

Revolting families: the Catalan “opt out” movement and practices of resistance against Standard Assessment Test (SATs). An exploratory research project.

Abstract

Neoliberal policy technologies are spreading across the globe. Most go unquestioned and unopposed, but in some cases, they have provoked reactions and movements that reject or resist them. In this article we discuss a network of families (the ‘Opt Out’ movement) that is boycotting the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) of primary education in Catalonia. This movement began in 2014, and four years on it has consolidated into 1500 families from 79 participating schools. This paper draws on exploratory research based on in-depth interviews with six of these families and a review of articles, websites and documents produced by or about the movement. Analytically, we draw on Foucault’s concept of resistance (1982) in two different respects: resistance as a ‘tactical reversal’ and **refusal** as an ‘aesthetics of existence’. Starting with Ball and Olmedo’s (2013) discussion of the ‘care of the self’, the paper aims to understand these forms of resistance by parents as a form of ‘irresponsible care’ of their children, of the parents themselves and their teachers. These practices are also considered as a critical politicisation of the SATs (tactical reversal); and as pre-figurative practices that gesture toward forms of educational knowledge, school governance and subjectivities that are alternatives to those produced by neoliberalism (aesthetics of experience).

Key words

Standard Assessment Tests, resistance, families, opt out movement, Foucault.

1. Introduction

As Peter Moss stated in a blog entry of the Institute of Education (UCL), the OECD, which has become the *de facto* ministry of education of the world, now proposes to develop a ‘baby PISA’ called International Early Learning Study (IELS), an international assessment of early learning outcomes among 5-year-olds¹. According to the OECD (2016, 103), IELS is intended ‘to help countries improve the performance of

¹ <https://ioelondonblog.wordpress.com/2016/08/08/is-a-preschool-pisa-what-we-want-for-our-young-children/>

their systems, to provide better outcomes for citizens and better value for money. Comparative data can show which systems are performing best, in what domains and for which groups of students. It would also provide insights into how such performance has been achieved'. IELTS is a significant component in a complex apparatus of global neoliberal policies that, as a number of authors (Rose 1999; Ozga 2013; among others) have pointed out, govern us by numbers. The practices of assessment, classification, comparison, ranking and categorising have become the key techniques of modern governing and strategic devices in the reform of education systems around the world and the production of new kinds of subjects - head teachers (school leaders), teachers, students and families. In this sense, the Standard Assessment Tests (SAT), of which PISA, IELTS, PIRLS and all their national and regional variations are paradigmatic examples, are one of the key techniques of knowledge-power for neoliberal educational government – government by calculation (Power 1997; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Bradbury and Robert-Holmes 2017). We interact with others, make decisions, and think about ourselves in these terms. We govern, represent, and improve ourselves through the medium of numbers. These practices and technologies are multiple points of contact between government and self-government; they work to make 'government possible and to make government better' (Rose 1996, 45) in the interstices of everyday life. They produce a new rationality and a new subjectivity linked to the principles of competition, the market and profit, in relation to which we come to understand ourselves as forms of human 'capital' and as entrepreneurs of ourselves (Foucault 2010a). Numbers constitute 'a regime of truth [that] offers the terms that make self-recognition possible' (Butler 2005, 22).

It is in these ways that SATs are 'productive', they have the capacity to orient and produce particular behaviours, identities, practices and so on. As Foucault (1981, 94) has made clear: 'relations of power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment. They have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play'. However, as Foucault also suggests, there is no power without resistance. Indeed, as Foucault points out, "In order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations" (1982, 780). In that spirit, this article seeks to understand the 'opt out' movement of families opposed to the introduction of SATs into Catalan schools, within the framework of a powerful international movement against testing in

schools. We suggest that Foucault's conceptualisations of resistance and refusal are a useful tool for thinking about the actions of these families.

As we shall see in detail below, Foucault's concept of resistance (1982) is developed along two different dimensions: one as a 'tactical reversal', and the other as an 'aesthetics of resistance'. For the first, conflict is inherent in all relations of power and is related to a strategic idea of power. Here, resistance means reversing the mechanisms whereby this relation is sustained. The second is related to the relations of power embedded in and realised through modes of governmentality. Here resistance is founded on the possibility of forging autonomous forms of life in and through techniques of self-governing (Thompson 2003). Thus, we understand the concept of government here not only in relation to 'political structures or the management of states', but more generally, in Foucault's sense, to designate 'the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed' (Foucault, 1982, p. 221). Building on the latter, we suggest that 'opting out' may be a site of ethico-aesthetic self-fashioning that can involve a resignification of the categories of student, parent or school and a concrete practice of the care of the self.

2. The Standard Assessment Tests and the birth of the 'opt put' movement in Catalunya (Spain)

The SATs organised by the Catalan Ministry of Education² were first introduced in Catalonia in 2009, both in year six (11-12 year olds) and in the fourth year of secondary education (15-16 year olds). During the 2013-2014 school year, dozens of families from a primary school in Barcelona, the Turó de Cargol school, began a boycott which involved not taking their children to school on the days of the SATs in year 6. In the same year, 2013, the Spanish government introduced the LOMCE (Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa: Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality), an educational law clearly informed by a combination of neo-conservative and neo-liberal models and practices, that bureaucratized, centralised and introduced various forms of assessment, ranking and competition into the school. This law deploys many elements of the failed LOCE (Ley Orgánica de Calidad Educativa: Organic Law of

² The tests were carried out by the Catalan government; in Spain the regions have control over education. In Spain as a whole, not all the regions began SATS in the same year or even with the same model of tests.

Educational Quality), which the Popular Party had already tried to develop in early 2000 (Olmedo 2008). This context of educational government in the Spanish federal system means that in Catalunya there has been a double and simultaneous movement against the educational policies of both the Catalan and Spanish governments. On the one hand, families and teachers joined together in the ‘Yellow Surge’³ and ‘Yellow Assembly’⁴ that protested against cutbacks in education by the Catalan government and fought for ‘a public education of quality’; and on the other hand, within the framework of FAPAC (Federació d’Associacions de Pares d’Alumnes de Catalunya: Federation of Parents of Students’ Associations of Catalunya), the XEI⁵ (Xarxa d’Escoles Insubmises: Network of Dissident Schools) was set up to oppose the LOMCE on a more global level and geared towards the concrete promotion, articulation and dissemination of the movement of families that boycott the SAT.

The birth of the SATs boycott movement comprised three elements: a movement of families and teachers against the cutbacks of the Catalan government and in defence of public education (Yellow Surge -Yellow Assembly); a movement of families and some teachers against LOMCE and its policies (FAPAC; XEI – Network of Dissident Schools); and a specific movement promoted by the XEI to boycott the SATs, a policy initiated by the Catalan government but which fits perfectly with the ideals of LOMCE and the proposed extension of forms of auditing, the SATs and government by numbers.

In the 2014-2015 school year, the SATs were introduced into year 3 (8-9 year olds) by the Catalan Ministry of Education and by that time there were 1035 families and 52 primary schools throughout the region that publicly expressed their rejection of the SATs via the XEI and FAPAC campaigns. In just one year there was a significant increase in the number of families (from a few dozen to over a thousand) refusing to take their children to school on the days of the external tests, something that generated a significant amount of interest in newspapers and on television and social networks. It is worth highlighting that as well as not taking their children to school on the SATs days, these families set up self-organised alternative educational activities so as to show that ‘another form of education is possible, one very different from the standardised and

³ <http://mareagroga.blogspot.com.es>

⁴ <https://assembleagroga.wordpress.com>

⁵ <https://xarxaescolesinsubmises.wordpress.com>

competitive models that SATs represents'⁶. This boycott was repeated in the 2015-2016 school year when, according to data from the XEI, 1597 families from 79 primary schools boycotted the SATs. In the 2016-2017 school year, 1712 families from 82 schools boycotted the SATs and in 2017-2018 school year they estimate a similar or slightly greater participation in the boycott than in the previous year, both in the number of families and schools.

For the XEI⁷, there are five main arguments that underpin its boycott of the SATs. First, the tests of the third and sixth year of primary schools are the backbone of the LOMCE: fighting against the tests is fighting the LOMCE as a law that is imposed without political and social consensus and that wishes to extend the requirement of SATs that the movement rejects. Second, Catalunya had already created an external assessment culture with its education law, LEC (2009), which the XEI also rejects. Third, the Catalan Ministry of Education uses the results of the assessments to classify students in the first year of secondary school. Fourth, the primary school tests are anti-pedagogical and discriminatory because they a) assess only a small part of the learning of the students and only focus on just two or three subjects, ignoring integral development; b) control and condition the curriculum (teaching to the test); c) make the work situation of the teachers more precarious, immersing them in a system of results management and accountability that forces them to work within an environment increasingly infused with competitive relations. Fifth, none of the Catalan political parties nor the teacher unions have been willing to oppose neoliberal-inspired laws, assessments and tests like LOMCE and the SATs, so it is left up to families. 'If families don't stop the LOMCE no one will do it for us'⁸. For all these reasons, the XEI recommends that families organise and prepare themselves for their 'conscientious objection' to the SATs: that is, get informed, get organised, negotiate with the school how to do the boycott and communicate your action to the XEI so they can disseminate information on these activities in the mass media.

3. Resistance to the SATs: The dimensions of 'tactical reversal' and 'aesthetics of experience' (Foucault)

⁶ <https://xarxaescolesinsubmises.wordpress.com>

⁷ <http://diarieducacio.cat/blogs/fapac/2016/04/07/arguments-per-rebutjar-les-proves-de-la-lomce>

⁸ <http://diarieducacio.cat/blogs/fapac/2016/04/07/arguments-per-rebutjar-les-proves-de-la-lomce>

This boycott movement in Catalunya is now five years old, although in other countries, like the USA and England, such movements (at different scales) have existed for a longer period and, at least in the US, have had a growing influence on educational policy, as Hursh (2013), Bellamy (2015), Pizmony-Levy and Green-Saraski (2016 and 2017), Bennett (2016), Mitra, Mann and Hlavacik (2016), Wang (2017) and Kyrilo (2018), among many others, have indicated. It seems clear that - against the neoliberal policies that in effect, as Clarke (2012) analyses, depoliticise education by reducing political concerns to matters of technical efficiency - the analytical key point of the SATs boycott movement in Catalunya has been, as it has in the rest of the world, a repoliticisation of education. The families that participate in the boycott, as we shall see in the analysis of the interviews below, are rejecting the approach of the SATs as they have been implemented – namely, from an instrumental and apolitical position. A form of political rationality that, in the words of Clarke (2012, 306) ‘has worked to align education with the imperatives of the market and managerial technologies of performativity, thereby naturalising a view of education as a technical, instrumental rather than inescapably political enterprise’.

Building upon Foucault’s two dimensions of resistance, noted above, we can begin to analyse the boycott practices distinguishing heuristically between resistance and refusal. The former as both constituted and enacted through counter-conducts and as a struggle to wrest the control of the meaning of education away from the state - ‘discourse is the power which is to be seized’ as Foucault (1981, 52-53) puts it. The latter as perhaps more fundamental and a challenge to the grounds on which subjectivity is proposed within dominant discourses, based upon a willingness to subvert them. A subversion that is transformative rather than just disruptive and within which it is possible to make oneself thinkable in a different way. Practices of refusal demonstrate the possibility of something new in the world. They are vehicles or opportunities for exploring new forms of existence, of being ‘otherwise’. The data below gesture toward such refusals on the part of parents and on behalf of their children, and the children of others.

In this way, following the work of Thompson (2003), Ball and Olmedo (2013), [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process], and Gallo (2017) based on the late work of Foucault, we can understand the SATs boycott movement as comprising the two types of resistance that manifest in different ways. First, there is the ‘*tactical*

reversal of mechanisms of power'. In this 'negative' dimension of resistance, families act reactively to the SATs by opting out. When the families decide not to take their children to school on the day of the tests, they are undermining the main foundation of the SATs: the presence of children in the school. We can say, following [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process] that the families undertake a form of reactive resistance to technique, to the concrete and precise form of power-knowledge that the SATs represent. The families are asserting their freedom to not take their children to school on the specific days of the tests and make the most of this freedom (Foucault 1981, 12). In doing so, they escape the process of examination, discipline, normalisation and classification that the SATs represent. Or as [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process] put it, 'The test aims to reveal something profound about the learner, their nature and their capabilities (...) it is the test that introduces the "penalty the norm"'. Further, what the families seek to call attention to and condemn on the one hand and avoid on the other when they do opt out, is the SATs as a 'moral technology' that objectifies the children-students based on their performance measurement in order to later classify them as 'good' and 'bad' students, 'normal' and 'not-normal' students, strivers and skivers. Such a classification on the one hand 'unveils the truth of the child' and on the other enacts the key criteria of neoliberalism, of the 'neoliberal thought collective' focused on the ideal of *homo economicus* (Davies 2017, 157) that serves to produce this classification. The children are fundamentally transformed when they are produced, through the SATs, as a resource, as value, as future productive citizens, as human resources. This form of resistance as a "tactical reversal of mechanisms of power" also becomes a disruptive resistance to the forms of governance that seek to manage the behaviour of teachers, families and the students themselves and relations of these actors towards themselves in the spirit of neoliberal rationality. Thus, when confronted by neoliberal governance that 'makes us responsible for our performance and the performance of others' (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 88) the families become literally irresponsible, in refusing to equate responsibility with the rationality of performativity. By becoming irresponsible in relation to this rationality of performativity, they open a new ethical space of responsibility and care towards their children, themselves and their teachers that also allows them to make clear that the SATs are not as inevitable, despite the ideological dominance of neoliberalism, as they seem. In the words of Gallo (2016, 692): 'The ethics of the care of the self is the

resumption of another aspect of the practices of governmentality, it is also shown as a way to practice the resistance to political power’.

Second, we can think about the resistance of these families as an "*aesthetics of existence*". In relation to the first dimension of ‘tactical reversal’ we can ask with Hartmann (2003,4): ‘How can one have a positive means of resistance which does not devolve to re-action or negation?’ Hartmann’s own response to this question is: ‘The answer, as we know, emerges in the 1980s through discussion of caring for oneself and Foucault’s genealogy of the critical attitude’. This is similar to Thompson’s (2003, 120) response, which we can adapt by saying that effective resistance against the SATs necessitates a **refusal** of the types of individuality imposed through practices of self-formation and the promotion of alternative forms of subjectivity. In this second dimension, therefore, the resistance of families to the SATs is understood as a refusal, as an exercise of autonomy, an attempt to create autonomous forms of education or self-formation. We can add, with Postma (2015), that these practices of resistance make the families ‘critical agents’ not only capable of identifying the regimes of knowledge-power and generating ‘tactical reversal’ (**‘liberation’**) but also able to imagine different ways of educating, and forms of existence and putting them into practice as a form of freedom (**activation**). Here, with Ball and Olmedo (2013) and Postma (2015), we understand that it is in the realm of subjectivity where an important part of the response to SATs and neoliberal governance is played. **As a result, this form of resistance as an ‘aesthetics of existence’ does not propose an alternative to SATs – something ‘better’ or more palatable. Rather it seeks ‘to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of the type of individuality that has been imposed on us’ (Foucault 1982, 785). It is the cultivation of a self that is, on the one hand, a product of and a disruption of various discourses and, on the other, the practice of the art of living well, living differently, relating to others in different ways. It involves creative strategies of non-compliance, based on ‘opting out’, that then open up possibilities of ‘autonomous and independent subjectivation, that is, possibilities for the constitution of oneself’ (Lazzarato, 2009: 114). These are vehicles or opportunities for exploring new forms of existence, of being ‘otherwise’. What is at stake here is some of the particular ‘arrangements’ that are complicit in the creation of the contemporary school subject.**

Here the families use their capacities, knowledge, organisations and so on to produce what Foucault requires for a ‘politics of ourselves’: that is, some kind of environment that encourages critique, experimentation, dialogue and disagreement rather than the creation of a systematic alternative social world [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]. Some of the self-organised educational activities that were part of the non-SATs day included, among many other different activities, taking a microscope and analysing sheets of paper, water from a drinking fountain and so on; taking photos with the children and discussing their basic concepts (light, framing and so on); taking a calculator and playing games, doing tricks and experiments; and preparing and assembling huts with clothes brought from the children’s homes. In all of these activities, with a clear over-representation of the educated middle class as we shall see in the analysis of the interviews, the contingency of the SATs as *one* of the possible ways of assessing specific learning (genealogy) is made visible. In a number of ways these activities are transgressions, they open up the possibility of a ‘creative traversing of the fields of possible action’ (Hartmann 2003, 10) through self-organisation. As Allan (1999, 48) puts it, such transgressions allow ‘individuals to peer over the edge of their limits, but also confirms the impossibility of removing them’. If subjectivity ‘is a key site of government, a point of contact, where truth and power are articulated in the form of practices’ [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process] then within the practices of refusal of these parents, as an “aesthetics of existence”, as forms of ‘irresponsible care’ of their children and themselves, the mothers and fathers open up a sceptical questioning of the regime of neoliberal knowledge-power and generate dissonance in relation to the production of a specific subjectivity of infant-child and family, of *one* specific form of what they are – or what they do not want to be. This opens up a new space of education as self-formation in which a different kind of subject might be possible, a subject capable of generating free and autonomous educational practices, as a form of work on one’s relation to oneself and to others from a position of reciprocity, critique and action (care of the self – care of others). In this way, as pre-figurative experimentation, creatively glimpsing new forms of education, new relations and new subjectivities. It is not surprising that Saltman (2017, 114), in his research on how corporeal and subjective control in education has expanded and how it impacts the mind and thinking, places the opt out movements in the US as one of the movements that “seize back control of the body as part of educational justice movements”.

4. Methods and data

Through our own contacts and those provided by the XEI, we agreed via email to conduct a face-to-face interview with 6 families that had boycotted a year 3 and/or year 6 test in the 2015-2016 academic year, these comprise the research sample. There were three criteria for the selection of families: they had carried out a boycott of the SATs; territorial diversity (city-rural, and different villages, towns or cities in different regions of Catalunya); and, as far as was possible (which, as we shall see, was not very far) we sought diversity in the education and profession of the parents (social class). The semi-structured interviews were carried out face to face in 2016 and at the beginning of 2017 in the respective villages, towns and cities, and were recorded and coded using the Atlas.ti program. Our analysis of the interviews is both categorial and discursive. The categorial analysis is related to describing the responses provided by each family in the different research dimensions that we wished to examine in greater depth. These dimensions, in addition to the socio-economic data of the families, were based on the interview questions, and were: a) how and from where the interviewees received the information about the movement that proposed boycotting the SATs; b) the process of how and when they made the decision to boycott the SATs; c) what their main reasons for boycotting the SATs were; d) what role their children played in the whole process; e) what kind of doubts, debates and resistance they experienced: their own, those of their family, of the school, of other families and so on; e) what happened on the specific days of the SATs boycott; f) whether there was, for the parents, a political and social dimension to the boycott or whether it was just an individual affair; g) if they felt any doubts, uncertainty or fear during the process; h) how they assessed their decision after the carrying out the boycott; i) other comments they wished to add.

Having completed the categorial analysis of the interviews, we then proceeded to carry out a discourse analysis of each interview. The discourse analysis was undertaken to dissect, disrupt and render the familiar strange by interrogation (Graham 2005). Here we aimed to identify the development and relations of different axes of power and knowledge and the different boycott practices and dimensions. The focus was on analysing the discourse underlying these practices and “words”. Or, in the words of Foucault (1972: 214) himself: “In analysing a painting, one can reconstitute the latent discourse of the painter; one can try to recapture the murmur of his intentions [or] ... set

out to show a discursive practice that is embodied in techniques and effect... shot through with the positivity of a knowledge (*savoir*). It seems to me that one might also carry out an analysis of the same type on political knowledge”.

We also explored the websites linked to the boycott movement⁹ and traced press articles that, in 2016, referred to the movement. This provided us with a more general understanding of the movement, its arguments, organisation, actions, debates and controversies and served as background to the interviews.

5. Data analysis

5.1 Introduction

When Pizmony-Levy and Green (2016, 6) portray the typical US opt out activist they define him/her as a “highly educated, white, married, politically liberal parent whose children attend public school and whose household median income is well above the national average”. Our sample of six families, which we identified through personal contacts and through contacts facilitated by the XEI, shares a great deal in common with this US profile. As we shall see below in the section on contradictions, this generates tension in terms of equity that has also been analysed, for example, by Pizmony-Levy and Green (2016) and Posy-Maddox et al. (2016). Clearly this is a very small sample and the empirical claims we might make on this basis are very limited. These interviews were conducted as part of a more general attempt to make sense of the Catalan op-out movement: its origins, characteristics, revindications and *modus operandi*. As indicated above, the interviews provide us with an opportunity to think about the meaning and possibilities of forms of resistance to neoliberal technologies of governmentality.

Anna¹⁰, a 43-year-old secondary school teacher and doctor in biology, and her husband Xesc, a 42-year-old doctor in physics, represent the university-educated middle-class profile that comprises the core membership of the XEI. They have two children who go to a rural state school (in a community of less than 1000 inhabitants). Also fitting this profile is Marta, a 46-year-old research project manager with a degree in physics and a daughter who goes to a two-form entry state school in a middle-income district in

⁹ <https://xarxaescolesinsubmises.wordpress.com>
<http://noalalomce.net/>
<http://www.fapac.cat/>

¹⁰ All names were changed.

Barcelona. Like Anna and Xesc, Marta is native, married and from a middle class background. We also interviewed Consol, a white, 40-year-old married woman with a family of four and from a middle-class background. She has a diploma in primary school teaching and teaches in a rural primary school in the region of Girona in a community of less than 1000 inhabitants and her two children go to this same school. Her double role as mother and teacher adds complexity to her commitment as an opt out activist. The final interviewee within this profile is Belén, a 47-year-old chemical engineer and government employee, who is the XEI coordinator of all Catalunya. She is married and has two children who go to a two-form entry state school in a middle-income district of Barcelona. Like Consol, she is white middle-class and has a family of four. The other two interviewees, Paquita and Nuria, are somewhat different. Paquita is from a large town in the province of Girona, married with two children in a two-form-entry state school, where she is president of the parents' association. She completed her basic education and works as a sales representative. She is a white working class woman. Nuria, married, has three children in a rural school in a village in Girona of less than 1000 inhabitants. She completed her studies of basic vocational training and works as a carer. What is missing here, and missing in the membership of XEI according to the leaders of the movement, are parents from manual working-class backgrounds and minority ethnic parents. Two factors are involved here. First, according to XEI's own data and consistent with research conducted in the US, UK and France (Monceau 2011; Rollock 2015; Posey-Maddox 2016; Vincent 2017; among others), these two profiles are a minority in the boycott movement. And second, the difficulty in finding these profiles, both for XEI and the researchers.

The recent international literature on the opt out phenomenon - Putwain et al. (2012); Hursh (2013), Bellamy (2015), National Union of Teachers (NUT) (2015), Pizmony-Levy and Green-Saraiskt (2016 and 2017), Bennett (2016), Mitra, Mann and Hlavacik (2016), House of Commons (2017)¹¹; Wang (2017), Kyrilo (2018) among others - points to five main arguments deployed by the opt out mothers and fathers to justify their position.

- a) First, that SATs negatively affect the well-being of the children through their effects in terms of stress, tension, anxiety and self-esteem, stemming from the

¹¹ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news-parliament-2015/primary-assessment-report-published-16-17/>

pressures of examination competition, the fear of ‘failure’ and the use to which results are put, among others (negative effects on the well-being of children).

- b) Second, that testing narrows the type of education that schools offer since teaching to test leads to a focus on highly specific skills and concomitantly the loss of a more integral vision of the child and their socialisation and the marginalisation of subject areas that are not tested, like the arts and sport (narrowing of the meaning of education). The pressures of testing also make it more difficult for teachers to innovate and be creative in relation to the curriculum and their classroom teaching.
- c) Third, the SATs cannot measure the full range of capacities of a child due to the limitations of their own structure, duration and approach, among others (contents and structure of the tests).
- d) Fourth, the use of the results to facilitate the classification of the children in the present and future; to promote competition among the schools based on the results; to foster performance-related payment of the teachers, and so on (uses of SATs results).
- e) Finally, especially in the US and England, research has also detected a link between criticisms of the SATs and of the ensemble of neoliberal educational reforms that have been addressed to education in recent years, as we noted earlier (SATs as a part of neoliberal education policy reform).

In Catalunya, with an opt out movement that has only just emerged, these five main arguments against the SATs are also expressed by the organisations and individual families, although the way in which the discourse of the six families we interviewed is structured does not always have the same orientation, motivations or articulation as in the US or England. We will examine this after briefly looking at how the opt out movement was formed in different areas of Catalunya.

5.2 The birth of the opt out movement in Catalunya

In Catalunya, the tests for the sixth year of primary school are still not well-known to those families whose children have not taken them since they were first conducted in 2009 – and those of the third year even less so. As Anna, talking about the 2014-15 school year, explained: “*The third-year tests came as a bit of a surprise ... they informed us at the beginning of the year, but since it was the first year that they did*

them and we didn't know anything about them, we didn't pay much attention ... and then at Christmas we received an email reminding us of them and we began to think”.

For most of the families, the school has become the main source of official information about the tests and the FAPAC (Federation of Parents of Students Associations of Catalunya) the ‘critical’ source. As Paquita explained: *“I found out about all this through the FAPAC, who began to give talks bit by bit ... it was X who explained very well, very simply, and I wanted to know more about it (...). Afterwards you have the task of explaining it to the families so that they realise what might happen and we believe that we can reverse this”.* She continues explaining that *“After the talks of FAPAC with a teacher of the Palamós secondary school, we asked every school in the Empordà region (of Girona) for a representative of their teachers and their AMPA (parents’ association), and we created ‘Empordà on the move’. We joined together so as to protest against the LOMCE in general”.* We can thus see, and in the next section we will demonstrate, that in Catalunya the opt out movement forms part of a more general struggle by families and teachers against the cutbacks introduced by the Catalan government and against LOMCE, the neoliberal-neo-conservative Spanish law of 2013 (Viñao 2016).

The opt out movement emerged and developed in ways that were dispersed, informal, and rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) at multiple points, with diverse objectives and concerns, through a variety of contacts, links and collaborations. **As the XEI itself explains and some of the interviews confirm, some groups of families began the boycott without knowing anything about the XEI or having any contact with it. When confronted with a reality and novelty of the SATs, in different places in Catalunya and, in dozens of cases, without connection with the XEI, groups of families self-organised against the tests. These self-organising groups only became part of the general campaign later. Accounts of the campaign in the mass media made it possible for these informal and dispersed groups to make contact with the XEI.** As Marta explains: *“During the 2013-14 school year I was president of my school’s parents’ association, and we received information that in another school in Barcelona they were protesting against tests in the sixth year when they were still not doing tests in the third year. But we received this information shortly before doing the tests and we didn’t do anything ... the following year I attended the first conference on public education organised by the*

yellow assembly of Gràcia (a district of Barcelona) and there, in this conference a school explained its experience of protesting against the tests of the sixth year". But things were not at all easy at the beginning, Marta continued: *"I joined the yellow assembly of Gràcia and my daughter was in the third year of the 2014-15 school year and we tried to boycott my daughter's class, but it didn't work out due to some internal questions; but we got informed and we spoke with the parents and in this way ..."*. The birth of the opt out movement thus needs to be understood as a process that is in no way linear, it is fragmentary, halting and characterised by both advances and setbacks, the work of building individual discomforts into a form of social movement was reliant entirely on volunteers and depended heavily on personal and informal connections that are linked to the progressive production of a discourse that is cautiously and cumulatively shared. This discourse begins with FAPAC and the Yellow Surge against the policies of cutbacks and progresses towards the creation of the XEI with SATs as a key point of focus within the architecture of the neoliberal education policy.

From a more global perspective, Belén explains the birth process of the XEI in the following terms: *"In the beginning the XEI (2014), which is an informal network without any statutes or anything (voluntarily), included primary school teachers but we are above all families, which is why we began with the support of the FAPAC – there are some ten people who are active. And it is the families who take part in the acts of rebellion because the teachers are government employees and there could be negative consequences for them and we don't want that. And we don't want to confront the teachers who are already in enough conflict with each other due to the laws. With the yellow assembly in each region (Assemblies for the Defence of Public Education) we work in networks and many of us who are in the assemblies are also in the XEI and in the coordinating committee of the parents' associations of Gràcia (a district of Barcelona); others are in the FAPAC ... What's important is to be able to articulate shared discourses ... in the end it is this (...) Because from the beginning we believe that rebellion is the task of each school and each family based on the context, their strengths etc"*. With Deleuze and Guattari (1987) we could say that the structure of the XEI emerges and develops like a rhizome that follows a non-hierarchical logic and one of 'heterogenous unity'. Here and there, throughout Catalunya, and based on previous dynamics, family availability, the school response and so on, there appear 'shoots' of this subterranean and horizontal root that is diverse in actions and organisation and

unitary in discourse. This is how Paquita sees it: *“It was the XEI that created this formula of family boycott ... they have done a lot of work”*.

For the most part the response of the Catalan government has been to ignore the concerns and actions of the op-out groups. Nonetheless, Paquita described the intervention of one School Inspector who sought to thwart the boycott.

“This year we have a new inspector and when he saw that last year there were so many children that had not attended the tests, he said he was against this, that this was not acceptable and that he could go to the school whenever he wanted and make the children take the SATs on the day that he decided. We told him that he had to respect the opinion of the families ... But it seems that in one school this inspector turned up and they couldn’t do anything. This provoked a conflict with the children because we had been explaining, at their level, that these tests are useless, that it is best not to do them, that they will create rankings ... and then the inspector arrived, and he told them that they had to do the tests and the kids said that at home they had been told they didn’t have to do them”.

As Belén explained, the logistics of organising disobedience is not easy, even aside from such tactics. The tests of year 6 of primary school and year 4 secondary school are all on the same day which makes it easier to organise parents to not bring their children, although it’s difficult for the children to reconcile that the school spends a great deal of time preparing them (teaching to test) for tests that they are not going to take. But in year 3 (of primary school) it is more complex because these can be done over a period of two weeks and each school is able to decide if they want to concentrate them all in two or three days, or do a test every day during these two weeks, or a mix. How do you boycott a school that does a part of the SATs every day for two weeks? Things are even more difficult in those schools where the leadership team and the teachers’ meetings did not facilitate the boycott. In general, according to the XEI, there have been very few teachers and school administrations explicitly hostile to the opt out movement, but there has been a lack of knowledge and above all fear among parents with respect to what will happen if the inspector finds out and how their actions might affect the school, how it might affect the resources they have and so on. The Catalan Ministry of Education intended that all children take the tests but the XEI campaign was based on the

argument that taking the test or not is a decision for parents and that the ministry needed to respect this. XEI felt it was necessary to put together a manual based on solid legal advice to protect families and teachers from repercussions. There was also the specific question of arrangements to have children looked after when not at school on the days of the tests. As Belén put it: *“the question was how we could self-organise so that some fathers and mothers stay with the children not taking the tests, set up activities for them, do some form of activism, do things with other schools, go to the park, a museum and so on. We promoted this, and it was another way of visualising the boycott”*. This is an example of the collective construction of acceptable and creative solutions, actually, an ethical response [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process].

5.3 The SATs negatively affect children’s wellbeing and learning

The argument that the SATs negatively affect the wellbeing of children was also linked to the idea that these tests are done too early. As Xesc comments: *“In Finland and those countries where they start reading later, and also the second language ... it serves no purpose to start so early ... but we live in a society of the more the better and the sooner the better. And... you know what? It just doesn’t make sense”*. Anna, his partner, expresses a similar sentiment: *“when they are older I see it a bit differently, but the truth is in year 3 they are little ... in year 6 they’re not so little, because they are older then”*. Marta addresses this in similar terms: *“In the tests of year 6, people think that they are mandatory, I’m not sure how to say it ... it’s more difficult not to do them ... it’s like different. But in year 3, speaking with the teachers we have seen that they are not appropriate to the age, the tests are too long, too complicated etc”*. Finally, Belén echoes this same idea: *“In year 3 they are still very little, they will have time to study, to stop studying and all that ... they will have time But in primary school, this first period of development, we respect the rhythms of learning that might be different”*.

In a more general sense, Anna expresses the argument that schools organised in response to the logic of the SATs, were more likely to enact rankings and classifications of children and deploy ‘dividing practices’ and would as a result be less inclusive, and less geared towards the well-being of all children, more exclusive and unequal. As she put it:

“The model of assessing the children in year 3 (SATs) is to rank them from first to last in a list and I don’t like that ... I don’t think it’s a model that enriches ... the poor kid that has the bad luck to lack skills in this particular intelligence of language or maths but has skills in another that is not valued, is labelled as unskilful which favours competition, continuous comparing with others ... I don’t like it It fails to value many skills ... what these tests value is not the most important ... I would like schools to value other things like how the child develops, how we can help them to find their potentials in music, or the arts or emotionally ... but everything is about pigeonholing ... in year 3 you should have achieved this ... why? Who says so?”

Anna is pointing out some of the totalising and individualising effects of techniques of testing, differentiating, and categorising students (Foucault 1982). Marta echoes this view but also makes a more general point when she says: *“There has to be another form of assessing the system that is different from this one, the experts in assessment can surely find another way. These forms of assessment are not adequate for them and also this is part of the struggle for what type of school and education we want as well”*. Marta is suggesting here that the tests have a distorting effect on the meaning of school and what it means to be educated. In other words, that testing is defining and determining that which it purports to measure. Education is in danger of being reduced to a series of performances and their measurement. Here we see a plurality of refusals, resistances and struggles against local fixations of power in specific sites.

5.4 SAT’s narrow school education – teach to test - cannot measure children’s capacities and teachers’ work

Several of the parents interviewed made the point that the SATs are not just standardised tests that are taken on specific days and that offer a formative assessment of learning. Rather, they are the cornerstone of a new school culture that orients curriculum contents, teachers’ methods and student identities to the assessment parameters that the SATs represent (Wilkins 2016; [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]). The SATs are in other words disciplinary techniques that reorient behaviour, teaching and class dynamics. As Anna put it: *“These tests do not say, far from it, what the kids really learn. Further, the way this school and many*

others work by using projects, with hardly any lecture-type classes, doesn't fit in with these tests at all and so the children have to train before doing them and so what the tests show is not really real". Paquita is of the same opinion: "We know that there are schools that are training the children in order to take the tests. That is the right word, because they are not used to taking tests like this ... and since they are forced to take them, in order to also see how the teachers are doing their job, they train the children to do them in the way they have been told to". To borrow a phrase from Foucault (2010, 19), this conjunction of practices, what we call neoliberalism, makes 'what does not exist ... become something ...', something that is 'imperiously' marked out in reality. What Paquita identifies here are some of the mundane but significant and very real aspects of power at work in Catalan schools to reconfigure the meaning and practice of teaching and the teacher. That is, the imperious re-making of the teacher as a productive but docile neo-liberal subject position.

For Marta and Belén, the key argument for boycotting the tests is above all that they fail to represent the type of school that they would like for their children. The tests produce 'something' the parents do not want. In the words of Marta:

"We want a school that is not measured in this way, with external tests. What the external tests assess is not what we want and what's more they don't assess the school work, right? Or they assess a part that is not what most interests us, we want a school that is more creative, much more participative, that values the life experience of the children and not so much the results. We want a school that is not competitive, that doesn't generate competition between schools, that doesn't assess the work of either the teachers or the children ... I know that all this sounds idealistic, but that's what we want".

Belén is of the same opinion: "In the school that my kids go to they work on areas of interest and they don't do exams. I don't see the point of making my son do an exam that he has never done in his life.... What are the tests for? I don't want him to be affected by a test that what's more makes no sense within the logic of the educational project of the school". Furthermore, it's interesting that some of the mothers make a link between the SATs and new kinds of school inequalities. In the words of Marta:

“One thing that’s very clear apart from the fact that the tests don’t assess the school work ... (is that) in year 6 there is an English test and it’s clear that in the schools where the parents can spend money on classes outside the school they get better results in English and those that don’t, don’t. And here, what schoolwork do the tests assess? It’s clear in this case that they don’t assess the schoolwork. And to assess the school, they should agree on how the school works and it should be different in each case”.

In other words, particular sorts of parental behaviour are also interpolated by the testing regime, which produces “subjects of audit” that will be permanently monitored and compared against others, against standards of performance, and so on (Jary 2002, 39). Even if unintended, the tests elicit competitive and advantage-seeking behaviour from some parents producing another identity of parents related to competition, because tests are more related to create (other pupil, teacher or parent subjectivities) than just to measure. The tests are seen by such parents as forms of judgement addressed to their children which may have implications for their future school careers, which contributes to producing or reinforcing a view of education as an arena of individual competition for esteem, position and scarce resources. Again, this contributes to re-forming what school *is*, what schools *are for*, what children *are* and what parents are supposed *to be and to do* [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process].

5.5 Uses of SATs results: rankings, competition, exclusion

This point was made by Marta who commented, *“it might be OK for year 6 to do the tests ... but the problem is what we do with the results”*. Clearly, the purposes of the tests and what parents should make of the outcomes is not made clear or are indeed ambiguous. Nuria puts it like this: *“The main problem is what use they make of the tests and the results ... if the department really wants to assess the system, it’s not necessary that everybody does the tests, a sample of students could do them because if they are universal each school would have to be assessed differently based on the type of work they do”*. Xesc made a similar point:

“These tests classify schools based on the results ... and on the basis of this little number is a form of assessment of the whole school. And not just of this school, of this educational model, of these teachers, parents ... a number of a test of a

child that did it on that day ... as if one can place so much weight on something like that and how this, in the long term, can lead to serious distortions in the education system between schools creating differences, rumours, oh watch that school ... for example in Barcelona a school that worked perfectly well and with a group of dedicated teachers, precisely due to this rumour-mongering that circulated around the parents, ended up being a school with a huge percentage of immigrants”.

Xesc then sees the tests as having a homogenising effect and as making it more difficult for schools to respond to the needs and specifics of their community. Schools are judged by criteria that pre-empt institutional and school decision-making. Teachers’ professional judgment and expertise are de-valued by the demands of testing. The quality of education in any and every school is reduced to a set of numbers. Consol also expressed her distrust of the uses made of the data: *“Although they say that they won’t do public ranking of the schools now they might want to make them public for the families and this means creating ghettos, more competitiveness and it’s not about that. The tests create conflicts between schools and between families and that is not building in a positive way – quite the opposite...”*. Or according to Belén: *“Also the different results among the schools are those that permit or facilitate school segregation, because since the year 6 results are given to the families, the school and the institute, they make groups of different levels based on the results of the tests. I think it is more enriching, during compulsory education, to see that there are all kinds of people ... the labour market already selects you!”*. As indicated by a wide variety of studies (Bonal and Tarabini 2013; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Olmedo 2013; Verger and Curran 2014; Serpieri, Grimaldi and Vatrella 2015; Piattoeva 2015; Ellis et al. 2016; Wilkins 2015 and 2016; [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]; Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo 2017; etc.) regimes of school-focused testing ‘fit’ with and ‘feed into’ the formation of education markets and foster choice and consumer-based relations between parents and schools. Such tests are one of the ways in which the neoliberal state constructs the conditions of possibility for an economy of schooling; a ‘concrete and real space in which the formal structure of competition could function’ (Foucault 2010, 132). **In some way, parents are aware the tests are part of a more general ensemble of reforms and practices that act upon the experience of and purposes of education. As we can see with Marta, some parents can feel quite comfortable with**

this audit rationality (if children are “older”) that has been produced and spread in all social dimensions and, specifically, in a quasi-market school space (Olmedo 2008).

5.6 Critique of SATs as a part of neoliberal education policy reform

Another core argument is that which links the SATs to the contemporary global ensemble of neoliberal / neoconservative political reforms and this has two aspects to it that sometimes go together and sometimes are separated in the Catalan case [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]. On the one hand, in recent years Catalunya has seen an upsurge of a movement that seeks independence from Spain and some opponents of the SATs are not so much critical of the tests themselves but rather because they ‘come from the government of Spain’. Xesc explained how this was evident in some of the meetings held to discuss the tests and organise the boycott:

“The most political fact, that the tests come from (the Spanish Minister of Education) Wert, made some parents, who would probably not have come to the meeting of families to speak about the tests, take a position more favourable to not doing them ... families that are ideologically in favour of Catalunya’s independence said: ‘if my child takes the exam, I am favouring the laws of Madrid’. In fact, in our school, more parents were against the tests for these reasons than for our arguments about classification pressure on children and so on”.

Alongside this ‘nationalist’ argument is another kind of political consideration. As Paquita said: *“The LOMCE is a classist law that segregates, it is recentralising, with these exams they want to control core subjects and we believe that education is much more than this: working in groups, more critical aspects....”*. Or in the words of Marta: *“The tests of year 3 are clearly LOMCE and people don’t like this. Boycotting the tests is a way of protesting against LOMCE”*. Belén, from a more global perspective, referring to the mobility of policies between countries, explains how the XEI’s critique in relation to the SATs and the policies they frame has developed:

“Our discourse has also been developing. At first it was just against the LOMCE and now we see that there are many aspects of the LEC that we don’t like either. What the laws LOMCE and LEC both want is the commodification and the privatisation of public education. What we disagree with is the model ... which comes from England with its famous Academies that arose as a way of taking public

education and privatising it. And that goes against guaranteeing equality of opportunities ... if we don't have that, we are like in feudal times with its fixed classes or estates ... if you are born in this family you stay here, end of story”.

Here then the school boycotts in Catalunya are situated within a more general politics of education, both national and global. In both respects the boycott movements contain traces and referents to some more fundamental struggles over where is it that what counts as education is defined. This process, from resistance against specific laws to awareness of the global complexity of neoliberal reforms that bear upon the construction of their own subjectivity, can perhaps be read as a process that goes from resistance to refusal.

5.7 Paradoxes and contradictions

There are at least three contradictions or tensions evident within these criticisms of and concerns about testing. The first is about the age of children. Parents are more concerned about SATs if children are “little” than if they are at the end of primary or especially in secondary school where tests are seen as more “normal”. It is clear that this differentiation in the evaluation of tests based on the children’s ages has a certain internal contradiction since, in principle, the arguments against the SATs are against all the SATs, not just those of year 3. This contradiction, seen especially and explicitly in the parents with a higher level of education, weakens the goals of the movement since from this perspective, the SATs are taken to be inappropriate when they are applied too early, but not entirely unacceptable in themselves, as is the case in the arguments put forward by the XEI (they are anti-pedagogical, they encourage teaching to the test and so on). One way of understanding this would be that, in some way, the parents with a higher level of education, at least in part, take for granted that there are exams, tests, rankings in life, and thus find it ‘normal’ that older children take them.

This contradiction is closely related to a second one, when considering which parents are leading these criticisms and campaigns. Many of these leading families have a considerable amount of cultural and economic capital, but at the same time they see themselves as fighting against SATs for everybody and see issues of equity and inequity as key concerns in terms of the second-order effects of regimes of testing. Here we see a

movement that states its intention to fight for social equity in education, for equality of opportunity for disadvantaged children and against school segregation, but at the same time is made up almost entirely of non-immigrant middle-class families. In relation to this important contradiction, a body of research has questioned the effects and motivations of the participation of the white middle-class in this type of movement. Authors like De Carvalho (2001) and Vincent (2017) have drawn attention to the classed nature of relations between teachers and families and of models of parenthood; Monceau (2011) and Rollock et al. (2015) have identified the class and ethnic composition of Parents Associations; and Van Zanten (2005) and Posey-Maddox et al. (2016) have explored the diversity of class actions in relation to school choice. The broad argument of these criticisms is that white middle-class families colonise certain schools, parents associations and protest movements and use them to further their own particular class interests, with the effect of heightening class inequalities. This is one dimension of the boycott movement that, undoubtedly needs to be taken into account when analysing its broad effects, both expected and unexpected. However, our analysis suggests another aspect of social class that requires further consideration, that we hope to pursue. That is, whether some of the forms of resistance indicated above are at least in some respects inherently classed. Foucault's discussion of self-formation within ancient Greece might, at face value, suggest that they are.

Last but not least, the third contradiction is about the roles of teachers and head teachers roles. Some of them are, at the same time, running SATs or at least facilitating their implementation and critiquing them. While some teachers see SATs as having a positive role to play in making schools more accountable and more clearly focused on the raising of 'standards' – as these are represented by test scores - others are discomforted to varying degrees inasmuch as they see SATs as a threat to the well-being of their students and their own professional autonomy. But there is a difficult move to make from discomfort to action (resistance or refusal) and many teachers are captured by a sense of administrative responsibility to prepare for and carry out the tests.

6. Conclusions

Anna: *"It's another way of saying hey, things could be different, and schools could be set up differently and it's good that they could be set up differently ..."*.

Despite the contradictions noted above, that exist to some extent in all social and educational movements, the opt-out and boycott movement is significant, we suggest, in a number of ways. Not necessarily in terms of the numbers of parents involved, although the numbers are not insignificant, but rather in terms of the ways that the opposition to testing ‘interrupts’ current schooling ‘as normal’. For some parents, many more perhaps than are actively involved in the boycotts, the introduction of the tests has required of them that they think about what education is, or more particularly the sort of education that they want for their children and for other children. This is for some represented as concerns about the wellbeing of their children, but for others it raises a set of more general issues about the purposes of ‘the school’ and education. In effect, they must consider whether this, a test-based form of schooling, is what they do not want as the education of the child, and thus what they *do* want. As Foucault put it, “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are” (Foucault 1982, 785). In other words, if they refuse to have their child tested then they must think about their reasons for their refusal, what they are against and what they are for. They develop a healthy suspicion of the present. For some this goes even further, and the boycotts become an educative experience both for them as ‘political’ actors - in attending meetings, making arguments, articulating concerns, organising events - and for them in relation to their children and the children of others, both in their parenting and in the organisation of alternative learning experiences. That is, opting-out is a reconfiguring experience of refusal, involving ethical work done on themselves, and a process of formation of moral subjectivity.

The parents must consider what is worthwhile, what they want their children to know, to do, to be capable of, to be. For the parents, boycotting the tests both makes schooling contingent and begins to establish the conditions for the creation of new modes of subjectivity. This is a form of activation that involves some kind of engagement in the travails and failures of self-fashioning, and experimenting with and choosing what we might be and how we might relate to others. It is ethics as a ‘social praxis’ that can be practised in many different ways. However, we have to accept that we have almost no sense of the extent to which these parents undertake their boycott of SATs as part of a more general project of ethical self-fashioning.

Nonetheless, all of this is a very immediate and very relevant form of the politics of education and it points to profound tensions in relation to the school student subject in contemporary education that go well beyond the inanities of testing. What the boycotts also signal is the possibility of doing education policy differently. That is, in ways that involve and engage parents in making decisions about schooling and the purposes of education.

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