

## **Title**

Assembling New Public Management: Actors, networks and projects

## **Authors**

Andrew Wilkins, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK, [andrew.wilkins@gold.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.wilkins@gold.ac.uk)

Jordi Collet-Sabé, University of Vic, Spain, [jordi.collet@uvic.cat](mailto:jordi.collet@uvic.cat)

Tomás Esper, Teachers College, Columbia University, US, [te2288@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:te2288@tc.columbia.edu)

Brad Gobby, Curtin University, Australia, [brad.gobby@curtin.edu.au](mailto:brad.gobby@curtin.edu.au)

Emiliano Grimaldi, University of Naples Federico II, Italy, [emiliano.grimaldi@unina.it](mailto:emiliano.grimaldi@unina.it)

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## **Abstract**

In this chapter we adopt the analytic of ‘assemblage’ (Anderson & McFarlane 2011) to document how New Public Management (NPM) has been mobilised and recontextualised within different nation states over time through the unique combination of discrete yet tangled and globally diffuse political movements and configurations. To make sense of these issues empirically, we trace multiple iterations of NPM within five countries: Argentina, Australia, England, Italy, and Spain. We focus our attention on the intermediating actors, networks and projects that have crystallised to produce different possibilities for the emergence of NPM within these countries and reflect on their comparable yet uneven development as dynamic expressions of governance assemblages.

## **Introduction**

A key focus of this chapter is the different kinds of joining up work that make possible the assembling and recontextualisation of New Public Management (NPM) within different national and sub-national policy spaces. This means documenting how NPM takes hold, endures or becomes disrupted within different national policy spaces as the result of intersecting forces and interests, “including the alignment of divergent political motivations, the translation of different ideas, and the invention of new concepts and programmes” (Prince 2010, 169). To make sense of these issues empirically, we trace multiple iterations of NPM within five countries: Argentina, Australia, England, Italy, and Spain. We focus our attention on the intermediating actors, networks and projects that have crystallised to produce different possibilities for the emergence of NPM within these countries and reflect on their comparable yet uneven development as dynamic expressions of governance assemblages. Through making explicit the active processes through which NPM is made and contested within obscurely national and sub-national policy spaces, we draw attention to the fragility and multiplicity of NPM as situated expressions of contingent ideas, relationships and practices.

In the field of global education policy, multilateral, transnational, non-governmental organisations such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have been vital to the spread and maintenance of NPM. Elevated by these global organisations to something akin to meta-policy, NPM has been used to remodel (and discipline) schools and school systems around the globe according to a narrow set of economic and business objectives focused on “quality improvement” (World Bank 2012, p. viii) and “effectiveness of management control systems” (World Bank 2013, p. xiv). This includes producing schools and school systems that are comparable and commensurate with each other through their shared use of performance indicators and output measurements to calculate teaching quality, school management, inputs and infrastructure, and learner preparation. The result are schools and school systems that are vulnerable to capture from

standardised testing regimes and global measures of ‘good governance’ (Sellar and Lingard 2013). Yet, empirical studies point to the uneven development of NPM across the globe as the co-function or co-articulation of pre-existing laws, networks and institutional logics (Gunter et al. 2016; Wilkins et al. 2019). It is therefore important to move beyond any exclusive focus on the whole (the global policy movement we might provisionally term NPM) and focus instead on explaining how the parts that make up NPM are assembled and disrupted through accommodations and revisions on the ground, namely through the development of national and sub-national politics and projects that cohere to produce unique governance assemblages.

### **Assemblage thinking**

Inspired by actor-network theory (Latour 2005) and the emphasis in Deleuze and Guattari (1987) on the event of ‘agencement’ (meaning arrangement, fixing or fitting), the concept of assemblage has been deployed across various disciplines, from geography (Anderson & McFarlane 2011) and cultural studies (Puar 2007) to social anthropology (Li 2007) and political studies (Prince 2010), to achieve similar kinds of analytical work. This analytical work points to a decisive shift away from ‘synchronic’, ‘institutionalist’ or ‘structuralist’ accounts of social change where there is a tendency to a) reduce phenomena to a residual effect of undifferentiated power structures; b) overestimate the degree to which participants are captured in fields of governmental power; and c) bring to bear a perspective of the internal coherence and rationality of those projects. “In these accounts”, according to McFarlane (2009, 565), “power radiates from an authoritative centre that instils stability and order by recasting the periphery in its own image, and the assumption is that power is effective and extensive”. What is missing from some neo-Gramscian and governmentality accounts, for example, is a focus on the contingency of assemblages (Newman 2007; Li 2007), namely the ways in which different forms of ‘problem representation’ (Bacchi 1999) are resolved contingently in specific contexts to accommodate culturally and historically sensitive relations of power and interest. The

analytic of assemblage therefore functions as a useful interpretative device for capturing the multiplicity and over-determination that shapes the emergence and formation of things.

Assemblage thinking has been used in a variety of ways within the literature on global education policy to explain the diverse events and practices that crystallise to produce the conditions of possibility for the emergence of different kinds of policy making and policy worlds (Gorur 2015; Mulcahy 2015). Rizvi and Lingard (2011, 8), for example, draw attention to the “pragmatic compilation of a diverse set of ideas and conditions” that underpin constructions of social equity in Australian higher education, with a unique focus on the strange entanglements that help to bring heterogeneous elements together. In a similar analytical turn that seeks to capture the problematic alignments shaping the formation of education policy, Koh (2011, 268) uses assemblage thinking to demonstrate how Singapore’s government works to sufficiently “indigenize” their own national education agenda within and against global pressures to adopt universal techniques and standards, thereby articulating and combining diverse elements within their constructions of education policy. What these studies of global education policy share is a commitment to non-reductionist accounts of social change as unfinished, untidy and incomplete. This includes a focus on empirically documenting those dynamic spaces and practices in which multiple entities hold together and operate (or not) across multiple differences and contradictions to produce different kinds of “volatility, precariousness and mutability” (Brenner et al. 2011, 237) in the formation of things, be it structures, organisations and social movements. The suggestion here is that assemblages (regimes, technologies, rationalities, events) are the productive property of multiple forces and interests “that may not be as internally coherent and unassailable as they often seem” (McCann 2011, 146). In this sense, the analytic of assemblage is useful for conceptualising the formation of things as never anything but a provisional unity of difference in which sameness, relationality or equivalence must be imagined in specific contexts for the purpose of making “heterogeneous actants cohere” (Baker & McGuirk 2017, 430). The resulting formations, what we might call groupings, collectives, structures, or organisations, always bear the imprint of these internal contradictions as complex entities continually adapting to

multiple determinations in which ‘relations may change, new elements may enter, alliances may be broken, new conjunctions may be fostered’ (Anderson & McFarlane 2011, 126).

## **Global assemblages**

This chapter mobilises assemblage thinking to contribute to a growing body of education literature that sidesteps traditional concepts like ‘policy borrowing’ and ‘policy transfer’ through their understandings and descriptions of global policy movement. This is because such concepts, while vital to the development of ‘rational’ understandings of policy making in a globalised world, appear to overestimate the homogenising effects of globalisation on nation states - or, conversely, underestimate the resilience and capacity of nation states as localised assemblages to resist globalisation. This means remaining circumspect of “reified and homogenous accounts of modern power” (Bevir 2010, 425) that begin with an assumption of or bring to bear a perspective of the internal coherence and structural determination of global projects. Instead, we align ourselves with those policy sociologists and critical sociologists of education who conceptualise global policy movement as “increasingly complex, pluri-lateral and cross-scalar” (Mundy et al. 2016, p. 7; also see Verger, Fontdevila & Parcerisa 2019).

Among the many research agendas of this literature is a focus on the role of intergovernmental organisations, private foundations, transnational advocacy networks, and global business communities to the development of global policy spaces, viewed here as policy spanners working at the intersection of global and national interests (Srivastava & Baur 2016). In turn, a strong analytic focus of this literature is a commitment to ‘deparochialise’ (Lingard 2006) education policy analysis through a nuanced view of policy making and policy worlds as translocal, mobile and networked. Relatedly, the concept of assemblage connotes emergence and plurality. It offers a “reading of power as multiple co-existences” (Anderson & McFarlane 2011, 125) constituted by a range of forces and interests flowing

from multiple relations of authority. This means critiquing and resisting ‘methodological nationalism’ as a basis for education policy analysis; that is to say, “limiting one’s analysis to state policies and politics within the state and assuming a fixed linkage between government and territory in a single nation” (Simons, Olssen & Peters 2009, p. 38). Instead, this literature captures the cross-scalar generation and flow of new global policy networks and their complicated distribution and insertion at the national and subnational level (Bartlett & Vavrus 2016).

At the same time, this literature acknowledges the resilience of nation states, regions and local governments as unique and (un)stable products of the assembling work that occurs between different path dependencies and localised practices of government and value systems, in effect pointing to the limits of global policy influence and inter-governmental policy convergence. This necessitates a context-sensitive appreciation for the micro-political strategies through which national and regional adaptations and refusals of education policy are enacted and transformed (Ball et al. 2012). In the spirit of this perspective, we adopt the analytic of assemblage as an interpretative strategy to trace multiple iterations of NPM within five countries: Argentina, Australia, England, Italy, and Spain. Here we focus our attention on exploring how NPM is provisionally secured through making various ideas, objects, relations, and practices cohere in ways that form governance assemblages, albeit assemblages that sustain and reproduce themselves through the continuous management of tensions and contradictions flowing from their problematic alignment with pre-existing practices, value systems and cultures. The result is a nuanced appreciation for the ways in which policy making and policy change is both “embedded” and “travelling” (Ozga & Jones 2006, p. 1).

## **Governance**

Since the 1990s, governments in mostly Anglophone countries have responded to globalisation by experimenting with new forms of horizontal governance as strategies for coping with the complexity of governing plural, diverse societies and the multitude of conflicting value systems flowing from those societies. Horizontal governance may refer to public-private partnerships (PPPs) (Beech & Barrenechea 2011), choice architecture (Wilkins 2013) or citizen participation (Bua & Escobar 2018), all of which are designed to locate citizens in new kinds of relationships and practices that extend beyond the “clunky command or instrumental contract relationships” (Davies and Spicer 2015, p. 226) they may share with the state. This includes mobilising non-state actors and organisations from the charity and private sectors as policy interlocutors who ‘consensually’ work with citizens to produce more flexible, efficient and responsive forms of service delivery. Horizontal governance therefore points to a disaggregation of state power and its dispersal outwards and downwards towards local organisations and communities. Viewed similarly by Third Way Leftists, economic liberals and free-market ideologues as an important strategy to dismantling the constraining effects of top-heavy bureaucracy on the capacity of organisations and communities to self-innovate or build resilience, horizontal governance is sometimes celebrated by those on the political Left and Right as an empowering tool for producing democratic contexts in which policy networks and policy communities work towards conflict resolution or trust building with stakeholders (for a critique of this view see Davies and Spicer 2015). Governance, on this view, speaks to certain discontents and grievances, notably a strong characterisation of centralised or political authorities as oppressive or inefficient with “the people requiring rescue from an over-bearing, intrusive and dominating public power” (Clarke 2005, p. 449).

Yet despite its widespread use by policy makers, politicians and supranational organisations around the globe, governance is a notoriously slippery concept owing to the different ways in which it is deployed normatively and conceptually. From a deliberative-interactive perspective, governance produces “interactive learning” environments (Kooiman 2003, 33) that are essential to communicative reasoning and to enabling diverse peoples to arrive at mutually influencing sets of goals and ideals. At



the same time, “governance is mainly interorganisationally oriented, trying to improve coordination of governments with the other actors who are necessary to deliver services or implement policies” (Klijn 2012, p. 213). On this account, governance can be used to describe how governments intervene both formally and informally through the provision of directives, rules and regulations to shape the way organisations and individuals conduct themselves (Wilkins and Gobby 2021). This includes the strategic mobilisation of intermediary actors and organisations as important ancillaries to the realisation of government goals. Viewed through the analytic of governmentality, governance can be described as a political and economic rationality aimed at cultivating spaces and relations for the realisation of particular modes of participation and self-governing among citizens (Miller and Rose 2018; Wilkins 2016). Here, governance emerges as a “self-contradictory form of regulation-in-denial” (Peck 2010, xiii), a “kind of bridging concept between the bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic visions of politics” (Eagleton-Pierce 2014, p. 16).

## **New Public Management**

If we understand governance as the formal and informal mechanisms to secure power and authority over something or someone, for the purpose of increasing efficiency, nudging behaviour or strengthening accountability (Wilkins 2021), then NPM is one characterisation of governance in modern societies. As a concept, NPM emerged during the 1980s in mostly Anglophone countries, at a time when political conservatives and economic liberals – or the ‘New Right’ – were calling for a ‘minimal state’ disciplined by fiscal responsibility and competition. Borrowing from public choice theory which characterises state-employed professionals working in public and non-commercial organisations as ‘rational utility maximisers’ motivated by profit and self-interest (Niskanen 1973), NPM aims to limit the discretion of public servants through delimiting the sphere of action in which they operate. These strategies in delimitation have taken on various forms. On the one hand, it means subordinating politics to economic evaluations through the provision of “output controls...private-

sector styles of management practice [and] greater discipline and parsimony in resource use” (Hood 1991, pp. 4-5). On the other hand, it means affecting behaviour change through the creation of structured incentives (user choice, competition, external inspection, high-stakes testing, and performance benchmarks) designed to motivate certain behaviours while penalising others. On this account, NPM is a key element of the movement from government to governance since it both celebrates self-government and strengthens the post-bureaucratic control of the formation of self-government.

In education, NPM can be traced to the proliferation of a wide range of contract, corporate and performative measures of accountability (Ranson 2003) that enable schools and parents to be located through the exchange and intersection of producers and consumers. As a result of these producer-consumer relationships, school leaders, school governors and teachers find themselves operating within very strict relations of power and authority whose discursive boundaries are always being redrawn around what constitutes ‘quality’ and ‘improvement’ from a business management or consumer perspective (Wilkins 2016). These discursive boundaries work by placing injunctions on judgement and behaviour so that school leaders and governors are compelled to discipline themselves according to the explicitness of economic evaluations or what Power (1997) calls ‘rituals of verification’, namely budget monitoring, target setting and risk management, among other market prerogatives and business ontologies.

There are some normative differences between NPM and governance worth highlighting, the main one being that governance appears to embrace horizontal steering mechanisms to solve issues of complexity, including intermediary associations like citizen participation and PPPs, while NPM is a goal-oriented technical project that relies on business instruments and market prerogatives to reduce complexity to properties of governable systems that can be monitored and controlled (Klijn 2012). At the same time, it seems misleading, at least in the context of contemporary approaches to public sector

organisation both in the Global North and Global South, to characterise NPM and governance as discrete and separate models of public administration and management. NPM has mutated significantly since its inception in the 1970s, to the point where it seems more appropriate to acknowledge the various ways in which NPM has become integrated with the politics and projects of contemporary governance. Osborne (2006), for example, introduced the concept of New Public Governance (NPG) to capture the ways in which governance is overlaid with NPM. During 1997-2010 in England, for example, the New Labour government emphasised ‘stakeholder governance’, namely the election and appointment of parents, pupils, staff, and local community members to school governing bodies, as a priority for enhancing local accountability and coping with the complexity of governing diverse populations (DfES 2005). This multi-level governance approach to strengthening accountability was predicated both on top-down prescriptions for effective governance modelled on central government policy decisions and bottom-up innovation of effective governance through improved bargaining and trust building between stakeholders. The concept of NPG therefore “posits both a plural state, where multiple inter-dependent actors contribute to the delivery of public services and a pluralist state, where multiple processes inform the policy making system” (Osborne 2006, p. 384)

On this account, NPM and governance can be understood as rationalities that often combine in contemporary forms of governmentality, interacting in productive ways and mutually supporting each other’s aspirations. Similarly, Klijn (2012, 215) observes that NPM and governance rely on each other for their development, making them mutually complementary:

“NPM offers the possibility of order and control but has difficulty coping with the real-life complexity of governing, while governance may help with that but cannot satisfy our longing for forms of control and our search for mechanisms to evaluate, in a clear-cut way, the performance of governments”

The following discussion builds on and adds to these insights through tracing the emergence of multiple iterations of NPM in different national policy spaces within the time period 2000 to the present. A focus on our analysis concerns how NPM crystallises through the entanglement of specific ideas, actors, networks, and projects. The resulting formations, what we are calling governance assemblages, generate discrete yet often similar types of social relations and institutional logics in different national policy spaces.

### **Rendering technical: Examples from Australia and England**

In England and Australia, the integration of NPM with the politics and projects of governance can best be described, to borrow a phrase from Li (2007, 265), as a process of “rendering technical”. Australia is a federated nation of eight states and territories, with the Constitution making each state responsible for their education system. The federal government has progressively increased its influence over state education policies and practices, especially through the creation of intergovernmental bodies, funding agreements with each state, a national statutory curriculum body, and a teacher professional standards agency (Savage 2020). However, as each state government is ultimately responsible for their education system, policy making and policy enactments in Australia are variable and uneven across the country owing to the delegation of budget responsibility, market competition, corporate management, and the professionalisation of school boards (MacDonald et al. 2021).

Initiated by the conservative Liberal Party in the state of Western Australia as an election commitment in 2008, the Empowering School Communities policy (Liberal Party of Western Australia 2008)

emphasised greater independence and local self-governance focused on community involvement, school-based management and school boards. Following the election, the policy was developed into the Independent Public Schools (IPS) programme by the Department of Education, which incorporated into its design local stakeholder input and imported international research (Gobby 2016). While the policy of IPS was couched in the language of ‘local empowerment’ and ‘local governance’, the implementation of IPS appears to normalise many of the business instruments and market prerogatives that define NPM (Hood 1991). As Gobby (2016) reveals, for headteachers who opted into the IPS programme, ‘governance’ is enacted primarily through NPM strategies which include headteachers having greater control over the management of their school’s budget, day-to-day operations, staff recruitment and small contracts, with increased oversight from professionalised school boards and steering from centralised authorities. Participative governance and horizontal steering mechanisms are displaced to make way for the expansion of new ancillaries of NPM, namely professionalised bodies. From this perspective, the IPS programme embodies a governance assemblage that articulates and combines a range of discourses and practices borrowed from NPM (EAC 2009; Fitzgerald & Rainnie 2012; Wilkins et al. 2019). The result is a facile synthesis of seemingly conflicting and contrasting tendencies whereby “heterogeneous elements come together in a non-homogeneous grouping” (Anderson & McFarlane 2011, 125).

Following the implementation of Western Australia’s IPS program, in which teacher union resistance was unable to gain political or public traction as it had in the past, school autonomy policies were introduced in the state of New South Wales in 2012 and in the state of Queensland in 2013. Western Australia’s palatable form of autonomy was nevertheless reconstituted and recomposed in each context, with the movement of policy ideas and practices mutating as they were translated and assembled in new locations (Clarke et al. 2015). This was particularly evident in New South Wales. Between 2009 and 2010, the state labour government commissioned US management firm Boston Consulting to review New South Wales Department of Education and Training expenditure for the purpose of achieving financial savings (CFESE 2020). This was supported by complementary reports

by the Commission of Audit (NSWCOA, 2012) and private consulting and accounting firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers (see CFESE 2020). These networks of “middling technocrats” (Baker and McGuirk 2017, 438) therefore helped to publicly cast school autonomy as a domain of financial efficiency and cost-cutting. This, in effect, worked to render governance technical through tightening its relationship to and dependence on NPM as a condition of its legitimacy and naturalisation.

While the IPS in Australia draws heavily on the promotion of discourses of decentralisation and devolved management articulated by global organisations like the World Bank and the OECD, IPS is not a direct outcome of these contexts. IPS is distinctive through its rejection of the kinds of ‘exogenous privatisation’ that has accompanied NPM reforms in other countries like the US, namely “the opening up of public education services to private-sector participation on a for-profit basis and using the private sector to design, manage or deliver aspects of public education” (Ball and Youdell 2007, 14). Moreover, the IPS in Australia has been laboured over through a continued commitment to the industrial platform governing the employment conditions of state-employed school teachers and used the department of education as a strategic policy centre and support for schools (Wilkins et al. 2019). This may be contrasted with the development of NPM in England where education reforms have largely been pursued on the basis of curbing, rather than preserving or enhancing trade union powers. This includes diminishing the powers of locally elected governments to hold schools to account for the communities they serve (Wilkins 2016).

Similar to Australia, England has ushered in a range of education policy reforms that are ostensibly in favour of community empowerment and local governance, yet in practice point to the expansion of more entrenched forms of business practices in schools. The introduction of the Education Act 1980 and Education Act 1986 by the then Conservative government in England sought to overturn many of the political arrangements that dominated the 1960s and 1970s, namely the “tight party management and paternalistic style of the Labour administration” (Sallis 1988, p. 114). In response, the then

Conservative government introduced reforms that stripped local authorities of their powers to nominate members to the governing body, often criticised as politically motivated. Instead, schools were granted the freedom to co-opt members to their governing body and parents were granted statutory rights to be elected as school governors. This came to be known as ‘stakeholder governance’.

Similar reforms were adopted by the Labour government in 2000 with the introduction of city academies (or ‘academies’, as they are known today) under the Learning and Skills Act 2000. The academies programme was designed to encourage alternative providers, specifically charities, universities and social enterprises set up as private limited companies, to oversee management of underperforming schools in disadvantaged, urban areas, including professional discretion over budget monitoring and allocation and admissions and staff pay and conditions. In 2010 the Coalition government (formed by the Conservative and Liberal Democratic party) introduced the Academies Act 2010, making it possible for all schools to convert to academy status by joining or creating their own foundations or trusts. In effect, academy trusts replaced traditional government structures, such as the Office of the Schools Adjudicator who are responsible for resolving disputes about the transfer and disposal of school premises and assets and ruling on objections to and referrals about state school admission arrangements.

Since the expansion of the academies programme in 2010, however, governance has dramatically moved away from any explicit focus on ‘stakeholders’ and instead shifted towards a strong focus on ‘professionals’ as the principal agents of governance (Wilkins 2016). The delegation of discretionary powers to managers and governors to pursue important strategic and budgetary decisions outside the purview of local government authority has meant that schools are seen as inherently risky (Wilkins and Gobby 2022). Schools are viewed as vulnerable to various abuses and accidents, including financial mismanagement, related-party transactions (when academy trusts buy services from a

company run by one of its members or trustees), and opaque, sometimes corrupt governance structures. To limit the schools' exposure to these abuses and accidents, successive governments in England since 2010 have encouraged schools to appoint particular people to their governing bodies to improve monitoring and control of their internal operations, specifically "business figures" (Former Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education Lord Agnew quoted in Smulian 2019) and "skilled professionals" (Former Education Secretary Damien Hinds quoted in Whittaker 2018). Here we can observe how NPM emerges as a dominant framework for naturalising various forms of corporate governance in which accountability is intimately tied to the capacity and willingness of schools to behave as high-reliability organisations, a process that closely resembles what Li calls 'rendering technical': "extracting from the messiness of the social world, with all the processes that run through it, a set of relations that can be formulated as a diagram in which problem (a) plus intervention (b) will produce (c), a beneficial result" (Li 2007, 265).

### **Varieties of political resistance and transformation: Examples from Argentina, Italy and Spain**

There are exceptional cases however in which the enactment of NPM produces more varied, mutated forms of governance. Three countries that highlight these permutations are Argentina (Beech & Barrenechea 2011), Italy (Grimaldi et al. 2016) and Spain (Verger & Curran, 2014).

#### **i. Argentina: Political shifts and local resistance**

During the 1990s, Argentina introduced several interrelated, yet contradictory education policy reforms influenced by the Washington Consensus. These ranged from decentralisation to a national quality assessment and the expansion of private provision of public education (Ruiz 2020). At the



same time, these reforms actively resisted marketisation as a driver for policy development (Beech & Barrenechea 2011). In the decades that followed (2000-2020), Latin America has become the target of policy interventions by the OECD and the World Bank who have continually advocated for more devolved school autonomy and the roll-out of test-based accountabilities in the region (Rivas, 2021). For instance, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico stand out as countries adopting these NPM initiatives to reform their education systems. Argentina, however, exemplifies both resistance to and accommodation of these reforms. The result is a governance assemblage made up of contingent relations and practices that are unique to the political development of Argentina.

In the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis in Argentina, the Nestor Kircher (2003-2007) and Cristina Kirchner (2008-2015) administrations committed to a process of economic recovery and public sector expansion. Kirchner's policy rhetoric at the time was couched in the language of a strong state and public education (Beech 2019). Argentina's economic recovery under Kirchner led to an increase in public expenditure on education including the expansion of compulsory schooling from 9 to 14 years (Claus & Sanchez 2019). Notably, Argentina became an early participant in PISA from the 2003 cycle (Rivas 2021) and sustained the tri-annual national quality assessment programme throughout this period. However, despite participation in PISA and increased resource allocation to education, there was a clear absence of any systematic planning for the monitoring and evaluation of reform goals (Sanchez & Rivas 2021). In 2015, however, the 'Cambiamos' coalition government headed by Mauricio Macri assumed office and introduced a political rhetoric that more closely resembled NPM approaches to education governance. Under the Cambiamos government, several policy reforms developed under Kircher were revised to bring about the conditions that would allow Argentina to become an OECD member (Carrió, 2019). In line with OECD's recommendations for test-based accountability, the Cambiamos government reformed the national assessment plan, calling it 'Aprender', so it could be conducted annually instead of tri-annually and on a census-based instead of a sample, as well as pushing for school-level test results by school to be made publicly available (La Nación, 2017). Although these political shifts point to a clear intent in assigning responsibility for

educational performance to schools (Felfeder et al. 2018), Cambiemos was unable to undermine the continued political influence of teacher unions and thus failed to modify the existing legislation to publicise school-level results.

## **ii. Italy: Continuities and disruption**

A different and more peculiar governance assemblage can be observed in the Italian education system (Grimaldi et al. 2016). Here the cross-scalar movement of NPM ideas and bureau-professional legacies and their integration with governance as a participative political project has produced a fragile and paradoxical alignment of divergent political projects. Up until the mid-1990s, education in Italy was governed through mechanisms of centralisation and hierarchy, although in the shadow of hierarchy, autonomy and collegiality were guaranteed to headteachers and teachers. Education policy therefore operated at the intersection of processes of centralisation and decentralisation, with the latter giving way to various forms of local democratic and participative professional governance at the level of the school.

The emergence of NPM in Italy was precipitated by a different set of dynamics to the ones observed in England and Australia. Since the late 1980s, the Italian policy agenda has been disproportionately influenced by various global critics of welfarism including European institutions (EU) and international agencies like the OECD, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In combination with an endogenous political crisis, these pressures helped to create the conditions for the distribution of NPM in the Italian public administration and, relatedly, in the education system. After decades of policy impasse, the OECD and the EU intervened to deliver a modernisation reform agenda with welfarism and bureau-professionalism constructed as an impediment to reform (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2012). Key recommendations from OECD and EU for education policy reform in Italy

was to modernise education governance through decentralisation and autonomy; redesign the teaching profession and school management; roll-out evaluation procedures to measure quality and effectiveness in ways that make them externally and internally commensurable; and consolidate public finance and make public expenditure in education more efficient and effective. The EU made these recommendations requisites for Italy to join the European Monetary Union (Bassanini 2009).

A key moment of translation and stabilisation of these policy ideas was the 1997 School Autonomy Reform (SAR), which was launched by a centre-left Italian government influenced by UK New Labour. SAR paved the way for the introduction of devolved management and decentralisation in Italy, loosened the hierarchical relationship between the Ministry of Education and schools, with the Ministry maintaining control on the design of national curricula, threshold performance levels and the financial and professional resources. Local and regional governments continued to be responsible for local educational planning, school buildings and organisation and local curricular priorities (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2012). Moreover, SAR emphasised localism and participative and community governance as key rationalities for its development following international recommendations (see OECD 1998). Interestingly, SAR introduced a tension in the Italian governance assemblage that created the conditions of possibility for multiple re-alignments. If governance relations were made more complex and heterarchical (Kooiman, 2003), the need emerged for new modalities to cope with this complexity. International organisations, often in alliance with influential private and philanthropic actors and think tanks, offered their recommendations including a hotchpotch of centralising and decentralising reforms, namely i) the preservation of national standards as tools for assessment, system evaluation, benchmarking, and comparison; ii) the strengthening of alignments between of schools and government's aspirations through test-based accountability and the generation of data through performance monitoring which could be used to guide decisions on resources allocation, equity policies and improvement; and iii) the publication of test results to stimulate competition between schools and produce informed users of education services. Unions, schools and professionals

fiercely resisted the translation of proposed recommendations into policy, interpreting them as a threat to their professional autonomy and collegiality.

Education policy in Italy since the early 2000s to the present day can be interpreted as the search for a solution to this tension. Centre-left governments have adapted and translated these recommendations to emphasise a set of policy drivers that aligned with some of the trends already observed in England, Australia or Argentina, namely a commitment to a social-democratic or deliberative-interactive ideal of governance (Kooiman 2003) that activates and empowers schools and professionals to manage themselves as self-governing entities operating at the intersection of government and local stakeholders. Right-wing, neoconservative governments have, on the other hand, challenged and revised the liberal democratic appeal to a communicative vision of governance under the auspices of a neocentralist appeal to the power of central and peripheral bureaucracies to exert a strong influence on schools' financial and organisational autonomy. In both cases, the enactment of these ideas has been sustained and managed within a rigid framework of NPM that positions service users as clients and which frames school autonomy and devolved management as entrepreneurial activities to be continuously monitored and evaluated.

A key moment of re-alignment, in this respect, are the early 2010s, when the 'modernisation' of the Italian education system was accelerated through the convergence of several dynamics that facilitated the transformation of NPM principles into key regulations and technologies of governance, culminating in 2013 in the creation of a national evaluation system (SNV) and the introduction of a 'thin' system of test-based accountability (Verger and Fontdevila 2022). The enactment of the SNV evaluation technologies (national testing policies, quality assurance and accountability measures) have been fiercely contested by unions, teachers' associations and intellectuals since their introduction. Yet, more than ten years of their enactment has resulted in the creation of a tacit consensus among Italian government officials, the public opinion and the majority of teachers on their necessity and/or

acceptability. It is on the basis of this acquired tacit consensus that the EU and its institutions continued to apply pressure to Italy to pursue modernisation of its education system through NPM principles and tactics, demanding more and more specific measures to be adopted, namely national benchmarking of standards through test-based accountabilities and infrastructures, large-scale assessments as well as intensified use of performance management and evaluation tools, together with performance-related pay mechanisms. Although not all these measures have been actually introduced (e.g. performance related pay), this intensification of the ‘modernisation’ of Italy’s education system was made possible by the alignment of national policy goals and the policy reviews, recommendations and publications coming from the EU OMC working groups, the OECD and the European Semester.

Similar to other Southern European countries, devolved management in Italy has emerged in the shadow of neo-statism as an internationally driven but nationally contested ‘technicising’ response to cope with the complexity of horizontal governance relations, with the state attempting to regain control resuming the role of commissioner within hierarchical and contractual relations with schools and professionals. This is despite efforts to accelerate the modernisation of education systems through grafting NPM principles and tactics onto deliberative-interactive ideals of governance, often through appeals to social democratic, community or citizen participation models of local governance.

### **Spain: Erratic and contradictory**

The emergence of NPM in Spain follows a similar set of trajectories to those described above and, like Italy, the result is a strong orientation towards NPM but without the full development of some of its policies, as seen in England or Australia for example. After the Francoism, Spain set a quasi-federal political configuration of the country, which the different regions (Autonomous Communities) were allowed to interpret and adapt national policy according to their own views, needs, and specific

political programs. In that complex balance between the central state and the regions, during the 1980s and under the authority of Spanish left-wing governments Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE 1982-1996), school autonomy was introduced and imagined as a policy lever for achieving democratic gains such as citizen participation and school boards that reflected the communities served by the school. This was coupled with a horizontal, non-professional leadership (Collet 2017; Olmedo 2008). But in 1990, the same PSOE developed a new pedagogical law that, for the first time in Spain, introduced the “quality of teaching” concept (Pini, 2010). What emerged from this concept was a model of quality that cast accountability “as science” that would satisfy the National Institute of Quality and Evaluation (1994).

Here, the introduction of quality as a mechanism for evaluation in Spain can be traced to the influence of three key OECD reports: *The Teacher Today* (1990); *High Quality Education and Training for All* (1992); and *Quality in Teaching* (1990). This intervention facilitated a shift away from the idea of school autonomy as a democratic-participative model and demanded a shifted towards school autonomy as an exercise in quality management defined by evaluation and accountability. Yet, due to “a combination of political, institutional and economic reasons, the final form adopted by the NPM approach is far from the model advocated by the international community and is deeply contradictory” (Verger & Curran 2014, 253).

While these reforms were introduced by PSOE, they were later rearticulated by the right-wing Popular Party (PP) in its first eight years in government (1996-2004). Here school autonomy took on a very distinctive trajectory and produced a very unique governance assemblage, defined by Verger et al. (2019) as “School Autonomy with Accountability” or what Pagès and Prieto (2020, 677) describe as a package of “curricular specialisation, diversification strategies, higher stakes accountability mechanisms and common core standards”. To enhance this shift from democratic school autonomy to school autonomy with accountability, governance reforms integrated the rationality of external tests

and accountability made popular by the OECD and its programme of global assessment, PISA. As Araujo et al. (2017, 3) argue, “PISA data do not justify PISA-based education policy”, yet, in Spain since the 2000s, PISA rationality has emerged as a powerful tool to justify the coupling and co-functioning of school autonomy and increased bureaucracy from the centre captured by the new centralised curriculum. But, as Verger, Fontdevila and Parcerisa argue (2019), despite Spain’s formal adoption of the school autonomy with accountability model, it has produced a governance assemblage that is far removed from the developments observed in England or Australia.

Some regions in Spain have more fully embraced the school autonomy with accountability model compared to others (such as Madrid or Catalonia). Yet, in many regions across Spain, the governance assemblage is closer to what we see in other Southern European countries like Italy. For example, the trajectory of education policy reform in Spain since the 2000s has centred mainly around: i) the delegation of certain responsibilities towards schools coupled with a strong control from the centre through a focus on accountability; ii) endless centralised curriculum reforms underpinned by increased assessment; iii) enlarged bureaucracy both from the centre and bottom-up; iv) changes to the role of headteachers, from ‘primus inter pares’ to the ‘representant’ of the state in the school; and v) changes in the function of the school board, with limited scope for participation from the wider community. This is despite opposition to PP laws (Parcerisa and Collet, 2022).

At the same time, the most recent PSOE education law approved in 2021 brings into question the pervasiveness of the school autonomy with accountability model in Spain. The current approach to school autonomy appears to be much ‘softer’ among schools in some region of Spain, with evidence of flexible curriculum and increased participation in school boards among parents and the wider community. On the other hand, bureaucracy has increased exponentially under these reforms coupled with the professionalisation of leadership, thus pointing to a contradictory governance assemblage defined by regional adaption, refusal and recontextualisation.

## Conclusion

As an interpretative strategy, the analytic of assemblage is useful for capturing how NPM fails to operate as meta-policy, at least in practice, but more accurately develops “as mobile calculative techniques of governing that can be decontextualised from their original sources and recontextualized in constellations of mutually constitutive and contingent relations” (Ong 2006, 13). Similar to the way assemblage is deployed in other literatures including critical urban theory (McFarlane 2011), critical policy studies (Prince 2010) and critical governance studies (Bueger; 2018), we have used it here as a framing for understanding how “promiscuous entanglements crystallize different conditions of possibility” (Ong 2007, 5), thus attending the dynamics of emergence that characterise the formation of things. Here we mobilise the analytic of assemblage to capture the various ways in which heterogeneous elements come together (or not) in particular ways to produce distinct governance assemblages that rely on, albeit rearticulate and repurpose the utility of NPM ideas and techniques. Our focus here has been to map the role of intermediating actors, networks and projects to the movement of policy and its complicated gathering, distribution and insertion at the level of national and subnational policy spaces where governance is assembled and recontextualised according to geopolitically variable motivations and interests.

In this sense, the analytic of assemblage has enabled us to “displace presumptions of structural coherence and determination” (Baker & McGuirk 2017, 431), namely any representation of NPM as the residual effect of global hegemonic projects where it may be reduced to properties or effects of a single logic or governmentality. While NPM can be described as a goal-oriented technical project geared towards the realisation of business solutions and market prerogatives, it can be more accurately understood as a global movement or strategy in applied public choice theory and neo-classical



economics, namely “the institutionalisation of market-based incentives structures and management forms that motivate utility, maximising employees and agencies to constantly engage themselves in developing new and innovative production processes and services” (Klijn 2012, 222). NPM therefore can be characterised as a form of meta-governance or meta-policy designed to normalise and naturalise a new conception of service delivery in the macroeconomy. At the same time, as our analyses show, NPM also needs to be understood as uniquely (trans)local, mobile and networked. It is a shape-shifting entity whose formation at any given time and in any given place relies on a provisional unity of difference held together by disparate objects, subjects, projects, and programmes.

This chapter therefore demonstrates that NPM cannot be studied as always and everywhere the same, even if it displays commonalities in its outward functions and effects. Instead, we have drawn on policy histories of the development of different iterations of NPM in five countries to emphasise the active, dynamic processes through which NPM is “resolved contingently in specific contexts, as assemblages of heterogeneous actants cohere, and the properties and capacities of these actants are variously mobilised” (Baker & McGuirk 2017, 430). This means capturing how NPM is made and installed to accommodate specific path dependencies and value systems, but also those moments of disjuncture and struggle when NPM is restricted, rebutted or revised under the pressure of unaccommodating conditions and alliances, namely the “gaps, fissures and fractures that accompany processes of gathering and dispersing” (Anderson & McFarlane 2011, 125).

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