable us to understand the political economy of social movements, exploring the dialectical relationship between structural factors and internal elements of social movement organizations. To do this, we explore three key dimensions of analysis: the contextual factors (Hay, 2002) that facilitated the emergence and consolidation of the XEI in Catalonia; their rationalities and discursive frames (Benford & Snow, 2000); and the collective action repertoires and their different impacts (Tarrow, 1993). Methodologically, this research follows the case study approach (Yin, 2009) to study the XEI in Catalonia. Specifically, we combine semi-structured interviews with activists ($n=14$) and stakeholders ($n=3$), with an analysis of press reports ($n = 14$) and documents produced by the social movement itself ($n = 11$).

The article is structured as follows: first, we present the theoretical framework, which is based on political process theory; then we describe the context of austerity and managerial reforms that facilitated the emergence of the XEI to combat the standardization and commodification of education; after that we describe the study's methodology, based on a qualitative case study; and finally, we present the main results of the research and our conclusions.

Social Movements and Collective Action in the Field of Education: A Political Process Approach

This research draws on social movements theory and, more specifically, the political process approach. This approach captures some of the main contributions of authors such as Tarrow (1998), McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1999) and Della Porta and Diani (2011) and analyzes the internal and external dimensions of social movements, including: a) the context; b) communicative strategies and discursive frames; c) the collective action repertoires of social movements.

First, the context in which social movements operate is decisive, not only in their ability to influence and to introduce new issues on the political agenda, but it can also condition their alliances, discourse and actions (Hay, 2002; Verger, 2009; Verger & Novelli, 2012). Context includes elements such as the existing hierarchies between the different social actors, the dominant values and the political opportunity structures (Ibarra, 2005; Neveu, 2006; Tarrow, 2012; Verger, 2008). The political opportunity structures (POS) enable us to capture those political factors and conditions that characterize the environment in which social movements operate and that help facilitate and/or hinder social mobilization, citizen participation in collective action and the impact on public policies (Ibarra et al., 2002). The POS make it possible to distinguish between relational factors (the model of relationships woven between social movements and governments and/or other actors and lobbies), systemic (for example, the degree of openness of the political system), and temporal (the historical context in which collective action develops; Kitschelt, 1986; Verger & Novelli, 2012).

Second, collective action also alludes to a symbolic dimension, which is key to understanding its mobilizing power. Interpretative frames (McAdam et al., 1999) are crucial since they act as mediators between the structural and organizational factors of collective action. The frames refer to “shared meanings and the concepts through which people tend to define their situation” (Ibarra et al., 2002, p. 43) and enable citizens to “understand and speak meaningfully about what is happening

in the world” (Tejerina, 1998, p. 135). The design of the frames is crucial to guarantee their social resonance, which is defined by their “credibility and prominence” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 619). As a consequence, for a frame to be successful it needs to be credible “both in content and in sources” and, therefore, the actors in charge of its social dissemination need to present a “solid public image” (Della Porta & Diani, 2011, p. 114). Broadly speaking, research on social movements tends to distinguish between three types of collective action frames: diagnostic, motivational and prognostic (Snow & Benford, 1988). Diagnostic frames contain information that allow you to easily identify the problem you are trying to solve and its causes. Motivational frames try to encourage the participation of the population in the campaigns, social mobilizations and actions developed by the social movement. For this, it is necessary to address the citizens (or the social group that is to be mobilized), clearly identifying the subjects that will lead the social change), while providing an optimistic message and reasons that show the viability of achieving the change in public policy (Benford & Snow, 2000). Finally, prognostic frames aim to identify possible solutions and/or alternatives, as well as how to achieve them (Verger, 2009). Basically, prognostic frames involve the generation of “hypotheses about new social patterns, new ways of regulating relationships between groups and new forms of consensus and the exercise of power” (Della Porta & Diani, 2011, p. 108).

Third, the actions of social movements serve to communicate their demands, weave relationships of solidarity, and generate a collective identity among their members (Tilly, 1986, 2008). Further, through the deployment of their repertoires of collective action, social movements attempt to strengthen a positive perception regarding the possibilities of change and create uncertainty in the political system to introduce their issues onto the political agenda and promote the production of substantive changes in public policy (Ibarra et al., 2002). The repertoires of collective action that social movements can deploy include a range of actions, such as direct actions, awareness-raising and political pressure, among others (Verger, 2009). Traditionally, direct actions tend to take place in the public arena and seek to make the conflict visible and communicate the demands of the social movement to public opinion. Within this typology of actions, we can distinguish between those considered conventional, disruptive and innovative. In addition, social movements can develop political pressure tactics of various kinds, for example through legal mechanisms or transferring their demands directly to the political representatives of the government. The effectiveness of pressure actions will depend on the level of social support the movement has, as well as on the power of its arguments and the adequacy in juridical-legal terms of its demands. Finally, awareness-raising actions are based on the dissemination of information generated by the movement, in which its particular worldview is made public, as well as the problems that lie at the root of the socio-political conflict and its causes. This typology of actions includes various activities, such as the preparation of press releases, the promotion of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, etc.), the organization of roundtables, talks and debates, and so forth. Generally, social movements choose one or another repertoire of action based on the problem they face, the political-ideological orientation of the movement, the resources available, and the context. However, it is important to note that these repertoires are complementary, such that social movements often combine various types of actions to achieve their goals (Verger, 2009; Verger & Novelli, 2012).

This conceptual and analytical model is used to investigate the Network of Dissident Schools against standardized tests in Catalonia, which emerged in a context of neoconservative, market-based reforms that we describe below.

Conservative Modernization and Educational Standardization in the Spanish Education System

The outbreak of the global economic crisis in 2007 had notable consequences on the member states of the European Union (EU), especially on Southern-European countries such as Greece, Portugal, Italy and Spain. Catalonia is one of the European regions that has suffered the greatest impact of austerity policies in education. These measures have been selective in nature, affecting the public sector disproportionately and equity policies in particular (Bonal & Verger, 2017; Bonal & Verger, 2013; Bonal & Zancajo, 2016; Martínez-Celorrío, 2015).

Subsequently, at the state level, the Spanish government combined the implementation of austerity policies with the education reform of the LOMCE (Organic Law, 8/2013, of December 9, for the Improvement of Educational Quality). This reform promoted the consolidation of an educational model based on what Apple (2001) called “conservative modernization”. The LOMCE introduced elements of educational re-centralization and attacks on Catalan linguistic immersion (Barbeta & Termes, 2014), strongly inspired by the neoliberal and neoconservative think tank FAES, linked to the main conservative party in Spain (Olmedo & Grau, 2013; Saura, 2015). However, this reform was widely challenged by various sectors, becoming particularly unpopular among the educational community and Catalan public opinion (Verger & Pagès, 2018; Saura et al., 2017). In this sense, the government of Catalonia and part of civil society perceived the LOMCE as a recentralization policy (Saura & Luengo, 2015) that posed a threat to the model of language immersion in Catalan in the context of the rise of the pro-independence movement³.

In response to the imposition of this reform, and with the impetus of the 15M⁴ mobilizations, in 2011 the Green Tide (*Marea Verde*) for Public Education in Madrid and the Yellow Tide (*Marea Amarilla*) in Catalonia emerged with the same objectives. This social movement led to a new cycle of mobilization in defense of public education and against the privatization of education, inspiring and facilitating the emergence of new social actors in the field of education. From the substrate of this movement, among others, there emerged in Catalonia the dissident movement against external standardized tests. However, it is important to note that in Catalonia the adoption of external accountability mechanisms is linked to a more far-reaching global reform of governance of the education system. In 2009, the Catalan Law of Education (LEC), which revolves around greater autonomy of schools, an empowerment and professionalization of school principals and defining mechanisms of external evaluation. These elements represent the three pillars of the Catalan law of education and constitute the bases of a reform inspired by the New Public Management (Verger et al., 2015). Since 2009, and under the framework of the LEC, an external evaluation of student results has been implemented that is applied annually to all primary and secondary schools. This standardized evaluation, which is census-based and applied in the sixth (final, 12 years old) grade of primary school (although initially it was also applied to the third (9 years

³ A key aspect for understanding the opposition of the educational community and a significant part of Catalan civil society to the LOMCE Education Reform Act (ERA) refers to the aspects linked to the distribution of decision-making power between the Autonomous regions and the Central Government. Historically, this has been a crucial element of political tension in educational debates in Spain (Engel, 2008). In this context, the LOMCE ERA was interpreted as a recentralizing initiative that also called into question the linguistic immersion model in Catalan, prevalent since the 1980s and which enjoyed a broad political and social consensus in Catalonia. Thus, opposition to the LOMCE ERA in Catalonia was widespread, as it synthesized a broad spectrum of social sectors with demands and criticisms of a political nature, cultural and linguistic elements and educational issues.

⁴ An anti-austerity movement, the first event of which was on May 15, 2011.

old) grade of primary school) and the third grade of secondary school (15 years old), measures students' basic skills and has been inspired by international assessment frameworks and instruments such as PISA (Verger & Pagès, 2018). Formally, it has no direct consequences for the students, teachers and schools, and in political documents it is described as “a formative assessment to improve performance and development of school autonomy”, in spite of having become “an instrument to measure school performance” (Verger et al., 2020). In fact, in recent years, this assessment has been consolidated as an educational policy instrument with multiple uses, and since 2012 it has been used to define a system of indicators and other “experimental” assessment tools, including logics of performance-related payment for teacher promotion (Beneyto et al., 2019; Collet-Sabé, 2017). Despite these experimental models, external assessment in Spain and Catalonia has had historically, and following a bureaucratic administrative tradition, a diagnostic orientation without a direct formal impact, so it could be characterized as a low-stakes accountability model. As we explained in the introduction, this makes the resistance movement against standardized tests in Catalonia a particular case: a collective action to boycott standardized tests under a low-stakes accountability model.

Methods

This article presents a case study of the Network of Dissident Schools (XEI) in Catalonia as an example of resistance to standardized tests in countries with low-stakes accountability systems, a phenomenon that has not yet been analyzed very much. Case studies are empirical investigations of a contemporary phenomenon necessarily analyzed within its historical and social context (Yin, 2009). They are methodologically appropriate when a series of specific conditions are met: the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not obvious and where the context is particularly relevant to understanding said phenomenon; the phenomenon is made up of multiple, complex and interrelated variables; data collection is based on multiple sources, which favors data triangulation; and both data collection and data analysis are based on the prior development of theoretical propositions (Yin, 2009). In terms of theoretical contributions, single case studies fulfill a double function. On the one hand, they allow us to test, confirm or question well-founded theoretical propositions, in this case relative to the context, the rationalities and discursive frames, as well as the action repertoires of social movements. On the other hand, they allow us to formulate, expand and propose new propositions relative to phenomena in which there is less consensus in the academic literature, such as the idiosyncratic characteristics of opposition to accountability in countries with soft accountability systems.

Our empirical strategy is based on the collection of data from various sources: semi-structured with activists ($n=14$) and stakeholders ($n=3$), as well as the analysis of press news ($n = 14$) and documents produced by the social movement itself ($n = 11$). With regards to the participants and the empirical sources, the interviews were conducted with two specific profiles. We interviewed activists that are mobilizers or with leadership or coordination roles ($n=4$), as well as activists that participate in boycott activities ($n=10$), from a total of eight primary schools. The selection of the interviewees was made following criteria of organizational responsibility in the case of the activists with leadership roles, and following a snowball strategy in the case of the boycott participants. The selection was not made according to schools because the object of our analysis is not the schools but rather the XEI itself as an organizational and relational network that makes up the social movement. In any case, the participants are from different schools to avoid contextual biases. Most participants are from the civil servant middle classes or new middle classes, despite the fact that other profiles of

working-class origin have been included, which are less common in the network of dissident schools, as can be observed in Table 1.

Table 1

Activists and Schools Characteristics

Code	Activist's background	Activist's role	School	Type of school
Interview 1	Civil servant middle class	Leadership	1	Urban public school (big city)
Interview 2	Civil servant middle class	Activist	2	Urban public school (middle-size city)
Interview 3	Working class	Activist	1	Urban public school (big city)
Interview 4	New middle class	Activist	3	Urban public school (big city)
Interview 5	Civil servant middle class	Leadership	4	Urban public school (big city)
Interview 6	Civil servant middle class	Leadership	5	Urban public school (big city)
Interview 7	Working class	Activist	6	Urban public school (middle-size city)
Interview 8	Working class	Activist	7	Rural public school
Interview 9	Civil servant middle class	Activist teacher	7	Rural public school
Interview 10	Civil servant middle class	Activist	8	Rural public school
Interview 11	Civil servant middle class	Activist	8	Rural public school

Source: own elaboration

The documentary analysis was made from the public documents of the movement, including informative material, press releases, manuals and other political documents that present its discursive framework. Press documents published during the peak period of the protest by the Catalan mass media were also used to analyze XEI's discourse in the media, contextual aspects and, more secondarily, the media treatment of the phenomenon.

An important research instrument was the interview script, which covers relevant aspects of the political context and process, biographical questions of the interviewee, motivations and rationalities of participation in the movement, repertoires of collective action, as well as subjective opinions, interpretations and experiences of the external assessment system and participation in the boycott mobilizations.

Based on these data, our analytical strategy privileged the triangulation of sources (that is, sought the analytical complementarity of texts from different sources, rather than seeking their

mutual validation) and the analysis of content (that is, analysis of the explicit manifest content of the text, as well as the emergent inferences that derived from it; Gorard & Taylor, 2004).

Findings

Emergence and Nature of the Opt-Out Movement in Catalonia: Socio-Political Factors and Political Opportunity Structures

The Network of Dissident Schools (XEI) arose in Catalonia from the creation of a blog during the 2013-2014 academic year, promoted by the commission against cuts to the “Patronat Domènech” state school, located in the Gràcia neighborhood of Barcelona. Although the movement has an urban origin, it later spread through networks of activists and associations of student families, reaching up to 57 schools. The movement initially arose in the context of the economic crisis and cuts in education. The activists also point out the importance of the approval of the educational reform to improve quality (LOMCE) in 2013, which involved a paradigm shift inspired by New Public Management (Parcerisa, 2016). This reform included the adoption of external standardized and centralized tests, with consequences for the accreditation of students. These factors (economic crisis, public cuts, and reform of the LOMCE) were perceived as a threat to state schools and educational equity, and generated a change of context that favored social mobilization:

Initially we were on the committee against cuts in our school. From there we organized and decided to resist LOMCE (...) among ourselves, the action that marked a before and after was the refusal to do the tests. This was the origin. (Blanca, activist)

At the beginning, the actions of this movement received a noteworthy public and media attention. Nevertheless, the removal of the more polemic aspects of the reform (Real Decreto-Ley 5/2016), and the discontinuity of families as actors of collective action, limited the success of such movement in the long term. However, the implementation of the LOMCE accentuated regional tensions, which are very present in the education debate in Spain (Bonal, 2000; Engel, 2008). Thus, in Catalonia, the reform is interpreted as an attempt at recentralization by the Spanish central government (Saura & Luengo, 2015), generated, initially, a favorable context for the consolidation of a wide and ambiguous alliance among multiple actors. In fact, as we discuss below, the XEI was able to take a strategic advantage of this context to frame its discourse.

In addition, under the dominant administrative tradition in Spain, of a bureaucratic and hierarchical nature, the external mechanisms of accountability have had an erratic trajectory⁵ (Verger et al., 2019), facilitating the emergence of movements of opposition to these reforms. In this context, the combination of different elements generated a new structure of opportunity, understood as a condition of possibility for the emergence and incipient consolidation of this movement and its repertoire of collective action.

⁵ For instance, in the Catalan education reform act (2009) the development of an independent evaluation agency was considered but never get materialized (Verger et al. 2015). Subsequently, other isolated policy initiatives were implemented but not retained at the long term, including a system of quality indicators and teachers' evaluation with incentives attached, or the so-called “pedagogic audits” for low performing schools (Verger & Pagès, 2018).

Composition, Actors and Alliances of the Network of Dissident Schools

Typically, opt-out movements have been led by middle-class families with high cultural capital and frequently white (Pizmony-Levy & Green-Saraisky, 2016). In the case of the XEI, the activists who exercised a leadership role belong mainly to factions of the new middle classes with high cultural capital. In this context, we identified an affinity between the social positions of the participants in the network, coming mostly from middle class families with high cultural capital, and their educational preferences for weak or soft pedagogical framing, in terms of Bernstein (Ball, 2003). These preferences are expressed as a certain inclination for transversal pedagogical approaches (in contrast with highly separated and standardized approaches) as well as for models of personalized evaluation. Here, we should highlight that such educational preferences are sustained with particular non-directive and flexible caring models, based in post-material values of emotional wellbeing where children should be the center and the focus of their own development. The relative homogeneity of the movement's social composition facilitates the consolidation of shared interpretive frames and cultural codes close to the school institution that allow it to question core aspects of the educational process, such as evaluation methods, curricular contents and teaching methodologies – but without questioning its commitment to education as a central strategy of family social (re)production, habitual in the new middle classes with high cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

We have not felt against the school or boycotting the school, despite distancing ourselves from it at times, with this more critical spirit of respecting children's rhythms (...) In the end, we haven't gone against the school because the school too (...) we have felt very legitimized, supported and very understood [by the school].
(Ferran, activist)

The opt-out movement in Catalonia is organized around a coalition of different actors. More specifically, this is based on the adhesion of formal and informal family associations that, in many cases autonomously, organize themselves to share discourses (talks, books and so on), resources (proposals, material and so forth), education, discursive frames (for example, debates on public education organised by many education stakeholders), and repertoires of collective action in network. From a horizontal dynamic established under the aegis of the FAPAC (Federation of School Parent Associations of Catalonia) and *Marea Amarilla* (Yellow Tide), the XEI crystallized as a network that brings together, gives support and coherence to the different nodes that compose it.

Unlike other contexts where teachers (as in the case of Chicago, see Au, 2016), students and academics (as in the case of Chile, see Hernández-Ortiz & Garrido, 2021; Montero et al., 2018; Parcerisa & Villalobos, 2020) have played a very active role in mobilizing opt-out movements, the XEI is made up mostly of families. Initially, the XEI arose from family associations of state schools located in the city of Barcelona. Organizationally, it collaborates with social movements made up of families (school family associations) through diverse strategies and multiple forms of activism in different platforms that facilitate the creation of informal spaces where leaderships are built and ideas and actions are shared and disseminated. These will make up for the lack of formal organization and the precarious coordination mechanisms between social movements:

We are an informal network and don't want to formalize it... We work in a network, we think that all these movements should have a common umbrella and the people have to be in different places. There are people from the XEI in the Yellow Assembly, others in the FAPAC, because we have to be there... Because otherwise it is very difficult to articulate discourses. (Blanca, activist)

Ideologically, the XEI is inspired by social movements focused on education: the *Marea Groga* [Yellow Tide in Catalan], the Marea Verde (Green Tide) and the movements organized around protests against the LOMCE. The network of dissident schools tried to weave alliances with other actors of the educational community, including teacher unions, pedagogical renewal movements, and student unions. However, the XEI finds it difficult to consolidate proactive alliances that go beyond formal support, especially among teachers and including teachers' unions.

In this regard, the institutional characteristics of the Spanish education system and the design of the tests made the alliance between the XEI and teaching staff difficult. On the one hand, the design of the tests under a low-stakes model did not involve consequences for the teachers, thus did not generate a direct questioning of the teachers. However, the characteristics of the Spanish education system are based on a bureaucratic tradition and administrative control typical of the Napoleonic state models. These models tend to privilege a rigid and standardized administrative system, in which the teaching staff are frequently highly restricted by normative structures (Verger et al, 2019; Voisin & Dumay, 2020). In this context, the Catalan Department of Education exerted pressure on schools and management teams with the threat of administrative sanctions to guarantee the realization of the test, fact that limited the participation of teachers in the boycott. This can partly explain the neutral position or tacit support of the teachers and the unions with regard to the boycott initiative, as well as a certain indulgence of its promoters in assuming that “they didn’t want to create consequences for the teachers” or “confront the educational community” (Blanca, activist). The teachers’ unions maintained a low profile: while they were not favorable towards the tests, they also did not play an active role in the field of collective action beyond giving formal support to families through communications and participation in press conferences.

Communication and Collective Action Frames against Standardized Tests and Privatization in Public Education

The communicative strategy of the XEI, like other contemporary social movements in Spain, was strongly influenced by the *indignados* movement (Álvarez-Ruiz & Núñez, 2016; Barranco & Parcerisa, 2020). Social media played a central role in the external communication strategy of the XEI, which took advantage of the use of online platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to disseminate its messages and spread its calls for actions of protest. In discursive terms, the diagnostic frame of the XEI combined a narrative that made a global questioning of the state reform of the LOMCE and of the cutbacks with a detailed critique of the standardized tests of the LEC. Thus, the XEI holds that the LOMCE promotes a model of education (but also political and ethical) that is neoconservative, that opposes the inclusive model of education and society that they defend.

First of all, the XEI formulated a critique of the curriculum proposed by the LOMCE, arguing that LOMCE curriculum was politically conservative, with an elitist conception of education, and pedagogically narrowly focused on instrumental competencies and outdated academicism (XEI, 2015). As Victor points out, “the LOMCE [...] was a law that could have been enacted in 1960. Everything was exams, a system in which those that pass continue and those that fail are left behind [...]. It was a law of ‘natural selection’” (Victor, activist). The XEI also denounced the centralization of the curriculum, which was presented as an imposition of the central government on the autonomous communities, a discourse that enabled them to combine the education debate with the regional conflict between Catalonia and Spain. The XEI knew how to play strategically with this context, on some occasions framing the fight against the LOMCE as a rejection “of an educational model that Madrid wanted to impose” (Alberto, activist). This facilitated the incorporation of other family profiles and made “some parents who may not have joined to support not taking the tests” (Alberto, activist).

The XEI also denounced the managerial approach of the LOMCE and pointed out that this reform promoted the questioning of teacher professionalism and the fragmentation of the education community. Under this reform, teachers would become mere instructors, undermining their role as educators. The XEI also opposed the new model of managerial school governance since it created a “pyramidal structure crowned by the figure of the principal” that would replace “the previous horizontal structure that functioned democratically through School Councils” (2015, p. 1). Finally, it argued that the LOMCE introduced a new ethical-political framework into the educational system that would be “founded on individualism, competition, segregation and privatization” (XEI, 2015, p. 1). According to one activist of the movement, behind the managerial reforms of the LOMCE and LEC “there is an idea of commodifying and privatizing public education” (Blanca, activist).

As can be seen, the XEI used the LOMCE strategically to criticize the components associated with the NPM that penetrated the Catalan educational system with the enactment of the LEC. According to the XEI, both reforms would try to insert new forms of business management into public education, thus inoculating the values and action logics of the private sector in the organization of schools. XEI activists identified the standardized tests as a central pillar through which the endogenous and exogenous commodification and privatization of education, at both the state and regional levels, are promoted. According to the XEI, the tests are the main tool of the LOMCE “to classify the schools, establish rankings and promote [...] competition between people and schools. They are the key instrument to assign market value to each school” (XEI, 2017, p. 5).

The XEI’s criticisms of the standardized tests include its excessively narrow focus (which captures only elements of memory in relation to instrumental competences, literacy and numeracy), but which obviates other knowledge, such as *soft competences* (creativity, reflexivity, emotional education and critical thinking), as well as the situated and contextual knowledge of students. Further, according to the XEI, there is an intrinsic tension between the projects of schools and the centralized and standardized nature of the tests. It is also a tension that is more pronounced in schools that actively exercise pedagogical autonomy to propose their own, differentiated educational models, and define their own “innovative” and “unique” pedagogical projects. These types of schools, with a majority of middle-class families (Síndic de Greuges, 2016), are those that participate most frequently in the boycott against the tests.

External tests are not what we want. What we want, what we think, is that we must evaluate the work of the school, more creative, more participative, the life experience of the children, and not so much the results; we don’t want a school that is competitive. It’s very idealistic, all this, but that’s how it is. (Mireia, activist)

A central part of XEI’s criticism are the negative impacts, the undesired effects on pedagogical practices (occasionally unethical) they believe would arise once the tests of basic competencies were consolidated: stress for the students, generalization of teaching to the test, and the exclusion of disadvantaged students from the test (cream skimming) – impacts and practices also identified in other contexts (Pizmony-Levy & Green-Saraisky, 2016).

In many schools with students [with academic difficulties] they did not make them take the tests so that they did not lower the school’s grades, which already shows the perversion of the system ... [In my daughters’ school] they spent three, four weeks preparing exclusively for the tests. They trained for the tests. I don’t send my daughters to train for state exams, I send them to learn, to socialize (Victor, activist)

According to the XEI, another risk associated with the tests is the publication and dissemination of the results of the schools that perform best and their effects in terms of school

segregation and competition. Along these lines, Anna points out that “ranking schools makes them and families compete [...] Imagine what this means for the families: creating ghettos”.

Finally, with regards to the prognostic frames, the XEI opts for “a universal, inclusive public education of quality that seeks not only academic excellence but also an integral education and one that believes in the values of an egalitarian, solidary, inclusive and transformative society”. The desirable solution for the XEI is a personalized model of teaching, one that respects and is based on the different rhythms of learning, the interests and situated knowledge and context of each student; that cultivates multiple intelligences and promotes soft competences; and that uses continuous assessment and takes into account the specific nature of each school. In organizational terms, they also propose that governments contribute at least “7% of GDP to public education” and facilitate the participation of the educational community in a process of public deliberation on the future of education (XEI, 2015, p. 2).

The Boycott of Standardized Tests: The Repertoires of Collective Action

The XEI’s repertoires of collective action combine different types of actions. First of all, with respect to actions of political pressure, the XEI activists highlight the difficulty in dialoging with the education authorities, and especially with the Barcelona Education Consortium and the Catalan Department of Education. As one of the activists points out, while it is true that on some occasions, they managed to hold meetings with the government, the result of these meetings was not satisfactory for the XEI, since their main demands were ignored.

In general terms, the actions organized by the XEI were characterized as “very grassroots and articulated through social media” (Blanca, activist). In this way, the XEI deployed awareness-raising actions by organizing talks and roundtables with social actors and experts.

I gave talks throughout the region, in [various municipalities], explaining what the standardized tests meant. *WhatsApp* groups didn’t exist during the LOMCE, everything was done by mail [electronic]. Basically, putting up posters, talks, speaking with everybody in the street (...) We gave many park talks, in the parks outside the school. Sending emails to those that had them. (Víctor, activist)

In terms of communication, the XEI tried to spread their ideas and actions through social networks, aiming to attract the attention of the media in order to reach a wider audience. The intention was for “the action itself to serve as a platform” (Blanca, activist), in order to influence public opinion and thus consolidate its counter-hegemonic narrative.

However, the aforementioned collective action repertoires were a complement to the actions to boycott the standardized tests, which would be the movement’s central protest tactic. The choice of this tactic was not easy. Initially, there were a number of proposals for dissent against the LOMCE, such as “not asking for schooling in Spanish”, “not asking for the subject of religion”, “not choosing the subject of Entrepreneurship and Business Activity”, and not taking the children to “the retakes in the 3rd and 6th grade of primary school” (Commission against cuts, 2014, p. 7). Despite the non-binding nature of the tests, families expressed doubts, unease, and dilemmas when placing their children at the center of the boycott, generating a complicated situation or ‘compromise’.

I didn’t want to put my daughter in the position of being the only one not going to the tests, because it is more complicated at some ages, such as the 3rd grade, in which they are still young. (Mireia, activist)

Many families thought “What will happen to my child if I don’t take them to do the tests?” It’s very complicated [the boycott]. (Víctor, activist)

However, the XEI considered that the most disruptive and effective way to oppose the LOMCE was the strategy of boycotting the standardized tests. Moreover, the standardized tests were conceived as the pretext to make a general criticism and articulate a global discourse against pro-privatization reform processes. As Blanca, one of the founders of the XEI, stated, “with the tests” they could “boycott and [...] have a certain echo” in the media, while “with other things they couldn’t”. One factor that favored the choice of boycotting the tests as a form of protest was that the results of the primary school tests were non-binding (Commission against cuts, 2014).

From the point of view of the XEI activists, the boycott of the tests was not an end in itself, but rather a means to capture the attention of public opinion and spread and articulate the discourse against the standardization, segregation, and commodification of education. Several interviewees pointed out that the alternative activity to the tests that they organized was conceived as a way of doing pedagogy and generating and strengthening community ties:

We networked the Gràcia schools (...) Most of the schools that didn’t do the tests carried out alternative activities, like visiting an air-raid shelter in the Plaza del Diamante, and another day we went to the Plaza de la Vila and made some murals. The parents also organized themselves so that 2 or 3 parents stayed with the children. (Mireia, activist)

The boycott tactic appears to be as an innovative and disrupting action, which allows to increase the visibility of the protest, both in social media and traditional mass-media. However, the practical development encounters some difficulties that might hinder its success. One of the salient challenges is related with the difficulties of aligning the interests among different actors of the school community. As it has been observed in contexts of high stakes accountability (for instance, in Chile), the alignment of interests among school actors turns into a difficult task due to the presence of important economic and reputational incentives attached to the test. Therefore, in certain contexts, such actions tend to conflict and divide the school community (Parcerisa & Villalobos, 2020). This is why the previous preparation of actions, the pedagogy and the search of mechanisms trying to minimize the costs of participating in the collective action appears to be critical. In the case of the XEI, despite tensions and fears generated for the treats of repression towards schools and teachers in particular, as well as the intra-familiar doubts and dilemmas caused by the participation in a protest that is ultimately exerted by sons and daughters, it appears important to highlight the critical role of an internal action protocol, which contributed to build trust and develop a greater perception of safety among organizers and participants.

Accordingly, and in order to encourage families to participate in the boycott, a *Practical and reasoned guide to conscientious objection to the LOMCE* was prepared, with the support of lawyers who advised the movement. This gave families a certain confidence and legal security in the face of the boycott. Unlike school administrators and teachers, who could face serious administrative penalties, the costs to families of not taking their children to do the tests were much lower. In some cases, pressure from the administration on the schools was so strong that they even threatened to “initiate disciplinary proceedings against teachers” (Ana, activist). In fact, pressure by school inspectors was recurrent in many schools. As can be seen in the following quote, the dissent guide prepared by the XEI was very useful for families to not back down and proceed with the boycott actions:

When we decided not to take the children [to the tests], [the inspectors] told them to do the tests on other days, not to say anything and to do the tests. But since we had this guide, we entered the school, we had the whole guide, we had the signed papers, we had everything, everything prepared. (Roser, activist)

However, the threats of repression towards the teachers generated some doubts among the families that organized the boycott, as one activist mother pointed out: “When I had some doubts, it was because I saw that something could happen to them (the teachers)”. In this case, the guides prepared by the XEI, together with the fact that, in some cases, they had the tacit support of the school (including management and the teachers), made it possible to finally boycott the tests. Therefore, the construction of alliances between the school actors appears as a critical factor for understanding the greater (or lesser) support for the boycott actions. In short, the alignment of the interests of management, teachers, families and students is crucial to understand the success (or not) of the boycott in schools. However, it is important to emphasize that the very nature of the tests as a measurement instrument makes it difficult for these alliances to remain in place over the long term due to the potential persuasive power generated by *datification*, its appearance of objectivity and the generation of dynamics based on “the need to measure and compare oneself with others” (Marta, activist). In other words, the standardized tests insert values associated with the idea of performance into school cultures, which makes it extremely difficult to carry out acts of resistance against these instruments (Ball, 2000; Baena et al., 2020).

Conclusions

The results of this research indicate that changes in political opportunity structures related to the austerity measures in education, together with the educational reform of the LOMCE, favored the emergence of the network of dissident schools. Discursively, XEI’s frames identified the standardized tests as an instrument of control and covert privatization of education with negative impacts on teaching models. Among the potential solutions to reverse the effects of the neoconservative educational model, the XEI proposed repealing the LOMCE, eliminating the standardized tests, increasing the education budget, and promoting a new universal and inclusive public education.

As is the case in other countries (such as the United States, see Pizmony-Levy & Green-Saraisky, 2016), in Catalonia the opposition movement to standardized tests has been led fundamentally by families, which tend to overrepresent factions of the new middle classes. A correspondence between the social positions of families and their cultural dispositions and educational affinities is observed due to weak pedagogical framing. As a complement to this argument, we can point out that the boycott of the tests has greater structural likelihood of being successful in those schools with “innovative” pedagogical projects, that are actively distinguished from their educational setting, and that are in greater conflict with a centralized and standardized model of assessment, led by middle class families with high cultural capital, non-traditional educational preferences and, also, a *habitus* that is very close to the codes of their school (in which they are the overwhelming majority and/or have a significant capacity to influence). In these schools, not only do families have cultural dispositions and educational affinities that are more critical of standardized educational models, but also the teachers and management team, tend to share similar approaches, generating more possibilities for micropolitical alliances between families and other school actors to realize the boycott. In addition, the high social capital possessed by most of the families that make up the network favors the creation of alliances and relationships with other social actors and educational authorities.

However, in organizational terms, it is necessary to underline the difficulty of consolidating this type of movement over the long term due to the turnover of its members, as well as due to the routinization of the external evaluation policy instruments by school actors and the increasing use that schools make of the tests, internally or pedagogically and externally or relative to the local

educational market. Thus, beyond resisting standardization, there is the possibility that in the medium term families and schools can be persuaded and co-opted by the power of numbers, metrics, classifications and rankings (Biesta, 2015), becoming agents with interests in maintaining such political instruments (Simons & Voß, 2018; Verger et al., 2019), either to maintain a high position in the hierarchy of the local educational market and/or to preserve a privileged situation in the field of education, or for expressive ends – that is, to improve pedagogical practices through the use of external data. In this regard, Au (2008) points out that the new middle class tends to have a strained or contradictory relationship with accountability systems based on tests since, on the one hand, they can benefit from these systems while, on the other hand, they oppose standardization and the forms of teaching that these policies promote.

The research also highlights the reasons that explain the choice of the boycott as a resistance strategy, its organization and the tensions experienced by the activists. The collective action repertoire allowed to visualize the social protest against the standardized test but also involved organizational challenges and might trigger tensions among different school actors (see Parcerisa & Villalobos, 2020).

Finally, this article shows how collective action of boycotting the standardized tests changes and reconfigures the school micropolitics, problematizing power relations inside and outside the school organizations and their daily educational practices. In such a context, families emerge as actors with growing agency within the educational sphere. For their part, teachers and principals tend to seek a balance between the demands and preferences of the families, the mandates of the educational authorities and the strategies and pedagogical and organizational models of the schools. In any case, the action of dissent against the standardized tests, beyond achieving its direct objectives, has enabled the questioning and problematizing of a wide range of school practices, including pedagogical and methodological approaches, privatization of education and school segregation, curricular content, assessment models and the actual participation in standardized tests. Although it was not the focus of our article, in recent years protests against standardized tests have been increasingly led by the movement of high school students. In this regard, future research should investigate the action logics and rationalities of this collective action, and also examine the similarities and differences with the Network of Dissident Schools.

In short, this article shows that, regardless of the consequences associated with the standardized tests, in countries with a Napoleonic administrative tradition, their implementation might favor the emergence of resistance by the educational community (see Verger et al., 2019). Such resistance is related to the very nature of the standardized assessment tests, their incentives (high, low stakes) and the unwanted effects that are associated with such policy instruments (creation of rankings to promote competition between schools, practices such as teaching to the test and selection of students to improve scores, and so forth). In fact, as research carried out in low-stakes contexts shows, the implementation *per se* of these instruments entails symbolic effects that can generate rejection by school actors. At the same time, however, these instruments also introduce new rationalities linked to the culture of performance and generate new interests and subjectivities among school actors (Falabella, 2020; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Verger et al., 2019) that make it difficult to organize collective action against standardized tests.

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