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**Student participation: between the twilight of the liberal model of democracy and the rise of neoliberal policies**

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**Abstract**

Student participation has become a relevant topic in the international debate on education. However, the conceptions of the meaning of participation and its practical implications are very heterogeneous. In this article, we review how educational policies have conceived student participation in Western countries. First, we present our conceptualization of student participation. Later, we explain the role of the liberal model of democracy in shaping school democracy and student participation. Then, we discuss that this model is suffering a crisis due to two main factors. On the one hand, the organisation of democratic processes in schools had limitations, which have been identified by many authors, institutions, and empirical studies. On the other hand, the pressure of the neoliberal agenda on standardisation and the emphasis on individual success are leaving aside the interest of democratic aims. We illustrate the evolution of education policies concerning student participation with the case analysis of the Spanish state educational legislation. To conclude, we present some reflections about the future of student participation.

*Keywords:* school democracy, school government, liberal democracy, neoliberal education, participation.

**Student Participation: between the Twilight of the Liberal Model of Democracy  
and the Rise of Neoliberal Policies**

Student participation has become a relevant topic in the international debate on education, with the support of institutions such as the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2010), the Organisation of American States (Torres 2001), and the United Nations with the inclusion of participation rights within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989). However, as we do not have a consensual definition of student participation and its meanings, its practical implications can be very different (Thomson and Holdsworth 2003).

There are many investigations around student participation, analysing for instance how it is implemented (Pagoni 2009; Andersson 2019), showing positive effects of student participation (Álvarez-García et al. 2013; de Róiste et al. 2012), and presenting barriers to student participation (e.g., Guérin et al., 2013). Many of them discuss the role of philosophical and political ideas under the conception of student participation and school democracy, considering the role of liberalism, neoliberalism, and diverse models of democracy (Feu et al., 2017; Friedrich et al., 2010). Nonetheless, to our knowledge, there are no studies that analyse the main political philosophies concerning the organization of contemporary democracies and their evolution and connect them with the changes in educational policies that shape school democracy and student participation and its practical implications. This is the aim of the study. In this paper, we review the evidence on the development of liberal democratic models of student participation in schools and the impact of neoliberal policies on it.

Our key point is that the first policies regarding student participation were inspired by liberal models of democracy that emphasize representation as the main path for participation. The implementation of this model had some internal limitations that,

together with the rise of neoliberal policies in education in the last decades, have created a scenario in which student participation face important obstacles.

Our analysis discusses common features of educational policies on student participation in the so-called Western countries. With this term, we refer here to several countries in Europe, America, and Oceania, such as France, the USA, and Australia, that share historical backgrounds and similar (but diverse) economic and political organizations (Daly 2014). Although liberalism is a core concept in Western political thought and practice (Bell 2014), the evolution of liberal policies and its translation to education are heterogeneous; in other words, each region and country have developed specific processes and outcomes. As Ball (1998) argues, “while it may well be possible to discern a set of principles or a theoretical model underlying policy —neoliberalism, new institutional economics, public choice theory or whatever—these rarely if ever translate into policy texts or practice in direct or pristine form” (p. 126), so the analysis of educational policies should be contextualized. For this reason, we illustrate the evolution of student participation under liberalism and neoliberalism with the analysis of Spanish educational laws.

To develop our ideas, first we present our conceptualization of student participation. Second, we analyse the main ideas of the liberal model of democracy and how they have been transferred to school participation. Third, we discuss why this model did not reach its purpose of creating a democratic culture in schools, and how neoliberal policies have aggravated the barriers in the promotion of student participation. Then, we present the case analysis of Spanish state educational legislation. Last, we present some conclusions about the future of student participation.

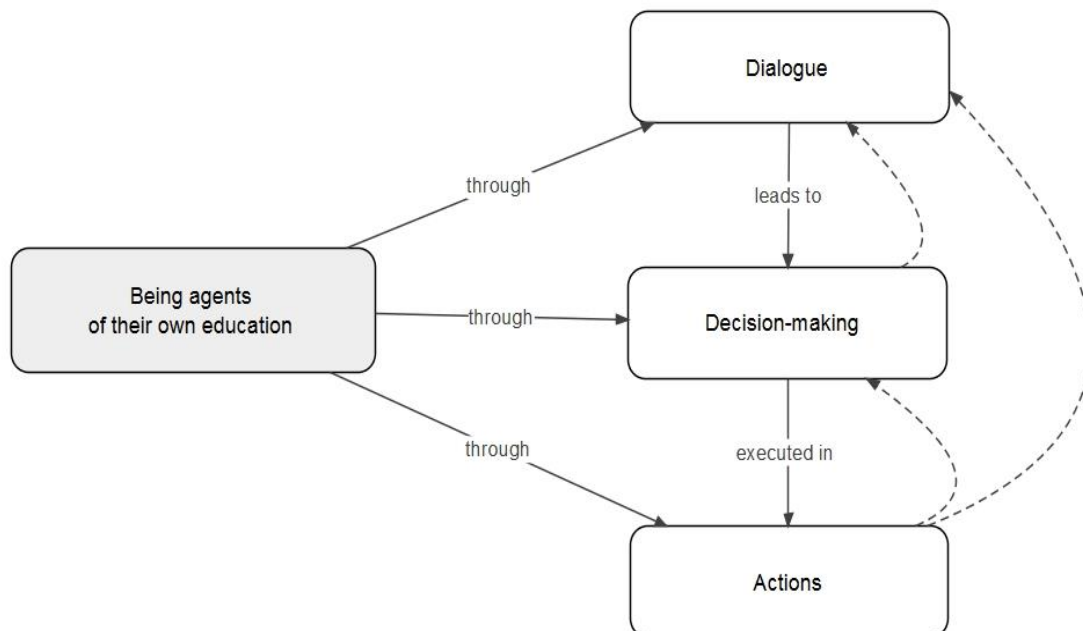
### Conceptualization of Student Participation

The concept of student participation has many different uses (Muñoz 2011; Thomson and Holdsworth 2003). In this section, we summarize how we conceptualize student participation. This conceptualization, which has been widely developed elsewhere (García-Pérez 2014; García-Pérez and Montero 2017), is inspired by the educational philosophy of John Dewey (Dewey 1995; 2004), the Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) and the models of participatory and deliberative democracy (Held 2006; Hildreth 2012).

We understand that participation is composed by a set of interconnected and non-linear processes that help students become active agents of their own education. These processes, which are presented in Figure 1, are dialogue, decision-making and actions (García-Pérez 2014; García-Pérez and Montero 2017).

Figure 1

Set of processes of student participation



Note: Translated from author's previous publication (García-Pérez & Montero, 2017)

Being involved in decision-making is usually considered a key aspect of student participation in the literature (Cross, Hulme, and McKinney 2014; Mager and Nowak 2012), and it can be done in any aspect of school life, such as participatory pedagogies in the classroom, class and school rulemaking, and conflict management; it is, in essence, the idea of learning to participate “by doing” it (Eurydice, 2012; Feu et al., 2021). From our point of view, decision-making is a core aspect, but we must emphasize its connection with the processes of dialogue, so students can share and discuss their points of view, and with the execution of the decisions into practical actions (García-Pérez 2014; García-Pérez and Montero 2017).

With this conceptualization in mind, we now turn to analyse how student participation has been shaped in schools following the ideas of the liberal model of democracy.

### **Liberal Model and School Democracy**

The liberal model of democracy has a long history. Many political theorists, philosophers, social movements, and politicians have contributed to its development. It would be impossible to summarise here all its history and how it has evolved in different countries. Therefore, we are going to focus on the main and common characteristics of what Macpherson (2012) identified as model number 2 of liberal democracy, because they constitute the basic principles of early legislation on school democracy and student participation. This model has also received the name ‘ethical liberalism’ (Olssen, 2000), to emphasise its defence of the idea that democracy plays a crucial role in personal growth and citizens’ moral development.

Liberal democracy defends the idea of the citizen as an ‘informed observer’, who is responsible and aware of personal rights and has an appropriate knowledge of the basic political structures and procedures (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Rubio

Carracedo 2007). This perspective of citizenship is strongly associated with three principles of liberal democracy. The first of them is the emphasis that liberal democracy poses on personal liberty, which implies that the individual needs to be free to decide about his/her own life (Macpherson 2012; Touraine 2000). Consequently, legislation must protect the individual from the government and other social forces that may impose restrictions on personal freedom (Macpherson 2012).

As well as personal liberty, a liberal democracy must ensure political equality (Dahl 1998; Sartori 1999). This is one of the concepts that has undergone many changes in the history of liberal democracy, because many liberal ideas were developed when large sectors of the adult population did not have the right to vote (e.g., women), and thus it was essential that early demands addressed such inequality (Dahl 1998). Nowadays, the liberal conception of equality is related to equal opportunities, which means equal access according to merit and capacities (Sartori and Foschini 2009).

Since personal liberty and political equality must be respected, one of the main requirements for liberal government is the idea of popular sovereignty (Sartori 1999). Popular sovereignty implies a distinction between the exercise and the titularity of power (Sartori 1999): the government exercises the power, but it is legitimised and selected by the community through periodic elections. With this mechanism of community control, we arrive to one of the most important features of liberal democracy: political representation.

Democracy has been linked to participation. However, in theoretical and practical terms, the idea of participation can be defined in different ways. Liberal democracy has postulated from its origin that representation constitutes the basic and most prominent mechanism of participation. As an illustrative example, one of the greatest liberal thinkers, John Stuart Mill, explained in his *Considerations on*

Representative Government (Mill 2001) that in large communities and societies, the direct participation of all citizens in public affairs is not possible. Therefore, he argued, the ideal form of government is that of the representative government.

According to liberals, not everybody is willing/able to participate directly in public affairs and, if we give participation an excessive role in the life of citizens, we face the risk of proposing a citizen serving democracy, instead of a democracy serving the citizen (Sartori and Foschini 2009). Thus, within liberal democratic principles, the organisation of periodic elections to elect the government and the legislators is the best way to ensure that citizens can participate in public policies and in the control of the political agenda (Dahl 1998; Sartori 1999). In this context, there must be rules to ensure that a certain level of political pluralism is present, to give a voice to all individuals within the community, and to create an equilibrium among the different groups and social classes (Macpherson 2012).

In addition, the promotion of cultural and political associations may complement the formal structures of the representative government (Sartori 1999). Following Dahl (1998), we can say that these associations make three important contributions to democracy: 1) they conform a path for political participation because they can provide information and opinions and influence decision making, 2) they may draw attention to include some topics in the political agenda, and 3) they generate spaces for public discussion and deliberation.

Bearing in mind these basic principles, we now turn to analyse how they have shaped the organisation of school democracy and participation. Considering the school as a 'micro-society', liberal democracy has applied similar ideas to those designed to govern states to organise the school government. In this sense, school democracy has tried to answer some of the main concerns expressed before, creating principles and

procedures to promote school democratic governments and the participation of families, students, and local communities.

As in the case of larger communities, educational legislation in Western countries has considered that the creation of formal structures is the core mechanism to promote participation. Representation, which constitutes the main form of political participation in liberal democracy, is ensured this way. If students or families had to spend much time participating in the government of their schools, academic activities would be diminished, and families and students would be overbusy. The same could happen with teachers. Consequently, student, families, and teachers mostly participate through their representatives.

According to our knowledge of the literature and state legislation, the main structures of school participation can be classified in six types (Feito 2014; Forde et al. 2018; Mcfarland and Starmanns 2009): head teacher and management teams, staff/teacher councils, school councils, student councils, class councils, and student and family associations<sup>1</sup>. The composition, existence, and relevance of these structures in decision making are heterogenous across countries. However, their inspiring principles are similar to those proposed by liberal democracy and they encompass the main aspirations of the model in terms of participation.

First, these structures establish a recognition that the educational community should have control or, at least, transparent information and the possibility to be consulted about school decision-making processes. The idea of popular sovereignty is not fully transferred here, because that would mean that students and families should be

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<sup>1</sup> The terms school council and student/pupil councils are commonly used with equivalent meaning in the literature. However, some countries differentiate between student and school councils. The former includes students and some coordinating teachers, while the later is an organ with representatives from all the groups of the educational community (families, teachers, students, management team and even the administration).

able to select the schoolteachers and management teams. Nonetheless, the presence of representatives from the different groups of the educational community provides a formal mechanism to help decision makers consider the interests, rights, and opinions of a larger number of people (Mill 2001). The exercise of power is legitimised by the existence of structures where representatives give voice to the different groups. The representatives of each group are usually appointed by a system of periodic elections.

As we will illustrate later with the case of Spain, the constitution of these structures, their roles, and their competencies must be carefully analysed if we want to understand how power is balanced and controlled. Our main point in this part of the discussion is just that participation is formally recognised, and it is fundamentally expressed through representation. As a complement, many countries have also recognised the existence of student and family associations (San Fabián Maroto 1997), which serve the important functions of political and cultural associations in democracy mentioned earlier.

### **Limitations of Student Participation under the Liberal Model**

In this section, we focus on the limitations in the implementation of school democracy and participation policies created following the principles of liberal democracy. First, we analyse studies that show the implementation of democracy in schools has important limitations. Second, we discuss some problems in the conception of the liberal school democracy.

Regarding the state of participation, there is a large body of evidence that show that the democratic structures of schools in Western countries are not generating participation processes. Many studies, in many countries, with different methodologies, have reached similar conclusions: students and families have no real voice in schools.

We could say, with Effrat & Schimmel (2003), that ‘our schools and educational systems talk the talk of democracy, but, at best, they limp the walk’ (p.4).

Evidence on this deficit of democracy in schools and a lack of student participation has been found, for instance, in countries like Portugal (Pedro and Pereira 2010), France (Pagoni 2009), England (Veitch 2009), Scotland (McCluskey et al. 2013), Ireland (Forde et al. 2018), the USA (Mcfarland and Starmanns 2009), and Canada (Raby 2008). Even in countries with a strong tradition of dialogic practice in the classroom like Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, different authors conclude that students have very restricted influence on core school affairs (Lieberkind 2015; Thornberg 2010; Keisu and Ahlström 2020).

The implementation of organs for representation has not reached its goals. Formal structures have no effective ways to communicate with the educational community, they are often manipulated by the teachers or head teachers and, in many cases, they only have a consultive role or they do not even exist (Eurydice, 2017; Mcfarland & Starmanns, 2009). Furthermore, students sometimes are not aware or not sure of the existence of student participation structures or they do not know about the existence of school documents related to central issues of their school (Alderson 2000; Pedro and Pereira 2010).

The inclusion of content related to citizenship in the last decades (Eurydice 2005; 2017) has not improved the situation. Due to the restricted democratic practice of schools, explicitly teaching democratic values and the theoretical meaning of participation is not very effective and, moreover, it can be counterproductive because students are living it as a contradiction. While formally talking about democracy, students experience they have no influence on the daily life of their schools, and they

may feel disaffection or cynicism (Hartas 2011; Mager and Nowak 2012; Thornberg and Elvstrand 2012).

As a general conclusion of the international research, students think they have no real influence on decision-making processes in their schools and no effective means to express their points of view. If they do have influence, it is only over peripheral topics. The reasons for this 'tokenistic' participation (Hart 1992) are complex to disentangle. From our point of view, an important part of this situation can be explained by the limitations of the liberal conception of school democracy, as well as the pressure of neoliberal education policies.

The liberal model of school democracy has wrongly assumed that, by just creating democratic structures for political representation, school policies would generate a liberal democratic culture in schools. However, some relevant issues were not successfully addressed within liberal school democratic policies to achieve their aims.

In general, we could say that the liberal democracy in school has a limited scope. The conception of political representation as the only mechanism for participation is very restricted and it is not well adapted to the school. As we have commented in the previous section, liberal authors argued that in large societies not everybody is able/willing to participate. This approach is not appropriate for schools. Above all else, a school can be considered a small community, where it is easier to find paths to promote direct participation (Feu et al. 2017; Fielding 2013) or, at least, to combine mechanisms of political representation with some spaces of direct participation. One inconvenient aspect of the practice of restricting participation to student councils with representatives is that most students are never exposed to participatory practices, whereas a few elite students may enjoy the privilege of having a voice (Hartas 2011;

Rudduck and Flutter 2007). Precisely, several international institutions (Council of Europe, 2010; Eurydice, 2017; Torres, 2001) and many scholars in the field (e.g., Apple and Beane 2007; Thornberg 2008) have emphasised the importance of providing spaces for democratic experience not only in the structures devoted to formal representation, but in all activities and spaces of school daily life. By living in a school that provided democratic experiences to all students, they can learn and exercise democracy.

The restricted focus of this view of government and participation has been aggravated by a lack of provision of important processes accompanying these policies. Firstly, teachers and management teams in schools have the leading role, so it is important to gain their commitment to the task of raising and spreading democratic values and practices (Andersson, 2019; Harber & Serf, 2006). Unfortunately, researchers have found that, often, schoolteachers and head teachers do not have an idea of participation as a key educational goal, they do not relate participation to a discourse on citizenship, and some of them have concerns about the idea of promoting student participation or might consider it a threat (Saiz-Linares et al. 2019). If they do not believe or accept democratic ideals, they will not make the effort to implement them or they will work against participation.

Besides, the complexity of participation makes it a difficult aim to be approached by teachers (Lieberkind 2015). The question of 'how do we promote participation in a school?' is not easy to answer (García-Pérez 2014). Furthermore, several studies have reported that teacher training programmes have insufficient contents regarding the promotion of participation in schools and the development of students' citizenship competences (Barr et al. 2015; Willemse et al. 2015). Therefore, within the best scenario, in which teachers agree with the idea of promoting democracy and participation, it is likely that they are not sure of how they should proceed.

The last key aspect that was not successfully addressed in liberal school government was the provision of time for participation. To promote participation, the discussion of values, norms, school procedures and, in general, to foster all kind of democratic practices in the school, it is necessary to ensure that the educational staff, students and families have time to do it (Guérin, van der Ploeg, and Sins 2013; Santos Guerra 2007). However, teachers often perceive that the lack of time is an important barrier to promote democracy and participation and, consequently, participation is subordinated to the pressure on the need to fulfil the curriculum (Guérin, van der Ploeg, and Sins 2013; Hulme et al. 2011). Neoliberal policies have aggravated this lack of time for participation and, overall, they have exacerbated the problems of the liberal model of school democracy.

### **Neoliberal Policies, School Democracy, and Student Participation**

There are several negative effects of neoliberal policies on school democracy. From our point of view, they can be summarised in two main lines: 1) deviation from democratic educational goals and 2) promotion of managerial models of school government.

Regarding the deviation from democratic educational goals, neoliberal policies in education have developed the idea of market-based education, where the customers can find useful information to decide which school they prefer (Torres 2002). The use of parental choice as a guiding policy principle has consequently generated the need for testable and comparable educational outcomes (Hursh 2007; Ozga 2013; Sahlberg 2010). This wave of standardisation has significant consequences on school democracy. First, it has increased the already mentioned pressure on teachers to fulfil the curriculum, making it more difficult to devote time to participation (Hulme et al. 2011). Second, it has produced an undesired tendency to 'teach for the test', i.e., to organise

school time to produce good results in external tests (Amrein and Berliner 2002; Hursh 2007; Sahlberg 2010). Third, it has narrowed the concept of curriculum, forcing teachers to leave aside content and activities that are not tested, and giving priority to testable, measurable, and comparable outcomes (Amrein and Berliner 2002; Hursh 2007; Sahlberg 2010).

Participation, citizenship competences and democratic values require much time, and it is difficult (but not impossible) to express them in measurable and comparable outcomes, due to its complex nature and to the difficulty to reach a consensus over competing views of democracy and citizenship (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Apple and Beane 2007; Eurydice 2017). For these reasons, these aims are not prioritised, and other contents that can be easily standardised become dominant within the educational agenda (Hursh 2007; O'Neill 2013; Sahlberg 2010).

As well as subordinating democratic educational goals, or even discarding them as a potential risk (Wilkins 2019), recent global policies connected to neoliberal values and ideas are reshaping the structure of school government. Under the influence of so-called New Public Management, to decentralise educational systems, schools have been given greater autonomy (Verger and Normand 2015; Wilkins et al. 2019). Globally, under the impulse of institutions like the World Bank (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009), many educational systems have promoted school-based management in which the state reduces its role and positions the school as the main improvement unit. It is important to note that school-based management is very heterogeneous; it has been accepted and defended by groups and parties situated on all sides of the political spectrum, although it has been unevenly developed in each country (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; Verger, Curran, and Parcerisa 2015; Wilkins et al. 2019). Nonetheless, the marketisation of the educational system derived from neoliberal policies, in combination with this process of

decentralisation, have often led to the impulse of a managerial model of administration where head teachers have a dominant role in school government (Hult, Lundström, and Edström 2016; Verger and Normand 2015). To achieve a competitive school, head teachers need greater specialisation, and they face more responsibilities to manage economic, financial, and human resources (Holm and Lundström 2011; Hult, Lundström, and Edström 2016).

This emphasis on managerial models has, among others, the effect of creating an institutional separation between teachers and head teachers (Hult, Lundström, and Edström 2016) and the reduction of the weight of families and students in decision-making. Consequently, the functions of participation structures like school and student councils may be diminished in formal and practical terms, and the educational staff, especially the head teachers, control the agenda and handle on their own the main decision-making processes.

Therefore, we can say that the main expressions of neoliberal policies have damaged the already fragile nature of school democracy created following the liberal model. The result is that school democracy and student participation are facing a deep crisis.

### **The Evolution of School Democracy and Student Participation through the Case Analysis of Spanish Educational Policies**

To begin this section, we must explain a few specific aspects to understand the evolution of democracy in Spanish schools. While most liberal democracies in Western countries were developed in the decades just after World War II, in Spain, democratic reforms were delayed until the end of Franco's dictatorship in the mid-1970s (Judit 2010). Therefore, the rhythm of our political and educational democratic systems does not follow the same path of other European countries, excepting Portugal and Greece,

which also constructed democratic governments after long autocratic periods (Reid-Henry 2019).

After Franco's dictatorship, during the period of Democratic Transition (1975-1978), Spain was constituted as an autonomic state formed by 17 regions or Autonomous Communities. From that time, one of the main tensions in Spanish educational policies has been the distribution of functions between state and regional governments. The regions have been demanding, with varying levels of success, more powers in educational affairs (Viñao 1994). Thus, in Spain, the introduction of the ideas of New Public Management (NPM) has mingled with this debate on power balances between the autonomous communities and the central government. All kind of ideologies and positions have defended, in some way, the idea of distributing power from the central government to the regions (Verger, Curran, and Parcerisa 2015; Verger and Curran 2014): 1) for socio-democrats, NPM is a way to improve the public sector, 2) for neoliberals, it is a way of reducing state size and introducing market-based policies, 3) conservatives consider that it allows organisation into a hierarchy and professionalisation of schools, and 4) progressive educators think it can produce a context-relevant approach and collegial participation in decision-making by teachers, students, and families.

Another important feature of the Spanish education system is the constant tension between educational policies from the conservative and neoliberal right and the social-democratic perspectives (Andrés Cabello and Giró 2016; Viñao 2014). As we will see, this tension has produced a remarkable succession of educational reforms and legislation during recent decades; this gets even more complex if we consider regional education legislation approved by different parties in each of the 17 autonomous communities.

In our analysis of the specific legislation, we focus on the democratic era, and we do not analyse specific regional policies, although we must highlight that they also shape some aspects of school participation. We consider only democracy in public schools because private schools do not follow the same rules in this area.

***Succession of Educational Laws and its Impact on School Democracy and Student Participation in Spain***

The Constitution of 1978 established the basic consensus required for a democratic educational system. In the negotiations, left-wing parties had to accept the important presence of private education with public funds (charter schools), and a wide range of parental choice, including the rights of parents to choose a religious education for their children (Andrés Cabello and Giró 2016). For their part, conservative parties had to accept a certain level of state control over charter schools and the principle of the participation of the educational community in school decision-making (Bonafant, 2000).

As we have said, in Spain, the two main parties turning in the government during the earlier decades of democracy designed several general educational laws that defend two different views (Andrés Cabello and Giró 2016; Eurydice 1997) of how to understand participation and democracy in schools. On the one hand, there is a conception of participation as an individual right based on parental school choice. For this reason, the state must ensure the right of families to have information about the performance and the educational goals of the schools. This is the interpretation of right-wing conservative groups and the People's Party (Feito 2014), who argue that, once you have guaranteed school choice and the existence of schools with different projects, other forms of participation are unnecessary (Martín and Gairín 2007). On the other hand, left-wing groups and the Spanish Socialist Worker Party defend that participation is a collective right that must be ensured in the different structures of school government,

control, and management (Feito 2010). Thus, while the Socialist Party legislation has promoted a more classic liberal view of school government, the People's Party has designed laws with a growing neoliberal conception. In Table 1 we present a summary of the different educational laws.

Table 1

## Summary of Educational State Legislation in Spain

<i>Laws</i>	<i>View of participation</i>	
	<i>Liberal model</i>	<i>Neoliberal model</i>
	Participation as a collective right that must be ensured in the structures of representative government.	Participation as an individual right based on parental school choice.
<b>1978 Spanish Constitution</b>	The principle of the participation of the educational community in school decision-making was established.	The presence of private education with public funds and a wide range of parental choice was recognized.
<b>1980 LOECE</b>		The government was responsible for selecting and appointing head teachers. The participation of families and students at public schools had to be fixed by an official internal document of each school, but there was no specification about the authors of that document.
<b>1985 LODE</b>	Creation of a collegiate structure of teachers, families and, in secondary education, students: the <b>School Councils</b> . They had an important role to control and manage public schools, including the selection of head teachers. Creation of <b>free student and parent associations</b> in each school.	
<b>1990 LOGSE</b>	Does not change the school government. It was complemented with the LOPEG in 1995	
<b>1995 LOPEG</b>	The <b>School Councils</b> got the power to elaborate and approve the educational project of the schools. <b>The role of parents' associations</b> was reinforced due to their capability to appoint directly one of the family representatives in School Councils.	
<b>2006 LOE</b>	Kept the basic structures approved with the LOPEG 1995. Following the recommendations of European institutions and the goal of enhancing social citizenship competencies, a <b>subject of Education for Citizenship and Human Rights</b> was included.	

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<p><b>2013 LOMCE</b></p>		<p>Gave a greater role to head teachers, and <b>reduced the powers of the School Council</b>, which lost many of its executive functions and was considered a mere consultive structure.</p> <p><b>Elimination of the subject of Education for Citizenship and Human Rights.</b></p> <p><b>Importance of standardised exams</b> in primary education and secondary education</p>
<p><b>2020 LOMLOE</b></p>	<p>Recovered the main points of LOE. <b>Decisions in the school council must be taken by consensus, rather than by majority.</b></p> <p><b>New subject of Ethical and Civic Values:</b> human and infancy rights, the Spanish Constitution, education for sustainable development, and world citizenship.</p>	

Regarding the educational laws implemented by the Socialist Party, the first one is the Organic Law for the Right to an Education (LODE 1985), which created a collegiate structure of teachers, families and, in secondary education, students, that had an important role in the control and management of public schools: the School Councils. This kind of structure with representatives from the different groups had been demanded by the movements of pedagogic renovation and the left and centre-left parties (Fernández Enguita 1992), and it was connected with proposals elaborated in countries like France and Italy (Monreal and Viñao 1989). This law established admission criteria for students based, among others, on home proximity, and it determined that the School Councils were responsible for the selection of head teachers and for teacher appointments. Right parties judged that the School Councils were a form of self-management, so they disagreed with the creation of this structure and tried to reduce its roles in the following years (Feito 2014). In addition, the LODE allowed the creation of free student and parent associations in each school. These associations gained prominence in some later legislation, especially those representing families.

In the Law of Participation, Evaluation, and Government of Schools (LOPEG, 1995), the Socialists introduced important changes regarding participation. The School Councils gained the power to elaborate and approve the educational project of the schools, and the role of parents' associations was reinforced due to their capability to appoint directly one of the family representatives in School Councils. LOGSE (1990) and LOE (2006) socialist legislation followed a similar path. The Organic Law of Education (LOE, 2006), following the recommendations of European institutions (Keating, Ortloff, and Philippou 2009), introduced the goal of enhancing social citizenship competencies. For that purpose, it included a mandatory subject of Education for Citizenship and Human Rights. This subject was highly contested by conservative groups, especially by the Catholic Church, which claimed that it was a kind of state indoctrination driven by the socialists to justify their social laws like those recognising homosexual marriage. The struggle around that subject was extremely politicised; it hardly considered curricular and educational goals (Gómez and García 2013) and it finally led to the elimination of the subject by the subsequent government of the People's Party. For some observers (Feito 2008), including ourselves, the inclusion of a course like this was actually an insufficient measure to foster citizenship education, considering all the limitations of school democracy and participation reviewed here.

For their part, the three educational laws approved by the conservative parties (LOECE in 1980, LOCE in 2002 and LOMCE in 2013) have enhanced parental school choice and have reduced the powers of the School Councils and the role of students and family associations. The first of them, the Organic Law of the Statute of Schools (LOECE, 1980), imposed several restrictions on participation and fixed a difference in the mechanisms of participation between private and public ownership schools. The

participation of families and students at public schools had to be fixed by an official internal document of each school, but there was no specification about the authors of that document. Furthermore, the law established that the government was responsible for selecting and appointing head teachers. The last of the three conservative laws, the Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE, 2013) had a noticeable neoliberal foundation. Among others, it gave a greater role to head teachers, and it reduced the powers of the School Council, which lost many of its executive functions and was considered a mere consultive structure (Andrés and Giró, 2016). Some analysis suggest that this law naturalised economising discourses of standardisation, efficiency, and output control (Wilkins et al. 2019).

Until the approval of LOMCE, the inclusion of standardised tests was applied only by regional legislation initiatives, so not all regions had this kind of measurement (excluding international measurements like PISA). LOMCE established standardised exams in primary education, in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of secondary education. The initial version of this legislation considered additional final global exams in secondary and post-secondary education to obtain an official certificate of studies, but they were not included after political and social negotiations.

In recent years, the educational law that is being enforced, the LOMLOE, was elaborated by the Socialist Party and approved at the end of 2020. This law is, broadly speaking, similar to the law implemented in 2006. Regarding democracy and participation in schools, the new law has erased the changes introduced in the former conservative law. The School Council and the teacher council have regained their status as government and participation organs. The School Council has more functions, such as deciding the school budget, purchasing new resources, and approving organisational rules. Additionally, decisions must be taken by consensus, rather than by majority.

Management teams are not appointed by the administration anymore; they are appointed by a commission in which the teacher and School Councils participate.

Finally, a new subject of Ethical and Civic Values has been included in primary and secondary education, covering special attention to contents such as human and infancy rights, the Spanish Constitution, education for sustainable development, and world citizenship. The inclusion of explicit teaching of this content is coherent with the provision of civic education and the values proposed by liberal models outlined earlier in the text.

### ***General Reflections on School Democracy and Student Participation in Spain***

Taking into consideration the Spanish laws, we can identify a tension between conceptions of school democracy. On the one hand, the laws elaborated by the socialist party have emphasized a more classical view of liberal democracy, focusing its efforts on the creation of formal participation structures (mainly the School Councils, complemented with student and family associations), where representatives of the different schools' sectors could influence decision-making processes, with an emphasis on teachers and families. In addition, they have included curricular content regarding citizenship education. On the other hand, conservatives have tried to reduce the role of School Councils and promote a managerial model sustained on head teachers. Furthermore, they have considered school choice as the main form of participation, and they have given more importance to standardized testing.

The analysis of the differences over School Councils, possibly the main point of dispute for conservatives and socialists concerning school democratic functioning, can illustrate the processes affecting student participation discussed in the first sections of the article. From a liberal perspective, it was essential to create a kind of representative government in schools. In School Councils, teachers, head teachers, families, students,

and the administration would have a voice in decision-making through their representatives. However, in practice, School Councils do not have influence over many issues and, while families have a reduced level of participation, students have no real impact on it (Pérez-Díaz, Rodríguez, and Fernández 2009; Vallespir, Rincón, and Morey 2016; Feito 2014; Santos Guerra 1997; Silveira 2016).

Part of this outcome may be explained because the School Council has undergone many changes with the succession of educational laws, with a constant tension between an increment of its functions or its reduction in favour of the head teachers, so it has been difficult to develop its potential (Feito 2007). In addition, there may be other factors explaining the limited experience of student participation in Spanish schools after the implementation of this structure of representation.

First, the organization of the School Council does not seem to be optimal to constitute a central path to promote student participation. This organ deals with issues that are usually far from the interests and the knowledge of students (e.g., budget, bureaucracy) and, when students are represented (in secondary education, but not in most levels of primary education), they form a minority whose argumentation skills are limited to compete against a high number of more capable adults (Gil Villa 1995; Santos Guerra 1997). Other type of student structures, combining both direct and representative participation, such as class assemblies and student councils (García-Pérez 2014; García-Pérez and Montero 2014), could increase the possibilities, interest, experience, and capacities of students to participate.

Second, teachers' role in leading democratic processes is essential, using their knowledge and experience to guide participation and promote consensus (Kohlberg and Higgins-D'Alessandro 1987). As in other countries, teachers in Spain are not always keen on promoting student participation and, even given that condition, they express

they lack training to do it (Belavi et al. 2021; Saiz-Linares, Rodríguez-Hoyos, and Susinos-Rada 2019). The experience with School Councils shows that we must improve their formation to guide and promote student participation in different areas. Teacher education should include the explicit teaching of democratic and citizenship ideas, but also be embedded itself in democratic and participatory experiences (Estelles and Romero 2019).

Finally, the initial interest in promoting liberal democracy in schools has been decaying with the growing influence of neoliberal policies. Instead of improving its implementation, there has been a shift in the priorities. Whereas the structures of participation have seen their functions reduced, head teachers and their teams have gained power to promote a managerial model of government. In addition, the greater role of parental school choice has been associated to a greater interest in standardized educational outcomes.

### **Conclusions**

The aim of this paper was to analyse the evolution of student participation and school democracy in the transition between the liberal model of democracy and the implementation of neoliberal policies. We have presented a brief conceptualization of student participation. Then, we have argued that earlier designs of democratic government in schools were based on the liberal model, emphasising the creation of associations and formal structures of participation through representatives. Its implementation had some limitations, like the restricted conception of participation (not considering direct participation), and a lack of teacher awareness raising and training in practices to promote participation. The critical situation of student participation was aggravated by the rise of neoliberal policies, and the subsequent deviation from democratic aims and the focus on standardised outcomes. Using the case analysis of

Spanish state legislation, we have shown the limitations of liberal-based policies on participation and the state of transition and coexistence with marketisation policies. This analysis is coherent with some of the conclusions of the comparative study by Batista & Pereyra (2020), that highlights a constant tension between democratic-participatory and neoliberal ideological projects in Spain.

The analysis of the succession of general educational laws that regulate the educational system in Spain has illustrated the tension and coexistence between the liberal and neoliberal models of school democracy. Other countries, such as Australia, the US and England, among others, have included content on Citizenship Education and, for decades, have been interested in reflecting the importance of school democracy in educational policies and, specifically, in the participation of students (Naval, Print, and Veldhuis 2002). In addition, in many European Countries the neoliberal conception of participation, conceived as the right of families to choose the kind of education and school they prefer for their children, has progressively settled as a core value, while the participation through representation structures created under a liberal perspective has been maintained (Eurydice 1997; 2017). Nevertheless, in the case of Spain there has been a difference in the historic moment when both models started to coexist. Just after the end of Franco's dictatorship, the Spanish Constitution (1978) included this twofold view of participation, while in other European countries like Finland, France and the Netherlands, the participation of the different educational actors in school government started before the 70s, and the parental school choice became an axis for school democracy later (Egido 2014).

Considering the evolution of school democracy and student participation, the liberal model was strongly supported a few decades ago, but nowadays we can only see the remains of a system pushed badly on several fronts. It is undeniable that the efforts

inspired in liberal democracy have produced positive outcomes. On the one hand, they have raised awareness about the need to consider participation as an alternative to more authoritarian traditional models of school government. Despite their limitations, the structures of participation through representatives constitute the formal recognition that communities, families, and students should have a voice in school affairs. On the other hand, liberal democracy has contributed to the idea that, to work, democracies need educated and informed citizens, and citizenship competences should be considered as a desirable educational goal. Nonetheless, there is a clear incoherence between educational democratic goals expressed in liberal policies and legislation and the lack of democratic practice in schools.

There is a need to expand the democratic culture in our educational systems, and for that, actions in several areas must be carried out. As we commented in the second section of this article, the restriction of student participation to an elite of representative students produces the effect that most students are not involved in participatory practices (Mager and Nowak 2012; Rudduck and Flutter 2007). In this sense, representation structures could still be an option, depending on the conditions of each educational system and school, but they could be complemented with some spaces for direct participation (Andersson, 2019; Fielding, 2013; Sanahuja et al., 2020). These spaces for direct participation would provide all students with democratic experiences, and they would also contribute to the improvement of the quality of representation, because representatives have the possibility to discuss the issues with the people they represent.

Another important action is the expansion of our knowledge about democracy and participation in schools. As well as theoretically elaborating its goals and concepts, more practical ideas could be generated to implement democracy in schools.

Researchers and educators in general can work in this area, both elaborating new practices and analysing schools that are already implementing different models of democratic organisation (Apple and Beane 2007; Feito 2010; Feu et al., 2021; Simó-Gil et al., 2018). The theoretical and practical foundations of democracy could be included in teacher training programmes, to encourage the importance of these contents and provide tools for classroom and school democratic management. Students should also be explicitly instructed about democratic skills and the functions of student councils (Haraldstad, Tveit, and Kovač 2021).

All those actions would be useless if the policy focus is kept in easily standardised and measurable outcomes, and there is not school time devoted for participation. High-quality standards are crucial, and they are a public good, so schools must meet certain standards and that they must be accountable to society (Levinson 2011). However, the way neoliberal forms of accountability have been implemented across the globe (Sahlberg 2006) must improve to fulfil essential democratic and educational criteria. Standards can be constructed through public discussion, a process that would itself foster democratic values and relationships and would enrich our knowledge by considering the perspectives of the different sectors involved in education (Levinson 2011).

In addition, following Ainscow, Howes, and Tweddle (2006), ‘we must measure “what we value” rather than, as is often the case, “valuing what we can measure”’ (p. 79). Democratic and citizenship goals and skills are some valuable things that are hard to measure but, if we want them to be key factors in the educational policy agenda, and we want to promote them, we should debate and work harder in the elaboration of several types of indicators to assess them. For instance, some researchers are studying

the assessment of citizenship competences (Daas, ten Dam, and Dijkstra 2016; Ten Dam et al. 2011).

In essence, it is necessary to undertake changes in the way educational policies have conceptualised student participation and school democracy and to conceive of and implement new democratic practices in schools.

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