Education for Democratic Life through Social Participation: Points of Encounter between Schools and Families

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Abstract

This document examines some of the elements regarding the education for democratic life (EDL) initiatives that have been developed in basic education in Mexico since the 1990s. The document places special emphasis on social participation (SP), not only because it is conceived as a key resource for the promotion of an active civic life in the school or among students, but also because it is deemed capable of promoting a closer relationship between schools and families, and the different people that make up both entities. Although some advances have been made in the area of EDL, a comprehensive policy that considers the development and consolidation of SP, based on the strengthening of relationships between the school and the family, remains absent.

Introduction

In recent years, various efforts have been undertaken in order to promote an education for democratic life (EDL), which is understood as a group of initiatives bearing different names (education for democracy, civic education for democracy, education for a democratic citizenry, education for democratic values, and civic education, among others). This form of education is fundamental to the global public policy agenda because it addresses the social needs derived from educational reforms, from efforts to democratize educational systems (Espínola, 2005; Gajardo, 1999; López, 2007), and, in general, from the numerous actions taken to fortify democracies (Cox, Jaramillo and Reimers, 2005). In addition to representing a set of abilities and skills that all children and young people should possess, this education is an essential means of ensuring young peoples' future incorporation and successful performance in the productive and political sectors of society.

The objective of this study is to examine some of the elements associated with the attention that the EDL has received in basic education. A special emphasis will be placed on Social Participation (SP) because it constitutes the most active expression of EDL (Eurydice, 2005). In particular, since both schools and families play an essential role in carrying out any initiative related to EDL in our societies, the attention of this paper will be focused on the relationship between the two. It is within schools and families that this form of education is constructed in a constant, dynamic and daily manner. There has been a long-standing interest in the teaching and practice of democratic values within schools and families (Biesta, 2007; Espínola, 2005), however, the urgency to understand it is greater today than before because, for the first time in human history, democracy represents the most widely accepted form of government in the world (Held, 1998). This situation, together with the changes taking place in schools and in families, adds a particular degree of complexity to the topic under analysis.
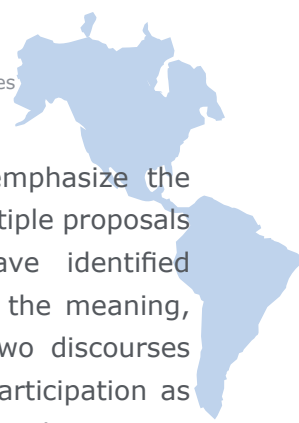
The study presented here is organized into three parts. The first part will illustrate various actions undertaken in the last decade by the Mexican state in the area of basic education, which were, to a large extent, the result of two significant events: Mexico's adhesion to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, and Mexico's signing of the National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education (Acuerdo Nacional para la Modernización de la Educación Básica, or ANMEB) in 1992. In analyzing these events, two elements will be looked at in depth. The first is the Reforms in Secondary Education of 1993 and 2006, and the Comprehensive Reform of Basic Education of 2009; fundamentally, the focus will be on courses such as *Civic and Ethics Education*, *Civic Education for a Culture of Legality*, and *The Comprehensive Program for Civic and Ethics Education at the Primary Level*. The second element is the push for a new conception of SP oriented toward the democratization of the educational system and the opening of school spaces to multiple actors through the creation of the Committees for Social Participation (Consejos de Participación Social, or CPSs). Both of these elements relate to the development of EDL in Mexico: the first one deals with education oriented to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, as well as the development of democratic behaviors; the second one, which relates to the CPSs, represents a valuable opportunity to put the aforementioned knowledge, skills and behaviors into practice. Since EDL cannot be successful if it is limited to the school space, relationships between schools and families are of particular relevance. In order to examine them, the second part of the article will present some features of the current state of both institutions. In regards to this topic it is worth mentioning that, even though evidence has shown a low level of family participation, diverse expectations, values, and beliefs still prevail among the main school actors; this, in turn, suggests the possibility of a greater degree of cooperation between these two institutions, a cooperation that could generate benefits related to both in-school achievement as well as to the promotion of family well-being and community development (Bolívar, 2006). In fact, a research paper relating to SP (Zurita, 2009b) found that supervisors, principals, teachers, and even parents desire closer relationships between schools and families as a means to strengthen EDL. Lastly, although there have been advances in EDL and in SP in Mexico, there is still no comprehensive policy to coordinate the different programs and actions (Latapí, 2005). Until now, the push for EDL has been focused on curriculum design, and especially on the modification of programs and curricula at the primary and secondary levels. In order to gain a detailed understanding of this situation, it is necessary to analyze a series of recent actions undertaken by the Mexican state in order to promote EDL in basic education.

Some Elements of Education for Democratic Life

Since the 1990s, multiple efforts have been made to strengthen democracy and citizenship through education. This phenomenon, which in itself has become an object of study in the social sciences and humanities as well as an area of focus within the field of government and educational policymaking, involves a wide range of national and international actors, both governmental and non-governmental, and has resulted in the utilization of millions of dollars in funding from public and private sources from various countries around the world. (Cox, Jaramillo and Reimers, 2005; Espínola, 2005; Eurydice, 2005; Levinson, 2007).

Education for Democratic Life transcends the traditional vision of civic education that conceived of students as passive receivers of knowledge and prioritized students' memorization

of instruments, norms, and institutions (Kymlicka, 2005). Education for Democratic Life goes beyond the idea of forming citizens whose participation in the public sphere is reduced to the act of voting in electoral processes (Kiwan, 2007). Instead, it promotes the exercise of rights and responsibilities in various areas of public life from a very young age. This education is related to a learning process that is continuous, active, collective, and critical; based on participation, social cohesion, equality, responsibility, solidarity, and peace; and oriented toward the goal of inspiring individuals to act as active agents in their own education. Education for Democratic Life implies a profound transformation of collective life and, for authors such as Touraine (1996), it is the only way to assure a peaceful and harmonious coexistence based on respect for human rights within the contemporary contexts of profound multiculturalism and of serious and intensified problems of inequality, exclusion, and poverty.

The wide range of literature related to EDL reflects a diverse set of initiatives that differ in their methodology, their conceptions of democracy and citizenship, the environments in which the initiatives are applied, the actors responsible for implementing them, and the targeted populations (Doppen, 2007; Kiwan, 2007; Perry, 2009; Reimers, 2007; Sears and Hughes, 2006; Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Even though all of the initiatives talk about democracy, citizenship education, or participation, they still exhibit significant differences because their accomplishments, the actors involved, and the impact that they have in their respective democracies are reflected in different ways in the various societies in which they are implemented (Sears and Hughes, 2006; Stevick and Levinson, 2007). Lastly, although there does not exist a homogenous conception of EDL, there is still a common recognition of the immediate necessity for this type of education.

It is also necessary to emphasize the close ties between SP and the multiple proposals for EDL. Various authors have identified instances of polysemy related to the meaning, scope, and implications of SP. Two discourses stand out: one that recognizes participation as representative of the vitality of a democracy; and the other, of a neoliberal nature, that, in conjunction with reforms of the state, sees in civic participation the possibility of obtaining more and better results from the state's policies and public programs (Blas and Ibarra, 2006; Corvalán and Fernández, 2000; Dagnino, 2006; Kliksberg, 2007; Levinson, 2007). In sum, it is reasonable to consider that different expressions of participation, whether they are spontaneous and take place on the margins of society or whether they are promoted by the state, represent valuable experiences of civic education and of the exercise of citizenship. Even though at times there may exist a perverse confluence between these two conceptions (Dagnino, 2006), this does not eliminate the possibility that they will in turn produce practices that could come to represent important mechanisms of civic intervention for particular individuals and groups. Consequentially, state-promoted participation, which is often assumed to be limited, artificial, and susceptible to manipulation (Cunill, 2006), needs to have certain nuances recognized this is especially so considering that the state's project can generate results that go beyond its initial formulation and that, when incorporated into collective actions and identities, can produce social phenomena of an immeasurable richness that re-signify not only the initial sense of participation and its objectives, but also the very ideas of democracy, civil society, and the state.

Within this panorama, Mexico has not remained on the sidelines of the debate and the various actions undertaken in the area of EDL. Of the most important causes that prompted

the educational system to undertake actions related to EDL, the following stand out on the international level: the fall of the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe, the end of the dictatorships and authoritarian regimes of Latin America, the reinstatement and consolidation of democratic governments, and the global human rights movement. On the national level, important causes related to the implementation of EDL programs include the process of democratic transformation of the state, the activation of civil society, the reform of the state, and the greater participation of nongovernmental actors in the formulation, design, and implementation of public policies. With respect to the topic analyzed here, it is important to focus on two essential events. As already mentioned, the first is the adhesion of the Mexican state to the CRC, and the second is the ANMEB.

The CRC is important for a number of reasons, but the following are two of its most relevant qualities: first, it is the human rights treaty with the greatest worldwide ratification; and second, given that it incorporates these rights in their totality, it possesses a perspective that is "holistic and indivisible from its provisions and principles" (IACI, 2007: iv). In articles 12, 13, 14, 15, and 24 of this document, children's rights are recognized with respect to participation in the various different arenas of everyday life. Through its adhesion to the CRC, the Mexican state has taken a step forward in the fulfillment of its obligations through various actions, including the modification of a series of legal instruments, such as the amendments to articles 4 and 8 of the Political Constitution introduced in 2000 and 2006, the promulgation in the year 2000 of the Law for the Protection of Children and Adolescents, the approval of the 2002-2010 Action Program entitled *A Mexico Suitable for Infants and Adolescents*, and the 2002 ratification of the Facultative Protocols of the CRC related to the

sale of children, child prostitution, the utilization of children in pornography, and the participation of children in armed conflicts. Nonetheless, as noted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2006, in Mexico, there still persist:

Certain traditional behaviors on the state level that, among other things, limit children's right to participate and express their opinions. The Committee has observed with concern the scarce opportunities that children have to participate and express themselves in decision making processes that affect their lives, especially at the school and community levels (UNICEF--UNHCHR, 2006: 349).

In light of these issues, the aforementioned Committee suggested to the Mexican state in 2006 that, among other actions, it intensify its promotion of the participation and expression of opinions of children and adolescents in schools and other institutions.

The ANMEB, for its part, introduced a singular perspective on the aims of education. This agreement has had multiple effects on basic education, but two aspects will be highlighted in this paper. The first one has to do with the curricular design of plans and programs of basic education. Since 1925, the year in which secondary education was first implemented in Mexico, a civics course has been included in the curriculum with the objective of collaborating in the formation of national unity and the consolidation of the Mexican state.[1] This situation changed radically with the Secondary Curricular Reform of 1993, which incorporated a wider vision of civic education.[2] As of 1999-2000, a course in Civic and Ethics Education had been included in the three grades that make up the secondary level, and later, in 2002, its implementation was extended to include

primary education (Guevara, 2006). This reform introduced the formation of values as an element in teaching approaches that, in turn, recognized students' prior knowledge and experiences, and sought to encourage the strengthening of attitudes beneficial to democratic coexistence and participation. Faced with the persistence of certain problems at the secondary level, though, the Integral Reform of Secondary Education (later renamed the Reform of Secondary Education) replaced the 2002-06 National Program of Education (Programa Nacional de Educación, or ProNaE). The Integral Reform of Secondary Education included a series of relevant modifications to this subject, taught from then on in the second and third years of secondary school. This reform, based on a competency-based educational model, sought to:

> encourage young people to assume collective commitments in the following areas: the defense and promotion of human rights, respect for diversity, the rejection of violent solutions when addressing differences, and the strengthening of values related to human coexistence (SEP, 2006: 13).

Likewise, the 2000-2006 federal administration created the course *Civic Education for a Culture of Legality*, also for secondary students. The intention of this course was to form citizens under the idea that "a good citizen knows the law, obeys it and also helps others obey it" (Levinson, 2007b: 113).[3] This tendency was further confirmed by the implementation of *Civics and Ethics Education* in primary school under the Integral Reform of Basic Education. This reform[4] understood civic education as an essential part of the formative field oriented towards personal development and human coexistence.

In the process related to the (re)design of the basic education curriculum, various

preoccupations and proposals came together in the formulation, design, and implementation stages. In this respect, along with the contributions of the Secretariat of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, or SEP), noteworthy contributions were made by the following entities: the Secretariat of Governance (Secretaría de Gobernación, or SEGOB); the Federal Electoral Institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, or IFE); the United Nations; the Organization of American States[5]; the Organization of Iberoamerican States for Education, Science and Culture; the Inter-American Development Bank; the Mexican Youth Institute; the National Human Rights Commission; as well as various universities and organizations of civil society (Levinson, 2007). Within this context, the 2002 Integral Program of Civics and Ethics Education for Primary Education (Programa Integral de Formación Cívica y Ética para la Educación Primaria, or PIFCyE), which was derived from the agreement between the SEP, the IFE and the SEGOB, stands out. This program focuses on the design and implementation of actions and strategies of promotion, along with the development and strengthening of civic education and training, democratic culture, and social participation. The promotion of civic education is achieved through the promotion of a global learning experience in four areas of education: the school environment, the everyday life of the student body, the course of study, and the cross-disciplinary (*transversal*) work that takes place among the different courses that make up the curriculum.

Subsequently, Secretarial Agreement 384 (2006) recognized the participation of experts, academic institutions, and members of civil organizations in the creation of Inter-Institutional Consultative Councils, whose work consists of the permanent revision and continuous improvement of basic education programs. Within this framework, since the Reform of Secondary

Education carried out by the 2000-2006 federal administration, PS is one of the eight competencies that give structure to the curriculum and courses of study. PS is defined as:

> The capacity to take part in decisions and actions of collective interest in various areas of political and social coexistence. It implies that students will take interest in matters related to the improvement of collective life and develop their sense of co-responsibility with representatives and authorities of social and political organizations. It is desired that students recognize themselves as subjects with the right to intervene and involve themselves in matters that directly affect them, and also in those matters that have a collective impact, such as the election of representatives and the exercise of power in the institutions in which they participate, through procedures such as dialogue, the act of voting, consultation, consensus, and dissent. Also contemplated is a consideration of the situation of individuals who find themselves in unfavorable conditions, as a reference point for organization and collective action (the Government of Mexico, SEP and SEB, 2009b: 47).[6]

The second matter issuing from the ANMEB is that of SP in education, conceived as one of the principal strategic lines of the educational reforms of the 1990s (Latapí, 2005; López, 2006; López, 2007; Torres, 2001). In Mexico, since the ANMEB and its later incorporation into the General Law of Education (Ley General de Educación, or LGE) in 1993, the CPSs constitute the distinctive figure embodying this new perspective. Although multiple modalities of SP exist in schools (Estrada, 2008; Zurita, 2009b), the School Boards (Consejos Escolares, or CEPSs) have an inherent democratic vocation because they are comprised of several different actors and because they were

conceived, according to article 69 of the LGE, as a channel of societal participation in actions directed toward the incremental improvement of educational quality and coverage.[7] From that point forward, participation has held an unusually central place in the discussions, policies, and educational programs of the various state and federal administrations. It is therefore to be expected that SP would appear in a constant form in the Sectorial Programs of Education, such as it figures in the current Program, whose sixth objective aims to:
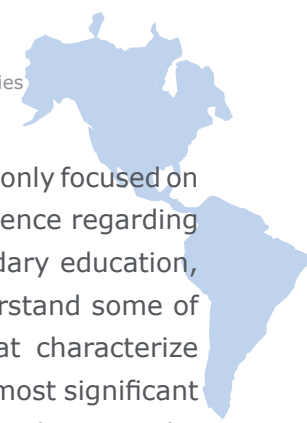
> promote a school and institutional administration that strengthens the participation of schools in the decision making process, distributes responsibility among different social and educational actors, and promotes transparency, accountability, and the security of students and teachers (The Government of Mexico, SEP: 2007).

Also sustained in this norm is the idea that the promotion of SP is associated with the following:

> A full democratization of the educational system that opens institutional spaces of participation to parents and to new actors such as organizations of civil society, with the goal of strengthening the communities of each school. Democratization will strengthen educational federalism, transparency, and evaluation, as well as appreciation for cultural diversity (ibid**).**

However, it is important to note that the third constitutional article, which was in existence long before the ANMEB, already signaled that:

> The norm that will orient education...will be democratic, *considering democracy not*

only as a legal structure and a political regime, but also a system of life founded in the constant economic, social and cultural improvement of the populace [italicized by the author].

It wasn't until the creation of the Quality Schools Program (Programa Escuelas de Calidad, or PEC) in 2001 that significant progress was seen in relation to the establishment of the CEPSs, due to the fact that in the beginning, the formation of these School Boards was recognized as a prerequisite for schools' incorporation into the PEC program. Furthermore, along with the CEPSs,[8] both Municipal and State Councils were required to learn about and examine the results of the evaluations of the public primary and secondary schools in their territories (Martínez, Bracho and Martínez, 2007).

Of course, participation in schools does not end with the CEPSs. It is important to emphasize that SP reflects the interests, preoccupations, expectations, and values of our times. As such, it is not isolated from the participation that exists in other areas of public life. From a historical perspective, SP cannot be separated from the history of the conformation of the educational system and, therefore—with respect to the Mexican state—from the limited political participation and the fragile civil society that characterized a good part of the past century (Barba, 1998). In this way, SP in primary and secondary education has followed an irregular trajectory, causing experts, educational authorities, and school actors to agree that this constitutional mandate is far from being achieved. A portion of the difficulties originate from the lack of clarity that educational authorities have had in the definition and implementation of an authentic SP policy (Latapí, 2005), let alone one that clearly expresses the connection between SP and EDL in schools (Guevara, 2006).

Even though this article has only focused on two aspects of the Mexican experience regarding EDL efforts in primary and secondary education, it is nonetheless possible to understand some of the advances and limitations that characterize this process. One of the process' most significant weaknesses lies in the disarticulation between the new design and implementation of *the Civic and Ethics Education* and *Civic Education for a Culture of Legality* courses and, on the other hand, the push for SP in primary and secondary schools. Despite the fact that these efforts were based on a broad vision of civic education which was supposed to be applied to the everyday life of the student body, it remains true that schools, and above all classrooms, were and continue to be the primordial space for learning, even when the objective of EDL is not restricted to teaching a lesson in a classroom during a certain number of hours per week. Likewise, the focus is mistakenly limited to children and adolescents, without considering that EDL cannot truly exist if it does not incorporate teachers, administrators, and parents, or if the exercise of the rights and responsibilities of children and adolescents is postponed until they become adults, or if the scope of the program is only limited to the electoral sphere. With respect to SP in schools, this article will later show that its application has also generated unfavorable results, given that the CEPSs have still not been successfully consolidated and, thus, the opportunity for them (and also other modalities of SP) to become spaces for the exercise of the knowledge, skills, and values that involve democratic participation (Kiwan, 2007) has been wasted. Nonetheless, the scope of this opportunity extends further because, as established in the CRC, in addition to facilitating the right of children and adolescents to participate at school, it could also be the foundation for an SP proposal integrating schools and families within their respective areas of action.
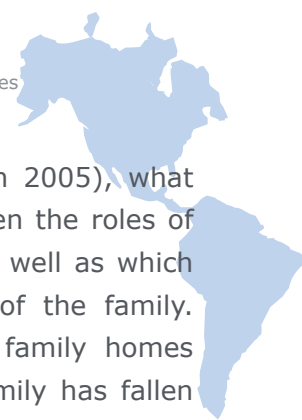
It is common to hear arguments that emphasize the fact that schools and families find themselves in the middle of profound transformative processes, and that they are simultaneously experiencing a crisis in their roles as socializing agents (Tapia, 2003; Tenti, 2008). The following section will examine whether these institutions possess characteristics that hinder SP or if, on the contrary, there exist points of conjunction between the two that could be utilized in proposals related to EDL and, especially, to SP in schools.

The school and the family, constantly changing institutions

The school and the family are institutions that have historically existed in a state of constant change, although during some periods these changes have been more radical or more visible. Some changes have been the result of a wide range of policies, programs, and actions, for example, the transformations that have taken place in schools over the past three decades as a result of educational reforms (López, 2009). In other cases, the transformations have occurred spontaneously due to a combination of multiple social, cultural, and economic factors, as has happened with the diversification of the types and the functions of families. For now, it is necessary to provide a brief synthesis on this topic in order to understand how both institutions are linked with one another and to identify the opportunities they could generate for the strengthening of EDL in Mexico.

With respect to schools, it is known that the reform processes have sought to convert public primary and secondary schools into the nuclei of educational systems, with a greater degree of autonomy through a greater decision-making capacity related to various topics (Gajardo, 1999). As these processes are being carried out, schools have tried to promote quality and equality, improve the results of learning processes at school, and assure educational coverage. At the same time, there have been efforts to promote PS in schools through different strategies, including the establishment of the Consejos, the design and implementation of a variety of programs, projects, and actions, as well as the incorporation of relevant courses into school curricula. Within this framework, it is pertinent to ask whether these changes have had an impact on the formation and practice of democratic values in primary and secondary schools. The National Survey on Beliefs, Behaviors and Values of Teachers and Parents in Mexican Primary and Secondary Schools (La Encuesta Nacional sobre Creencias, Actitudes y Valores de Maestros y Padres de Familia de la Educación Básica en México, or ENCRAVE), carried out in 2005, found that teachers recognize that basic education makes a limited contribution to the formation of values. Thus, for example, they expressed that they teach values that they do not in fact practice. To illustrate this, it is enough to see that 17% of teachers would not accept (or would partially accept) an indigenous person living in their home, a third would not accept (or would partially accept) a person of a different religion living in their house, and 40% would not accept (or would partially accept) having a homosexual in their home. Furthermore, only one in three teachers believes that, by the end of secondary school, young people treat their contemporaries with respect and are tolerant of the differences that exist among people. Teachers believe that the best option for increasing tolerance is to establish dialogues with parents and, to a lesser extent, with the young students. On the other hand, teachers recognized that schools promote the following qualities to a large degree: appreciation for learning (57.7%), love of knowledge (55%), respect for others (54.4%), positive feelings about work (53.3%), gender

equality (53.1%), and honesty (51.4%). With respect to the individuals responsible for the formation of democratic values, it is interesting to note that 65% of teachers—and 73% of parents—believe that parents are responsible for this task. Furthermore, the multiple efforts to promote the formation of democratic values in schools have faced serious challenges like, for example, those generated by the profound transformations that schools are experiencing. In this way,
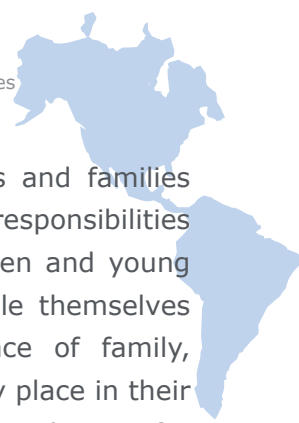
> everything that occurs in society "is felt" at school. In other words, all of the structural changes that are registered in the principal dimensions of our societies have their corresponding manifestation in the educational institutions and practices... This "invasion" of society into school life is one of the new developments in the current moment, and it is causing us to question many initiatives and modes of doing things in educational institutions... Correspondingly, these developments are at the base of a profound feeling of discontent and disorientation among teachers, administrators, parents, students, experts, and the greater public (Tenti, 2008: 14 and 15).

Families in Mexico have lived through relevant changes related to the increase of paid jobs held by women outside of the house, the increase in the care of children and adolescents by men, the lengthening of life expectancies, and the delayed departure of young people from their family homes. In Mexico, nuclear families predominate.[9] Eighty-five percent of homes are biparental, while 15% are monoparental, generally pertaining to the mother. Furthermore, diversification in the composition of the home, due to the postponement of first marriages and decreases in fertility, has also been noted and has resulted in a reduction of the average family size.[10] Although nuclear homes still predominate

(nearly two thirds of the total in 2005), what has significantly changed has been the roles of the different family members, as well as which person is considered the head of the family. Thus, the portion of biparental family homes with a masculine head of the family has fallen from 90.3% to 85%, while the proportion of monoparental homes led by women has doubled from 7.3% to 15%.[11]

These statistics indicate some of the transformations that have taken place within families; however, in order to understand how family dynamics work in relation to the values that are taught, learned, and reproduced at home, the National Youth Survey (Encuesta Nacional de Juventud, or ENJ) of 2005 contributes some very valuable information. To begin with, the survey highlights how young people now have greater opportunities and possibilities to communicate and dialogue with their parents regarding many different issues, with the exception of sex and politics. With respect to interfamily relationships, mothers were identified as the first people that youths consider when they have a concrete problem, feel the need to have a conversation, need advice, need money, or when someone is sick. With respect to politics, the survey found that young people, principally women, exhibit *little* or *no interest* in political issues, although this situation changes as children grow older.

In order to find how tolerant young Mexicans are, they were asked to select, from a list of specific people, those whom they would like to have as neighbors. The most accepted groups were close relatives and foreigners; on the other hand, the following groups provoked a negative response from more than 70% of participants: individuals with criminal backgrounds, alcoholics, and drug addicts. With respect to the institutions or people who inspire the greatest confidence amongst young Mexicans, family members were

the most chosen, followed by school classmates or coworkers. The groups of people who inspired the least confidence included people richer than the interviewed individuals, and community leaders. When questioned about the credibility of institutions and/or people, the family once again received the highest marks with respect to confidence, followed by doctors and schools. On the other hand, the institutions that received the lowest marks were the police, political parties, federal deputies, and unions. When asked to make a general assessment of their lives, nine out of ten young people considered family to be very important, with work, school, money, and romantic partners occupying a secondary place in their lives. But the family is also essential with respect to other matters related to learning processes, such as reading habits and practices. According to the results of the 2006 National Reading Survey (Encuesta Nacional de Lectura, or ENL), the family is second in importance after the school, and constitutes a primordial reference point for reading, considering that 72.1% of surveyed individuals read at home and 20.1% read books loaned to them by family members or friends.

These statistics show that Mexican families, even with their notorious transformations, continue to carry out crucial educational functions. In other words, it is true that in traditional societies families performed multiple reproductive, educational, sanitary, protective, social, and religious functions; but as societies became more modern, other specialized institutions were created that rapidly assumed responsibility for these functions, or shared them with families. Nonetheless, families did not cease to intervene in the teaching, learning, and practicing of the values that mark the development of people as autonomous, independent, and productive individuals who participate in the economic and political life of our societies (Valdivia, 2001).

In synthesis, both schools and families are recognized as possessing responsibilities related to the education of children and young people. At present, young people themselves recognize the primary importance of family, with school occupying a secondary place in their lives. This fact contrasts with their distrust for politics, their characteristic lack of tolerance, and the dissatisfaction they feel with respect to different political institutions. An element expressing the encounter or clash between both institutions and between their expectations and demands is, without a doubt, SP itself. As has been recognized by various authors (Bolívar, 2006; López, 2009), SP encompasses a group of processes indispensible to the everyday functions of schools. By virtue of the fact that SP in schools is the active part of EDL, it is necessary to examine its principal traits, modalities, and results, especially those in which schools and families interact. This matter is addressed in the following section.

Social Participation and Education for Democratic Life

The reforms carried out in Latin America and the Caribbean during the 1990s aspired, among other objectives, to a SP in schools that would transcend its *traditional* preoccupations, practices, and results (such as attendance, conduct, and discipline at school, the assignation of responsibilities, and the support of administrative functions), replacing them with *new* ones, such as the democratization of the educational system, the increase of family expectations with respect to the educational trajectory of their children, the demand for a high quality education, and the capacity to make responsible and informed decisions regarding the education of their children. This fact influenced discussions in the educational field, causing SP to acquire great relevance; for even when SP is discussed in

other political, economic, and social arenas (Blas and Ibarra, 2006; Cunill, 2006; Dagnino, 2006; Kliksberg, 2007), its manifestation in education takes on a very particular set of characteristics (Biesta, 2007; Corvalán and Fernández, 2000; Levinson, 2007).

At present, SP in Mexican schools is a multidimensional, heterogeneous, and dynamic phenomenon that combines forms and modalities that are both institutional and non-institutional, both existing prior to and after the ANMEB, and also both individual and collective (Zurita, 2008; 2009a). This complexity is increased when SP takes place in public schools whose level (preschool, primary or secondary), modality (general, indigenous, or technical), system (the National Council for Educational Development, or the Community Education Promotion Association), enrollment size, type (mixed-grade, team teacher, unitary), and even time of day (morning, afternoon, or full day shifts) impose undeniable particularities.
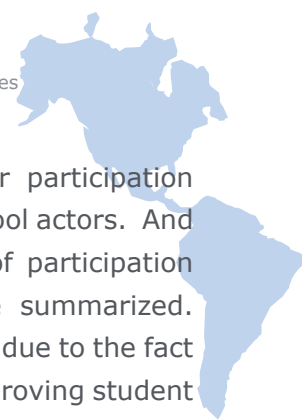
In order to become familiar with this phenomenon, a series of results, derived from a study begun in 2005 with the central objective of identifying processes of SP in primary schools in the Mexico City region,[12] will be analyzed. In carrying out this study, four different groups of school actors were asked to share their points of view, experiences, and proposals with respect to SP: administrators, principals, teachers, and parents. Participation was understood as part of a permanent discourse and action that the actors construct and reconstruct, which are related to different aspects of the formal and informal ties that connect them to schools, the braoder educational system, and the social context. The following pages will present some of the principal findings of this study in five specific fields: a) SP from the perspective of the school actors, b) obstacles, c) results, d) accountability; and, e) recommendations for the

promotion of effective SP.

a) Social Participation from the perspective of school actors

The study investigating SP in the primary schools of Mexico City compiled, through a survey, descriptions of the existing ideal conceptions of participation, schools, and actors, comparing them to the opinions regarding school actors and the form in which they participate. The surveyed individuals easily recognized various differences between the *ideal* SP (the SP which *should take place* in Mexican primary schools) and reality. The *ideal* definition is full of positive aspects and its dimension is, in the majority of cases, collective, that is, it alludes to the sum of efforts to obtain results also considered to be collective. In contrast, the question regarding the *actual* participation that takes place in schools received almost as many different answers as there were people surveyed. The responses were characterized by their frequent use of descriptive adjectives (whether related to the quality, quantity, or results of SP) in defining participation. In this manner, the distinctive polysemy of the notion of *participation* was confirmed not only in the conceptions, but also in the expectations of the actors with respect to their vision of SP in public primary and secondary schools.

The individuals who took part in the survey know that various aspects of participation (protagonists, objectives, actions, and results) depend on elements such as the level of education (preschool, primary, or secondary), the time of year within the school calendar, the modality of the service (general, indigenous, technical, etc.), the surroundings (urban or rural), or the socioeconomic conditions of the population that attends the schools, for example. Nonetheless, all parties were in agreement in voicing their preoccupations with respect to the

low level of parental participation throughout the basic education cycle, from preschool through secondary school. In terms of participation, the surveyed individuals assign a great deal of relevance to the participation of parents, placing them above other actors. In this way, without parents, SP in schools is inconceivable. In accord with this vision, the institutional modality of PS par excellence continues to be the Parents' Association (Asociación de Padres de Familia, or APF), as was recorded by Gershberg (1999) a decade ago. In this respect, our study found that the APF is the most well-known modality in school communities: more than 95% of principals, teachers, and parents said that an APF existed in their school. On the other hand, not even 25% of principals and only 8 % of parents identified CEPSs in their schools. In contrast with the almost-absolute dominance of the identification of SP with **parental** participation, the mention of students as protagonists in SP is practically nonexistent. These opinions are congruent with the national tendency observed in the National Evaluation of Social Participation in Basic Education.[13] With respect to the participation of children and adolescents, while it is true that Student Societies (Sociedades de Alumnos, or SAs) were created before the ANMEB, in the 2005-2006 school year nearly 60% of secondary schools possessed these entities, but without any guarantee that they truly functioned according to the standards (Zurita, 2008).

In our investigation of the objectives of SP, we found that the objectives that received a greater percentage of responses were the improvement of student learning and the promotion of greater parental participation in the development of school infrastructures. In this investigation, as well as in the National Consultation on Social Participation[14] and the National Evaluation, these two topics, associated with learning and infrastructure, are found

to be the principal proposals for participation opportunities among different school actors. And it is here that two conceptions of participation that merit deeper reflection are summarized. The first one is wider and integral, due to the fact that it includes the proposal of improving student learning. This tendency could be related to the current model of mutual involvement between the school, the community, and the family, in which a greater interconnection is thought to generate greater educational results (Bolívar, 2006). In contrast, the second conception, although it also coincides with current educational policies, is not inclusive given that it is limited to a single type of actor (parents) and directs participation toward a single action (the improvement of the infrastructure). The reduction of PS to a conception that principally includes only parents is worrying, because it contradicts the spirit of the educational reforms of the 90s, which sought to encourage the intervention of multiple actors and to broaden the topics that could be the objects of their collaboration. Upon asking the surveyed individuals to indicate the characteristics of schools in which PS exists, the fundamental role attributed to parents was once again revealed. On average, eight out of ten participants agreed that the most important characteristic is the parents' interest, followed by teacher participation and by the active functioning of APFs.

The survey was carried out in Iztapalapa, which is one of the political delegations with the longest tradition of social mobilizations within Mexico City,[15] and it was predicted that parents who resided in this delegation would participate intensely in social movements, popular organizations, political parties, religious organizations, etc., and that this would in turn be reflected in schools. Nonetheless, a large majority of parents signaled that their participation in school was minimal, and that those who did participate did so primarily through religious

and athletic organizations, which do not have a significant impact on schools.

Finally, although the actions promoted by the ANMEB in Mexico are based on a discourse that promotes the democratization of the state and of society, SP in education was rarely mentioned as part of the process of democratic transformation. On the contrary, the survey exhibited a constant manifestation of efforts to dissociate schools from political participation. While this is not an occurrence exclusive to Mexican schools, it does display a certain paradigmatic quality[16] "The possible politicization of schools inspires fear among teachers, principals, and administrators, because they see in politics the threat of political or partisan conflicts extending to the school space. From this perspective, various actors think that, even though the school space is neither isolated nor impenetrable (Oraisón and Pérez, 2006; Tenti, 2008), it is preferable to shelter it from the political realm.

b) Obstacles

The individuals who took part in the survey identified different obstacles that impede the development and consolidation of SP in schools and in the educational system. The most identified obstacles concerning the participation of administrators, principals, and teachers include: lack of respect for school actors, lack of tools to build ties between actors, lack of communication and, particularly among teachers, lack of time. In the case of parents, the other actors recognized their lack of time and their lack of interest toward school activities. The principals and administrators highlighted some other obstacles that correspond to the characteristics of the primary and secondary education system, such as the excessive workload, the disarticulation and simultaneous operation of numerous school programs, the lack of resources to promote

initiatives, or the reduced possibilities for schools to make their own decisions about undertaking projects or implementing programs.

The members of the school communities are exposed to the risk that their efforts to incorporate new mechanisms of SP or to fortify the existing mechanisms might fail, due to the fact that the educational system has not incorporated substantial changes that would support them and permit such consolidation. The urgency of an integral policy of EDL goes beyond the design and implementation of specific courses, given that, from the perspective of SP, even though the strengthening of SP is one of the principal objectives of the current Sectoral Education Program, the different programs that have promoted it (the PEC in the federal administration of 2000-2006, or the Safe Schools Program and All Day Schools program in the current administration), do not propose articulations between each other. This is despite the fact that the strengthening of SP is one of the principal objectives of the current Sectoral Education Program. This disarticulation is experienced in a dramatic fashion in schools: given the permanent overload of activities and programs, SP is added to a long list of tasks to develop, and the response to pressures to promote it is no longer just the refusal or resistance to change, but rather, its apparent (but not genuine) fulfillment.

c) Results

In the methodological design of our study, all the different aspects that, according to the participants of the survey, benefitted schools and their actors were considered *positive* results, no matter if they were generated intentionally or not. Among the principal considerations associated with the results of SP, the fact that participation proves more beneficial for the school as a whole than for any particular member stood

out, along with the fact that participation helps different actors learn to solve problems and work in teams, and that SP in education is a benefit in and of itself. For the survey participants, these considerations are sufficient reasons for the promotion of SP in schools and in education.

When they were specifically interrogated about the contributions of SP in schools, the survey participants identified to a higher degree the contributions that relate to the organization and functioning of the school, as well as to the interest of parents in their children's education. In some cases they identified processes of SP in the school that were transformed into organized actions, and oriented toward matters related to social or community development. The study shows that, in the opinion of the surveyed individuals, SP contributes positively to schools' well-being; but it also shows that participation is not the panacea, nor the magic formula, that can solve all of the problems related to schools and education; far from it: SP can deepen conflicts, postpone the construction of agreements, or generate a sensation that time is being wasted (OECD, 2001; Shaeffer, 1994).

d) Accountability

In recent years, discussions concerning accountability have been initiated in the educational sphere (Di Gropello, 2004; Hanson, 1997; Meade and Gershberg, 2006). In Latin America, these discussions are related to issues such as the processes of educational reform of the 1990s, the incorporation of mechanisms of educational evaluation, the democratization of public policies, and demands from organizations of civil society for government accountability (Corvalán and McMeekin, 2006). However, in Mexico accountability has not yet achieved acceptance within the educational realm, even when, for multiple actors, accountability is seen

as a positive practice that encourages increased quality of education. The data collected in our study shows that principals and teachers commonly see accountability as an unnecessary interference into teaching practices or as an heavy-handed attempt to exercise vigilance and oversight. This explains a large portion of their rejection or, in the best of cases, of their reservations relating to the demand for accountability on the part of parents, experts, and the media.

Three topics associated with accountability were considered in the survey: the use of economic resources, school management, and student learning. The investigation confirmed that the use of resources is one of the topics that provokes the greatest degree of interest among the different actors of school communities. On the other hand, learning is not a matter that is open for discussion, given that only those who possess the necessary knowledge—school actors—can give their opinion on the issue. The results indicate that accountability in the school space is informative and that different resources are utilized for its dissemination (assemblies, APF meetings, written reports), depending on the features of the recipient; in other words, different means of communication are used depending on whether this information is being sent to parents, teachers, or APFs. Likewise, the content of the information varies: in some cases the decisions being communicated have already been made and carried out, while in others the information is presented for consultation so that decisions can be made afterward.

e) Recommendations for the promotion of Social Participation in schools

In the face of the variety of recommendations that the surveyed individuals voiced in relation to SP, it is necessary to classify
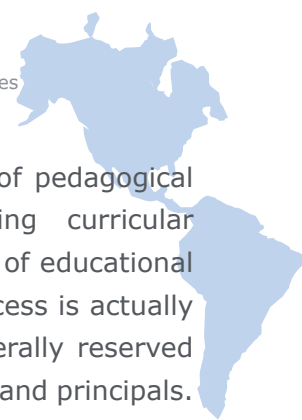
their responses into three separate groups. The first refers to the actors essential to the promotion and consolidation of SP in schools, that is, the actors who should take a more active role in the diverse areas of participation, such as administrative, educational, cultural, and communicative. Parents, teachers, students, communities, principals, and authorities are among the most commonly identified actors in this group. Although these actors maintain a close relationship with education and with the school's daily operation, from the perspective of the survey participants, they do not exercise their rights nor comply with the obligations assigned to them by the normative view of SP in education. Despite the numerous motives that prevent their attendance, they suggest the design and implementation of various instruments (bulletin boards, messages, emails, telephone calls, newsletters, class chalkboards, agendas, mailboxes, school visits, and open classrooms) in order to, for example, establish and promote communication, share subsequent problems and actions, take decisions, and allocate tasks.

The second group of suggestions includes the promotion of certain elements that were considered fundamental for SP, such as communication, collective labor, organization, and respectful coexistence. Likewise, it recommends others—such as learning, diffusion, and assessment—that, in and of themselves, imply the achievement of specific objectives. Additionally, the survey participants emphasized that schools should favor an operation that is satisfactory, with greater opportunities to establish their objectives and to control the manner in which they seek to achieve them. Finally, the third group of recommendations brings together abilities and conducts, both individual and collective, which are essential to strengthen processes of participation. These recommendations include communicative expression, responsibility,

compromise, work, involvement, socializing opportunities, cooperation, and the availability of the time necessary for collaboration.

Conclusions

This article has analyzed various elements associated with the promotion of EDL in primary and secondary education in Mexico, emphasizing the ties between EDL and SP. On the level of educational policies, especially those concerning curricular reforms, a relatively articulated strategy concerning EDL was observed, through the *Civic and Ethics Education* and *Civic Education: Toward a Culture of Legality* courses, as well as the *Integral Program of Civic and Ethics Education*. Nonetheless, the teaching of these courses does not achieve the desired objectives, given the existence within the educational system of fundamentally contradictory conceptions of basic notions such as citizenship, legality, etc. (Guevara, 2006). On the other hand, it is indisputable that, up to the present, efforts to design and implement a policy that promotes SP in education and in schools have been weak. Despite the discursive recognition of the relevance of both schools and families in the implementation of the precepts of these courses, along with other programs oriented toward similar objectives (such as the Safe Schools Program[17]), the classroom continues to be seen as the principal space for the teaching and practice of these values. This contributes to the fact that there has not been a close connection between the subject matter of these courses and the existing modalities of participation in schools. An even greater disarticulation is seen with respect to the organizational forms that develop more spontaneously between schools and families; in many cases, these forms could be oriented toward the same purposes (such as improving student learning, fortifying safe school environments, or increasing educational quality),
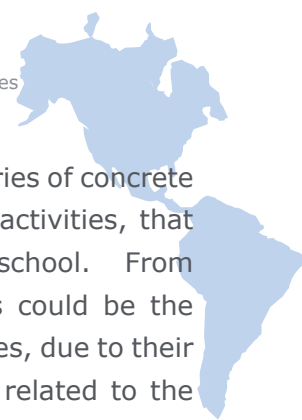
but they do not have anything to do with the APFs, nor with the CEPSs, nor do they have ties with any strategic educational program, even though these forms could be an active channel for the practice of EDL.

The urgent need for the creation of channels to assure communication and collaboration between schools and families based on the principles of EDL has been recognized, beginning with the study, Social Participation in the Elementary Schools of the Federal District (Zurita, 2009b). One notable aspect of the issue is that the discourses relating to official education policies and programs that deal with the topic of SP have been focused on the CEPSs. In some cases, if the Committees do not exist or are not functional, then there is no participation. Nonetheless, it is worth insisting on the fact that SP covers multiple modalities of participation in schools, both institutional and non-institutional, and both traditional and innovative; the Committees are only one option among these different modalities. For others, participation is fundamentally related to parents, and these individuals forget that there are other actors both inside and outside the schools. The complexity of SP grows even more because various different frameworks operate simultaneously in schools, causing the participation of some actors to fluctuate according to areas, issues, and even periods of the school year.

Therefore, if a specific moment within the school year were analyzed, we would observe that, on the one hand, the participation of parents and students is encouraged in those activities where a greater degree of involvement is accepted (contribution of fees, support in the celebration of social and sporting events, carrying out extracurricular activities, collaboration during beginning-and end-of-the-year activities), while, on the other hand, there are other activities

(associated with the elaboration of pedagogical proposals, discussions concerning curricular content, or reviews of the results of educational evaluations) in which parental access is actually prohibited because they are generally reserved for other actors, such as teachers and principals. If SP varies from one actor to another and from one area to another, there are no clear rules between the different actors, and the idea that predominates is the one that suggests that responsibilities are not being fulfilled; logically, the emergence of conflicts is inevitable. The options for participation depend, in part, on the available institutional strategies established by the current rules and regulations. However, in the end all of the strategies rely on the resources, the expectations, the rights, the opportunities, the responsibilities, and the interests that each actor has within the school. The teachers, the principals, and the educational authorities desire a greater degree of parental participation in schools and in education, but not just any type of participation. The participation they desire responds to the initiative and necessity of said authorities, keeping in mind that a different participation, that is, a spontaneous, analytical, active, and proactive participation, born from the necessities and interests of the parents, the students, and the community, provokes fear and rejection, because it causes them to imagine a chaotic and uncontrollable situation.

The most worrying aspect of our study is that, in Mexico, the state-based model of SP in education has been poorly defined for years (Latapí, 2005). Nonetheless, as time goes by, the country has experienced some advances in EDL. For example, EDL is currently on the education policy agenda and there is interest in consolidating its practice. The country currently possesses a series of experiences and lessons learned that could be employed in order to reinforce or refine approaches, propose strategies and, in particular,

to construct a true proposal of EDL based on SP; or, more specifically, based on a model that articulates the relationships between schools and families. Doing this would enable the possibility of obtaining better results, which would, in turn, result in short term benefits for students', schools', and families' development of democratic knowledge, skills, and behaviors. This would contribute to the democratic transformation of the country as a whole. With respect to participation in schools, there are various institutional and non-institutional modalities that could contribute to its development.

In this sense, rather than create new approaches, it is necessary to take advantage of the existing modalities of SP (such as the SAs, the APFs and the CEPSs), to support and facilitate their functioning in a way that creates the institutional conditions within the educational system that will turn schools into spaces open to EDL. Likewise, the CEPSs, as has been established since 1993 by the LGE, which conceived them as a channel for societal participation in actions directed to educational quality and coverage, must take a protagonistic role in actions relating to EDL. In fact, the recent publication of Sectoral Agreement 535 in June 2010 may contribute to the functioning of the CEPSs, because it establishes a series of concrete actions, as well as a calendar of activities, that should be carried out by each school. From this perspective, the Committees could be the bridge between schools and families, due to their involvement with multiple issues related to the new notion of SP, such as: family expectations concerning the progress of their children, their demand for a quality education, the capacity to make responsible and informed decisions regarding their children's education, and the review of test results. Indeed, according to the central thesis of this study, SP can constitute the foundation for the construction of a model of EDL that is based on the connection between schools and families. In order to develop democratic and proactive relationships between both institutions, it is essential to design consistent and integral policies and programs that seek to combine efforts, integrate actions, and fully exploit the advantages that these institutions have with respect to EDL. If this does not occur, proceeding with isolated and disorganized actions could generate a lack of confidence and interest, lead to feelings of failure, waste the already-undertaken efforts, and even worse, could lead to an apparent fulfillment of responsibilities that is only true informality formal sense.

Notes

1   The fundamental moment in the process dates back to the Primary Education Act of 1908, from which was derived the constitutional civic-mindedness that predominated in civic education during the greater part of the 20th century (Tapia, 2003).

2   The reform of articles 3 and 31 of the Political Constitution established compulsory secondary education, which was recognized as the final stage of basic education.

3   In the 2009-10 school year, this course was a nationwide requirement, studied in the first year of the secondary cycle and taught in 8,018 public, private, general, and technical schools, as well as

distance education, CONAFE, and adult education programs across 22 federal entities.

4   This reform "aims to provide students with a combination of knowledge and competencies that will allow them to become citizens with the potential to participate effectively and consciously in the multiple scenarios that involve the practices of language; to this end, basic literacy allows citizens to participate using reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills" (Mexican Government, SEP, 2009a: 5 and 6).

5   *Through the Education for Citizenship, Democracy, and Values in Plural Societies* program, or through initiatives such as the Central American Network for Education in Values for the Practice of Citizenship and Democracy (Levinson, 2007).

6   The participation competency also includes political participation.

7   The General Law of Education established in its second section that Committees should be established on the school, municipal, state, and national levels, assigning objectives, functions, and members for each committee.

8   In the federal administration before the 2000-2006 administration, according to the Technical Secretariat of the National Council of Social Participation, the number of CEPSs established increased 22%, with growth sustained across the three educational levels. The Municipal and State Committees also grew during that period, while the National Committee had a brief existence (Zurita, 2008).

9   According to the CONAPO, in 2005 there were 25.9 million homes composed of 105.5 million people. Of these, 23.9 million were *family* homes, while the other two million homes were inhabited by unrelated persons, or by individuals who lived alone.

10 The average age among women grew from 21.2 years in 1976 to its current level of 24.1 years; in the same period, the median age among men grew from 24.5 to 26.5 years. Fertility decreased: from 5.9 children per woman in 2006 to 2.2 in 2005. The average size of homes changed from 5.7 members in 1976 to 4.1 in 2005.

11 Source: www.conapo.gob.mx (September 22, 2009).

12 The Call for Sector Funds SEPSSEDF-CONACYT 2003-1. Its methodological design included a document analysis, a survey of 254 questionnaires taken from 35 supervisors, 20 principals, 100 teachers and 99 parents from 20 primary schools in the political delegation of Iztapalapa; two focus groups, one with "Technical Pedagogical Advisors" and the other with industry leaders and high-level offiicials of the district's Federal Administration of Educational Services.

13 This evaluation was carried out in 2006-07. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods designed to collect and systematize the vast array of required information, a national

panorama of the state of SP was constructed, spanning the three levels of basic education in the years 2000-2006 (Zurita, 2008).

14 The First National Consultation, organized by the Technical Secretariat of the National Council of Social Participation, was carried out between 2004 and 2005 with the collaboration of 74,000 public schools of basic education from every federal entity, except Michoacán and the State of Mexico.

15 The study considered primary schools in Iztapalapa, a political delegation situated on the west side, exemplifying the recent history of the Federal District due to its growth, its unequal socioeconomic conditions, and because the majority of its population is young. Iztapalapa has a long and intense tradition of participation in social movements, popular organizations, and political parties. Furthermore, it is the only delegation that has experienced a process of educational decentralization initiated in 1993 with the Iztapalapa Educational Services Unit, now known as the Iztapalapa General Directorate for Educational Services.

16 "In general terms, the actors of the educational institutions don't recognize the fact that in schools, scenarios of political activity are being constructed, although they do accept that politics affects the school as part of the system of government that governs society" (Bardiza, 1997: 19).

17 This program establishes the idea that, to reach its goals for the establishment and consolidation of safe school zones, it is necessary *To facilitate civic education that is provided to students through the basic education curriculum in the Civic and Ethics Education, Culture of Legality courses, and other related courses.*