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Lessons Learned From the Nicaraguan
Autonomous School Reforms

Executive Summary
(Translated from Spanish by Ben Meade)

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Introduction:

The decentralization of education in Nicaragua, especially the Autonomous School Program has been the subject of much recent research. Ten years after its inception, the achievements, challenges, experiences and evaluations of the Nicaraguan Autonomous School Program have come together to form an important synthesis of research, opinions and ideas.

This study attempts to provide new perspectives to the existing body of research. Through qualitative research methods, it moves closer to the internal dynamic of the schools with the conviction that the traditions, roles and values internalized by members of the education community help to explain their behavior within that community.

This study focuses on the perceptions of the local relevant actors including teachers, administrators, students and especially parents. Through analysis of these perceptions, we attempt to arrive at conclusions regarding the social dynamic in and around the Local School Councils (LSC) and to place them within the local social-educational context. The foundation of this study is the analysis of the participation of parents through the LSCs, including their economic contribution to schools, and the politics and economic effects of this contribution. We also focus on school governance by the LSCs.

General Methodology:

In order to add depth to the body of research and understand holes in the research, especially the qualitative research, the team conducted a literature review of work pertaining to the Autonomous Schools.¹

Also, a methodological training seminar regarding qualitative-ethnographic studies was conducted for the four different field researchers in order to unify the focus and operational criteria for the development of the study. This permitted a more unified and

¹ These include primarily:

- “Autonomía Escolar en Nicaragua: Segundo Vistazo a la Reforma 1995-1997”. Equipo de Evaluación de la Reforma Educativa en Nicaragua: Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deportes/ Proyecto APRENDE/Banco Mundial. Enero, 1999
- “Decentralization, Citizen Participation, and the Role of the State: The Autonomous Schools Program in Nicaragua”. Alec Ian Gershberg. 1999 Latin American Perspectives.
- “Education Decentralization in Latin America: The Effects on the Quality of Schooling,” Don Winkler and Alec Gershberg, in Shahid Javed Burki, *et. al.*, eds., *Decentralization and Accountability of the Public Sector*, Proceedings of the 1999 Annual World Bank Conference on Development in Latin America. Washington DC: The World Bank, 2000
- “Evaluación del Régimen de Autonomía y la Calidad del Servicio Educativo en 18 Escuelas Rurales/Urbanas Nicaragüenses”. Vanessa Castro. Junio 1999. Informe de Consultoría presentado al Banco Mundial.
- “Rebuilding the Social Contract: School Autonomy in Nicaragua”. Gustavo Arcia and Humberto Belli. December 1998

coherent vision of the study among team members and the development of the appropriate methods of analysis for research of a relatively new theme.

Case Studies: Twelve Autonomous schools were selected, that are in many key aspects representational of nationwide characteristics of Nicaraguan Autonomous schools, especially outside the capital of Managua. Schools were selected based on the following criteria:

- a) **Age of the School:** Schools were included that had operated for at least three years as Autonomous schools to allow adequate development of opinions and experiences about autonomy.
- b) **Academic Level:** Eight primary schools and four secondary schools were selected to approximately represent the number of primary and secondary schools that exist nationally.
- c) **Size of the School:** Schools were selected that represented the approximate median national population for primary and secondary schools. The population ranged from 300 to 600 students for primary school and 800 to 1,200 for secondary.
- d) **Poverty Index:** Case study schools were designated according to their location in areas of “high priority” or “lower priority” on the Nicaraguan index of poverty.²
- e) **Parental Participation:** Schools were classified as “high”, “medium” and “low” levels of parental participation. Autonomous schools do not evaluate levels of parental participation. To develop this scale, among other criteria, we considered the quantity of parents observed participating in school activities, number of LSC initiatives, level of communication between LSC representatives and school administration and whether or not the school had a parental work group.³

Also, as key sources of general information the study conducted interviews with 12 school administrators, 60 parents and 60 students (both members and nonmembers of LSCs), as well as 12 employees of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education at the central, departmental (state) and municipal level.

² Poverty data was collected from the Red de Protección Social (RPS) of FISE. Localities are ranked on a scale of 1 to 6 in the poverty index. Localities are considered “high priority” if they rank 1 to 3 on the index and “lesser priority” if they rank 4 to 6.

³ These were selection criteria that the team developed roughly through secondary sources first, then confirmed in the field.

Analysis:

The study was developed through a literature review and in depth individual and focus group interviews with primary actors involved in Nicaraguan Autonomous schools. The techniques were coordinated by means of a general matrix.

Individual and focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed and served as data for the qualitative analysis. The data was coded using methods described in Rubin and Rubin (1995).⁴

The resulting analysis considered the general behavior of the selected Autonomous schools according to: administrators, teachers, parents and students. A comparative analysis was also conducted that observed characteristics that were particular to schools with “high”, “medium” and “low” levels of participation. Other dimensions considered comparatively were differences between primary and secondary schools as well as school location in areas of “high priority” and “lower priority” areas of extreme poverty.

Principle Findings:

1. Roles and Participation of the Educational Community:

The participation of parents is extremely influential to the general dynamic of LSCs in the Autonomous case study schools. The leadership style of the school principal was decisive in stimulating or inhibiting this participation.

All of the case study schools had at least one group member of the educational community (parents, teachers, principals or students) active in the school. In schools with “high” and “medium” levels of participation by parents – teachers and students also had high and medium levels of participation. In schools with “low” levels of parental participation, teachers had greater participation. Students had participation levels that were independent of parent participation and generally had very limited roles in the LSCs.

- a) **Parent Roles and Participation:** In schools with high levels of parental participation we found more parental organizations. Along with LSCs we found classroom and grade level parent organizations. This appears true regardless of the poverty level of the community, and was true for both primary and secondary schools. The participation of parents in schools classified as “medium” levels of parental participation, showed similar behavior as schools with “high” levels of participation, although with less intensity. All of the schools with “medium” levels of participation were located in areas designated as “high priority” in the poverty index. In schools designated as “low” levels of participation parents tended to only meet when student report cards were presented and did not form

⁴ Qualitative Interviewing: the Art of Hearing Data. Rubin, Herbert J. and Irene Rubin. 1995 Thousand Oaks: Sage.

class or grade level organizations. Also in these schools, we observed much indifference among parents regarding organizing activities, and parents rarely supervised teacher attendance.

- b) **Teacher Roles and Participation:** Teachers generally served as Secretaries of the LSCs, and although they were greatly outnumbered in the organization, they played an important role and were highly influential within it. Teachers principally served as promoters of participation for the different groups of stakeholders.
- c) **Student Roles and Participation:** Student members of the LSCs carried the least active role in comparison to the other sectors. Their presence at meetings was generally a formality, due in large part to the fact that they were greatly outnumbered by adults at the meetings. However, student governments acted with a certain level of dynamism independent of the LSCs.

2. The Role of Leadership and Leadership Styles:

Among case study schools we found three leadership styles among school principals:

- Democratic and promoter of consensus and participation
- Excluding consensus and participation
- Mixed, with both democratic and intransigent leadership styles

Along with these categories, principals were also divided in two leadership style subgroups according to personality. The first is characterized by a *strong* leadership style. These principals had *strong* personalities, but were not imposing and promoted participation and consensus. The second are called *moderators*, and they are characterized by being more conscientious and conciliatory. Principals with *democratic* leadership styles were found to listen to concerns and proposals of other stakeholders and to create discussion and dialogue.

For those principals designated as *excluding consensus and participation* we observed two common personality traits: a tendency to be *imposing* and another to be *indifferent*.

Of the eight primary case study schools, six were designated as *democratic* leadership style and two as *mixed*. Of the six designated as *democratic*, five had *moderator* personality characteristic and only one *strong*. In three of the four secondary schools principals were designated as *excluding consensus and participation*. Of the three, two had the tendency to be *imposing* and one to be *indifferent*. Only in one of the secondary schools did we find a principal with a *democratic* leadership style who also had *strong* personality characteristics.⁵

⁵ Note that we do not assert that the distribution of leadership styles we observed are representational of all school nationally.

3. The Functioning of the LSCs:

- a) The elections of LSC members in all of the case study schools were commonly accepted as democratic. However, these processes and their results varied in participation levels and levels of support of the educational community.
- b) The level of parental participation within the school determined the strength of the system of rules and norms regarding LSC meetings and the level of attendance at meetings.
- c) The dynamic of decision making within the LSCs followed democratic and inclusive procedures. However, in schools with “high” and “medium” levels of participation, decision making was carried out through group analysis and discussion among LSC members. There was a general perception in these schools that other sectors’ points of view were taken into taken into consideration when decisions were made.
- d) Even though there were small differences between the case study schools, the lack of training regarding the functions and operations of the LSC was a need shown in all the schools studied.
- e) **Despite differences in the levels and types of parental participation, and the limitations of our sample of schools, it is the opinion of the team that the Autonomous School Program has not achieved its principle objective: “To reconstruct the social pact so that parents can determine the type of education that their children receive and that the government respects and promotes the parent’s will and fulfills its obligation to provide the necessary resources for public education.” Government has had a primarily financial-administrative focus regarding the reforms in recent years. However, there remains the possibility of returning the focus to the “social pact” between parents and the government.**

4. Impacts of School Autonomy

- a) One of the principle benefits of the Autonomous School Program is the added economic incentives provided to teachers. However, this benefit is facilitated in large part by World Bank financing. The support of school infrastructure has been partly guaranteed by the FISE (Social Emergency Investment Fund). Only a small amount of central and school level funding were observed to be a benefit for teachers and Autonomous schools.
- b) The economic support of parents has reduced significantly in recent years. We found that in primary schools, especially those located in impoverished communities, school fees and charges have disappeared due to agreements made within LSCs. This leaves great doubts regarding the economic sustainability of

this reform strategy. In secondary schools, fees and charges appeared to have also diminished in recent years, although not to the same degree as in the primary schools. Actors in secondary school maintained the perception that the fees were obligatory despite the fact that at the time of the study the Nicaraguan Ministry had outlawed fees for attendance.

- c) In all of the schools studied there was very little participation by members of governmental and non-governmental organizations. Also, the LSCs lacked the initiative to motivate solidarity and social responsibility among members of these groups. It is possible that the education level and lack of training of LSC members were contributing factors limiting this participation.
- d) In curricular material, the majority of the case study schools preferred following the established norms of the MECD. In depth initiatives to develop curriculum were not observed. However, in two schools with high levels of parental participation, we did observe adaptation of the standard curriculum.

Principle Lessons Learned:

1) The lack of clarity regarding the economic sustainability of the Autonomous School Program in the medium term perhaps necessitates a new strategy. This strategy might require using more national resources as a proportion of total school resources. The benefits of local funding should be maintained but national funds should be used for better salaries and incentives for teachers. This would reduce the financial administrative pressure on the Autonomous schools and allow them to concentrate more on the quality of education.

2) So that the Autonomous School Program is able to develop to its potential and take advantage of the rich quantity of possibilities at the local level, there should be a greater balance of participation among the different sectors of the educational community. This would require a change of roles and strategies among actors at the school and community level. In particular continued support means greater involvement by NGOs and members of civil society, perhaps including religious organizations.

3) Given that the levels of participation and organization within the case study schools was dependent largely on the leadership style of the director, it is important to promote democratic leadership in Autonomous schools. Democratic leadership could be promoted through improvements in the selection process of school principals, improved leadership training, and improved technical training at the school level.

4) At the teacher level, it is appropriate to consider the promotion of teacher advisory boards, managed and directed by the teachers themselves. Also, to improve the participation of students within LSCs, adult members should consider new ways of interacting with students within the LSCs and working to train student members for more effective participation.

5) There is a need to professional development among members of Autonomous schools especially around school projects. This should be carried out through the development of a strategy of training and technical assistance in the formulation, development and evaluation of school level projects.

6) This support and education of local actors should be facilitated through strengthening the role of the local MECD technical assistant and dedicating a larger amount of human resources to strengthen local capacity in both the financial and administrative aspects of school management. To the extent that the MECD wishes to support local curriculum changes, local pedagogical support would also be needed.

7) There is potential to improve relations and coordination with other sectors of civil society in the Autonomous School Program. This was one of the original goals of the program. In order for this coordination to take place it is important to include active members of the community within the LSCs to promote school projects that are in the interest of the community.

8) Key to developing a proposal of local capacity building within the educational community are the LSCs. This capacity building should focus on developing knowledge and abilities in managing technical tools, developing and carrying out projects, communication and feedback between sectors, human relations, group management, decision making, and conflict management among other skills.

9) The Autonomous School is a concept that is not sufficiently understood. This is perhaps due to the polemical, political, and ideological climate that has surrounded the program. There is a need for a strategy to improve understanding and knowledge regarding the Autonomous School Program as an expression of civic participation and of the participation of the local community in education. This is particularly true given the change of the program's name to Escuelas de Participacion Educativas. Given the general use of the term internationally, it is critical that "autonomy" not be a dirty word associated with one controversial reform in Nicaragua.

10) The previous proposals represent goals for the national education community in the sense that they would require more political and judicial support. They also require placing the Autonomous Schools Program on a coherent and effective path in search of solutions for its problems. As policy instruments to facilitate this process we suggest: el Plan Nacional de Educacion, la Ley de Participacion Educativa, la Ley de Participacion Ciudadana, and the strengthening of the Planes Municipales de Desarrollo among others.

11) Finally it is important to continue to include both quantitative and qualitative research in the evaluations of the Autonomous School Program in order to provide a wide range of findings and allow for the continued development of the program. Also, it is suggested that this research be carried out with the participation of the principal actors in the local education community, allowing them opportunities to offer suggestions to better their own experiences.