Social Participation in Education: Towards a "School Community" in Las Margaritas, Chiapas

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Abstract:

This paper presents the results of a social participation strategy implemented by the Municipal Council for Social Participation in Education (Consejo Municipal de Participación Social en Educación, CMPSE), in the Mexican municipality of Las Margaritas, Chiapas. It defines social participation on the basis of the relationship between civil society and the political field, illustrates the various types of participation exerted by the members of the school community, and presents the needs agreed upon by the actors as well as the predominant fields of action.".

Key Words:

Social participation in education/ School community/Political field / Civil society/ Chiapas

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a wider project whose purpose has been to improve the quality of education in the municipality of Las Margaritas, in Chiapas, Mexico.

The purpose of this paper is to show the components of an experience of social participation that involved the educational community of said municipality, highlighting both the modes of participation assumed by the actors and the educational needs and reciprocal demands that cropped up. To this end, we will progressively present the specific fields of action that community members made reference to, after outlining the legal framework and contextualizing the case; then we will define the social participation field and discuss the conceptual framework of civil society and the

political field where such participation takes place.

Special reference will be made to the social consultation fora held at the end of 2006 and throughout 2007 in the localities of Nuevo Momón (Selva I) and Bajucú (Cañada Tojolabal), as part of the project "Leadership and Social Participation: A Model Experience in Educational Reform in Las Margaritas," initiated by the City Council of the municipality itself and the Municipal Council for Social Participation in Education (CMPSE, as per its Spanish acronym) under the advice of and in coordination with INED/Casa de la Ciencia: Centro de Innovación Educativa[1].

The project forms part of the wide-ranging educational reform that began in Mexico in 1993 with the General Educational Act, which made way for educational decentralization and provided for the creation of social participation entities such as the Municipal Councils for Social Participation.

The purpose of the consultation fora conducted in the localities of Nuevo Momón and Bajucú was to gather and systematize professional and public opinion on what happens at the schools and with the teachers, as well as on educational needs, thus opening up spaces for the main actors of education – i.e. of the school community – to express themselves: students, parents, teachers, as well as managing staff from the different educational levels that operate in Las Margaritas territory, and municipal authorities. The Town Council and the CMPSE opted for targeting the work at the Selva I

(Nuevo Momón) and Cañada Tojolabal (Bajucú) microregions because these were deemed to be most needful in the municipal context.

Map of the Mexican Republic, with the State of Chiapas highlighted
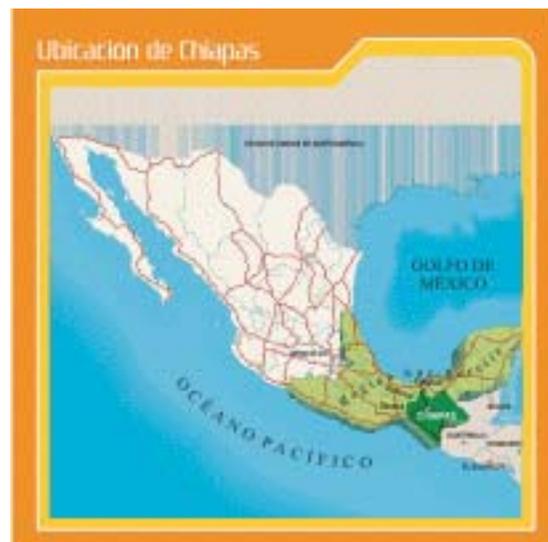
Map of the State of Chiapas and the municipality of Las Margaritas
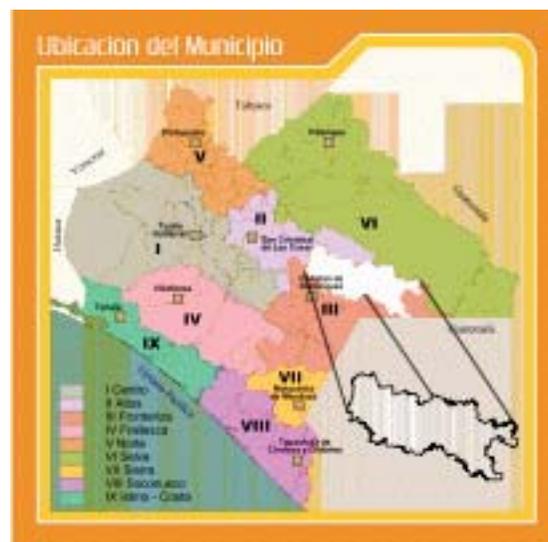
State of Chiapas and the municipality of Las Margaritas
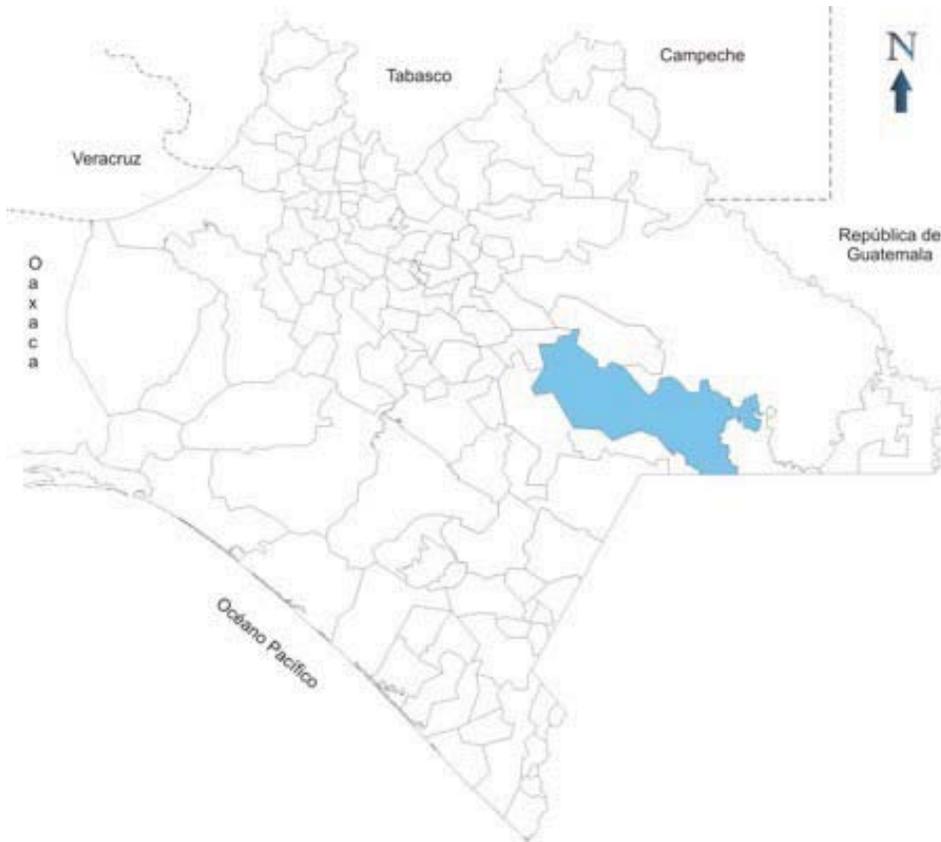
According to data from INEGI (2005), the municipality of Las Margaritas has a population of 98,374 inhabitants, out of which 49.6% of those aged 5 and older speak an indigenous language, with 31.67% of them being monolingual. The predominant ethnic group is *tojolabal*. The municipality exhibits a very high margination index (CONAPO, 2005), ranking 41st on a state level (out of 118), and 341st on a national level (out of 2439). These characteristics render Las Margaritas one of the least favored municipalities in the educational arena, considering that, according to the 2005 population census, its illiteracy rate stood at 30.22% for those aged 15 and older, compared with a state average of 21.35% and a national average of 8.4%. According to the same source, out of the population aged 15 and older, 55.45% has not completed elementary education, 18.92% has completed only elementary education, and only 13.96% have studied beyond the elementary level. As regards school failure rate in Las Margaritas, at the elementary level it stands at 15.2% compared with 7% statewide and 4.3% countrywide. At the secondary level, the failure rate stands at 22.73% (INEGI, 2005); while the state rate is notably 11.8% and the national average is 18.0%. Additionally, due to the territorial extension and orographic characteristics of the municipality, many localities are far away from each other and difficult to access, all of which hinders the educational services provided. It should also be borne in mind that the municipality is within the zone of influence of the Zapatista

National Liberation Army (EZLN, as per its Spanish acronym), which has implemented its own "Zapatista Autonomous Education System" in its autonomous municipalities.

Aware of this, Las Margaritas' municipal authority has assumed the challenge of dealing with the educational problem through concrete actions that aim at a noticeable improvement in this area, by involving the three main educational actors in the process. The first action tending towards this goal is the integration and consolidation of the CMPSE, which has been given the responsibility of allocating part of the resources of branch 33 (Ramo 33), i.e. the federal contributions earmarked for the construction and reconditioning of the municipality's educational infrastructure. Moreover, the CMPSE has been assigned the obligation to implement actions leading to the improvement of the quality of the education provided at the municipality's existing schools. These are not minor tasks, considering the scant culture of participation that generally prevails in society and, specifically, in the case of the Municipal Councils, which in most situations act just to validate decisions made in a centralized manner by the municipal authorities. In contrast to this, it was proposed that fora should be conducted as a participation mechanism that could energize school community interrelations.

This document presents the systematization of such experience which, due to the analysis conducted, provides for detecting: a) the educational needs of the region; b) the meeting points between the actors; c) the educational prospective that opens up on the immediate horizon, and d) the contribution to citizenship participation and joint responsibility as regards education in the whole of society.

The Problem: Social Participation in Education

Since the 1920s participation in Mexico sprang forth as a local governance strategy (Canales, 2006, p. 70) in an attempt to legitimize the governments themselves by getting society involved in public affairs; in the case that concerns us, this involves the School Councils and the Councils for Social Participation in Education.

With regards to participation driven by public educational bodies, the educational authority itself has acknowledged its failure: "Up to the present time, it has involved an induced kind of participation, in which authority proposes the issues and even the forms, rather than listening to students' and citizens' proposals" (Programa Nacional de Educación 2001-2006, p. 68). It has been shown (Canales, 2006, p. 77), however, that social participation in education was postponed by the governments that preceded the 1992[2] Agreement; while the Participation Councils that were created after that time failed to come all the way, and little is known about their performance and operation.

These actions were proposed as public policies that endeavored to induce participation from governmental spheres. The purpose was to foster citizen participation but without creating the relevant mechanisms that would provide
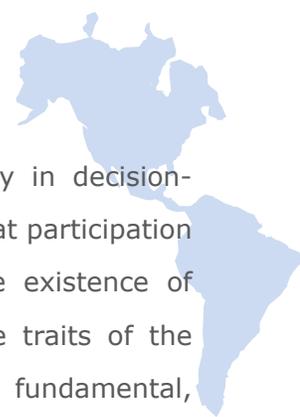
for dealing with the multidimensional nature of participation and the heterogeneity of the actors. In this respect, it has been pointed out (Canales, 2006) that such proposals were based on a conceptual error, i.e. thinking that social actors can be created at will and that implementing a simple mechanism in which government and society come into "contact" with each other implies that we are already in the presence of participation, legitimacy, democracy, good governance, etc.

In a context such as Mexico, where transition to democracy has vanished from public discourse – due to the myriad problems and criticisms towards institutions that stemmed from such transition, to the lack of mechanisms involving society, and to the ghost of illegitimacy – participation springs forth as an inescapable element in democratic societies insofar as it is a sign of a live citizenship, which transcends formal schemes and gets involved in public life, in the political order itself. It is worth noting, however, that the analysis of participation nearly always falls within a common theoretical framework situated inside that transition, as an expression of civil society; from our point of view it is important that our approach should transcend it.

Participation has generally meant forming part of something, even though this certainly does not show the totality of what is implied in the act of "participating". As Latapí (2005, pp. 8-10) has clarified well, however, when applied to society, participation acquires specific connotations. The most significant ones include taking part

in the running of society, mostly in decision-making by those in power, and that participation is a necessary condition for the existence of democracy. These two distinctive traits of the implications of participation are fundamental, because they mostly refer to the active citizenship that gets involved in public affairs; that, as an essential and necessary contribution, also has repercussions on democratic life in general because modern democracies could not be understood and upheld with purely electoral mechanisms: a wider legitimacy, founded on citizens' participation and consensus, is required.

Civil Society and the Political Field

As stated earlier in this paper, analysis has been circumscribed to the theoretical framework of civil society. Participation is claimed to take place within civil society, as part of the *world of life*, therefore signifying that civil society is "the institutional framework of a modern world of life that includes both the private and the public spheres" (Latapí, 2005, p.15). According to Cohen & Arato, it is like a third sphere that sets itself against political society and economic society. The point is that it would seem as if there were no articulation; as if, instead, negation was the fact that defines it. In addition, reference to civil society is nearly always made vis-à-vis expressions of citizenship "beyond the state" (Torres, 2001, p.10) or in contraposition to political society, and nonconventional participation is neither characterized as part thereof nor as an eminently political action.

This is the framework in which participation by civil society is conceived: a kind of non-place mediating in everything, and lacking a precise space in any of the practical fields.

However, this approach has led to contradictions and inconsistencies arising from a misunderstanding of what the political field means and implies. And some of the underlying questions are: Does civil society come into being and take action inside or outside the political field? Can civil society be understood as the set of citizens who do not pursue political power? Many of the doubts arise on account of dichotomous separations between civil and political society, and of not finding a clear point of convergence. What is that point of convergence, then, if any?

Enrique Dussel (2006) has shown the relevance of defining the political field in order to become acquainted with its internal logic and learn how to differentiate what is either peculiar to or alien to it; thus, there arises a debate concerning one of the elements of the field that we want to transcend in the analysis: civil society.

Dussel (2005) revisited Bourdieu's category in order to characterize and delimit the political field as the various possible levels or realms of actions, in which the subject operates as an actor in a role – that of a citizen – and is formed by implicit principles which are the forces that structure "the allowable practices within the field". It is, therefore, the space "where political actors perform publicly *as politicians*". This does not mean, however, that we are really dealing with a field peculiar to political society, which is normally associated with institutional party-based politics. It is this latter component which makes the difference. Indeed, *civil society is a sign of the transition from an abstract subject to a political subject*. The question is how to discern whether as a civil entity it is part of the political field; not even Habermas (1987) or Cohen & Arato (2003), who were inspired by the former author for their work on civil society, were able to discern this question (Dussel, 2005). This is because by situating civil society in the world of life as opposed to "the political order," it is divested of practically all the possibilities of its "civil" political power – when this power actually lies inside the political field, although in a different position and, mostly, less institutionalized than the political order itself or political society. It is a subfield within the political field (Dussel, 2005) in which citizens become increasingly participatory as actors aware of the political order. They fulfill a *political* role inside the field rather than outside it – the conventional vision of civil society would leave them out due to the power issue – in such a way that it can only be understood from the inside.

Thus, if civil society is understood as those nongovernmental agencies and institutions that contrast with political society, this not only implies negating citizenship and assuming that politics is a realm for the exclusive practice of the political "professionals." It also fails to account for the essential moment of participation, that is, the performance of a political role within the field

where power is common ground. For this reason "social participation" cuts deep into the political order, passing through civil society and subsuming the "social" order into the civil-political aspect of the field. Rather than talking of civil society, then, we should talk of social or citizen participation in so far as we are dealing with an actor in the political field, without necessarily fulfilling the postulate of organized and conglomerate participation . Social participation in education is political participation *in* the educational field.

The Educational Field and "Communal" Participation

Three types of participation have been recognized in the community-school relationship within our field of reference; as may be seen here, the referent is the community, situated and contextualized in the political field, rather than the generic, abstract civil society which lacks articulation with power and politics. Tenti (2004) has characterized structural, contributive and political participation. The first is diffuse and tends to show the relationship of the various actors without differentiating their needs; the second accounts for the way in which the community "supports" the school mostly in terms of contributions: money, labor, materials, and so on; and the third is equivalent to the strongest sense of participation, in which the individual or collective actor is a part of and therefore clearly intervenes in making direction- and course-setting decisions. The actor not only contributes ideas or materials, but also decides what to use them for (i.e. exercises power) and gets involved

in managing and creating the institutions themselves.

Social participation from the educational field has been categorized in different ways. The most outstanding, perhaps due to its dynamism in relation to the three main actors, is that of "school community," which, as claimed by Tenti (2004), makes reference "to the set of relationships holding between teachers, authorities, students and their families in each educational establishment." This is an interesting concept because it lies fully within the educational field, from where it may be subjected to a relational analysis; and in spatial terms it lies in the school, i.e. the place where the various actors are expected to converge. Torres (2001, p. 14), on the other hand, distinguishes between school community and educational community: where the former makes reference to formal school education and the latter includes precisely the aggregate of society interested in education. The latter term enables us to position ourselves at the community's most de facto level, i.e. the reality reported herein, because the communal aspect in the context under study does not refer to formal schooling.

The community sphere points to common patterns that to a certain extent go against and differ from what is considered "the society". A community is certainly different from society as such, because in the former social relations are marked by the participants' subjective feeling of making up a whole. "Society," on the other hand, is defined by a social relationship in which

the attitude towards social action is inspired by a compensation of interests on rational grounds (Tenti, 2004). As may be seen, however, a harmful dichotomy still prevails which would seem to suggest that the rational aspect is on society's side whereas the pre-reflexive volitional aspect is on the community's side. The term 'community' that we would like to use is partly underpinned by Tenti (2004) himself, when he claims that it refers to a set of relationships in territorially situated and limited territories that place a set of agents in a situation of proximity. The question of proximity is precisely the one we have seen as characteristic of a typically communal mechanism (Estrada, 2007) that provides for closer acknowledgement, organization and participation relationships, and that has repercussions for the way of conceiving and becoming inserted in the political field and in the relationship with others.

Methodological Consideration

Our analysis was based on information from various strategies and registers: participatory observations, semi-structured interviews, as well as materials produced in each group, such as flip charts, drawings, written opinions, and so on.

Our research strategy consisted in performing a discourse analysis that would initially provide for detecting emerging patterns (Bertely, 2000) and then finding inconsistencies and discontinuities in discourse that would lead to identifying the figurative nucleus (Jodelet, 1986) of a given social representation – formed by the interpretation and the meaning ascribed

to what happens – and the fields of action alluded to by each of the actors from the role played in their practical field. Together with the "recorded" data, this enabled us to separate and reconstruct the components of a particular reality that could not be dealt with through a holistic approach, but only through the specificity provided by the analytical resources.

The Research and Evaluation Area of INED/Casa de la Ciencia that compiled the information for the analysis consisted of one researcher in charge and two field technicians. We conducted participatory observations during the workshops, we recorded the entire participation process for the three actors, both separately and later in the final synthesis, which was an attempt at getting meanings to converge. We also interviewed the actors during breaks and at the end of the fora; we conducted individual interviews and in some cases group interviews involving three or more subjects because, given the prevailing hushing-up culture and the predominance of monolingual – normally tojolabal-speaking– parents, sometimes it proved more useful to do it in this way. There were 18 interviews in all, six per actor, although interviews were also held with members of the CMPSE and with the principals of those schools used as sites However, it should be stressed that our basic information-gathering tools were observation and the analysis of the products performed during the fora.

From Demands and Needs to Proposals: The Parental View[3]

There was plenty of parental participation

from positions that were both critical and propositional. This made evident parents' awareness of being able to improve learning conditions for their children by acting in an organized way as a collective rather than on an individual basis.

There were four fields of action in which parents recognized educational needs and demands. Like every field (Bourdieu, 1988), they are defined here under an internal logic that provides for discerning what belongs to the field and what is beyond it. Therefore, our analysis is presented based on the needs that subjects deemed to be most important, grouped under the field of action.

Table 1. Communal expression in parents

Field of Action	Reference Discourse
Communal Expression	"That we should all be together, each one pooling ideas." "They should all participate and pool their thoughts." "We should get together as a community; although sometimes we negotiate, we are not a priority, they say there is no budget." "Now we already know how to get organized, teachers and parents work for the good of our children. We even have the COBACH because we have been negotiating as members of Momón. We belong to an organization and we negotiate from there." "Every community should make a commitment with their own people, because if we as visitors are the only ones who learn it would not be very good."
	"Well, then, with everyone's strength, will to work, strength, language." "It is an experience, we do not communicate with the communities themselves, it is the same need we have with nearly all. For me, the diagnosis made by those involved is important; it is going to be useful for the benefit of our communities."

In these expressions the communal question prevails. One of the needs emerging from their own discourse is the idea of getting together and making the necessary proposals but as a community, doing away with individual needs, which on many occasions become silenced private demands. These are characteristics specific to the context that may be strengthened so as to deepen social participation in education: the tendency to perceive and conceive themselves as a community confers upon them – as their own experience has shown – the status of relevant collective subject when it comes to making themselves heard, either inside or outside the community.

This communal expression is defined on the basis of relationships of mutual acknowledgement among members, who mobilize themselves in order to achieve their communal needs vis-à-vis the educational processes, that is, using the school as the immediate referent. The communal practices found in this population are also equivalent to a stale expression of communal education (Pieck, 1996, p. 20), featuring the classical claim to social and economic

development through direct participation. For that reason the presence of the question of power and of political relationships is clear. In other words, the school is like a bridge that articulates community development and on which it is not "the organized people" of civil society, but rather a sign of communal expression that may be individualized, atomized, unstructured and heterogeneous, but that acquires a logic in the historical *a priori* of being a communal "us" by becoming inserted in the decision-making sphere of the political-educational field.

It was not a coincidence that the proposals that parents made should include the idea of a communal organization that may help them to deal with basic situations, such as securing teaching materials. This emerging pattern discloses a relevant area of action to be dealt with by parents as the actors but, as we shall see later, it is only the starting point of a wider claim.

Table 2. Parents' demands of teachers

Field of Action	Reference Discourse
On Needs from Teachers: Joint Responsibility and Community Commitment	"Parents and teachers will all work alike." "The Parents' Committee should be in contact with the teacher." "Coordination between parents and teachers so that they are accountable." "It is communication between parents and teachers; but efforts have to be pooled to find out why they do not give it; sometimes we go on and on like that, blaming each other." "They should respect, support and help the community, they should not misbehave; we ask them to help with some document and they say 'I cannot'." "[He/she] should commit him/herself to working with the children and the community, concern him/herself with teaching; sharing with the children and the community." "It became absolutely clear that [we have to] coordinate with teachers and those higher up in order to take action; thus, in agreement, to be able to do something…" "The Parents' Committee should be in permanent contact with the teachers." "Improving communication relationships." "Avoiding conflicts between parents and teachers."
Field of Action	**Reference Discourse**
Training Aspects Expected from Teachers	"Teachers should teach well." "We want more attention to be paid to our children; more homework in the subjects they do not know well, in mathematics, Spanish, the two most important subjects that we want our children to learn; teachers should concern themselves with what children do not know." "Teachers are not here to teach everything that is needed; they lack training, they are also going to take courses." "They should devote extra time to children who have problems with mathematics and Spanish." "A good teacher… who is patient with the children, who does not beat them with a rod." "They should devote their free time to helping the young, mostly in sports." "Now teachers have a lot of time off, they only come 2 or 3 days [to work]" "They claim there are union meetings;

	we already told them that if they do not come to work, they'd better pack and leave; they claim they received a document and have to go out."

This table has two parts: the first shows parents' expressions dealing with the need to have a close relationship with the teachers. In the second part, which is not so different from the first, parents refer to the teachers except that they make specific reference to their training.

There is an obvious consistency in discourse: the demand for joint responsibility and community commitment. As may be seen, parents are not demanding that their children's education be exclusively delegated to the teachers, unlike more urbanized contexts (Fernández, 2001) where the tendency is to turn the school and, by extension, the teachers, into the children's guardians, with the school being a day care center. Here parents are demanding to be participants, and thus to transcend the private sphere as their sole relationship with the educational field. The communal spirit that permeates their attitude forces them to acknowledge that education cannot be the exclusive responsibility of a single individual or sector. However, there is also a demand for teachers to provide better teaching and better treatment to their children; these issues are entirely related to teachers' training.

Parents believe that good communication with the teachers may solve part of the educational problems they are confronted with, and that the lack thereof lies at the root of the problems. A clear example of this was that, during the fora, one of the parents was surprised to learn that many times teachers' absence from class was due to the fact that they are summoned to attend trade union or other meetings, and that this results in their having to miss school, even for several days. As this parent had never been informed of such a situation, he thought that the teacher was absent solely on account of his own arbitrary decision. This shows not only that parents lack information about school life, but also that teachers lack information about their students' families; both complaints are, in effect, contradictory and complementary (Vila, 2003) because they reflect the need to lay bridges in the educational community. Parents' wager for dialogue and communication is encouraging, because they are seeking the best way to solve the educational question; there is comprehension rather than confrontation or unjustified complaints, and this is feasible by way of information through participation.

Although the above is extremely relevant, the fact that parents made reference to teachers' training issues may be even more so, because it is a forbidden topic in terms of the Social Participation Act. This is a crucial point because if there is a determining factor in students' education, it is the teachers. Parents discussed different points in this regard, including two essential aspects. The first has to do with teachers' responsibility to attend and remain in the work center. The second refers to the care and teaching offered to their children.

These two factors are inseparable from teacher training, because they demand that teachers be responsible and committed to themselves and to the students they serve.

Table 3. The parents' role as they see it

Field of Action	Reference Discourse
On Their Specific Role as Students' Parents	"Parents should force children to do their homework." "…As parents, we should send our children to school, so that we can be demanding with the teacher." "Sending our children to school to be entitled to demand more." "Parents should send their children to school." "Parents should collaborate with and help their children do their homework." "Every father should send his children to school." "Well, as regards education, we as parents should send our children to school and work in harmony there, on what the school has to do; if cooperation is needed, well, we have to cooperate." "Workshops for parents."

As stated earlier, the "communal expression" makes parents regard the issue as a problem that needs to be dealt with by the various sectors involved, and they perceive this not only in the necessary relationship they have to establish with teachers, but also with regards to their self-image as parents. In the fora, this sector wondered about certain practices that they considered counterproductive for their children's education and generally for the development of the municipality. They were able to distance themselves from their role in order to, by questioning themselves, acknowledge the fact that many of them prefer to take their children to work in the fields, rather than sending them to school. Thus, one of the commitments they assumed during the fora was that the priority was to send children to school because, in their own words, it would be best for their future. This actually has to do with a comprehensive hegemonic social representation that considers the meaning of the school to be based on social mobility and the supreme value of what is learned. Although this certainly can no longer be acted upon in other contexts, in this context it is still embodied in the material and symbolic possibilities that the study affords them.

On the other hand, although still along the same lines, they hinted at the fact that they also lack training, that even though their children receive an institutional formal education at school, which is largely under the responsibility of the institutions and the teachers, they (the parents) should also be supportive in some way, whether by reviewing their children's homework or becoming interested in what their children are studying. In other words, underlying parents' discourse are two parallel lines that are displayed on their practical horizon and that, regarding needs and demands from themselves, consist in: a) sending their children to school, and b) trying, in their capacity as adults and parents, to participate in training processes whereby they may be trained so as to contribute to get a better education for their children.

We found that, conventionally, parents' participation in the school has been conceived (Vila, 2003, p. 34) as an *informal treatment* (characterized by a sporadic and occasional relationship) and that the *more formal relationship* (class meetings and interviews) is insufficient for the processes that intend to foster social participation in education. On the contrary, this exemplifies the intermediate point between *consultative* and *projective* participation (Trilla & Novella, 2001, p. 7), where parents became agents of the project and had the possibility of channeling their concerns, opinions and needs inside the school community, not only from a consultative stance, but from a decision-making stance, by stating the future action lines that the school community should follow. The modes of participation they assumed and the course taken by said participation shows, in addition, that the communal device they come from precludes an explanation of their practices within the framework of civil society, because power and political relationships are very clear to them, and through their participation they perform a political function in the educational field.

The Teachers' Perspective: From Delegating Problems to Questioning Practice

Like parents, teachers also mentioned the needs that in their view should be dealt with as a priority both in the regions and in the municipality. It is worth highlighting their agreement with parents in demanding joint responsibility, communication and the latter's involvement – as well as their discussion about and reflecting upon training and refresher training aspects that they believe they lack.

Large numbers of teachers attended the fora, considering that these were held on Thursdays and Fridays, which are normally the days when teachers leave the community to return to their locality. It is worth noting that, just as in the case of parents, female participants were a minority. In the case of Bajucú, were was not a single female teacher in one of the classrooms; while in the other group there were only two. This is certainly an indication of the culture of the context, in which nearly all the women are excluded from participating; however, this was also a topic of reflection during the fora.

Teachers made reference to five fields of action in which it would be necessary to intervene in order to attain an educational transformation in the municipality. Two of these are worth noting: a) the relationship with parents, and b) their professional training.

Table 4. Teachers' demands of parents

Field of Action	Reference Discourse
From Parents: a) Blaming	"…They do not send their children to school, it's the parents', the father's fault; they do not take advantage of the resources available." "They do not help with the homework." "Vices, alcoholism." "Scholarships are misused." "Poor communication between the father and his children." "The quality of education starts from the first grade or even from the pre-school level […] customs and traditions mean a lot […] mostly in the case of indigenous people and

	peasants. These are elements that delay teaching, ideas are not created […] when they have celebrations, children already start drinking, and they are tipsy when they get to school the next morning."
b) Joint Responsibility	"The teacher is blamed for everything, for what happens, the people. What happens when a diagnosis is made? Poor school performance is due to the teacher. But the teacher is not the only one. There are many people involved, even the federal government, the state government, the municipal government, the teacher, the father and the children." "So, what to do so that everyone participates, so that we are not the only ones to take the blame, because we get blamed for it: 'that teachers do not do this', 'that they do not do that,' and parents blame us and we blame parents. Then I believe everyone has to participate." "Lack of school-parent communication." "Active parents' participation in the school, in school homework." "Having a good communication between the institution and the parents' committee."
c) Training for Parents	"I believe that illiteracy; it is extremely important to counteract that. Because precisely due to ignorance people act like they do, even here they claim that 'they are very poor,' but they are given scholarships that they can use but they don't. What do they do? What do you do? 'Well, I have money; I go and have a few drinks." "Something that could be done is having these workshops not targeted at us but at the community, events suitable for the community, generalizing

	so that in that way perhaps awareness may be raised in everyone." "Yes, there is a tremendous lack […] of support from parents in the sense of […] for school activities and, mostly for their children's homework, given that in some cases […] they can neither read nor write." "Well, it is important because what is involved is education, in terms of learning, of agriculture, of the children, it is all-inclusive and it is important that we should acknowledge that we are all participants."

The first part of the table shows that teachers' demands or needs with regard to parents are mainly of three interrelated characteristics: a) total delegation to or blame of the parental sector; b) joint responsibility for their children's education, and c) training. In our view, the three are intimately related.

We might say that, in fact, it was difficult for teachers to look at themselves more critically, and they delegated most of the responsibilities to the other actors, although at the same time they paradoxically claimed that the quality of education begins with teacher training. Thus, although some requested that parents should assume greater responsibility for their children's education, others, in a veiled way, included here the need to get rid of the expectations created due to their having been for years considered the agents of educational change. In this manner, they also expressed the discomforts of the teaching profession, which – as claimed by
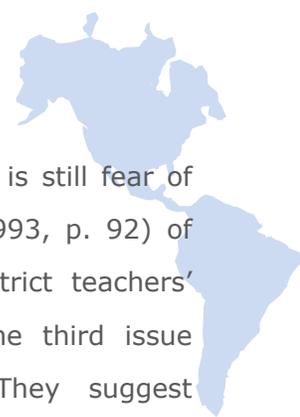
Fernández (1993, p. 82) with reference to the reaction aroused by the participation of other actors in the school – sees its autonomy being restricted and its authority being questioned. And although that was exactly the tendency, what teachers also managed to show was the need to share the responsibility with the other actors who have an equal bearing on students' training – in this case with the parents.

It should be noted that a clear *consented upon need* can be observed here, i.e. a convergence between two of the actors, because parents and teachers are asking for a usual and essential issue: the interrelation between one group and the other in order to assume joint responsibility, and communication between the actors for dealing with the day-by-day problems they face.

This is not the rule, however, because it coexists with another deeply rooted idea among teachers, which consists in blaming parents and their culture as hindrances for the improvement of education. The point has to do with training, because their discourse unveils an inability to understand the sociocultural context in which they are immersed, and it is precisely in such contexts that competencies and attitudes in favor of intercultural relations and for understanding the different other are most clearly required. Even in this case, teachers refer to training for the others, not for themselves, but mainly so that parents may help their children at home and contribute to certain tasks at school, from the private sphere, without fully meddling with "school business," because there is still fear of the "black beast" (Fernández, 1993, p. 92) of participation councils, which restrict teachers' autonomy and authority. So, the third issue relates to parents' training. They suggest courses, workshops and literacy. These elements are certainly required for getting parents to assume joint responsibility for the improvement of education, and were objectively detected by the teachers themselves. However, it might be the case, as mentioned earlier, that teachers are also demanding to be released to a certain extent from their responsibility. The question should be dealt with very carefully in order to prevent the claim to joint responsibility from turning into parents' assuming greater (or total) responsibility, as the tendency seems to be in this context.

It should be stressed that the inability to understand the role of each of these actors in the educational community arises precisely from a lack of dialogue and daily contact. Most of the problems arise precisely from this deficiency.

Table 5. Responsibilities that teachers assign to themselves and to others

Fields of Action	Reference Discourse
On Others Responsability without Looking at Themselfs	"Teachers' absence is due to the economic situation, poor salaries." "[We have had] monotonous workshops and sessions." "[We need] teacher training conducted by appropriate staff." "Lack of knowledge of new ways of working (methodologies, techniques, etc.)."

	"More creative courses." "Lack of teacher training conducted by appropriate staff." "The workshops are given by unsuitable staff."
On Training for Themselves	"Teachers lack initiative to work." "The problem of participation not only arises because of language, but also because the teacher fails to foster participation." "Education in values [is required]." "In addition, problems are not circumscribed to a lack of infrastructure, but there is also a lack of teacher training." "Teachers do not take the liberty of making home visits; we are not interested in learning how our students live." "The knowledge acquired should be applied; in the courses I have attended I've had to apply it." "The idea advanced is that of our cultures' coexistence […] it is very important to bear it in mind, and mostly it is something that we have to work on;" "The courses we need should be contextualized; the authorities should know the conditions of the schools, because many courses do not make sense."

The second section included in the fields of action clearly refers to teacher training. In principle, it refers to courses or workshop they have received from the others, that is, from the Ministry of Public Education (SEP, as per its Spanish acronym) or from those in charge of the training processes in which they have been immersed. Their comments are worth noting

because they practically blame the staff who have given such courses, although this entails a lack of understanding of what training implies, i.e. that training is in actual fact self-training insofar as it requires a motion by oneself and for oneself (Yurén, 1999). We found out that they attend refresher training courses more as recipients than as integral and essential parts of their own learning process. That is why this perspective is remarkable and it evidently represents a need that has to be worked on, because they show a willingness to join training processes but these should be different from those they have attended through the SEP courses.

Another perspective tends to justify the poor results on account of lack of economic support, because they claim to be capable and willing, but the teacher "does not do it" for lack of "support". So the point seems to be clear: some teachers will not change as long as they do not get that support, which seems to refer solely and exclusively to economic support.

Notwithstanding the above, their own discourse renders evident their training needs, in a lack of commitment, in their inability to transfer or apply the knowledge they deal with in the various refresher courses and workshops they attend, in a lack of competencies to understand and deal with contextual features from a teaching point of view, in signs of intolerance of differences, and so on. This was the critical part in which teachers managed to look at and question themselves, because there was a clear agreement that educational quality

starts with their own training. In this respect, their expressions highlight essential training topics, with one of them undoubtedly being the question of intercultural treatment. It would seem as if, from their perspective, the question is to break away from the culture and traditions of indigenous students, rather then reassessing and strengthening them on behalf of their own training.

Teachers' participation was rather characterized by their assuming the formal-consultative component and by their expectation vis-à-vis the other actors' claims, because they are in fact the ones who hold the majority decision-making power within the school community, and they are not totally willing to share it for the sake of defending two clearly identified components: their autonomy and authority. From the teachers' point of view, there is practically no room for the other actors' social participation in education except in the private sphere. They regard community issues as hindrances because they entail a stronger commitment to the context in which they are immersed, and therefore the political and decision-making implications of participation are viewed with uncertainty and as a source of instability for their habitual practices. These representations may be claimed to be closer to a conventional civil society insofar as the political power does not come into the picture, and the participating subjects do not clearly become actors in the educational field.

The Students' Perspective: First-hand

Knowledge

Students were perhaps the sector that turned out to be most difficult to get to reflect on the municipalities' needs and demands; for some of them, this was due to their young age. Aware of this, we asked students to think in local and day-by-day terms. The strategy implemented by the team of INED/Casa de la Ciencia facilitators was to use a ludic element and make subjects aware of their educational reality so that we could be in a position to ask them about it. The children who worked in the fora performed different activities that disclosed their aspirations concerning education and their school, as well as concerning the relationship with the other educational actors. In this manner, they were led to discover different fields of action, and underlined two as the most relevant: a) the relationship with the parents, and b) aspects dealing with teachers' training.

Table 6. The relationship students expect to have with their parents

Field of Action	Reference Discourse
On the Relationship with Parents	"Parents should attend the meetings." "Parents should advise their children to go to school." "They should help in whatever odd job there is at the school." "They should support us; they should send us to school and that's it." "Well, they should be better organized.

	"Many times, parents do not get organized, they do not come to an agreement whether to request this or that; on the other hand, by listening to parents from every community and to the teachers, they may get better organized and be able to negotiate or request what we need." "Let's see, let me think […], one: having every school's infrastructure; two: having teachers come at the scheduled teaching hours, they should not miss so many lessons so that students do not miss any; another is perhaps for teachers and parents to get organized so that the requests may be processed."

Students' discourse was useful for detecting their own educational needs and cross checking the other actors' information and findings. Thus, we confirmed parents' opinion in the sense that they often prefer to take the children with them to work in the field, rather than sending them to school. As may be seen from the discourses above, this is one of things children demands from parents: having the possibility of attending school on a daily basis, without this right being affected by interruptions caused by the parents. As suggested earlier, this is part of a prevailing representation of the school that is full of symbolic values, and that continues to be present in students as an internalization of school discourse; that is the reason behind the complaint aimed at parents about this.

They would also like parents to attend meetings; in other words, that parents should show an interest in the children's educational process. But not only that: we inferred from their comments that if there is a group of actors who are fully aware of the power that subjects acquire when they get organized, that is the group of children and youths. This is confirmed not only because they expressly request that the two other groups, parents and teachers, should get organized, but also because their own willingness to participate and get involved is evident. This is striking because, out of the three groups of actors, students have the least power of impact in terms of negotiating with the authorities; however, as they are aware of needing the other (as members of the parents' communal device), they use their comments to appeal to parents and teachers to get organized, thus also assuming a participatory stance. They are aware that they could improve in three issues that have already been dealt with as fundamental: a) continuous attendance at school; b) the construction and maintenance of school infrastructure, and c) getting organized in collective bodies as a means to create opportunities and negotiate elements for their benefit.

Table 7. Students' demands from themselves and from others

Field of Action	Reference Discourse
Looking at Themselves and at Others	"Students should also be respectful." "Nothing, that they [the students] should attend school, they should indeed." "Study more, go on studying." "What? …Study more."

	"I go on doing my homework."
On Teachers' Training Aspects	"Our teachers should be good." "They should teach us more." "They should pay attention to us." "They should have an understanding attitude towards us." "The teacher should not miss school." "Teachers should teach children to be responsible." "They should take us out to play." "They should teach us well, they should attend, they should be in school every day." "We should report to the teacher's principals, so that the teacher understands that he/she should teach in a better way and so that what they do in the classroom leads to a better result."
On Violence	"I would like my teacher to be affectionate with us and not to mistreat us." "I want my teacher to treat me as a student." "I'd like teachers to be good with the students of every school; they should not scold or get angry." "I'd like my teacher to be respectful with us." "I want my teacher not to beat us and not to scold me." "I want my teacher to be respectful with me." "[…] He/she should teach us with a lot of love and affection; he/she should not beat us and scold us because we want to learn as we deserve and we also want to be loved very much." "I'd also like my teacher to be more pleasant and not to scold us so much, because sometimes he scolds us too much and we even get a headache; he should also be

	a bit more understanding." "I'd like my teacher to be affectionate, not to scold us; she should be humble with us."

For the most part, students referred to themselves as equally responsible for the improvement of education, particularly in their specific field of action, i.e. being students and doing what is expected of them as such: respecting, studying, and doing homework. Here, there is undoubtedly a field of action that is as relevant as it has been for the other actors – i.e. being able to work on students' joint responsibility; obviously this not only relates to fulfilling their duties as students, but also to their forming part of a given community.

The key point of students' participation lies in the judgment that they make of their teachers, mostly regarding the latter's training. As may be seen, one obvious aspect is the need for teachers to have better professional performance so that they may give students better treatment, in an atmosphere of respect and understanding that fosters learning. Students even manage to define an ideal profile of what good teaching performance would be like: he/she should be good, kind, understanding, patient, humble, respectful, "he/she should not beat us or scold us," and he/she should teach "as it should be."

Just as clear is the representation of the teacher as the one who provides a model or morally exemplifies – whether explicitly or, mostly, via the hidden curriculum – what things should be like, through signs of respect and
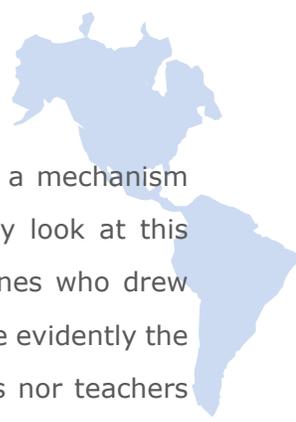
responsibility that the students demand because they value them and because, in many cases, the lack of those elements is evident. It is strange that some students should define their teachers as good, not because they find positive values or professional qualities in them, but because teachers do not beat them. This is partly due to the fact that some students feel fortunate for having a teacher that does not exert this kind of violence on them.

There were numerous comments regarding the prevailing climate of intimidation: some openly declare that the teacher mistreats them by shouting at them or beating them; this led us to realize that there is an evident red spot – a situation that requires urgent attention. We refer to the undeniable scenario of violence that exists in the teacher-student relationship.

When parents were made to realize during the fora what their children had said, there were no signs of concern but rather of a certain collusion. This definitely shows the need for the interrelation of the educational community, because it does not exclusively have to do with the teacher-student relationship, but also with parents. The latter, in principle, did not seem to be surprised that this should happen in the schools, although they did refer to the violence they had themselves experienced while they were students.

These expressions under the teacher training component are perhaps the entry that should be given priority. The type of teacher training that will reverse this situation is certainly one that should take place under a mechanism that forces teachers to objectively look at this reality. On the other hand, the ones who drew attention to this training aspect are evidently the students, because neither parents nor teachers dealt with it.

It is essential to retrieve the demands and needs mentioned in students' discourses, not only on account of what it means for students in the short term but also because they are in fact the most important component in the educational triad and are paradoxically suffering from the negative actions the other two actors are inflicting on them. In this case, the teachers' lack of training in dealing with otherness results in varying degrees of violence on the students.

Children and youths, due to their concrete and long experience at school, come closest to attaining the articulation of the school community. Although they are those most familiar with it, they are also those who are the least heard, given their position inside the school. Thus, due to the characteristics of their participation, students are positioned rather as external to the school community and hence external to the decision-making power.

The demand for parents and teachers to get organized and work together did not seem to be logical and did not even crop up during the fora, as historically has been the case. However, the essential finding was that the three main educational actors coincide on the idea that they should work together and in an organized way. We should note here a clear *consented*

upon need: teachers, parents and students are seeking that they all be part of educational change; the educational triad is in place, and the actors seem to demand from each other that it should be energized and that they should become interrelated.

Concluding Remarks

The main finding of our analysis is the agreed upon need expressed by the three educational actors and symbolized by the *tojolabal* expression that parents highlighted: '*Laj neb' tikik*,' that is to say, "let's all learn" by participating – although participation is signified in a different way by the members of the school community. It should be stressed, however, that they coincide in that participation consists of a reciprocal need and demand for communication and joint responsibility of the educational actors for the sake of education. Additionally, two lines of action were detected that point to the consensus of the school community under study:

– **On the interrelation, organization, and communication of the "school community"**: We detected the need to implement a permanent strategy to foster communication and reflection among the actors so as to enable them to experience themselves as an educational community. We ascertained a tendency to get organized as a community, as well as a reciprocal demand of being at least informed about what is happening. This fact in particular is regarded as something

that could succeed in getting parents and teachers decidedly involved in educational and community issues.

– **On training**: This was the second predominant pattern and cannot be attributed to a single actor since we discovered training needs both in teachers and in parents. The former exhibit clearly identifiable deficiencies, such as sensitivity to context; strategies for bilingual intercultural treatment; training and self-training strategies; understanding, respect for and acknowledgment of the other, and so on. Parents exhibited an urgent need to become literate and sensitized in various aspects, such as the importance of adequately using the economic support given by the government through social programs.

"Communal expression" appeared as a sign of the historical *a priori* of being a communal "us," that is, of the disposition to understand each other as a whole made up of mutual responsibilities, which comes into being upon entering decision-making grounds, i.e. political participation in education. That is why it was not possible to analyze it as an expression of civil society, because it was a social or citizenship participation *in* the educational field and, as stated earlier, it does not exclude the issues of power and explicit political relationships. What makes them overcome the formalities of civil society as conceived by Cohen & Arato (2003), for example, is the material level of their demands.

We found that fostering participation that is not merely consultative results in the expression of *agreed upon needs* among the actors, especially when they notice the transition from consultative to a more projective participation (Trilla & Novella, 2001, p. 18) demanding from them commitment and joint responsibility. However, in the case of the parental sector, it feeds on the communal device to which they belong and which is visibly different from that of the teachers. The actors assumed different types of participation. Parents were more prone to the earlier one, that is, to the intermediate point between consultative and projective/decision-making participation. Teachers demanded a more decided participation from parents, although they conceived it as exercised from the private sphere, but not necessarily in the school context, as the parents implicitly demanded when they referred to organizational issues and mostly to teacher training issues. On the other hand, students exhibited a rather undermined participation; they perceive themselves as having little decision-making power; however, even though they see themselves as beneficiaries of a better communication between parents and teachers, they are very clear on the need for the other actors to become interrelated.

The implications of these findings for social participation in education are clear. The apolitical "neutrality" of the conception of civil society must be transcended, because it hinders actors from exercising their political decision-making power *in* the educational field, so that reference can properly be made to political participation (Tenti, 2004) and abstract actors may be perceived as political actors (Dussel, 2005). We found the advantages of community participation, mainly that by parents, who – due to the "subjective feeling" of being a whole and to the proximity in their relationships – are more willing to participate and get involved by expanding their communal device to encompass the educational sphere. Unfortunately it is the teachers who set up barriers, and it is precisely with them that work should be done so that social participation may develop beyond ineffective public policies.

Notes:

1 INED/Casa de la Ciencia is a center for educational innovation located in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Ever since its inception in 1994 it has promoted the improvement of quality in public education, both in Chiapas and in various states of the Mexican Republic where it has been influential, through the participation of the various actors and by implementing training processes whereby practices may be transformed and articulated with educational policies.

2 In 1992, and as part of the drive towards educational decentralization, the federal government, the state governments, and the National Union of Educational Workers (SNTE, as per its Spanish acronym) signed a Nationwide Agreement for Modernizing Elementary Education. In this document the parties agreed that federal educational services be transferred to state governments, and several important figures involved in social participation in education appeared (Canales, 2006).

3 For reasons of space, we have omitted from this paper the actors' expressions regarding infrastructure. However, there are issues that are essential and that relate to the fields of action presented, such as: schools closer to the communities, or else some kind of transportation that facilitates transport; food and lodging for students that come from distant communities and that stay at the schools, and so on.

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