Understanding Participatory Innovations:
A Multiple Streams Account of the Creation of Parents' Councils in Swiss Schools

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ABSTRACT

In response to a perceived 'democratic malaise', the adaptation and the design of democratic innovations of citizen participation have drawn increasing scholarly attention. Knowledge of the processes leading to the introduction of participatory arrangements is still scarce, however. Drawing on a study of the creation of new participatory school councils for parents of school children in Switzerland, this article investigates the processes and the conditions for the advent of democratic innovations. The analytical perspective uses Kingdon's Multiple Streams Approach to show how policy entrepreneurs use persuasion strategies to couple the problem, the policy and the politics streams in education policy reforms, eventually leading to the introduction of new participatory devices. Empirically, the case studies of four Swiss cantons show that the creation of participatory school councils was part of broader reforms in school governance. We conclude that participatory innovations cannot be regarded in isolation, but must be understood in the context of wider processes of policy change in the sector concerned, whose outcome depends on actor strategies, ideational framing as well as the availability of windows of opportunity.

Key words: participatory innovations, parents' councils, school reforms, Switzerland, Multiple Streams Approach.

Introduction

Education plays an important role in modern democracy in that it contributes to the anchorage of democratic values in society that are necessary for the legitimacy and stability of the democratic political order. Gutman (1987) famously argued that education, in the democratic state, must be non-repressive and nondiscriminatory, and that the responsibility for education must therefore be shared among parents, citizens and professional educators. It is therefore not a coincidence that democratic school governance is a hallmark of modern democracies. This notably entails procedures and institutions through which local communities can engage in school management and/or education policies. Elected school boards are an instrument through which the democratic control of local schools is traditionally organized, and they often have a history that reaches back as far as the 19th century. In addition, many countries have seen the emergence of new participatory instances in school governance in the 1990s. These instances strengthen the involvement of parents and other community stakeholders in the governance of local schools, and thereby created new opportunities for direct citizen participation (see Corter and Pelletier, 2005).

Studies on participatory innovations in school governance have established that close collaboration between schools and their local communities is not only beneficial for student success, but can also contribute to revitalizing local democracy more broadly (for an overview, see Mintrom, 2009). This nicely ties in with the scholarly debate on democratic innovations proliferating also in other policy fields (Smith, 2009), and that tends to emphasize their potential to cure a "democratic malaise" (Geissel and Newton, 2012) or to contribute to

improving the quality of democracy (Michels, 2011). What is rarely analyzed, however, is the introduction of participatory innovations as such. Many studies simply assume that participatory innovations are a somewhat natural response to democratic deficits of existing institutions (Kübler et al., 2019: 3), neglecting that such innovations are a "choice rather than […] a necessity" (Newig et al., 2017: 271), and that their stands at the end of dynamic processes that must be explained rather than taken for granted (Warren, 2009).

The aim of this article is to contribute to better understanding the advent of participatory innovations. The questions we seek to answer are: in what context are participatory innovations introduced? Who are the actors driving this process? How do they go about it, and when are they successful? Drawing on qualitative evidence from four in-depth case studies on school reforms in four Swiss cantons, we reiterate the processes through which participatory innovations were introduced, focusing notably on the strategies of actors who promoted these innovations, as well as on the conditions under which they were successful. Using the Multiple Streams Approach to policy change, we compare cantons in which these innovations were adopted to those in which they were not, in order to explain why participatory innovations saw the light of the day in some places but not in others.

Participatory innovations as policy change

Switzerland is a federation composed of 26 cantons (the federate states) and roughly 2200 communes (municipalities). Swiss education policy is very decentralized. The main competence lies with the cantons, who govern public schools autonomously and delegate far-reaching responsibilities to municipalities (Büeler, 2007).

Democratic control in Swiss school governance
Citizen participation in local school governance in Switzerland today takes place in two instances: school boards, as well as parent councils.

School boards oversee all public schools in a given municipality. Their members are citizens usually affiliated to local political parties, and directly elected by the municipal electorate for a fixed term. School boards traditionally have extensive supervisory and policy-making authority: they administer public schools, they are responsible for the recruitment and assessment of teachers, and, within the limits set by cantonal legislation, have some leeway in designing the programs of the schools located in a municipality (Altrichter and Rürüp, 2010; Hega, 2000, Maag Merki and Büeler, 2002).

Parent councils are established at the level of a given school, and its members are elected or appointed by the parents whose children study in that school. Parents' councils do not have any competence regarding the school's administration or educational matters, but can liaise between parents and teachers, and engage in activities annexed to the school (e.g. cultural events, recreation). In some cantons, such school councils not only include parents whose children are at the school – elected or appointed by the other parents – but also representatives of the school staff and the municipal authorities.

School boards are the traditional supervisory authorities through which democratic control of public education is exercised in Switzerland, and have a very long history. Parents' councils, where they exist, are a relatively new addition, established in the wake of school reforms implemented by many cantons since the 1990s. These reforms were very much

inspired by the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993; Schedler, 2000), and pursued an agenda of professionalization and de-politicization of school governance. Three elements were central in these reforms (Maag Merki and Büeler, 2002; Quesel et al., 2015). First, delegation of competences to individual schools aimed to increase the autonomy of local school actors. Second, the establishment of full-time principals taking care of the operative management of individual schools aimed at a professionalization of school management. Third, the customer orientation was strengthened via the promotion of parental involvement at the school level, leading to the introduction of parent councils in some cantons. Regarding the latter, in two cantons, Zurich and Basel City, schools are obliged by law to establish parent councils. In all other cantons, establishment of parent councils is an option left open to individual schools. In some French-speaking cantons (e.g., Geneva and Vaud), schools can also opt to admit representatives of other stakeholders to the parents' councils.

The creation of parents' councils strengthens direct stakeholder participation in school matters. We can thus conceive them as *democratic innovations* (see Smith, 2009; Geissel and Newton, 2012), i.e. instances expanding opportunities for citizen participation that did not previously exist. They represent a change in an existing policy as a result of a decision made by a competent public authority. As such, they appear as the result of a top-down, rather than of a bottom-up process. This is not uncommon for participatory innovations which are often initiated by supranational organizations such as the World Bank or the OECD (Font and Galais, 2011), as well as national and subnational governments (Lowndes et al., 2001; Somerville, 2005). Participatory innovations in school governance, in many countries, were part of wider reforms in educational policy, initiated by the educational administration and decided by state authorities (Parker and Leithwood, 2000). In order to understand the introduction of parental involvement in school governance, we need to examine its role in the context of these wider reforms.

The power of ideas: policy change in the Multiple Streams Approach (MSA)

In order to do so, we a use a theoretical perspective that draws on Kingdon's *Multiple Streams Approach* (MSA) (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2014). As other idea-based approaches of the policy process (see Sabatier and Weible, 2014), the MSA insists on the role of ideas - besides material interests, and institutions - as crucial explanatory factors for policy change, and assumes that ideas are malleable and can be actively shaped by political entrepreneurs.

The MSA conceives of a policy decision as resulting from the combination of three streams flowing through the system: the problem stream, the policy stream and the politics stream.[1] Each of these streams is largely separate from the others, and follows its own rules. The *problem stream* consists of public problems that citizens want addressed, and that evolve according to their own dynamics. Policy-makers find out about the gravity and the conditions of such problems by monitoring, feedback and focusing events that draw attention to such problems, and raise their salience on the agenda. In education policy, examples are poor performance scores of students in a country or a sub-national region, on which internationally coordinated testing exercises (such as PISA) regularly shed light. The *policy stream* consists of ideas about policies that should be pursued in a given policy field. These ideas are crafted and developed by members of the policy community - specialists of the field including governmental officials, practitioners, as well as scholars - who tend to think of them as policy

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[1]   The following presentation of the MSA is based on Zahariadis (2014).

alternatives in the sense of 'solutions' to alleged public problems. In education policy, examples are pedagogical concepts, school curricula, but also models of school governance. Finally, the *politics stream* consists of the dynamics shaped by of public opinion, by interest groups, political parties, or election results. A new government can decide, for example, to emphasize new aspects in education and promote new goals of education policy.

According to the MSA, policy change occurs when the three streams are coupled, i.e. joined together. This happens in critical moments – called 'policy windows' – when so-called 'policy entrepreneurs' seize the opportunity to couple the streams. Policy windows only exist for a certain time span. They open as a consequence of compelling problems (e.g. the publication of a very bad PISA test result) or through events in the politics stream (e.g. a change of government following general elections). The MSA views policy entrepreneurs as "sellers of ideas" (Mackenzie 2004) and the crucial actors of policy change: during a policy window, they actively join the streams in that they associate a policy alternative with a problem and secure political support. When a policy window is opened by problem conditions, policy entrepreneurs will seek to push their pet policy alternative by presenting it as the solution most suited to effectively act on the problem – Zahariadis (1996) calls this "consequentialist coupling". When a policy window is opened by events in the politics stream, however, policy entrepreneurs will seek to use the new political support to push their pet policy alternative by looking for a problem that it can solve – a strategy that has been called "doctrinaire coupling" (Zahariadis, 2008) or "problem surfing" (Boscarino, 2009).

The MSA thus presents policy change not only as the finding of a new solution to an existing policy problem, but also as the finding of a new problem to an existing policy solution. Successful coupling of streams by policy entrepreneurs will depend on their ability to convince the public that the association between policy problem and policy alternative – whatever comes first – is credible.

Understanding participatory innovations in the changing Swiss school governance
The democratic innovations examined here – the setting up of parents' councils in Swiss local school governance – must be placed in the context of the cantonal school reforms which led to, or enabled, their creation. More precisely, we can examine how cantonal public school legislation was changed to stipulate the creation of parents' councils, and who were the actors involved in these processes of change.

According to the MSA, change of a policy depends on the ripeness of three relatively independent streams, the existence of a policy windows, as well as successful coupling activities by policy entrepreneurs. The *problem stream* is ripe if political actors such as parties, associations and the media accept an entrepreneur's problem definition by adopting it. The problem stream is not ripe if no problem is defined which justifies the introduction of a new participatory school council or political actors do not endorse the entrepreneurs' problem definition. The entrepreneur tries to ripen the problem stream communicatively by using policy frames (see Zolnhöfer et al., 2016) which contain a coherent set of arguments (see Schön and Rein, 1994). Entrepreneurs integrate alternatives in policy frames to create a need for reform, sell them to the public (Béland, 2005) and to legitimize their policy choice (Wueest and Fossati, 2015; Cox, 2001). The *policy stream* is ripe if a policy alternative (solution for a problem) is produced by a policy community and available. An alternative corresponds to a reform concept containing tangible goals. The *politics stream* is ripe if there is political support for a policy change. The entrepreneur can foster the ripeness of the politics stream by convincing political actors of the need for this change.

To couple the streams and to act as an entrepreneur, an actor has to link a problem with a solution – here: the introduction of a participatory innovation in school governance – and gain support for this solution. The coupling can occur in a problem focused way by finding a solution for a problem - consequential coupling - or by searching a problem for an already existing solution - doctrinaire coupling or problem surfing. The stream coupling has to take place during a favorable period conceived as a policy window.

Drawing on the concepts of the Multiple Streams Approach, our empirical analysis will thus focus on the processes through which the idea of introducing parents' councils as an element of school governance was adopted – or rejected. In doing so, a particular emphasis will be placed on the actors who put this idea forward, and notably on their policy entrepreneurial strategies related to the shaping, ripening and coupling of the three streams.

Creating parent councils in Swiss school governance: four case studies

In the following section, we reiterate the reform processes relevant for the introduction of new participatory school councils in four Swiss cantons. First, we analyze the process in the canton of Zurich that led to a new legal obligation requiring each school to have its own parent council. Second, we examine the process in the canton of Argovia, where the status quo prevailed and parent councils remain an option left to individual schools. Then we take a look at the canton of Geneva and at the canton of Neuchâtel, where reforms led to the introduction of participatory school councils including not only parents but also other stakeholders (so-called *conseil d'établissement*).

Method and data

This selection of cantons was preceded by a systematic analysis of the school laws in all 26 Swiss cantons (Buser, 2019: 72) resulting in the identification of four different types of democratic school governance existing in Switzerland. The selected cantons each represent one of these types.

They also vary with respect to the outcome variable of interest: new participatory school councils were indeed made compulsory in Zurich, Geneva and Neuchâtel, attempts to do so failed in the canton of Argovia. We thus use a most similar system designs (see Anckar 2008), in which variation of outcome is to be explained across largely similar systems. Indeed, in accordance with the MSA, we expect not structural differences between cantons, but process dynamics therein – and notably the action of policy entrepreneurs – to explain different outcomes.

Evidence for the four case studies is essentially qualitative and was collected between 2012 and 2013. At the core of the data collection were 84 in-depth interviews conducted with actors involved in the reforms under scrutiny: officials from ministries, teachers' associations, municipal school boards, parent's councils, as well as politicians from different parties. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed with a thematic coding using the software ATLAS.ti (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In order to address the challenges resulting from interviewees' difficulties recollecting events in the past, we used official documents such as minutes of parliamentary debates, media reports and documents produced by the actors involved in the reform processes to triangulate information gained from the interviews (Yin, 1994). Case reports in this article are summaries; the full case study reports are published in Buser (2019).

Zurich: from experimental school autonomy to a new school law with parent councils

In the mid-1990s, a comprehensive set of NPM reforms – called *Wirkungsorientierte Verwaltungsführung* (wif!)[2] – was launched in the canton of Zurich (Widmer and Rüegg, 2005). Part of these NPM reforms was the school autonomy project called *Teilautonome Volksschulen* (TaV),[3] consisting of 14 components, one of which was the introduction of headmasters and another being the participation of parents in the form of institutionalized parents' councils. A new public school law was created and came into force after approval in a popular vote in 2005. Paragraph 55 of the new law obliges schools in the canton of Zurich to implement a parent council. The Zurich public school law does not define specific tasks for parent councils: schools have to define them in their organizational statutes, but parental participation in educational matters in schools is excluded. Furthermore, the introduction of headmasters resulted in the loss of school boards' operative tasks, i.e. the school internal management.

Crucial for the process leading to this reform was the election, in 1995, of former management professor Ernst Buschor to head the cantonal ministry of education. From 1995 to 1998, the new minister and staff within the cantonal ministry reviewed existing plans for school reforms, working towards adapting these old plans to the core tenets of the NPM reform program. In 1997, they came up with the TaV reform project (see Lengwiler et al., 2007), which was first implemented on a voluntary basis as a school experiment (Erziehungsdirektion ZH, 1996). In 1999, the ministry of education worked the different TaV elements into a draft of a new school law, which was then discussed by the cantonal parliament and important interest groups within a public consultation process (Kantonsrat ZH, 1999: 2377). The new law was eventually passed by the cantonal parliament, but rejected by the cantonal electorate in a popular vote in 2002, mainly due to strong opposition against the integration of the Kindergarten in the compulsory school curriculum which was also part of the new law. After this defeat and the election of a new education minister, the "Kindergarten-clause" was removed, and the revised version of the new law, after passing the cantonal parliament, was also approved by the cantonal electorate in a second popular vote in 2005 – including paragraph 55, which requires schools in the canton of Zurich to implement a parents' council.

Regarding the problem stream, the NPM paradigm influenced the education minister's output-oriented problem recognition as he argued that the public administration in general, and public schools in particular were managed in an inefficient way (Erziehungsdirektion, 1996: 4). This position is not surprising as minister Buschor, a former professor of management, had worked and published in the field of NPM theory, and is the inventor of the wif!-term in Switzerland (Buschor, 1997). Furthermore, he had had experience of introducing NPM reforms previously in the field of health care (Ritz and Sager, 2010).

The education ministry also used a financial and administration crisis in public schools (VPOD, 1998) and ensuing threats of parents to enroll their children in private schools, as an argument to legitimize the school autonomy reform TaV and the institutionalization of parent councils. This problem definition resonated very well with the local media who cited these issues numerous times (VPOD, 1998). As one journalist put it the local newspaper *TA Magazin* on November 11th 2000, the media debate about the school reform had changed: while in 1995, the NPM elements of the reform had been criticized as "Americanization", the

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[2] Effect Oriented Administrative Guidance
[3] Partially Autonomous Public School

reforms were praised as a "lucky strike" a couple of years later. The problem stream was ripe. This is because the education ministry used a scenario of crisis to convince the public of the need to reform. The communicative persuasion of the public was important because the cantonal constitution required the new school law be submitted to a referendum vote by the cantonal electorate. Furthermore, the promotion of parents' participation in school governance appeared, to the professionals within the education ministry, as a good means to gain the support of parents for the school law revision as long as the public can only say yes or no to the whole package.

The policy stream was also ripe because the long-standing request of social democrats and parents' association to introduce parents' councils was part of the school autonomy reform TaV. The education minister and administration launched TaV by combining old and new reform elements, framing it within the NPM paradigm. Thereby the agenda setting took place in the administration in the first step. The education ministry invited in a second step representatives from parents and teacher associations to participate in a project group. This project group built the policy community, which was responsible for the elaboration of the reform.

In the politics stream, the election of the NPM advocate Buschor as well as active parental associations contributed to winning over other political actors as well. Indeed, the minister did not confine himself to a merely executive function, but played a more proactive and extra-institutional one as leader, initiator and promoter of NPM reforms (Kussau, 2002: 69). Whereas left parties, parents' associations and the teachers' union focused on parents' input-oriented local decision-making rights, conservative parties and two other teacher associations focused on parents' output-oriented responsibilities. Because of this polarization in the cantonal parliament, the education ministry had to further work on ripening the politics stream. Consequently, the education ministry drafted paragraph 55 in the school law, stipulating the institutionalization of parents' councils without a specific mandate. Moreover, they defined negative competences by excluding the participation of parents in teaching. This because teachers were afraid that parents would interfere in teaching.

In addition, the education ministry included the political actors in the decision-making process by launching a consultation and inviting them to participate in project groups (Kantonsrat ZH, 1999: 2377). They compared the school autonomy reform in Zurich with successful reforms in other countries and cantons to point out their importance (Regierungsrat ZH, 2000). Furthermore, the ministry continued school autonomy reforms as a school experiment to convince the political actors of its road capability, and to continue with the reform after the lost referendum in 2002. However, a generalization of the school autonomy reform had been intended all along (Kussau, 2002: 215).

In the canton of Zurich a window of opportunity emerged in the politics stream in 1995, when Buschor took over the ministry of education and launched the school autonomy reform TaV as part of the NPM reform wif!. The school autonomy reform facilitated large and varied school reforms as well as the introduction of parents' councils (Kussau, 2002: 70). The introduction of parents' councils could be straightforwardly justified with the output-oriented and NPM conform concept of a customer focus.

In sum, the new school legislation was flowing out of the broad TaV project. The process combined old and new school reform elements and framed them within the NPM paradigm. In the terms of MSA framework, the case of Zurich is as an illustration of

successful doctrinaire coupling of policy streams, i.e. matching a problem with a pre-defined solution. The education authority, acting as a policy entrepreneur, had first launched the school autonomy reform TaV, and legitimized it afterwards with a financial and administrative crisis.

Argovia: subsidiary parental involvement

In the canton of Argovia, the NPM reform *Wirkungsorientierte Verwaltungsführung* (WoV)[4] was triggered by the cantonal parliament in 1995, inviting the government to initiate NPM reforms (Riederer and Farago, 2000: 16). While the government had already announced to work on renewed strategic guidelines for school governance in 1993 (the so-called *Leitbild Schule Aargau*), these were finally adopted by the cantonal parliament in 1996 as part of NPM reforms, after a wide consultation process (Regierungsrat AG 2001: 3). The renewed guidelines encompassed twelve principles including the introduction of professional headmasters for local schools, as well as the strengthening of school boards. The creation of parents' councils was, however, not part of the new guidelines, which merely stated that schools and parents should work together, and that schools must respect the educational responsibility of parents.

To implement the new guidelines, the government launched a project aiming to increase school autonomy and labelled Segra (*Schulen mit erweitertem Gestaltungsspielraum*).[5] Segra tested and evaluated the effects of shifting competences from the cantonal to the local level and new forms of school organization at the municipal level; it was intended to empower schools and municipalities to administrate their responsibilities regarding pupils and parents (Regierungsrat AG, 2001: 7).

The Argovian Social Democrats were the only political party seeking to promote the creation of parents' councils in the context of the school autonomy reform. In 1996, they requested the inclusion of parents' role in the school guidelines by emphasizing the potential contribution of parents' councils to solve local problems more efficiently (Grosser Rat AG, 1996: 432). But they were unable to convince decision-makers in education policy. In 2001, the Social Democrats renewed their call for parents' councils and requested that such councils be introduced as experiments, and that their potential to deepen the output dimension of local democracy should be scientifically evaluated (Grosser Rat AG, 2001). Obviously, the Social Democrats tried to use the NPM reform WoV and the school autonomy reform Segra as windows of opportunity to promote the introduction of parents' councils. However, they were unable to come up with a coherent discourse about the policy problem in the education sector which the introduction of parents' councils would solve. Neither did they argue that the quality of schools was bad, nor that the relationship between schools and parents was conflictive. Instead, they merely mentioned successful examples of parental involvement in Germany, and argued that Argovian schools were increasingly under pressure to do parents' educational work, that parents lacked interest in school matters, and argued that parents had difficulties in participating in school activities. This problem definition shows a deficiency of coherence as institutionalized parent involvement only works if parents commit themselves to participate. Thus, in the canton of Argovia the problem stream was not ripe because the Social Democrats were not able to establish a coherent problem definition of a policy crisis that required the introduction of parents' councils.

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[4] Ouput oriented administrative guidance.
[5] Schools with more creative discretion.

Similarly, the policy stream was not ripe: the policy community did not have a common policy position about parental involvement in local school governance. Even though the Social Democrats had promoted the institutionalization of parental co-production in schools beforehand, they had not formulated precise goals that one could hope to attain through parental involvement. While the matter of parents' councils had been discussed in the context of the renewed school guidelines, no clear position had been reached, and, subsequently, parents' councils were not part of the school autonomy reform Segra. Unlike Zurich, there was no change at the head of the cantonal ministry of education. Within the education ministry, staff had come to the conclusion that there were no good reasons for the creation of parents' councils in all schools of the canton. Moreover, as the NPM reforms had been launched by parliament – and not by the government – the education ministry had little motivation to initiate and push proposals forward. The self-production of reform ideas was weak, with administrative actors borrowing ideas from debates in other cantons in order to keep up with the trends of the day (Kussau, 2002: 71).

In the politics stream, there was no opportunity or necessity to create support for the idea of parents' councils either. There were no other parties, and not even associational actors in the education sector that would have supported the Social Democrats' request to create parents' councils. Indeed, the cantonal parents' association declared itself politically neutral on this matter and did not actively support the institutionalization of parents' councils. The cantonal teachers' association emphasized its opposition to parental involvement in local schools, especially in the field of teaching. In the discussion preceding the parliamentary debate, the dominant discourse was to refer to the principle of subsidiarity, and to the quality of the traditional structure of school governance (in which parents' councils were not foreseen). This discourse was not about NPM, but about governability and the risk of "over steering" in school governance: it was argued that there were already a lot of actors involved in Argovian school governance, and that there was no need for parents' councils to regulate and govern schools in any way. To some, parents' councils in Argovia appeared to be a "taboo topic" because parents' councils are constituted often in situations of conflict. In the parliamentary debate on the school reforms, the Social Democrats were all alone to claim the institutionalization of parents' councils, and were unable to find the necessary majority (Grosser Rat AG, 1996: 438, Grosser Rat AG 2001: 656).

In the canton of Argovia, the NPM reform WoV and the school autonomy reform Segra opened a policy window for promoting the creation of parents' councils as part of reformed Argovian school governance. While the Social Democrats, as policy entrepreneurs, tried to couple the streams, they were unsuccessful: as a single (and minority) party, their position was too weak to set the educational reform agenda, and they also proved unable to convince other political actors to support their claims. As a result, there was little support for the idea to institutionalize parents' councils as a new actor in Argovian school governance. The window closed when the school autonomy reform ended: parents' councils were not integrated into the school guidelines and therefore not part of the reform agenda.

Geneva: the school grade initiative as catalyser of school reforms

In the canton of Geneva, school governance reforms are closely related to the political debate stirred by pedagogical reforms adopted by the cantonal education ministry in 2001. These reforms were directed at increasing the performance of Geneva's schools, as severe deficits of the education system had highlighted by the poor performance of Geneva's public schools in the PISA tests at the time. Among other things, these reforms involved the abolition of numerical grades in Geneva's public schools. Parents and teachers were quick to

organize their opposition against this measure: they founded an association called *Association refaire l'école* (Arle)[6] and, in 2003, handed in a popular initiative (a direct democratic instrument by which citizens can ask a change of legislation) that demanded to reintroduce numerical grades as the basis for the evaluation of pupils' performance in Geneva's schools (Conseild'État GE, 2003).

The cantonal government took the school grade initiative as an opportunity to launch a large public debate on the performance deficits of Geneva's schools and their governance. The situation was presented as very worrying, and the cantonal government argued that reforms were needed, criticizing Arle – whose membership was on the increase – to complicate these reforms and thereby to aggravate the situation. In 2004, representatives of the cantonal ministry of education formulated the idea of increasing parents' involvement in Geneva's schools through the creation of participatory councils at the level of individual schools (*conseil d'établissement*). The idea was based on the experiences seen by a delegation of Geneva's education ministry in the Canadian province of Québec during an official visit. In a series of articles in Geneva newspapers *le Temps* and *La Tribune,* the Geneva education ministry 'confessed' that errors had been made by poorly considering parents in school governance so far. It claimed that in Québec, the delegation understood that a confidence-based relationship between actors is essential, and that the fundaments of school governance in Geneva must be changed, and that conflicts must be reduced.

In 2005, the education ministry formulated a new strategy aimed at solving the lack of performance, coherence and cohesion in Genevan school governance (Département d'instruction publique, 2005: 1). This strategy, called *triangle*, contained 13 elements, including the strengthening of school autonomy, as well as the creation of a new alliance between schools and families, in order to re-establish confidence between the education ministry and the citizens. To implement this strategy, an action plan was defined, involving the introduction of professional headmasters, as well as the creation of participatory school councils. But the government also made clear that it intended to stick to the abolition of numerical school grades of the previous reform. In 2006, the referendum on the school grade initiative took place: 75.5 percent of Geneva's electorate approved the initiative and thereby the reintroduction of numerical grades in the canton's public schools.

Just one month after its clear defeat in the referendum, the education ministry announced the launching of the school autonomy reform in a press conference (Département de l'instruction publique, 2006a). The reform contained the reintroduction of school grades as requested by the initiative, the abolition of traditional school inspectors, the introduction of headmasters, school projects and participatory school councils. The reform was implemented in 2008, including legal requirements for the creation of participatory school councils (Département de l'instruction publique, 2008: 3).

The analysis of this decision-making process suggests that the problem stream was ripe because the education ministry faced a major crisis, epitomized by Geneva's bad PISA results and major public opposition expressed by the school grades initiative, which discredited the ministry's 2001 school reforms. In several articles of the local newspapers *La Tribune* and *Le Courrier*, representatives of the education ministry alarmingly spoke about a "fight against rudeness", about the distrust of a whole population against the public schooling system, and about the fragility of the relation between the families and the school. The education ministry

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[6] Association to Remake Schools.

argued that Geneva's public schools had to be improved to secure their future it insinuated a scenario that schoolchildren would migrate to private schools if Geneva's public school did not operate to the parents' satisfaction. Participation opportunities for parents in schools were thus presented as a means to re-establish confidence, and to stop the exodus of schoolchildren from the public schooling system.

The policy stream was also ripe as the education ministry had invited teachers associations and the association of school inspectors to collaborate in the internal administrative project group very early on (Département de l'instruction publique, 2006b) – a policy community that had intensely worked on formulating a policy alternative. The participatory school councils were explicitly part of the school autonomy project and served clear reform goals.

Regarding the politics stream, no crucial regime change took place nor could the education ministry count on the political support of other parties. Nevertheless, the education ministry was able to foster the ripeness of the politics stream by including crucial associations in the project work (Département de l'instruction publique, 2006b), consulting political actors, comparing the school reform with other cantons and countries (Grand Conseil GE, 2004: 11), and leaving out a parliamentary discussion. Indeed, the launch of the school autonomy project was very fast. Furthermore, most political actors supported the professionalization of school inspectors through their replacement with headmasters and did not see the new participatory school council as problematic since they were only attributed marginal decision-making competences.

The school grade initiative served as a policy window that opened in the politics stream, as an opportunity for the education ministry to introduce participatory school council, presented as a possibility to restore a climate of confidence needed to 'save' the public schooling system. Although the school grade initiative was clearly directed against the education ministry, the latter used it to propagate general structural reforms of school governance and implement these through the backdoor. In this situation, the education ministry acted as a policy entrepreneur and successfully coupled the three streams in a doctrinaire logic – it used a political crisis to propagate the long-planned introduction of headmasters. We can clearly speak of problem surfing: there was no mass exodus of schoolchildren from public schools. Although the popular support of the initiative to reintroduce school grades was a defeat for the education ministry, it was able to use it as window of opportunity to implement two innovations in Geneva's school governance: professional headmasters and participatory school councils, as part of the school autonomy reform.

Neuchâtel: regionalization with school districts

In 2010, a law decided by the cantonal parliament of Neuchâtel abolished the traditional school boards and replaced them with participatory school councils (*Conseil d'établissement*). Unlike in other cantons, this decision did not occur as a consequence of administrative reforms in education, but was related to a reform in Neuchâtel's law on municipalities, as well as to the intercantonal harmonization of public schooling systems in Switzerland.[7] More precisely, the replacement of school boards with participatory councils

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[7]   A coordination body of all cantonal education ministers, launched, in 2007; an intercantonal agreement (called *Interkantonale Vereinbarung über die Harmonisierung der obligatorischen Schule* - HarmoS) concerning the harmonization of Swiss public schools and aiming for the standardization of schooling years; and school curricula in all 26 Swiss cantons (EDK, 2007).

was part of the regionalization reforms, aiming at a disentanglement of competences between local and cantonal authorities.

The process was as follows. In 1999 an alliance of left parties criticized the far-reaching competences of traditional school boards as being problematic (Grand Conseil NE, 1999: 645). Six years later, this alliance asked to revise the municipality law to prevent school boards from representing particular interests rather than general interests of the public. In 2007 the Social Democrats, together with the Liberals and the Swiss People's Party drafted a revision of Neuchâtel's municipality law, stipulating that school boards transfer their competences to the municipal governments and be reduced to a consultative body. The cantonal government approved this idea, asserting that the changes would be necessary because of the intercantonal harmonization of schooling systems, which had been discussed and accepted in the parliament shortly before (Grand Conseil NE, 2008: 319). Municipalities also approved of the idea – only school boards were opposed to their being deprived of their powers. Furthermore, it was proposed to introduce new participatory school councils, and this idea was also justified as being allegedly required by the intercantonal harmonization procedure ongoing at the time. The government also supported this idea, and announced further structural reforms aimed at vertical power sharing and a coherent vision of Neuchâtel's school governance (Conseil d'État NE, 2008: 20). In spite of semantics about vertical power division and competence transfer to municipalities, the agenda of the cantonal government was centralization. Already in 2004, the education ministry had criticized school boards as a relic of a distant past, when they were important as a counterweight to the church in educational matters, but obsolete today. In 2008, the government explicitly advocated stronger regionalization of school governance allegedly required by the HarmoS concordat (Grand Conseil NE, 2010: 2305). In consequence, a structural reform was launched, together with the association of municipalities and the cities, to create seven school districts for the whole canton (Département de l'éducation, de la culture et des sports, 2010). The cantonal parliament accepted this regionalization in 2011 (Grand Conseil NE, 2011: 2063).

Regarding the problem stream, the advocates of the reform argued that school boards lacked representativeness and that their cooperation with municipal governments was often difficult (Département de l'éducation, de la culture et des sports, 2007). They further argued that new participatory school councils were required by the intercantonal harmonization procedure HarmoS – an allegation that is highly debatable. They merely defined the problem as a matter of vertical power organization and used HarmoS as a frame to justify the introduction of the participatory councils as well as to create support for further structural reforms. Once established, this problem definition remained largely uncontested.

In the policy stream, the creation of participatory councils was also firmly established as the only viable policy alternative. Parties in parliament, but also the government and municipality associations had been in involved in the formulation of this alternative, and constituted a coherent policy community. This community shared the common value of governability to improve the local set up of school governance. Furthermore, the introduction of the largely consultative participatory councils and the abolishment of formerly powerful school boards was the first step towards regionalization, resulting in a reduction of the number of actors involved in school governance.

In the politics streams, all major parties were favorable to the introduction of participatory councils (Grand Conseil NE, 2008: 277 ff.). Even school boards favored a clarification of responsibilities. Left, liberal and conservative parties initially had asked for

the municipality law revision together (Département de l'éducation, de la culture et des sports, 2007). Therefore, the support of parents' associations was not necessary. To convince the municipalities of the revised law, the government proposed to consult their opinion. Negotiations took place concerning the regionalization, which was a compromise between the cantonal authority and the municipalities (Grand Conseil NE, 2011: 2058). Although there was a change in education minister during the crucial period, this did not affect the reform process, as the new education minister simply continued the process as he took over from his predecessor.

In Neuchâtel, it was the HarmoS intercantonal harmonization project that was used as the window of opportunity for introducing participatory school councils and abolishing the traditional school boards. During this window of opportunity, the education ministry acted as the policy entrepreneur who coupled the streams. The coupling was doctrinaire, as the education ministry had already made clear that it wished to abolish the traditional school boards. The ministry used the changed political environment, which was in favor of a harmonization in school governance and against school boards with decision-making competences, to couple the introduction of new participatory school councils a posteriori with the problem of the vertical power structure in the canton. This coupling was largely opportunistic and rather illogical, in that the new participatory councils had only consultative functions and had therefore no role in securing governability within the vertical power division. Furthermore, there is no evidence in the HarmoS project itself that participatory school council are required (see EDK, 2007). In sum, the education ministry in the canton of Neuchâtel used the HarmoS project and the law revision as opportunity to push the centralization of school governance, taking away power from the municipalities and concentrating it within regional authorities.

Comparison: problem-surfing and the coupling of policy streams by policy entrepreneurs

The case studies show that in the three cantons in which new participatory school councils were introduced – Zurich, Geneva, Neuchâtel – coupling of policy streams during a favorable moment took place, whereas this was not the case in the remaining canton – Argovia – where the introduction of new participatory instances of school governance failed.

The problem streams were ripe in the canton of Zurich, Geneva and Neuchâtel because policy entrepreneurs managed to push their problem definition discursively. In the canton of Zurich, entrepreneurs used a constructed school crisis, in Geneva a political conflict about the grading system, to convince the public. Even though in the canton of Neuchâtel, the problem was less dramatized, the problem definition of a lacking vertical power division did not meet real political circumstances. In the canton of Argovia, the canton in which no participatory school councils were introduced, the Social Democrats tried to act as policy entrepreneurs, but were unsuccessful at coupling the streams. They failed because they did not use a coherent set of arguments or a dramatized policy frame to convincingly indicate existing deficits in local school governance. This shows the importance of 'discursive framing strategies' (Schmidt 2008) to create the conditions necessary for successful stream coupling.

Regarding the policy streams, all three cantons that created new participatory school councils were characterized by policy communities who had formulated clear policy alternatives as part of comprehensive reform programs. In the canton of Zurich and Geneva, the implementation of new school councils was part of output-oriented school autonomy reforms (TaV and Triangle) in the canton of Neuchâtel it referred to a governability-focused, larger reform of the municipality law. In contrast to that, the introduction of parents' councils

was not part of the reform agenda in the canton of Argovia because no policy community had made an elaborated policy alternative available. The Argovian Social Democrats were the only actor who advocated the introduction of parents' councils but without offering a concrete implementation strategy. The comparison of the policy streams shows that successful coupling depends on whether a policy alternative is firmly established, e.g. as part of a larger reform agenda.

In the politics streams in Zurich, Geneva and Neuchâtel, education ministries acted as policy entrepreneurs in that they managed to convince political actors of their reform intention and thereby garner support in a discursive way. In the canton of Zurich, the entrepreneur negotiated for a compromise solution between left-wing interest groups favoring the rights of parents, and right-wing interest groups favoring parents' duties. In the canton of Geneva, the entrepreneur included teachers' associations in the administrative project group and excluded the parliament from the political debate to avoid opposition. In the canton of Neuchâtel, the entrepreneur consulted the communities to convince them of their own power deprivation. Conversely, in the canton of Argovia, the social democrats referred only to examples of parents' councils in Germany to justify their request.

Regarding the political climate, the case studies show that the three cantons that have introduced participatory councils, support for change was present. In Zurich, reforms had been launched by the arrival of the new education minister, a former management professor convinced of the necessity and benefits of NPM reforms. In Geneva, a desire to professionalize school governance was present due to a deep political crisis in education policy, and in Neuchâtel, political interests of the various actors were rather convergent. In contrast, in the canton of Argovia the institutionalization of parents' councils was seen as a taboo-subject, and the existing school governance was viewed as working rather well. The comparison of politics streams shows in sum that changes in government were only in the canton of Zurich important for the introduction of a new participatory school council. Furthermore, parents' associations were merely in the canton of Geneva and Zurich crucial change actors. Regime changes and lobby activities are thereby no necessary condition for the successful stream coupling.

Regarding the nature of policy entrepreneurs, the comparison of the coupling processes shows that stream coupling is easier if the entrepreneur is the government – as was the case in Zurich, Geneva and Neuchâtel. First, the government has the possibility to influence the agenda without encountering opposition in the administration as it can emerge in the parliament. Second, the government possesses many discursive resources since its members can produce and spread information, launch school experiments, consult political actors or involve them in project groups. Third members of the government in Switzerland are usually professional politicians – to the difference of members of the parliament, for instance – and therefore have more financial and temporal resources. Fourth, it is easier for governments to be proactive. In the cantons of Zurich and Geneva, the government was obviously proactive as it had launched the reform programs. In Neuchâtel, it was in charge of the structural reform process in which the school reform was integrated later on. In contrast, the Argovian government was clearly not proactive.

Furthermore, in all three cantons, which implemented new participatory school councils, the coupling was doctrinaire. The education authorities used the political climate to promote a precast school reform, which they legitimized retrospectively as responding to a problem. In the cantons of Zurich and Geneva, the education authority claimed an exodus

from schoolchildren to private schools. In the canton of Neuchâtel, the governing council created the impression that the HarmoS project required a vertical power division between state levels although a power concentration was pursued. In contrast to this, no coupling of policy streams took place the canton of Argovia, as the Social Democrats did not couple the introduction of parents' council with a constructed problem. Thereby the comparison of the coupling processes shows that it is easier to create policy change if an entrepreneur constructs a problem for a prefabricated solution than to solve real existing problems.

The case studies also support the idea that a window of opportunity was necessary to introduce new participatory councils in school governance. In all four cantons, this window opened in the politics stream because of a changed political environment. NPM reforms provided the window in the cantons of Zurich and Argovia. These reforms facilitated the promotion of parents' councils because the concept of customer satisfaction is part of the NPM paradigm. In Geneva and Neuchâtel domestic events such as the school grade initiative and the municipality law reform created a favorable moment. In Geneva, the entrepreneurs used the school grade initiative, which discredited the governmental school policy, to promote new participatory school councils. Those school councils should solve the crisis of confidence demonstrated by the acceptance of the initiative by Geneva's citizenry. In the canton of Neuchâtel, the entrepreneur used the municipality law reform to promote the replacement of power-holding school boards with the participatory *conseil d'établissement* and thereby pursuing their envisaged centralization in school governance. Moreover, in the canton of Neuchâtel the HarmoS project, created a favorable moment for the entrepreneur to open a policy window as it was used to legitimize the introduction of the participatory councils. However, policy windows appear as a necessary condition, but by no means as a sufficient condition for successful participatory innovation. In the cantons of Zurich, Geneva and Neuchâtel entrepreneurs were able to use this window to push their pet solutions, in the canton of Argovia the window closed without the introduction of parents'councils.

Conclusion: participatory innovations as entrepreneurial change

In this article, we set out to explain the introduction of new participatory school councils by Swiss cantons through the lens of Kingdon's Multiple Stream Approach and its conceptual tools for understanding policy change.

The analysis shows, first, that discursive construction and persuasion strategies were important to foster the ripeness of policy streams. In all cantons which implemented new participatory school councils, the policy entrepreneurs constructed a problem to legitimize school and community reforms including the introduction of a new participatory school council. Second, policy windows emerged in all cases in the politics stream because of a changed domestic environment. The window closed in the canton of Argovia when the Social Democrats were not able to ripen the policy stream or to successfully couple the introduction of parent councils with a problem. Third, the coupling is facilitated when an entrepreneur possesses decision-making competences and if problem surfing takes place: In all cantons where policy change happened the government acted as a policy entrepreneur by searching a problem for an existing solution.

Furthermore, the case studies show that the participatory innovations were not necessarily at the core of processes of change, as governments tended to prioritize aspects of governability and problem solving over improving democratic control of local public schools.

In all three cantons that now have parent councils in local school governance – Zurich, Geneva and Neuchâtel – the governments advocated these participatory innovations not to achieve a deepening of democracy in the first place, but rather to legitimize reforms that aimed at increasing autonomy and professionalization of schools. In the end, these reforms also resulted in cutting back the influence, or at least changing the role of traditional school boards. As day-to-day operative management is now performed by the schools themselves, school boards are more confined to strategic functions (Quesel et al., 2015). Hence, the introduction of participatory school councils – with rather limited effective power – was also used to propagate and legitimize these broader reforms that substantially affected existing power-relations in school governance. Even though parental participation in these new councils is quite lively (Gundelach, Buser, and Kübler, 2017), it remains to be seen whether the new parents' councils can have any long-term effects on Swiss school governance, and what these effects are.

Beyond the cases under scrutiny, the results of our analysis also allow to draw some more general conclusions. First, it emphasizes that participatory innovations cannot be regarded in isolation, but must be understood as part of wider processes of change that takes place in a given policy field. Second, we have shown that, similar to policy change more generally, the introduction of participatory innovations is a dynamic process whose outcome is conditional on actor strategies and ideational framing. Third, we think that the Multiple Streams Approach has usefully contributed to unravelling this process, as the decisions to create participatory innovations are rooted in policy entrepreneurship and successful coupling of problem, politics and policy streams, using policy windows as they appear. Mutatis mutandis, we can thus conclude that successful participatory innovations depend on skillful 'participatory entrepreneurs.'

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