



**Summary of the Conference:**  
**Decentralization and Social Participation in the School: “The  
Future of Education Reform in Nicaragua**  
(Foro Sobre Descentralización y Participación Social en las Escuelas: “El  
Futuro de Reforma Educativa en Nicaragua”)

November 2002  
Managua, Nicaragua

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School University, Milano Graduate School of Management & Urban Policy. See:  
<http://www.newschool.edu/milano/cdrc/schoolreport/index.html>  
for the project web site.

## **Introduction:**

The Foro Sobre Descentralización y Participación Social en las Escuelas: “El Futuro de Reforma Educativa en Nicaragua” (Decentralization and Social Participation in the School: “The Future of Education Reform in Nicaragua”) took place in Managua, Nicaragua on the fourth and fifth of November 2002. The conference was sponsored by the Tinker Foundation and co-sponsored by the New School and Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECD). Participants included researchers and academics from universities in Nicaragua, the US and Sweden, members of international aid organizations, school administrators, and union representatives. Key participants included the current Nicaraguan Minister of Education, a past minister who is credited with inventing the Autonomous reform, the executive principal of Nicaragua’s major teacher’s union, representatives of the World Bank and US AID, and one of the leading scholars on education reform.

Along with discussing theories behind the Autonomous reform, its history and future, participants presented findings from research on Autonomous schools and information regarding educational projects that relate to the reform. Perhaps more important than individual presentations, the conference served as a forum for debate, where informed and important actors from the president of the largest teacher’s union in the country to the Nicaraguan Minister of Education were able to share their opinions and be heard by other key participants. It is hoped that the conference served to create an impetus for future dialogue and cooperation among the various members of Nicaraguan education policy community.

Participants were divided into five panels. The first panel presented and discussed recent findings regarding the Autonomous reform as a way reflecting on the impact and lessons that can be taken from the program. The second panel discussed ongoing projects that deal directly with the Autonomous schools both in the classroom and in their infrastructure. The third panel discussed new legislation that affects and changes the Autonomous program. The fourth panel discussed the involvement of civil society in Nicaraguan education, especially in the Autonomous schools. And the fifth and final panel discussed the MECD’s view of the reform and its plan for the future. The conference was concluded by a summary of the conference provided by Dr. Robert Arnove. What follow is the conference program and a summary of the presentations and discussion.

## Program

### **Monday November 4<sup>th</sup>**

8:30 – 8:45 AM

Dr. Alec Gershberg, New School University  
**Opening of the Conference and Welcome**

8:45 – 9:00 AM

Nuzzly Ruiz, University of Stockholm  
**Perspectives of teachers, students and parents regarding the Autonomous Schools Program: An experience in Esteli, Nicaragua**

9:00 – 11:45 AM

Prof. Alec Gershberg, New School University  
Dr. Valinda Sequeira, Universidad Autonoma de Nicaragua (UNAN)  
Dr. Raul Ruiz, UNAN  
Lic. Cefas Asensio, Banco Iner-Americano de Desarrollo  
**Presentation of the results of the study: Presentation of the Study: Empowering Parents While Making Them Pay: The Nicaraguan Autonomous School Program**

Lic. Orlando Ortega, Investigador Principal Proyecto Aprende  
**Experiences from Proyecto Aprende**

Dr. David Edgerton, USAID  
Dr. Violeta Malespin, USAID  
Lic. Flor Daysi Espinoza, MECD  
Dr. Vanessa Castro, Consultant  
**Investigation regarding community participation in BASE II**

11:45 – 12:45 PM

Dr. Humberto Belli, President of Ave Maria College of the Americas, Ex Ministro del MECD  
**Looking towards the future of Autonomous Schools: the local perspective.**

2:00 – 3:45 PM

Lic. Jose Antonio Zapeda, Secretario General de ANDEN  
Lic. Ruth Cuadra, Secretaria General de Maestros Democraticos  
Dra. Elba Baca, MECD, Asesora Legal  
**Legal Aspects of the Reform**

3:45 – 5:30 PM

Lic. Mario Quintana, Rep. de Coordinadora Civil  
Lic. Yadira Rocha, IPADE  
Lic. Sven Andersson, University of Stockholm  
Lic. Aurora Gurion, EDUQUEMOS  
Lic. Bertulia Rodriguez, Principala de la Instituto Nacional Autonomo de Chinandega  
**Contribution of Civil Society**

## **Tuesday November 5<sup>th</sup>**

9:15 – 10:15 AM

Dr. Gustavo Arcia, Consultant, Duke University.  
Dr. Melba Castillo Aramburu, IDH Nicaragua Project Coordinator  
Dr. Francisco Berríos, Consultant  
Dr. Tulio Tablada, SETEC  
Dr. Carlos Lacayo, Consultant, Ex- Director of Projects and Local Development- FISE,  
Ex- General Director- Red de Proteccion Social- FISE.  
**Administrative Decentralization**

Dr. Silvio De Franco Montalván, Nicaraguan Minister of Education  
Lic. Martha Palacios, Asesora del MECD  
**Nicaraguan Education: The Past and the Future**

11:00 – 12:00 PM

Dr. Robert Arnove, Indiana University  
**Synopsis of the conference and closing remarks**

**Opening Remarks:  
Dr. Alec Gershberg  
New School University**

I have high expectations for this conference. With the audience and panelists that are here we will be able to learn collectively and to discuss strategies that will enable us to continue the process of education reform at the elementary and secondary levels in Nicaragua. There have been significant changes in the world of education in the last 20 years, but unfortunately the world is not static and progress is challenging and necessary. Nicaragua may be a small country, but its education reform model is well known and important at the international level.

I would like to thank the Tinker Foundation, not only for their generous financial support, but also for their guidance. When I purposed an investigative study of decentralization social participation in Nicaragua they asked me, “And how are you going to insure that this academic study will not remain 100 percent academic?” The purpose of the Tinker Foundation is to support development through political reform in the real world that assists human and economic development. This is why I had the idea of conducting a conference where people from the academic and research community and the Nicaraguan ministry of education could come together to share and discuss different ideas about improving the Nicaraguan schools.

I would also like to thank Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECD) for their support and their decision to be involved in this conference- I believe that this was a very good decision on their part. And there are very many individual I will thank after some glasses of wine at the reception that we will have at the end of the day.

But for the moment, I would like to begin with the conference. Some rules: the goal of this conference is to create dialogue, not just to listen to the panelists. The contribution of the audience for me is in a sense, more important than that of the panelists. The panelist’s role is to encourage dialogue and to leave time for it too. For that reason we believe it is important that panelist respect the time limits. With a few exceptions, each panelist, or group of panelists is going to have 10 minutes.

Obviously, the idea is not for us to present all that we know about the theme of education reform in Nicaragua. With the wide range of experiences and viewpoints that are collected here it is difficult enough to limit the conference to a day and a half. Therefore, the idea is that each panelist will not do three things:

- Share an idea of something that he or she believes that we know, that we’ve learned or that we take for granted.
- Propose questions and or key tensions for the future of education reform and if one wants and has the courage:
- Give their own concepts and strategies about how to resolve these questions and key tensions.

At the end of the conference all will be very familiar with the three signs: five minutes, one minute and stop. It is always the role of the teacher and the moderator of the panel that is in charge of managing the time. The sessions are taped and therefore please use the microphone when speaking.

Now we are going to start with a variety of views of educational projects and evaluations relevant to the theme of decentralization and social participation. Today in the first session of the morning we are going to have dialogue, but not as much as in the rest of the conference. The goal is to put many ideas on the table to start. Later, if we take a look at the program, we can see that the time for dialogue increases with each panelist, until the final day when I hope we have heard from everyone in the conference.

Two more rules:

The debate is healthy and very important. We have many different point of view represented at this conference and it is important that everyone feel that there is a sense of mutual respect, a respect that it is given that all of us are part of the same struggle- the improvement of educational quality for Nicaraguan students and the development of the economic, social and human capital at the community level.

The focus of this conference is the future- the future of the schools of participatory education. For this reason, the present moment is key. There is a new administration that has recently passed the first school year. After ten years, there is finally an education law, el Ley de Participacion Educativa. And we are waiting for key decisions to be made regarding the interpretation and implementation of the law. However, those that do not learn from history, you know very well how to finish the cliché. We have to make a strong and honest attempt to learn from the lessons of the autonomous schools. Fortunately, there is much to learn from them. We are in a sense, closing this important chapter of educational reform and social participation in Nicaragua. Only after writing and reading about this last chapter can we use what we have learned to add to the probability that this coming chapter of the schools of participatory education will be even more successful than that of the autonomous schools.

Thank you for your patience, attendance, and your contributions in this conference. Welcome.

**Panel 1:**

**Recent studies of the autonomous reform: This panel reported findings from various recent studies conducted that relate to the autonomous schools.**

**Dr. Nuzly Ruiz de Forsberg**  
**University of Stockholm**

**Presentation of the Study: Perspectives of teachers, students and parents regarding the Autonomous Schools Program: An experience in Esteli, Nicaragua**

Presentation of information from a study focused on the implementation of decentralization in two autonomous secondary school, one rural and one urban. Interested in the processes of decentralization and the significance of the reforms for the involved actors. Research is based mostly on qualitative data- interviews with school principals, students from fifth grade, parents and teachers. Also collected quantitative data regarding the socio-economic conditions of the families.

Will divide presentation in two parts:

How the reform was conceptualized.

The achievements, opportunities and limitations that have occurred as a result of the reform from the perspective of the educational community investigated.

The first stage of the study was a review of the concepts and models of decentralization that have been developed to govern schools.

In the next stage examined the politics surrounding the decentralization of education in 1993 and studied the recent Ley de Participacion Educativa and its components.

Also reviewed the studies and evaluations of the reform.

Found that the involved actors had different visions of the reform:

In official documents found that the reform was presented as a form of school based, management based in the participation of parents, students and teachers in academic and administrative matters. There is also a component that gives the school advisory boards certain evaluative responsibilities.

The international studies also reflect a model of school based management and refer to educational units managed by parents. Also, power is decentralized and the reform is compared to the reform in Chicago of 1990.

Local studies emphasize present the reform as an example of deconcentration with limits of power regarding pedagogical aspects and more focused on administrative aspects.

The largest Nicaraguan teacher's union, ANDEN, at the initiation of the reform saw it as a form of privatization. This related to the fees, which were a part of the initial reform.

Groups from civil society saw the reform as a process of deconcentration of certain MECD functions. But the MECD continued controlling the substantive aspects of education.

A school principal saw the reform also an example of deconcentration. Deconcentration of minor decisions, but the majority of the decision making power remained in the hands of the MECD.

Examined the different tendencies of decentralization in relation to theory and arrived at the conclusion that Nicaragua has mixed elements of different types of decentralization. On one side the MECD has control over the curriculum, finance, educational standards and legislation. Deconcentration refers to a transfer of certain elements, but not powers of evaluation. Certain management functions are transferred to the local level, but according to the rules established by the central office. This is reflected in the Autonomous School Manual of May of 1990, which establishes that the school advisory board has the power to approve the proposal for the teachers plan, but according to MECD standards. There are elements of delegation because decision making powers are transferred, but this power can be revoked at the discretion of the central office. The decision to name the school principal is in the hands of the school advisory board. The aspect of devolution and school based management deal with a transfer of power so that educational units can function more independently. This signifies a change in roles in all of the involved actors.

After the approval of the Ley de Participacion some functions have been decentralized and others recentralized. For example, according to the Autonomous School Manual, the school advisory board has the power to suggest and approve the incorporation of new electives and now the MECD must propose them. This is a power that has been centralized.

Before, the school advisory board could not participate in the naming of the school principal. Now this function has been decentralized and the school advisory board names the principal.

Before the school advisory board could control the parent's monetary contribution to the school. Now with the new law, school fees are prohibited.

Before, to be a member of the school advisory board one had to meet five requirements including the requirement that the member read and write. The new law no longer requires that the member read and write.

Next, will present the achievements and opportunities of the reform according to the actors.

Found that experiences between the rural and urban have been very different because of a variety of factors including socio-economic factors.

Found that the major achievement of the reform according to the actors is that spaces of participation have been opened due to the structure of local leadership that was created. Found that an essential element for effective parental participation in the school was the leadership style of the principal.

According to parents, spaces of participation have been opened for parents and students.

Found that a common obstacle according to the actors were contradiction in the lines of power among the involved actors.

Also, even in schools that have been autonomous for six years, some parents still do not know about the reform.

Believed that the educational community should take advantage of the spaces of participation that have been created so that they can construct their educational project according to context. Also, the spaces of participation can be used for the dissemination of information in schools.



Dr. Raul Ruiz addresses the conference. Behind him are Dr. Gustavo Arcia, Dr. Alec Gershberg, Dr. Valinda Zaqueda and Lic. Cefas Asencio

**Prof. Alec Gershberg**  
**New School University**  
**Dr. Valinda Sequeira**  
**Universidad Autonoma de Nicaragua (UNAN)**  
**Dr. Raul Ruiz**  
**UNAN**  
**Lic. Cefas Asencio**  
**Banco Iner-Americano de Desarrollo**

### **Presentation of the study: Empowering Parents While Making Them Pay: The Nicaraguan Autonomous School Program**

This study attempts to show variables that are associated with different levels participation and examines the impact of school fees in the autonomous schools. It examines the characteristics of schools with high, medium and low levels of participation showing how schools can foster effective participation among parents.

### Parental Participation:

Data on parental participation were collected from 144 interviews conducted with key stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators and students) at 12 case study autonomous schools: eight primary and four secondary schools. Case study schools had at least three years of experience and had different levels of parental participation.

According to the study, parents have been the major winners in the autonomous school reforms due to increased participation and responsibility in the education system. Schools with high levels of participation had open and productive communication between school principals and parents who discussed issues such as school fees and discipline in the classroom. These schools discussed and solved problems collectively. Schools with high levels of parental participation had principals that were strong, dynamic and active leaders whose roles were clearly defined and understood throughout the school.

In schools with low levels of participation parents participated in school mainly to discuss student's report cards. Principals in schools with low levels of participation were characterized by an indifference to parental participation and a tendency to solve problems independently. Also, in these schools the role of the principal was not clearly defined or understood among members of the school community.

### Impact of School Fees:

One of the controversial elements of the reform has been the issue of the "voluntary" quotas. Autonomous schools collect funds from parents in the form of "voluntary" quotas- charges for registration and exams and donations. It is alleged that the voluntary contributions were often in fact required. As part of the study, the team members examined budget data to examine its impact on autonomous schools.

According to the team, for the majority of autonomous schools, the support makes up zero percent of the overall budget. However, school fees made up 5 percent of the overall budget for 70 percent of the secondary schools. This is significant considering that this 5 percent makes up more than 50 percent for many of these schools total discretionary budget. The speaker pointed out that perhaps there was a way that this important contribution could be maintained.

A clear tension that was brought to light by the presentation was the relationship between school fees and increasing inequity in the system. Schools in poor areas are usually unable to provide funding beyond the central transfer, while schools in more prosperous areas were able to augment the central transfer significantly and provide additional resources for students, provide teacher salary bonuses and a higher quality of education. Due to Nicaragua's weak and inefficient tax system there is no guarantee that tax money collected at the community level will make it back to the community in the form of services. The school fees allow for communities to receive the direct benefits of their expenditures, but lead to greater inequity. A potential resolution presented by the team was the concept of matching grants. Schools in poor areas would receive an amount

proportional to their contribution and schools in wealthier areas would donate a proportion of their contribution to fund these grants.

The team also examined the quotas qualitatively through interviews with school community members. The interviews focused on the politics of the quotas, their economic impact and their impact on school quality and curriculum.

**Findings:**

According to the majority of principals, teachers and members of the school advisory board the quotas did not make a significant financial contribution to the schools. The maximum contribution that was found among the case schools was 27 percent of the total budget, although there were also schools with 0 percent contribution. The socio-economic situation of the communities played a strong role and schools in impoverished areas contributed less. According to the interviews children living in poverty were likely not to have uniforms and often went unfed.

There were cases where the “voluntary” quotas were in fact fixed fees.

Secondary schools were found to contribute more than primary schools. In the majority of the primary schools the contribution was 0 percent of the overall budget.

Schools with high levels of parental participation were more likely to have a fixed fee. Schools with high levels of participation also have strategies for collecting quotas including registration and examination fees.

In schools without quotas parents often contributed to the school in the form of manual labor.

Schools that received more funds through quotas were more likely to give teacher bonuses. Principals on the other hand were often frustrated at the fact that they did not receive bonuses.

Families in schools with high levels of contribution were found to be happy to see the effects of their contribution, especially in improvements in school infrastructure.

The funds were found to act as a stimulus for teachers.

Schools with high levels of participation had alternatives for generating funds outside of the quotas.

**Discussion:**

A concern of one of the participants was the time period in which the studies had taken place (the New School study was completed in 2001 and was seen as a culmination of the

autonomous reform and the study carried out by Dr. Ruiz de Forsberg was completed in 2002). The participant believed the results were not directly relevant due to the recent Ley de Participacion Educativa.

A panel member responded by stating that the studies of the autonomous system were considered a relevant starting point for the dialogue because they recounted the lessons learned from the process of autonomy and the beginning of the process of decentralization of education.



Members of the Reform Projects panel, from left to right, Dr. Vanessa Castro, Dr. Violeta Malespin, Lic. Orlando Ortega, Dr. Humberto Belli, Lic. Flor Daysi Espinoza and Dr. David Edgerton

### **Panel 2:**

**Reform Projects: This panel presented information regarding ongoing projects that relate school reform and parental and community participation in education.**

**Lic. Orlando Ortega**  
**Ivestigador Principal Proyecto Aprende**

### **Experiences from Proyecto Aprende**

Shared experiences regarding the Proyecto de Educacion Basica APRENDE. APRENDE is a project of the MECD, financed by the World Bank that was implemented in 1995 to improve the coverage of preschool and primary education in Nicaragua, increase parent and community participation in education, improve the quality and efficiency of education, and to modernize the MECD.

Focused on one aspect of the project that allowed for members of school communities to develop their own projects- to develop their decision making capacity and to work together for a better a better quality education. One of the biggest challenges encountered in the process of decentralization has been the building of capacity among school community members to make their own decisions. The MECD worked to develop capacity among school community members while addressing one of the major problems faced by many schools- lack of basic infrastructure. The project, which is part of APRENDE, is known as Sistema de Mejoramiento de Centros Educacion Primaria (SIMCEP). The basic objective of SIMCEP is to support the process of educational decentralization through the direct participation of community members in the improvement of infrastructure in their schools.

Individual projects amounts range \$2,000 to \$50,000.

School advisory boards are informed about SIMCEP as part of the training they receive on becoming decentralized schools.

MECD delegates promote the program in individual schools.

The school principal identifies the needs of the school and makes an initial proposal to the MECD delegates showing the needs of the school.

The proposal is evaluated and a technical advisor is assigned to the school to support the school advisory board throughout the process.

Three local contractors are invited to make bids on the projects. The lowest bid is selected.

Funds are assigned and the work is carried out under the supervision of the school advisory board and the MECD technical advisor.

Since its initiation in 1995 the project has financed:

Work in 840 primary schools

Renovation or construction of 3,662 classrooms

Benefited 179,000 children

Has had a total investment of \$12 million

The project has also worked in the construction of preschool classrooms as well as temporary domiciles for rural teachers whose permanent residence is located far way from the place where they teach.

The SIMCEP method is applicable for use in other areas of school development as a way of facilitating parental participation in the schools.

SIMCEP promotes parental participation.

Costs are 20 percent lower than FISE costs.

Only through the enthusiastic participation of the community, can education in Nicaragua be improved.

## **BASE II**

**Dr. David Edgerton**

**USAID**

**Dr. Violeta Malespin**

**USAID**

**Lic. Flor Daysi Espinoza**

**MECD**

**Dr. Vanessa Castro**

**Consultant**

### **Investigation Regarding Community Participation and Effects of Base II**

#### **General Description of BASE II:**

Sequence of two projects:

BASE I: 1994-1999

BASE II: 1999-2003

The primary goals of BASE II are to improve access to a high quality education, improve academic achievement and to increase the number of students completing sixth grade.

BASE II is supporting the expansion of curriculum reform and decentralization, initiated in BASE I. BASE II puts more emphasis on sustainability and in making the program more easily replicable.

Its functions include the administering the Red Nacional de Capacitacion (the national training program), supporting the system of model schools, supporting bilingual education in schools in the Atlantic coast region and facilitating the involvement national and international NGOs in local schools.

#### **Community Participation in Base II:**

BASE II includes a community participation component that involves parents and members of the public and private sector in improving the education system through concrete actions like involving the community in improving the school facility, supporting children in their studies and using the skills and experiences of community members to help in the teaching of the school curriculum.

Participation of families, community and private sector- established through the Ley de Participacion Educativa, el Plan Nacional de Educacion.

El Plan Nacional de Educacion establishes responsibilities and rights of parents, the community and society in general in their role in the school.

The community education component of BASE II is carried in the BASE II model schools through the participation of six NGO's located in different regions of the country and by the involvement of a team of five community participation facilitators that serve the model school not served by the NGO's. Both the NGOs and the team members work closely in training the school advisory boards.

Six NGOs were selected from 36:

Alistar Nicaragua

Asociación Los Pipitos

Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica-UCA.

Fundación Cocibolca.

Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Democracia.

Plan Internacional.

The NGOs supervise 45 model schools located in different regions of the country. They bring different focuses and skills and work in different regions of Nicaragua. They work with teachers in model school in helping children learn about subject like environmental education and bilingual education and help to promote special education. For example Plan Nicaragua offers services such as construction, health care, and food and works closely with its four affiliated model schools. The Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica works in the Atlantic coast in the most isolated and most difficult to provide services. Los Pepitos is exploring the possibilities of working with children with learning problems.

Model Schools not served by NGO's are served by a team of five teachers that work to facilitate community participation through training school advisory boards in how they can become more effectively involved in their schools.

Consistent accompaniment and evaluation are essential parts of the process.

The NGOs and the community participation facilitators train school advisory boards in evaluation, supervision and planning, all of which are carried out by the community members themselves.

As part of the program a strategy for promoting community participation in the model schools was developed which include the following elements:

Promote appreciation for the importance of participation in education and improving its quality

Allow community members to gauge and evaluate the level and quality of participation

Form the school advisory board and work commissions depending on the needs and characteristics of each community

Capacitate school advisory boards in leadership and effective participation in the schools

Permanent evaluation and accompaniment- fundamental element, especially in assisting in evaluation and project execution

A curriculum was developed as part of the training of school advisory boards which includes the following subjects:

Parent participation in the school

Stimulating self-esteem among children

Democratic leadership and problem resolution

Learning at home

Developing responsibility among children- this responsibility is developed gradually and appropriately according to skill and age level

Community Participation: Experience as a technician for a model schools

A member of the BASE II team described her experiences as a technician for a model school and summarized some for the lessons learned from the experience:

Community participation in education allows not only for development in the school, but also in the community.

When the school opens to the community and the community feels comfortable to come and participate in activities at the school it leads to greater, communication, integration and cooperation within the school and the community

Careful evaluation by the school advisory boards transfers trust and inspires greater participation and collaboration throughout the system

Motivation and enthusiasm develop when community members are able to see results in their participation such as a school library or a school attractively decorated

This work is difficult but not impossible. It requires great organization, and clear intentions and goals.

**Dr. Vanessa Castro**  
**Consultant**

Presentation of findings regarding various studies measuring the effects of parental participation on the quality of education.

The process of autonomy is not homogenous and does not by itself guarantee quality education. Educational quality is improved by several variables factors.

Parental participation improves the quality of education, but there are many types of participation. One is the construction, cleaning, or decoration of schools, which I would define as an elementary level of participation. A more developed level of participation is

found in supporting and capacitating parents in school achievement. This involvement has a strong correlation with increased achievement of children.

Parental participation can be effective in promoting the quality of education when there is harmony in the system and when all of the participants grow and benefit as a result of their work and participation. If all the participants are benefiting, there is little conflict. For there to be harmony, it is necessary that leadership:

- Unifies participants and knows how to create consensus
- Empowers participants
- Has a clear vision of education as a priority

Also, for parental participation to be successful there needs to be a structure of democratic participation. Schools that functioned effectively in one study had commissions that were created according to the needs of the school rather than expectations and desires of the principal.

Schools with high levels of academic performance had groups such as: study circles, academic achievement clubs, as well as environmental and disaster prevention clubs.

Harmony requires a vision and plan where the necessities and priorities of the schools are all focused on the improvement of academic quality.

Positive outcomes in student achievement were achieved when parents directed student study circles and substituting for absent teachers, not teaching class, but through help of the guides supervising student work.

Also, in successful schools parents participated in giving lectures regarding their work, helping in the planting of school gardens, preparing learning corners in the classes, and supervising classes.

One study measured student achievement in 1999-2002 in model schools some of them multi-grade classroom schools and others regular separate grade (with pure grades). This study applied a test in the third grade and measured student's "dominio"- more than 60 percent of the answers on the subject correct. The subjects tested were Math and Spanish.

One school, a poor and isolated rural school without access to basic services, was one of the highest achieving schools in the department and students there achieved up to 67% and 80% dominio in math and Spanish. The mean dominio for all the model multigrade schools was much lower.

The activities of parents that most influence student achievement:  
Personal visits to class by parents, substitution for teachers

The model of decentralization in Nicaragua has opened spaces so that parents are able to participate more in the education of their children. It is important that the focus remains on improving the quality of education.

**Dr. Humberto Belli**  
**President of Ave Maria College of the Americas**  
**Ex Ministro del MECD**

### **Looking toward the future of Autonomous Schools: the local perspective**

It was believed that autonomy would lead to improved learning however it was promoted for other reasons.

Autonomy and participation in the schools were seen as a right of the community- an intrinsic right of the community to vote and have a voice in the policies that affect their lives.

The more pragmatic consequences, like improved learning, were not directly motivating the reforms.

There was also a need to depoliticize and liberate the educational system, increasing its stability.

The political nature of the system has caused great damage and has hurt many past reforms.

This reform has depoliticized the system through taking power from the state and transferring it to the community.

For example, after presidential elections Dr. Belli received phone calls recommending people for positions as school principals. Because of the reform he no longer had the power to name principals- they were now elected by the community.

School principals were no longer appointed for political reasons.

In the transition from presidents Chamorro to Aleman there were no changes in principals for political reasons.

If a system is created where employees move up or down in the system depending on their merit and not on their political affiliation it will lead to higher quality education in Nicaragua.

Initial statistics regarding the autonomous schools show that they have less desertion than non-autonomous schools.

By funding according to the number of students, an incentive system was created to get and keep students in the school.

The reform was also shown to lead to affect the problem of teacher absenteeism. Many teachers in rural schools teach class from Tuesday to Thursday. The reform allows for parents to demand better attendance from teachers and creates an incentive system for improved attendance of teachers in the form of pay bonuses.

An important lesson learned from the reform was the need for parents to have clear data regarding student performance and academic standards for their children in their own language so that they can participate more effectively.

## **Discussion:**

One of the participants took issue with term facilitator in reference to teachers, seeing it as degrading and infers that they are not professionals. According to the participant, ANDEN (the largest Nicaraguan teacher's union) does not accept the term of facilitator.

Participants pointed out that the significance of the term facilitator is a goal and a movement towards a more modern and open way of teaching. The older traditional system is easier and simpler, while the role of facilitator requires that teachers are more innovative and creative in the classroom and forces the children to take charge of their own learning.

A participant pointed out that 35 percent of school infrastructure is in poor condition and that there were currently 2100 schools that were condemned due to their poor physical condition.

How could this problem be addressed and is it fair to place the burden for this problem of poor infrastructure on the communities and teachers?

Responding to the issue of poor school infrastructure, Lic. Orlando Ortega brought up an example of a rural autonomous school that was conducting classes in a container. The school and community came together to construct their own school which served to bring community members together, involve them more in education and to develop local infrastructure.

A participant was concerned about the time and effort teachers must make in the new system of participatory education. Beyond the normal teaching day teachers were expected to spend time after school meeting with parents and civic groups. The participant stated that he wasn't saying that there weren't irresponsible teachers, but that teachers were poorly paid, not recognized for their effort, and blamed for many of the educational problems.

The education system's dependence on outside aid was also discussed. According to the participant 75 percent of the Nicaraguan school budget came from loans and donations. The participant asked how a successful and sustainable education system could be formed on outside aid.

Regarding the subject of teacher absenteeism a participant stated that it is important that parents and school advisory boards are able to measure and evaluate the positive and negative regarding teacher performance. It is important that those teachers that are doing a good job, that their work is recognized and that there are positive incentives for teachers.

Dr. Alec Gershberg made observations regarding the problems of language in the reforms. The participant stated that words carry much weight and program names often

confuse people's judgment. For example the term autonomy is a concept and the name of a program in Nicaragua. In the 80s Mexican government carried out a failed reorganization of their health care system that was referred to as a decentralization reform, but in reality did not decentralize the system. In the 90s, when the government stated that it wanted to decentralize, people were opposed because they associated decentralization with the earlier failed effort.

In Nicaragua autonomy is unfortunately heavily associated with one program.

Another participant had a question for Dr. Belli regarding his thoughts about the implementation of the reform when he was minister. The process of reform was successful and resulted in dramatic changes in the system. What strategies were used in the implementation of the reform, and what lessons could be passed on to the new minister regarding the reform?

Dr. Belli responded by saying that one element that helped him implement the reform was the length of time that he and his staff were in office. Also, he and his staff were permitted to be especially innovative and had much freedom because of the change of government during the initiation of the reform. Also, the process of decentralization was implemented with very little noise and planning. They started with an experiment in the field with a group of 20 volunteer schools. Then members of the MECD visited school to discuss school autonomy and to listen to their opinions.

Another participant had a question about Dr. Bellis' thoughts regarding the reason the municipal educational advisory boards have not developed as successfully as the school advisory boards.

Dr. Belli responded that it was partly a combination of a lack of time and continuity. The formation and support of municipal educational advisory boards was in the agenda, but the following administration did not emphasize this subject and it was not followed up.

A participant was concerned about the sustainability of the reforms.

Dr. David Eggerton responded by saying that BASE II emphasized sustainability and for this reason it was working in close collaboration with the MECD. Also, empowering community members would also lead to sustainability.

A participant asked Dr. Belli about the legal foundation of the reforms and how his administration resolved the issue of a lack of consensus regarding the reform.

Dr. Belli said that the reforms did not have a legal foundation, but benefited from a tremendous increase in executive power that allowed them the freedom to implement the reform. The legal part of the reform came later with the Ley General de Educacion. Consensus was reached through discussion and debates at the micro-level with dialogue with teachers and local actors. This was used to reach a more overarching consensus.

A participant asked a question regarding the great discrepancy in levels of participation among different schools and what could be done to build positive participation.

Dr. Vanessa Castro responded by saying that the process of promoting participation of parents was a process of building capacity, appreciation and motivation and was a job that needed to be highly organized and well planned and with clear and established rolls.

A participant from the MECD stated that a serious past error that was committed by the MECD, was its failure to communicate with the teachers' unions. Because of the nature of their dialogue- the unions attacked and the MECD defended. This prohibited constructive dialogue to take place. The participant stated that it was important that they work towards a consensus emphasizing the accomplishments of the reform.

A participant wondered if researchers used control groups in the previously mentioned studies.

Dr. Vanessa Castro responded by saying that due to the size of Nicaragua and the way positive elements from individual programs and schools disseminated to schools throughout the country it has been difficult to establish control groups. For example, some non-autonomous schools are more independent and self-managed than many autonomous schools. This makes evaluation difficult because all the schools are in many ways mixed up in the reform.

Responding to the same comment Dr. Alec Gershberg talked about that he has learned about the importance of including both quantitative and qualitative studies in research.



Members of the legal panel, from left to right, Dr. Elba Baca, Lic. Jose Antonio Zapeda and Lic. Ruth Cuadra

### **Panel 3:**

**Legal Aspects of the Reform: This panel discussed recent legislation regarding the reforms and how these laws affect the educational system.**

#### **Lic. Jose Antonio Zapeda Secretario General de ANDEN**

Nicaragua is one of the few countries in the world that does not have a general education law. This permits education ministers to implement changes without violating laws.

Currently there are two education laws in Nicaragua. One is the Ley de Carrera Docentes, approved in 1990 and most recently the Ley de Participacion Educativa.

In 1998 the minister introduced a program that is known as the Ley General de Educacion Basica y Media and the Ley General de Educacion, which legalized school autonomy. Both are not laws, but rather national education plans. The Nicaraguan Education Commission reached an agreement that general education law was necessary and not ambiguous projects.

The Plan Nacional de Educacion does not have adequate financing, does not have legal support and has not been adopted by the present administration.

In 2000, the Ley de Participacion Educativa- was a requirement of a World Bank project, Proyecto Aprende, that required that school autonomy be legalized was not approved until April of 2002.

ANDEN has always supported the decentralization of education but never was given an opportunity to participate in the dialogue regarding the reform and their opinion

regarding the law has never been sought out. If it had been their might exist greater agreement regarding the issue of education decentralization.

Important elements of the Ley de Participacion Educativa for ANDEN:

According to the law the educational community is made up of parents, students and teachers

The MECD is at the service the community and the community is not at the service of the MECD

The maximum authority in the school is the school advisory board and therefore the maximum authority is made up parents, teachers and students. The principal's roll is to create harmony and create conditions so that school advisory board is able to operate effectively.

Parents decide on the process by which members of the school advisory board are elected.

The law outlaws school fees

There are contradictions between the expectations of the MECD and the Law. The MECD says that all schools must be a part of the participatory education program within two years while the law says that the school community first decides collectively if they will become a part of the program or not.

The law is good, but in need of improvement and there is a need for creating a more democratic MECD.

**Lic. Ruth Cuadra**  
**Secretaria General de Maestros Democraticos**

The teachers have two laws: Ley de Carrera Docente that was implemented in 1990, and is used frequently when teachers are fired. It is monitored by two commissions, one at the department level and one at the national level. If teachers feel that their rights were violated they appeal to the department level commission, if the issue is not resolved they pass to the national level commission. Very few teachers know of the law. In a survey, of the 20 teachers asked about the law, only 2 knew of it.

The Ley de Participacion, is more recent and the MECD is still in the process of training school advisory boards regarding the law.

The Ley de Participacion has had many problems including:

There has never been an established set of rules. Every school did what they wanted at their school.

A contradiction between an education system that is supposedly a function of the state, but is heavily dependent on private support.

Hopes that the law is respected and the MECD guarantees its effective application for all those involved. There are instances where the school advisory boards do not follow MECD law; she hopes that this will not be the case with this law. The MECD therefore should train the school advisory boards effectively. The law states that of the members of the board, the treasurer, the coordinator, and the secretary know how to read and write- the rest do not need to know how to read and write. Therefore how can the illiterate members interpret the law?

If the law is not known and understood by all involved parties it will not be properly followed.

Chapter 6, Article 16 states that the MECD will provide a monthly transfer adequate to cover the expenses of the school. However, in reality the transfer is often only sufficient to cover the teacher's salary. How can a school pay support staff, and to provide incentives to teachers? The union of Maestros Democraticos therefore is in favor of the voluntary quota. The transfer should also correspond to the needs of the individual school.

As long as the teacher's pay is not improved, the level of academic achievement we desire will not be reached.

**Dra. Elba Baca**  
**MECD**  
**Assesora Legal**

Will focus on the Ley de Participacion and not the reglamento- the reglamento is still being debated in the Nicaraguan Supreme Court.

The reglamento was written and approved by the president and not by the MECD.

New elements of the law:

Participation in education for parents, students and teachers is guaranteed through the school advisory board.

The school advisory board works collectively- as a group.

The school advisory board is the maximum authority in the school but the MECD maintains its roll as the governing body. One of the main roles of the school advisory boards and the school principal is to follow the politics, norms and rules set by the MECD.

The principal is no longer named by the school advisory board, but is now elected by the school community- teachers, parents and student through the student government. In cases where there are no available candidates a person can be appointed to the position.

The MECD has had a systematic information campaign regarding the law. There has been a great level acceptance and interest regarding the law.

The law is part of the decentralization process.

Only in difficult cases will the MECD delegate play a role in resolving conflicts at the school level and only in exceptional cases will the issue reach the central level.

**Discussion:**

A participant saw a problem with Article 33 of the Ley de Participacion Educativa, which stated that teacher representatives of the school advisory boards could not be a union member.

Dr. Vaca responded by saying that the representative could affiliated, but could not be a member of the board of principals of the union because of political conflict that could result. She stated that a union representative would never be in favor of firing a teacher that is affiliated with the union.

Lic. Zipeda responded by saying that the law does not state clearly who is excluded from being a member and this was problematic because it could lead to different interpretations of the law. He also stated that is was not a function of the advisory board to observe labor issues. Labor management was a function of human resources of the Comision Departamental de Carrera Docentes. The law does not establish a labor management function for the school advisory board.

Another participant saw a conflict regarding the six year restriction of the term of principals. Why should a good principal, with good relations with community be forced to resign after six years?

Another participant observed a problem with a lack of supervision of private schools.

Another participant asked the panelist opinion regarding the feasibility of a donation fund that would shared among schools.

Lic. Zipeda responded by saying that ANDEN has created a proposal for such a fund, but that the proposal is not yet supported.

The participant responded by saying that a fund could be created where the government provided matching funds for poor schools.

Another participant stated that the MECD was in the process of creating such a fund (fondo sonrisa) as part of Proyecto APRENDE.

A participant stated that in his research he came across a case where parents in a poor community created there own scholarship fund for poor students.

A participant stated that there are many type of incentive systems in the education world and that it was important to find the best one for Nicaragua.

Lic. Zipeda questioned why unions and teachers included in the debate regarding reform. He saw a problem in a lack of space for dialogue regarding the reform and a great need for involving teachers in the process of reform.

Dr. Cuadra stated that she hoped that the school advisory boards would put more emphasis on academic affairs. The boards generally focus on the financial and other aspects are ignored.



Lic. Bertulia Rodríguez addresses the conference. Behind her are (left to right) Dr. Sven Andersson, Lic. Yadira Rocha, Lic. Aurora Gurion and Lic. Mario Quintana.

#### **Panel 4:**

#### **Contribution of Civil Society:**

**This panel discussed the involvement of civil society in education reform and in Nicaraguan Schools**

#### **Lic. Mario Quintana**

**Rep. de Coordinadora Civil**

The three great problems with the Nicaraguan education system are:  
More than a million school out of children not in school

Thousands of children that leave the system every year  
The problem of the quality of education that is offered

The role of the Coordinadora Civil is to work to resolve these types of problems. The government does not have the capacity to solve the fundamental problems of education. Involvement of civil society is essential if these problems are to be overcome. This Plan Nacional de Educacion establishes the need for coordination with civil society, but this has yet to take place.

The education community goes beyond teachers, students, and parents. It also includes the private sector, community organizations and religious organizations.

The national education budget is not sufficient especially considering there are more than one million students out of the system.

The state has a great responsibility to guarantee access for these children and to improve the quality of education.

Education decisions are not being made at the school level. The Coordinadora Civil therefore believes that there is a great need for involvement of civil society in decision making to represent the community.

There is also a great need for the education plan to work in coordination with national development plan.

**Lic. Yadira Rocha**  
**IPADE**

Is participation in education mandated formally as a part of decentralization or is it simply a part of democracy?

Important elements of decentralization:

Decentralization is shared power and the process of decentralization is a redefinition of power and the roles of the state and the civil society

At the national level the goal of decentralization is to optimize and make more efficient the economic and social at the local level

Reevaluation of civil society- its limits, its opportunities its rolls and responsibilities

Decentralization requires dialogue and capacity on all sides to listen and learn

It is important that there exist a shared vision of the roll of participation in education. This will prevent individuals from implementing their own ideas and visions and will lessen the conflicts between different actors.

The process of decentralization was a project of one government and not the nation.

Education reform needs to be more of a national project.

It is important decentralization include civil society beyond the members of the school advisory board.

Citizens are often not aware of what's expected of them by the education system and the benefits that are available for them in the system.

It is important that citizens at the local level are informed and convinced about the benefits of the participation of civil society.

There is a common attitude among citizens at the local level of acceptance of rules and regulation implemented at the national level illustrated by language commonly used such as: "They changed the law." "Now they are telling us to..."

It is important that research is conducted to determine the strength, weaknesses and limits of decentralization.

Decentralization occurs through a process, not through law or decree.

As part of the process of decentralization it important that parents and teachers are capacitated so that they can be active participants.

Student participation is usually little more than an adornment. It is important to reinforce their roll.

Teachers should be benefiting from the process and not losing

Teachers' unions should also be an active participant and should not be excluded.

**Lic. Sven Andersson**  
**University of Stockholm**

Will present findings from his study, which was a part of the larger study, overseen by Dr Alec Gershberg.

While other members of the team focused on the internal aspect of the reform he concentrated on the roll of civil society in the autonomous schools.

Conducted interviews in towns that had autonomous school with members of civil society including priests, mayors, union representatives and MECD delegates.

**Findings:**

Overall there is very little participation of civil society in education. The most consistent form of participation was on national holidays and other events.

The MECD's politics are contradictory. Their message is that they want to participate yet they impede participation of civil society because of political fears.

There exists a great insecurity and confusion regarding the limits of power in municipalities and the rights of parents.

There is confusion regarding the rights and powers of MECD delegates. Many mayors did not feel that they properly understood the reforms.

Mayors felt that if they contributed more in the school they would be upsetting the autonomy of the school.

The lack of legal foundation for the reform for eight years has also impeded participation of the civil society.

There is a lack of consensus among organizations regarding reform.

There is a lack of professionalism among MECD delegates and they often pay more heed to political interests than the interests of the community and the school.

Suggestions:

Depoliticize the delegate position. Make appointment to the position and advancement based on merit rather than political affiliation.

Change the responsibility of the MECD delegate to focus more on evaluation and less on management.

Establish a profession group of trainers to carry out a continuous education campaign regarding participation.

### **Lic. Aurora Gurion EDUQUEMOS**

School autonomy has opened the social/political panorama in the schools.

Theory behind school autonomy:

It was believed that it would lead to improved quality and coverage through participation and democratization.

Parental involvement would lead to better teacher supervision and attendance and would allow for better decision making at the local level.

There are real problems with the current system of school autonomy and it is important that we work to resolve these problems so that school autonomy might accomplish the objectives for which it was created.

Problems with school autonomy:

There are contradictions between what was proposed in the past and what is being proposed now.

School principals should be hired from the school advisory board, but are often not.

Parents are not trained adequately.

The MECD is overly politicized and lacks professionalism.

The MECD governance is often contradictory.

Teacher salaries are not sufficient.

The principal objective of EDUQUEMOS is to emphasize and prioritize in the public and private sectors, the importance of a quality primary education for all Nicaraguans in order to move beyond poverty.

Works in two areas:

The political arena, to influence and maintain the perspective that education is fundamental and that Nicaragua will not develop socially or economically without education.

Influence the private sector to support education and to support the poorest children that are often forced to work through a small scholarship that allows them to stay in school.

**Lic. Bertulia Rodriguez**

**Principala de la Instituto Nacional Autonomo de Chinandega**

The Instituto Nacional Autonomo de Chinandega has had a very successful experience with school autonomy.

Success within the reform is dependent on the people that are managing the process at the school level.

Rules and regulations are fine, but in Nicaragua, with all of the deficiencies that exist, we all have to be agents of change in order to be successful.

In the beginning, did not want to be part of the autonomous reform, but then decided to try it and a school advisory board was selected.

After several years with the reform able to say with security that 100 percent of the parents participate actively.

The parent association acts to support the school advisory board in their decisions.

Role as a principal is now to execute the decisions that are made through consensus by the school advisory board.

They have a program of Secundaria Distancia, originally made up of a group of 30 parents. They work to resolve discipline and attendance problems in the school. If a child is absent they go to the parent of the child to ask why the child was not in school.

Every year a list of achievements is written. Among these achievements from 2002 are:

Active participation of the parent association in decision making

Participation is not politicized and includes members from different political parties and religions working together

Economic participation is essential and managed to maintain a system of support despite the new law.

**Discussion:**

A participant pointed out that leadership was a crucial element in the autonomous schools.

A participant stated that although there existed great problems in the Nicaraguan education system, there are thousands of successful cases of participation and achievement. There is a great need for creating ways to spread information about successful cases, possibly a school for principals.

A participant stated that there was a proposal that had been submitted to the MECD for a system of a school principal exchange.

A participant stated that the idea of a school for principals was a good one. In most cases of good schools in poor areas in the US there was an exceptional principal who was a good leader skilled in teaching and sharing ideas.

Probably we are not going to find 8,000 strong leaders (number of schools in Nicaragua) in Nicaragua who want to be principals, therefore we need to think of strategies to support all of the principals, not only those who are the most talented.

Also in the US, principals that are successful are making many contacts with NGOs and the civil society including health clinics and legal aid centers. Successful schools are in many cases like community centers and there is a need for creating more connections between schools and NGOs that can support them.

A participant stated that not everyone can learn how to be a strong leader. However, if there is a forum for sharing ideas about leadership, leaders with potential emerge.



Members of the administrative decentralization panel, for left to right Francisco Berríos, Dr. Melba Castillo Arambura, Dr. Tulio Tablada, Dr. Carlos Lacayo and Dr. Gustavo Arcia

**Panel 4: Administrative Decentralization: This panel administrative decentralization reform in Nicaraguan education.**

**Dr. Gustavo Arcia**

**Consultant, Formerly: Senior Economist, Research Triangle Institute, and Adjunct Professor of Public Policy, Duke University.**

There exists a social contract between a parent and the school where the parents' children attend school. The parent supports the school and the school carries out its role of educating the child. The governance of the education system is too important to leave to a bureaucracy. There is a need to create an administrative and operational system that allows a synergy between parents and the schools.

I would like to bring attention to the link between school decentralization and the current situation of the MECD. Nicaragua has made substantial efforts in promoting school autonomy. However, these gains have been made at the local level, while at the central level the Ministry still behaves as a centralized system.

Optimal roles for each sector in a decentralized system:

**Role of the State-**

**Regulation:** Design and enforce standards and regulations.

**Finance:** Pay for public education. Education, especially primary education benefits the public and if education were left to the private sector there would be a sub-investment in education.

**Information:** In a decentralized system information is vital for managing the system and rendering accounts. It is the state's role to collect and disseminate information that benefits local school and inform parents.

Principal goals of the state in providing education:

Equity: Create a system where all have access to a quality education

Efficiency: Select the most efficient manner in providing education.

Accountability: On receiving the responsibility from people to educate their children the state then has the responsibility to inform the people on how it is educating their children.

To complement these goals we need to make efforts in measurement and evaluation, and in the design of a better multi-grade classroom.

Evaluation: Concentrate in two subjects- Math and Spanish

Create a system of rewards based on the relative progress of each school. Make each school compete with itself, in order to be fair with the school's own limitations.

Examples: Take a multi-grade classroom school in a poor rural area and urban schools in a middle class neighborhood. Their math and language performance cannot be compared because of the differences in the socioeconomic backgrounds of students. What can be done is to develop a "performance zone" for each school, where their results have to be, given their location and the characteristics of their students. Get results above the zone and you are rewarded; get results below the zone, and you are re-evaluated to determine a course of action.

The determined level of reward for each school is dependent on the socio-economic level of the parents of the children in the school. This type of program has already been applied in the US and Chile and has achieved good results.

In Nicaragua we should reward successful school's academic achievement and we need to start measuring achievement now.

Schools should continue to receive funds from the MECD depending on its performance and on its net enrollment rate. This rule would force the school to be honest with itself. Right now children enter the first grade too early, which foster repetition. This is due to the lack of preschools. If only academic achievement is rewarded, teachers and administrators would have a tendency to focus on the highest achievers, leading to increase repetition and dropout. If this happens, funding would decrease since the net enrollment rate would decrease. If the school pays no attention to academics, performance would decrease, leading to a decrease in funding. As a result, a funding formula based on performance and net enrollment rates would help the school seek equilibrium.

The MECD has yet to realize that parents are the clients. There is a need for the MECD to create a system of evaluation and a way to disseminate information to parents, administrators and teachers along with information about funding, teacher pay and resources.

**Dr. Melba Castillo Aramburu**  
**IDH Nicaragua Project Coordinator**

Will present findings regarding the politics of education in 1996.

At this time the process of autonomy was starting and there weren't clear reasons why the reform was occurring.

Key questions:

What were the motivations, political and non-political, explicit and implicit behind the reform?

Who are the main actors and how did they implement the reform?

What was the process of implementation?

Conducted an analysis of findings for common tendencies and review of the theory supporting decentralization.

Findings:

There wasn't a clear or formal plan or document supporting decentralization.

Actors were distrustful of the process and actors and did not share a clear and common understanding or vision of the reform.

Schools were motivated to become autonomous due to the increase in funding that they would receive

The teachers' unions distrusted the process

Unions lost power in the process

There was a depoliticization of the educational system

Some secondary schools received between 9 and 25 percent of their total budget in parental support leading to significant increases in pay for some teachers

Tendencies (can not be directly linked to the process of decentralization):

Reduction in public per capita spending

Increase in capital spending

Reduction in coverage for primary school students (this has since increased)

**Dr. Francisco Berríos**  
**Consultant**

Conducted a comprehensive study on the subject of the decentralization of education for Proyecto Aprende.

He collected a vast quantity of information on the subject- mostly data from the MECD. Processed, analyzed and structured the information.

The MECD is interested in the process of educational participation, the experience of autonomy, all that is being done to increase participation and the impacts of decentralization.

Findings:

Greater levels of participation, greater local control, greater parental participation, greater collection of local resources for use in the school

Lessons:

There is an excess of rules and regulations in the MECD should be evaluated. Rules and regulations should be minimized so that schools can develop their own programs independently and not be impeded.

Without a strong MECD, decentralization will not be successful. The MECD should be capable of supporting the process of decentralization.

**Dr. Melba Castillo Aramburu**  
**IDH Nicaragua Project Coordinator**

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Reduction in coverage for primary school students (this has since increased)

**Dr. Tulio Tablada**  
**SETEC**

Will focus on how the central administration is the counterpart of parental participation. Will present decentralization from a pedagogical perspective- from the standpoint of a teacher, school principal and central administrator in a School Based Management system.

There is a tendency to ask something from teachers, principals and parents for which they are not adequately prepared.

Experience in school was not adequate preparation to be a school principal.

Had to abandon the old one attitude, "I know everything. I'm a professional." And develop a new one, "I'm going to listen and participate."

School administrators, along with the state and the MECD have to facilitate the conditions for effective participation.

There will always be a need to centralize functions as a part of the process of decentralization.

The state allows for a society to live together working for the common good.

The state, working under the authority of the law searches for the common good.

In decentralization the state changes from a hierarchical and coercive vision and gains a greater respect for autonomy and organizations at the local level.

This implicates a change in behavior not only at the personnel level, but in the elaboration of manuals, in supervision and in rule making.

Decentralization allows for the disenfranchised to have a voice and participate.

Decentralization searches for equity and quality.

In 1993 UNESCO said that decentralization was threatened by the fact that is was broadening divisions between diverse communities.

In cases such as these the state must intervene to protect equity.

It is the MECD's responsibility to find the most equitable way to govern and fund the system.

As an administrator, one must search for ways to involve the community and the municipality, not from merely talking about participation, but through using proven methods that facilitate the participation.

There is a basic national curriculum, but along with this there needs to be an individualized curriculum for each school depending on the needs and characteristics of the school.

**Dr. Carlos Lacayo**  
**International Consultant.**  
**Ex- Director of Projects and Local Development- FISE**  
**Ex- General Director- Red de Proteccion Social- FISE.**

Share experiences of the last six years working in decentralization, community participation and municipal development with FISE.

Benefits of decentralization:

In developed countries local governments manage between 40 and 70 percent of total government budgets. This local control has worked to change situation where economic development is focused on small groups- those that have the voice in the free market, while large pieces of the population are excluded. Decentralization works to narrow these gaps.

Decentralization also works to break the systems of clientelism that exist in developing countries. In a centralized government, clientelism is prominent at all levels of decision making and doesn't permit social capital to develop or for the poor to develop. Decentralization opens spaces for participation and makes clientelism difficult.

Decentralization and local participation are instruments that work to prevent inefficiency and inequity in provision of services to the poor.

Also, represents an opportunity to improve transparency and regulation of budgeting.

FISE role in education:

FISE is not an instrument to produce infrastructure, it is instrument to produce social change.

In the last 11 years of FISE, \$158 million has been invested in educational infrastructure. Makes up more than 40 percent of total social investment and 11 percent of all public investment and more than 60 percent of the total investment in education.

Benefited more than 500,000 children.

Training of more than 200,000 local people.

26 percent of FISE investment in education goes to the poorest 20 percent.

The impact on education has been significant and positive in the increased level of matriculation, and in narrowing the education gap.

FISE has also had an impact on social development with its program the Red de Proteccion Social- a pilot program with more than 12,000 children covered.

There was an increase of 22 percent in children below 13 years old in school in first through fourth grade and had a matriculation rate of 94 percent of the children in the program.

FISE has also had a community participation program that has opened spaces of participation for thousands of people.

The greatest contribution of FISE has not been its work to reproduce infrastructure, but its work to develop social change, to open spaces of participation for marginalized populations and to create a more sustainable model for development.

In a country with such a high level of exclusion in education we are sending a negative message to international investors.

No development program in this country will be effective when rural people receive an average of 3.5 of education.



Dr. Silvio De Franco Montalván

**Panel 5: Nicaraguan Education: The Past and the Future: This panel discussed the MECD's position on the reform and its plan continuing the reform.**

**Dr. Silvio De Franco Montalván**  
**Ministro de Educación, Cultura y Deportes**

Problems with education in Nicaragua:

Inequality: the poorer the person, the less education they receive causing a cycle of poverty.

Access: poor rural areas have less access to education

Uneducated population: large number of people over the age of illiterate 12 without education and without human capital other than ability to do physical labor and difficult to retrain. This leads to a general sense of fatalism among the population and machismo.

Due to the condition of extreme poverty the capacity of the state is severely reduced and country heavily dependent on foreign aid.

Since 1980 Nicaragua has received more than \$20 billion in foreign aid.

It would be interesting to investigate where this money is now and how it has been used. Since that time there has not been an increase in the productive capacity in Nicaragua and even though there have been advances in democracy we have yet to achieve political maturity.

Autonomy:

What are the positive effects of autonomy and what is the work that remains (the problems of autonomy and potential solutions)?

Positive effects of autonomy:

Increased involvement of parents in education and in school decision making

Change in the way schools are administered and financed

Sense of ownership among the participants

Problems of autonomy:

Implemented very quickly and sometimes without adequate training of the school advisory boards

In many cases principals did not have a thorough understanding of financial and administrative elements

The number of autonomous schools created without attention to their content and quality

These problems have led to problems in the second generation of autonomy including:

Abuse in the use of resources: inappropriate use of school funds

Over-reporting the number of registered students in order to receive more funds

Principals and school advisory boards are so caught up in working on ways to get more funding that the educational aspect is often ignored

The emphasis of decentralization now should be the processes that occur in the classroom: methodology, how the children participate in their own learning, the capacity of the teachers, development of creativity and analytical skills.

This type of methodology and pedagogy has occurred only in rare instances like in Proyecto BASE.

We still do not have clarity in the results of autonomy or the results that we are looking for.

We also are missing feedback mechanisms and mechanisms for evaluating what happens in the classroom.

The problems of second generation must also be addressed through a strategy that addresses all of them:

Need to involve people more

Need for more technical training

Need closer supervision of school accounts

In Nicaragua we have a serious problem- the illusion of control. People believe that they control Managua, but in reality no one controls Managua.

Decisions are lost, are not made correctly and do not allow for others to participate.

Local decision making is a solution.

Decisions should be made where the problem occurs.

We are attempting to strengthen the municipal system.

The municipality is the key- where the delegates of the MECD have the capacity to give support to the educational system rather than merely supervise.

This will be a difficult process due to the strong tendency we have to centralize in Nicaragua.

We have started with a pilot program in Carazo which will later be applied to other municipalities.

This can not be accomplished through decree. It will be achieved little by little through feedback and flexibility.

The first stage will take four years and will never finish.

We will have multiple systems to evaluate and support actors in order to help them make better decisions.

Another project is directed at people 12 to 30 that have no education.

We have found that poverty is not the only factor that affects school retention. There is a strong correlation between the level of education of the parent, especially the mother, and retention of the child in school even controlling for poverty levels.

The project consists of four years of basic education and emphasizes skills that will serve people in the labor market like communication skills and how to work in teams.

Through this program we hope to improve retention and address the problem of teen pregnancy through sex education.

We are also working with the World Bank in an initiative called Education for All.

This project works to assure that by 2015 all children of age are in primary school.

Funds are used to improve the processes and the quality of schools and to give scholarships to extremely poor.

The program will reinforce autonomy and decentralization through creating a fund that will be administered through individual schools that can be used to improve processes and maintain the school.

Nicaragua has the lowest percentage of people in educational training in the world- 2 percent.

Half of those who finish high school don't go to college and have few options.

We have a pilot program that develops high school technical training to serve as a base so that a graduate can work in a business.

We have also a program to provide education outside of the classroom for those with least access using technology like educational radio.

**Lic. Martha Palacios**  
**Asesora del MECD**

In the nine years of decentralization the fundamental conclusion is that decentralization was not completed.

We have not reached the vision of becoming more efficient at the local level.

On March 21<sup>st</sup> of 2002 the Ley de Participacion Educativa was implemented.

This formed a more solid base to begin to think about how the local level is performing in its responsibility of strengthening the municipal delegations of the MECD.

Under this law, we found that we had two ways decision making place in the schools:  
At the institutional level- where educational processes are formulated that then pass through the school, through the municipal delegation, to the departmental delegation to finally arrive at the central site.

Decision making also takes place through the school advisory boards with the participation of the municipal advisory boards.

Our goal is to synthesize the MECD with the policies of the Ley de Participacion Educativa.

Pilot program:

Moved with a team of experts to Carazo to study the educational system there and how the MECD performed there at the local level.

Worked and lived in the educational community for four months.

Experts included: finance experts, pedagogy experts, experts in organization management and in decision making.

Objectives of pilot program:

The primary goal was to find ways to Improve academic performance and quality in Carazo

Identify the programs that the schools, departmental delegation and municipal delegation faced

Identify the most important decisions to decentralize

Identify the capacities and resources of the local MECD and their needs: How could the central MECD better support the local MECD so that they could function as an effective partner and facilitator of the schools?

Outcomes of pilot program:

- Reorganized the function of the municipal delegation. The primary function of the municipal delegation was supervising school budgets. Schools had to focus on fund raising in order to get the resources they needed. It is vital and urgent to revise the transfer of funds- the big problem for schools was raising adequate levels of funding.

- Changed the priorities of the municipal delegation to meet the priorities of the central MECD: improve academic performance.
- Changed the function of the traditional supervisor from someone with preconceived notions of what should take place to someone who helps to identify problems and helps to resolve them.
- Created a new local MECD position- the local technical trainer. This person is in charge of identifying the training needs at the school level and helps the central MECD to adapt to the needs of individual communities.
- Train technical person at the municipal level in statistics so that people could identify how school at the local level compared to schools at the regional and national level. The World Bank assisted in creating who train delegates in statistics.
- Changed the function of the municipal educational advisory board from merely being a presence at national holidays to being more active in supervising academic performance in the municipality and facilitating improvement in education.

Local initiatives:

Group of preschools reorganized, combined to be more efficient

In secondary schools with large numbers of teachers per teachers revised the capacity of the schools. Found ways to utilize the space in creative ways: Saturday classes, evening classes etc.

This process culminates in the evaluation of the performance of the local MECD delegates and an evaluation of changes in academic performance.

### **Discussion:**

A participant had a question regarding the MECD's BID program for De Franco Montalván. The program serves two groups: people in the 12 to 30 age group and parents of students. What type of education were the people in the 12 to 30 age group receiving? This is the age group who are usually wrapped up in problems of drugs and gangs and in many cases they lack opportunities. What good is technical education for these people if there are no jobs available? Often the response to this problem is to teach them to generate their own jobs, but if there is no economic plan, a plan to generate employment, this also will fail.

De Franco Montalván responded by saying that in no country in the world exists where one finds the perfect fit between supply and demand. Young people in the program are given a basic education along with a simple technical education teaching universally useful skills. Also, try to change attitudes hopelessness and fatalism. This helps young people to find employment and generate their own jobs. Self generation of employment is

a reality in Nicaragua where 78 percent of the working population is working in the informal sector.

It is true that this age group is often at risk. To address this problem the MECD, in coordination with the Ministerio de Salud and the Ministerio de Familia have developed a pilot program that attempts to improve the environments where problems occur. Drug use and gang affiliation numbers have diminished significantly in the pilot neighborhood. This work requires time. There is no magic plan that develops employment. Employment is usually developed through investment. Investment occurs in the right political and economic environment and not through government decree. Investment in Nicaragua occurs especially slowly, but has recently been improving and has generated low level positions. The focus of development has also changed. The focus has shifted from national development to regional development trying to focus on what exists in each region and the potential of each region and what might encourage investment in the region (a highway for example) so that the public and private sector can work together to generate employment.

Basic education allows people to learn to use new technologies (including simple ones), take risks and adapt to changes. It is an essential component of economic development.

Another participant saw the program in Carazo as successful but worried that it would not be duplicated in other areas. What would the Minister do make sure the positive characteristics of the program were duplicated in other areas?

The Minister responded saying that Carazo was selected because of its strength and location in order to be able to control other variables. From Carazo the program will move to other municipalities. The idea was to have a basic model that can be adapted to meet the needs of different environments. The project will take four years. Once the program is better established, the MECD plans on opening training centers in those municipalities.

Another participant saw a tension regarding the MECD delegate position. On one side it is important to have delegates that are politically loyal. On the other side, if it is necessary to have technically skilled delegates they need to stay in the position for a long period of time to develop technical skill and experience.

De Franco Montalván stated that his interest was that the delegates served their communities well. He supports a civil service law that would guarantee that delegates were selected based on their qualifications and experience.

Another participant had a concern that the MECD's focus has been on infrastructure but has ignored an essential problem- the low teacher salary.

The participant was also concerned about the fact there seemed to be a tendency to reduce the size of the MECD and increase the number of MECD projects.

Dr. De Franco Montalván responded that he agreed with the participant about the problem of low teacher salaries and had been working hard to increase them. He is also

working to improve conditions for teachers including providing living quarters in rural areas and providing health care for 12,000 rural teachers.

Recently he discussed a loan with the EU for the education sector. A condition of the loan discussed was an increase in teacher salaries.

Regarding the MECD's size and organization Dr. De Franco Montalván stated that the MECD is currently organized by function and project creating a matrix that no one knows how to manage. To assist the problem of divisions and factions within the MECD, the MECD recently prohibited the publication of project names on school materials. Schools and MECD workers tended to identify themselves according to the organization that was financing the project leading to fractionalization within the system. In the years to come sectors will receive loans rather than financing individual projects.

A participant had a question for Dr. Tulio Tablada, the participant asked how the Ley de Participacion Educativa could be reformed.

Dr. Tablada emphasized the need for more participation in the education process and expressed his desire to work with ANDEN regarding the law.

A participant had a question regarding the new funding formula and how it would functioned and was concerned about using Carazo as a pilot when its conditions did not represent the conditions found in the rest of the country.

Dr. Palacios responded by saying that the new funding formula was implemented in June of 2002. The previous formula was highly complex and resulted in inconsistencies. After conducting an analysis of school needs and spending the MECD established a new funding system. Funding is determined by the number of students with different funding categories: three size categories, categories depending on the level of instruction and to attempt to address the problem of inequity rural schools receive an extra 10 percent. In regards to the selection of Carazo for the pilot program Dr. Palacios stated that the next department to be selected for the program would be Managua which represented 60 percent of the countries' students. Managua, and the reorganization of its educational system to make the MECD a partner of the schools there is a major undertaking. She also stated that she wanted to invite the teacher union leaders to participate in the process. The departments with the largest populations were selected first and the next departments would be Leon and Chinandega and Grenada and Masaya.

A participant stated that there was a need to accelerate the process of decentralization but was concerned about a lack of consensus and common understanding regarding decentralization policies and lack of instruments to institutionalize them.

Dr. Palacios stated that the Ley de Participacion Educativa clearly establishes the role of the municipal delegation helping to bridge the gap between the MECD and individual schools. Also, the MECD has formed commissions to addressing the Ley de Participacion.

She stated that she hope that the in the process of including other departments in the process that the MECD can have discussion with union leadership. She stated that she

believed in union leadership and the work that they do. In the process of developing Managua she makes a commitment to discuss its development with the union leaders. Dr. Tablada stated that the Consejo Nacional de Educacion (national educational advisory board) is functioning. The President named Dr. Castellon as chair. Dr. Tablada is a member of the technical advisory committee. There are representatives from different sectors.

A participant had a question for Dr. Carlos Lecayo regarding FISE. To the participant, one of the most important accomplishments of FISE in recent years has been its surveys and constructing data bases indicating poverty levels at the local level and family conditions among others. Did Dr. Lecayo see opportunities for using the data bases for informing the MECD in their work? And what did Dr. Lecayo think of the idea of creating a shared fund made up of voluntary contributions that is given to those who most need it?

Dr. Lecayo responded saying that the FISE had carried out more than 1,200 surveys in order to understand the population that was being served by FISE projects and their impact. FISE also did surveys of schools themselves measuring teacher performance and school building use. Approximately 1,500 children are represented and 400 schools. There is a great potential for using the data for important research and more effective political involvement.

In respect to the matching grants, the FISE is transferring through its program, Mantenimiento Preventativo de las Escuelas (preventative school maintenance) is in 110 municipalities. Funding works through a matching grant system. For every Cordoba contributed by the municipal government the FISE contributes 15 cents and the community contributes 10 cents.

A participant sought the panelist view of the cultural changes that have been brought about through decentralization. And about the development of local capacity- in the participant's the building of local capacity was essential if decentralization was to be sustainable.

Dr. Palacios stated that the fundamental strategy of the MECD at the local level has been developing the capacity of local actors. They have encountered the greatest resistance at the national and departmental level. At the municipal level resistance lowers every day. The MECD ensured that every teacher in the department of Carazo knew about the program and how their role in the new system along with their rights and responsibilities. All of the members of the school advisory boards received training and municipal advisory boards to develop an understanding of the new system and their role within it. Capacitation of local actors is an essential element of the MECD strategy.

A participant stated that it was his opinion that cultural and institutional changes were necessary for true reform and legal reform in itself was not enough and that people needed to continue to insist and push for reform.



From left to right, Dr. Robert Arnové,  
Dr. Vanessa Castro and Dr. Alec Gershberg

**Dr. Robert Arnové**  
**Indiana University**

### **Conference synopsis and closing remarks**

1) In discussing and summarizing this conference on Educational Decentralization and Educational Participation, the first thing that needs to be asked is why decentralization, and more specifically why the emphasis on school autonomy and participation. How are decentralization, autonomy and participation conceptualized? What is the relationship between them and what purposes do they serve? And finally, how does decentralization fit into an overall project to increase access, equity, quality and the successful functioning of an education system?

2) So we need to begin with the vision of those who were responsible for initiating, who are now responsible for its execution, and the groups that are key to its implementation or appropriation- who have taken this project as their own rather than as an imposition.

3) For as Mark Hanson, who has studied the decentralization process in Spain, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina and Nicaragua has noted:

1. The degree of acceptance of the vision of decentralization among the distinct centers of power (political powers, unions, bureaucrats, religious institutions etc.) determines the success of the reform.

2. The understanding of the goals of decentralization is the key for understanding the specific aspects of the strategy.

3. However much the process of decentralization involves the transfer of positive opportunities by the central authority, in a situation where both are benefited, instead of simply unloading problems and burdens where one party suffers to the other's benefit, will determine the possibility of successful and effective change.

4) As Nuzzly Ruiz, the first speaker noted, the Nicaraguan model is a mixed model, with elements of deconcentration and delegation, and little to no devolution, which is considered the most truly democratic and effective form of decentralization in the long-run.

5) The visions of the different actors also vary greatly and are even conflictive. As we saw yesterday, former minister Humberto Belli made the point that decentralization was a project intended to strengthen the role of the civil sector and increase the role of the family in education while decreasing the role previously played by the centralized bureaucracy of the MED.

6) Whether or not one is in agreement with the ex-minister Belli -- that this was the most effective and appropriate way to "reestablish the social contract" between the state and the society as Gustavo Arcia and he wrote in an article for PREAL-- there is no question that the project had the educational goals of increasing the efficiency and quality of education.

7) Before coming to yesterday's meeting I had the pleasure of speaking with a well-known and respected former minister of education (before 1990), who gave an opinion about decentralization. He said that it started out as a good idea that was poorly implemented because what started out as an educational project became an administrative and, above all, a financial {"financiero"} project. It was seen as a way of alleviating part of the financial burden of the state for education and as a way of increasing the salaries of teachers.

7A) This approach to decentralization led to an array of conflicts and problems with which we are all familiar. Conflict between teachers, administrators and parents over charging school fees in a context of growing poverty; and over increasing the number of students in a school to obtain more money, but most likely not increasing the quality of education

7B) Studies by the World Bank and Belli and Arcia have indicated that when parents were satisfied and participated they were involved in areas related to the budget, maintaining the budget and the building, and rarely in relation to the curriculum.

8) Vanessa Castro spoke about it being important that all groups benefit, each group (teachers, students, parents, community members, administrators) has its role involving a division of work that corresponds with the achievement of significant educational goals.

9) One of the last speakers mentioned that the state in Latin America has traditionally imposed reforms. This, however, is the situation all over the world. What we know about effective schools is that they have a particular social-psychological climate, a culture--- schools function as communities. Each group has a role to play to create a school that makes sense for them.

10) Leadership is imperative, but also so is the role of the teachers. No reform will succeed without the support of the teachers. They are the single most important input-factor in the learning of students; they are the key to the success of a school. Not enough attention has been given to the teachers, not just their salaries, but their working conditions, educational preparation, and professional development. Decentralization efforts around the world have been implemented, in part, to break the power of teachers unions and to fragment teachers' collective efforts, while blaming teachers for whatever goes wrong. And parents of course are very important to the schooling process--but as support. All have to work together to bring about an effective school

11) Escuela Nueva is an example of a successful reform that has provided quality education for the most disadvantaged rural populations of Colombia and other countries as well. The results are evident in international assessments of educational achievement where Colombia, largely due to the Escuela Nueva, is the only country in Latin America in the UNESCO 1997 study where rural children did better on standardized tests. Not only do students in Escuela Nueva schools in Colombia (but also in Guatemala where the elements of this reform also have been implemented) learn more, but they also evidence stronger civic values with regard to dispositions that favor democratic participation. The elements of the Escuela Nueva involve a flexible, child-centered and community-oriented curriculum, a flexible academic calendar, strong community participation in school decision-making and, most importantly, professional development of teachers. Students themselves play an important role in maintaining the successful running of the schools, when experienced teachers leave and are replaced by new teachers unfamiliar with the elements and ethos of the Escuela Nueva. But as successful as some schools are they still depend on the professional development and adequate support of the teachers and an entire package of innovative components.

12) In examining the performance of Latin American education systems for my chapter in my forthcoming 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of my co-edited textbook, *Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local*, – Nicaragua appears among the lowest performing systems with regard to adult literacy, access to preprimary education, enrollment in primary education, repetition and retention rates, and numbers of students going on to secondary education, despite two decades of reform efforts. What is needed is a total package of reforms: preschool education with adequate complementary nutrition and health programs, appropriate curricula and textbooks, multicultural and bilingual education programs, a flexible academic calendar, etc.

13) Each country (as each community) needs its own strategic plan and vision of what constitutes educational and national development instead of a one-size fits model recommended by World Bank or the IMF.

14) The model has to be the result of a process of national dialogue and consensus – building among the state and the various constituencies of civil society.

15) Nicaragua has wonderful projects -- BASE, APRENDE, FAE -- but they often do not work together. What is needed are complementary efforts of these various actors to achieve a more complete and cumulative impact on improving the education system.

16) I wish to note here the importance of both quantitative and qualitative research to acquaint educational policy makers and practitioners with educational reforms that are needed and under what conditions they may be achieved. Research is needed to acquaint the education community with what is both desirable and possible. Research can inform and inspire dialogue as well as vision. There is a great need to establish networks to undertake research and disseminate findings to improve educational policy and practice.

17) For example, we know that high participation is involved with more satisfaction, but who is participating? What factors are related to participation or lack of participation on the part of parents, teachers, and students --and with what results? How has the role of a school principal changed? If as Dona Bertulia (the principal of a school) pointed out yesterday, her school increased its enrollment by approximately 1000 students and almost 100% of parents participate: What factors were related to these phenomena and what impact did increased enrollments and participations have on the functioning of the school? What interventions work best with different constituencies? We have already spoken so much of the new law of participation. What aspects of the law facilitate or hinder effective participation and desirable outcomes?

18) To return to my opening questions concerning the vision of decentralization, who is involved, and who benefits. What is needed is a comprehensive approach to educational reform involving a number of interrelated components, one of which is an effective decentralization related to improving the content and conditions of teaching and learning. Further needed are systematic and continuous dialogue and consensus-building, based in part on what we have learned from examples of success and failure, to achieve an education system that contributes to developing the potential of all Nicaraguans and to advancing Nicaragua as a country that is more independent, prosperous, and just.