



## PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLING: A DIVORCE OF CONVENIENCE\*

Christopher Martin, \*Elsa Guzmán Flores

**Resume:** PhD in Anthropology and Education, University of London. Honory Visiting Associate, Institute of Education, University College, London. His research interests are education and society.

**\*Resume:** PhD in Anthropology and History, University of Wageningen, Holland. Project advisor in Casa Universitaria de Tizapan, SUV, Universidad de Guadalajara. Her research interests are political anthropology on rural conflicts and education.

**Submitted:** April 13, 2015. Accepted for publication: January 14, 2016.

**Recovered from:** <https://sinectica.iteso.mx/index.php/SINECTICA/article/view/628>

### Abstract

Although since the 1993 Education Act in Mexico established parental participation in schools through the newly created school participation councils (CEPs), these have rarely been more than a dead letter. Most of the studies on the subject have attempted to explain why this is so in the general terms. However these have lacked close ethnographic study of school processes that include the CEPs. This article draws on three years of field research in a rural school zone in Jalisco. Not satisfied with culturally essentialist notions of parental apathy of disinterest the authors examine the reason why this culture of silence occurs. Through a journey of understanding of school-community relations of several primary and one secondary school that included classroom observation of teaching, ethnographic interviews and conversations with parents we reached the conclusion that the relationship between school and community is "a divorce of convenience". Each party finds it more convenient to keep it from the other rather than collaborating to improve the education of the students. The details of this phenomenon are discussed in the article.

### INTRODUCTION

For nearly 20 years in Mexico, the legislation has existed to bring about parent and community participation in schooling. Councils for Parental Participation Schools (CEPS) and parents associations have seen their role strengthened in along with policies emphasizing the school as the core of the educational system. But the results of these initiatives have largely failed. The CEPs, the most recent official organ for social participation, remain a dead letter. Although as individuals parents have always contributed with monetary support and helping their children with their homework, as a group they are conspicuous by their absence in the life of most schools, most visible at the school gates delivering or waiting for their children, with a few active or well connected parents running the school cooperative or the school breakfasts.

Why is this the case? Prevailing views attribute it to passivity, and to citizens'

---

\*Translated into English by authors. Chapter to appear in forthcoming book to be published by Elsevier with the provisional title "Educational policy is only as good as its weakest link: Dilemmas of reforming education in Mexico". Not to be quoted without the authors being consulted.

being unaccustomed their children's performance. There is something unsatisfactory about this explanation because it begs the question about why people are passive, especially since it is in their interest to be active in something that directly concerns them. Passivity is really a description not an explanation. In the words of Thomas Moore regarding his silence over King Henry the Eighth's controversial second marriage, "Silence [or passivity in this case] betokens many things" (Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*). It may betoken consent, but equally, dissent. We will argue that what looks like passivity over social participation in school is more like an error message thrown up by a series of operating failures involving all the stakeholders in the educational system. Understanding this error message takes us to the heart of the Mexican educational system's malfunctioning.

In our view the users of the school are not against the current arrangements for a more active role in the running of the school. Neither are they indifferent to them, though they are often unaware of exactly what they are. They do not get involved because they are not convinced that it is worth their while. On balance, they consider it better to leave well alone and not get too close to the school's operations. They find it an impenetrable, unfriendly and a risky environment in which to participate.

The upshot is what we call a "divorce of convenience". Each partner, except in the case of an emergency, agrees to leave the other alone: the school has right over the children during school hours, and the parents at all other times. But the relationship is unequal, the school being the dominant partner. This means that the school may make demands on the parents for "child support" but the parents, in spite of legal indications to the contrary, in reality may make no claims on the school, if they want to avoid prejudicing their child's advance in the school. Like all divorces, the children are the ones who suffer (see Martin, 2004: 296). As in all divorces, the children may play each partner off against the other over matters like homework, grades and disciplinary matters.

### **STUDYING SCHOOLING AND COMMUNITY IN MEXICO**

In 2010 we participated in two projects that have provided the data that is the backbone of the present chapter. The first was the Standards Project of the Mexican Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) and the Institute of Education (IoE) in which parents, parent leaders and children we interviewed among other stakeholders to gather their opinions on what they saw, what they wanted and what they thought needed improvement in the public education on offer. This study was conducted in 11 states: Nayarit, Sinaloa, Colima, Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Zacatecas, Nuevo Leon, Coahuila, Tabasco, Chiapas and Yucatan.

At the same time we began living and working in a small town in Jalisco observing the interaction of parents and teachers in three schools, beginning with the secondary school and then, in the new school year 2010-2011, we added two primary schools to our study. In one, one of the authors was a temporary part time teacher; in the other, we were researcher-advisers to the school's School improvement grant (*Programa de Escuelas de Calidad*, PEC) in which the activation of the CEPs was a priority.

This paper on parental participation schools has drawn on both sets of data. In addition, two further sets of data have been used. The first is a house-to-house survey of Buenavista covering 300 people conducted in December of 2011 from all the wards of the municipality. [The names of people and places have been

changed in order to protect their anonymity.] The survey included questions on all aspects of life in the municipality like an open question on the quality of the educational services. Additionally, we made use of opinions given in a public meeting held on the 11th of September 2010, in which we were involved, to ascertain the educational opinions and needs of the population on the soon to be inaugurated virtual University of Guadalajara, the *CASA Universitaria*.

The methodological approaches we used to discover why parents seemed to shy away from participating in their children's education (when it is so obviously a useful thing to do) evolved as we progressed with the study. We started with an examination of the official legislation, regulations and guidelines for societal participation in schooling. We complemented this with face-to-face interviews with heads of the Parents Associations, (APFs) the main organ for parental representation in schools until the CEPS came into being, in 11 states to enrich our understanding about how the channels of participation worked in practice. [The interviews were part of a larger study commissioned by the SEP-IOE to ascertain the opinions of all stakeholders in the educational system on the current curriculum and its teaching.] We then surveyed the studies with the operation of the CEPS and APFs (Martínez, Bracho González and Martínez Valle).

These studies' great value was in revealing the failure of the CEPS and other channels of societal participation to really involve parents and other stakeholders. Nevertheless, their conjectures about why stakeholders were reticent to get involved in schooling, were of less value since they lacked sufficient field data and longer term ethnographic research, such as would go beyond actors reporting on what they did or thought, to witnessing what they did and said in the actual participation context and the interactions occurring in it.

In our field-work in Buenavista, a small town in rural central Jalisco, we observed the interaction of parents and teachers in three schools: two primary schools and a secondary school. The intake of the two primary schools was similar, the majority of children coming from families of labour migrants, farmers and day labourers, with a small proportion of around 10-15 percent coming from professional or business families. In the Miguel Hidalgo (MH) school we were invited to be independent consultants to help improve the school, including parental participation, that in turn would help the school obtain federal funds PTE-TEC (see below). In the other school (Hacienda) one of us gave voluntary music classes. This provided us with an informal view of the daily life of the school. This view was complemented by regular discussions with a key teacher informant and researcher with whom we had worked closely over many years.

In the secondary school we focussed on formal activities in support of parental participation and we observed the day-to-day activities of the school but not so much as teachers or promoters. Thus during our period of the study we were able to observe everyday parent – school interactions close up.

With the MH and secondary school we started by introducing ourselves to the teachers and then the parents in formal meetings. In the H school one of the authors began by introducing himself to the head teacher, to whom he was presented as a colleague of our chief informant, a respected member of the teaching team. From then on, people got to know him through his teaching work.

Over a period of 6 months we began to accumulate data that gave a fuller picture of the impediments to parent-school collaboration, each side turning away from

the other, changing supposed participation, where it existed at all, into pretence, a simulation of what it was supposed to be.

The evolution of our research ran alongside a period of especial official promotion of social participation. We were able to trace this initiative from the opinions of educational policy-makers and senior players in the administration, in our 11 state interviews, including those responsible for Jalisco, via the efforts of middle level officials and parent representatives in charge of the favoured organ of participation, the CEPSS, down to the teachers' responses to it and parents involvement or lack of it in this process.

### THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

When we asked parents in meetings and individually why they did not participate more in the life of their school, the immediate reply was because they just don't have time due to their multiple commitments in the household and at work. Taken at face value this might seem to be the end of the story. They are just not interested. But as we will try to show, behind a simple statement are implicit meanings, notions that may seem obvious to the respondent, but are hidden from the inquirer. As social researchers know well, the most obvious answer is sometimes the one that is least explicit, precisely because for the respondent, it is obvious or taken for granted. We found this to be the case with respect to participation reticence.

We followed up on parents' excusing their lack of involvement with the school asking them to detail more their commitments. With over half of the local population living and working outside the municipality, mainly in the USA, we were not surprised to find Buenavista household heads burdened by heavy domestic and income generation activities. Nevertheless, other factors stemming from their relationship with the school began to emerge and led us towards a fuller understanding about parental participation reticence. "Parents are not used to participating in education; they tend to leave it to the teachers" (María, head of APF in the secondary).

This notion was echoed in two other APF interviews in Aguascalientes and in Jalisco. In the former, the state APF representative added that it was necessary to promote parental involvement in their schools. Parental participation reticence was faithfully recorded in Zurita et al's (2003) and Martínez et al's study (2007) and in a work on citizen's civic participation in the political process more generally (Aguayo, 2010). Interviews with teachers and both studies conclude that the culprit is apathy, the apathy of the population to assume responsibility for public affairs. Some attribute this to the paternalistic behaviour of the Mexican state's development strategy of incorporating the population into broad sectoral hierarchical blocks, where many rights, privileges and benefits have traditionally been distributed in return for members' loyalty and conformity.

Apathy, like Thomas More's silence, or more recently and more relevantly, Paolo Freire's culture of silence (1970) can be interpreted in various ways. Paolo Freire understood the silence he found among the poor marginalized people to be a survival strategy in the face of oppression rather than willing submission. In similar way, George Foster (1965) coined the term "limited good" to characterize the peasants' sense of the injustice if their basic needs (the limited good) were not met. Their silence would be broken under these circumstances. Even more to the point is J.C. Scott's "passive resistance" or "informal resistance" where the disad-

vantaged opt for forms of indirect dissent and resistance, such as foot-dragging or dissimulation that end up being far more effective and less risky than outright protest (Scott, 1985).

Rather than dubbing the parents' indifference or reluctance to involve themselves in the school as apathy or passivity, both of which are value judgements, we prefer to use a more neutral term, participation reticence, a term that opens the way for further investigation. This study was a journey to get to the bottom of participation reticence. The layout of this chapter is an account of this journey. We passed through four stages in our research journey; each added an insight on to the previous one culminating in a perspective on the issue that related a broad set of actors, the authorities, parents, other family members, teachers, pupils and others involved in the street life of the community.

In what follows we attempt to take the reader through our research journey phase by phase, that was akin to peeling down through layers of understanding starting of the apparent apathy about school participation, starting with the most obvious obstacles and ending up with factors more deeply buried beneath the surface of social action.

#### **FIRST STAGE, THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: A TOP-DOWN AFFAIR**

Mexican public education is mainly a top-down affair. Unlike the USA in the developed world or Kenya in the developing world where significant civic activism created the modern educational system, in Mexico, from the Cultural Missions through the establishment of the SEP, and the incorporation of the teachers into the official National Teachers Union (SNTE), up to the recent *Alianza*, the educational system was created and developed by the government fiat. Popular educational initiatives, old and new, have also existed, but they have hardly left any mark on the nation's public education in Mexico, at least until the indigenous movement of the 1990s and onwards.

The school is effectively the last link in the chain of command issuing from the SEP-SNTE nexus rather than the core educational institution. Curriculum decided at the highest level, and the laws governing the working day, the fundamental requisites of school operation, and even the duties of teachers in broad terms –i.e. norms are national. In spite of the “federalization” (decentralization) of the system from the early 1990s, educational reform has been largely an administrative matter (see inter alia Schmelkes, 1997 and Pardo, 1999). The school has been subject to increasing bureaucratization and regulation, restricting its decision-making power. This has occurred even while officials spoke of the school being the nucleus of the educational system (see Diario Oficial Sexta Sesión De 2007, *The Alianza para la Calidad Educativa*). At the same time, the SNTE gained power in the past few administrations (Ezpeleta, 2004: 409). Now more than ever, teacher promotion and salaries are determined by test results and conditions imposed by the SEP-SNTE. Parents and children remain excluded from any feedback on these matters.

This leaves the school very much at the mercy of the official educational stakeholders (politicians, bureaucrats and the union) but not its actual users. (Ironically the overwhelming majority of the stakeholders controlling the educational system, the politicians, bureaucrats and union members opt out of the public education they run and earn from, considering it of insufficient quality for their own children.) In a teachers' union meetings we attended in 2011-12 called to assign teachers to vacancies in local schools, the procedure established was for teachers

to be assigned entirely on the basis of their ranking (*Carrera Magisterial CM*). The union representative called out the register of names starting with those highest in the scale and the first to opt for the vacancy gets it. Neither the school nor even the head teacher has any say in the matter.

In some SEP organigrams, the school, its teachers, head teacher and the supervisors do not appear; of course, parents have no place in this official representation. This is also reflected in the SEP and local interviews, with parents relegating everything to the teachers. Under these conditions it is difficult to imagine any serious role being given to parents whatever the legislation says (see the Legislation and Guidelines of CEPS in Diario Oficial, Sexta Sesión, ACE, 2007)

Yet just as the administrative and political control from above was being consolidated, most recently through the *Alianza*, the *Carrera Magisterial*, and standardized testing, *ENLACE* one can detect a counter current gathering strength, notably the promotion of the CEPS and the rhetoric of the school-centeredness and the current vogue of school management. School centeredness began as an emergent current of policy in the early 1990s, with the idea of "School Projects" in the Modernization agreement of 1992 (ANMEB). Zedillo declared on the radio the school was the centre of the educational system (see Martin, 2007). This also became the frequent refrain of the Secretary of Basic Education Gomez Morin, under the Fox administration (Diario Oficial Dec 2007).

Nevertheless, the supposed delegation of authority to the school was immediately undercut by the way it was to be carried out. Both the older Association of Parents (APF) and the more recent CEPs far from being counter-weights to the SEP-SNTE traditional exclusive hold over public education, were themselves incorporated into the rules and regulations given by the SEP regulatory system. In other words even the bodies that were set up to provide representation, have been co-opted into the very entity that they are supposed to be independently monitoring.

The authorities and the union have untiringly assured themselves of having the upper hand in school administration, something that Justa Ezpeleta has analyzed from earlier times (*inter alia* 1990). Currently the officially favoured representational body, the CEPS gives 50% plus one to parental representatives. Yet the legislation does not bar the head teacher from assuming the presidency of the Council. This was the norm in the schools of the municipality studied here. (A notable exception is the special case of Colima where the Education Secretariat has barred head-teachers from holding this position, Claudia Santizo, 2010.)

Our interviews with the state representatives of the APFs reveal a mixed picture of the impact their members have on the school. The majority say they have to struggle to make their voices heard in the school, in large part because they are excluded from pedagogical matters except to enlist their support for school improvements and running costs. The respondent from Aguascalientes said that she had developed a good working relationship with the authorities, but that at school level, parents were loathe to make their opinions heard on the running of their schools. "They need to be encouraged and taught to do so because they are not accustomed to doing so." She said.

The majority of the APF representatives interviewed were concerned about child abuse and other forms of teacher malpractice in schools, but also bemoaned the lack of initiative of the parents to break through the traditional hold teachers and officials have on school life.

Turning now to our specific case of Buenavista, before entering into our focus on parental participation, let us look at some general data on the public's appreciation of the educational services in their municipality. According to the house-to-house survey, opinions were divided on the quality of these services. They were also ambiguous. As is so often the case in Mexico on educational data, the gross statistics often display strong support for teachers and the institution of public education ("Los valores de los mexicanos", Alducín & Basañez, 2006). Yet micro studies and ethnographic research unpeels these general opinions to reveal deep disquiet and fear that they and Mexico in general are losing out educationally (Martin 2004, Nexos Feb. 2011). It appears from the Nexos 2011 article and from this study that parents are aware of the international surveys on education in which Mexico does poorly, via the mass media. Very few respondents gave it a high ranking, but few said it was very poor. The majority opinion thought it was just about satisfactory, but normally with reservations considerable about teachers' absenteeism and high handedness. The public meeting on the UDG CASA echoed this disillusionment with public basic education. They were also worried about the low throughput of secondary school graduates to higher education, something that to the respondents indicated that the schools were not doing their job.

Turning now to the main issue of our concern, namely participation, in Buenavista we held focus groups of a total of 95 parents. Apart from one session in the MH primary school, another was conducted in the local secondary school that covered parents from all over Tizapan municipality. In these sessions, it became clear that the parents were not aware of the existing official forms of participation. Of the 95 parents in the focus groups only two people knew anything at all about what the CEPs were, and told us that they had never been informed about them, even though only a few months earlier (spring of 2010), schools had received notification that they needed to activate these representative organs.

The majority of respondents knew of the APF, probably because it is an older more well established body that the CEPs. Our findings from observation, informal interviews and the focus groups informed us that parent-teacher meetings for practical matters, organizing breakfasts, cleaning and other mundane tasks around the school, are the main form of parent involvement in the schools.

Following one of the focus groups sessions, the secondary school APF representative echoed the Aguascalientes representative's assessment that parents are just not used to taking initiative in this way and that they needed encouragement to do so. When asked if the school did encourage this, she said that it didn't and that this was likely to be the main reason for parental reticence.

In brief, although some parents know something about the channels of parental representation, the majority either do not know about them, or are reluctant to make their voice heard. There were few indications of why this was the case at this stage of the research. It was on closer reading of parents' comments inside and beyond the school gates that possible answers became clearer.

## **SECOND STAGE, DISCRETION, PLAYING THE SYSTEM AND KEEPING PARENTS IN THEIR PLACE**

As we have pointed out, the educational administration is an impenetrable bureaucracy that puts the public off getting involved, by treating them as petitioners for state favours, and incidental to educational processes, perhaps even obstacles to their smooth running. This way of dealing with the public is especially pronou-

ned in Mexico where state officials continue to use their positions as gatekeepers to state benefits and services, rather than to see themselves as public servants paid by and thus accountable to the taxpayer. This kind of obstacle to public accountability is institutional in the sense of not being built into the practices of Mexican public administration (Aguayo, 2010: 243).

It is precisely the discretionary power exercised by officials that the institution gives them, that permit personal discretion, (although this power is circumscribed by their superiors who use their own discretionary powers to sanction or reward their subordinates). Parents experience discretionary practices and personalise in their dealing with the schools of their children. It plays out in three different ways.

The *first tactic* is where the official, in our case the teacher or head-teacher, simply ignore the rules, usually because they consider themselves immune from sanction or because no-one is really checking compliance. A good example of this is a teacher expelling a pupil without bothering to give a reason and in complete contradiction of the rules that only permit exclusion when the child is a real danger to other children. The *second tactic* occurs when the official interprets the rules and simulates a procedure normally to avoid a time-consuming activity or one that complicates his or her life, or because the official gets some personal benefit out of this rule bending, for example, in acting as a gatekeeper for some resource or benefit. *Tactic 3* is a variant of tactic 2. This occurs when an over strict application of a regulation, or the invention of one, is used to go against parents. An example is denying a transfer for reasons of strict transparency, or giving parents the bureaucratic run-around when they try and submit a complaint to the authorities. This is well captured in Juárez's famous dictum, "Justice for my friends; the law for my enemies".

In our case of education participation, each of these tactics operated. As explained above, in 2010, the SEP issued instructions about activating societal participation, and reporting on progress. From the beginning, it was clear at local level, that head-teachers were aware that this was a strict requirement and that they had to comply. At the same time, according to our key informants in the schools we studied closely, teachers meetings on the establishment of the CEPS, were focused on rule bending, evasive and simulation tactics (tactics 1 and 2) keeping parents out of the matter as much as is possible given that the matter concerned them directly. Let us see how.

The rules governing parental participation stipulated a parental majority of 50% + 1. But this parental advantage is undermined if other members who are the head's friends are co-opted, if parent members are also teachers active in the school or another local school, and if the head takes the presidency. At least one of these tactics applies in all three schools under observation.

The CEPSs do not permit parents to involve themselves in hiring and firing of teachers or in the professional-pedagogical work. However, where teachers conduct or in their professional shortcomings directly affect the childrens' progress and well-being in school, parents may be involved. Furthermore, in some schools, parents have actually been invited to participate in aspects of teaching (Escuela Lagos de la Sierra Negra, Puebla, Tlalpán, Vélez Andrade et al 2008, Mexico City, and the Aztec abacus Nepohualtintzin in Xochimilco, SEP-SNTE 2010). Nevertheless in the school zone under discussion, parents are excluded completely from any such contributions and as far as possible outside the school gates with the



exceptions of individuals carrying out manual tasks for the school, as already mentioned. Here a mix of tactic 3 and 1 operate: a restrictive reading of the rules, and keeping parent uninformed about them, especially their increased and broader scope as co-partners in school matters.

In spite of this greater inclusion of parents' involvement in the life of the school, in practice in Buenavista their role continues to be confined to:

- Attending meetings called by their children's class teacher or to collect school reports
- Responding to particular matters concerning their children's performance or behaviour
- Making payments for school upkeep, breakfasts etc.
- Attending school open days, feast days and public holiday events

As one parent put it in an conversation outside the school:

The teacher only wants to see me when there is a problem.

Or when they need some money" added her companion. (MH Breakfast woman)

In the focus groups about parental participation we saw that parents had not been informed about their role in the newly activated CEPSS. In the MH school, the first time that the parents had heard of this organism, was in a meeting where a senior training official addressed the parents on the subject. Following that meeting one parent said this:

It is difficult to participate as we should because we do not know how. We have only just learned about these CEPSS. I knew about the Safety and Emergency committees, but not the CEPSS. I did not know they were all part of the same thing". We have not been informed.

Parents clearly resented being kept in the dark about matters that directly concern them. Then to make things worse, they are made party to their own exclusion from school participation so that the teachers can shirk their responsibilities in this regard. The way that the head teacher and his staff get round the official obligation to set the CEPSS in motion, and their disinclination to do so is an exercise in simulation (tactic 1). One pair of parents who attended the meeting to establish the CEPSS in one of the primary schools explained it in this way:

They asked us to come to the parents meeting and then asked us for volunteers to make up the school council but then once having the names they would not have to bother us again! I mean that does not sound as if they want us to take part in anything or for us to have a voice, does it?

Two teachers and a parent reported on a similar incident early on in the school year 2011-2012. One of the teachers explained it thus:

The head-teacher called us for the first parents meeting of the school year. About half of the parents were there. We were told that we needed to form a Council. He said we did not need to worry too much about obligations. All he needed was

a few names to send to the authorities and that would be that. Of course put that way, no-one wanted to volunteer – just to rubber stamp the head's paperwork. X's brother was asked and he refused outright to be associated with such a pretence.

In two teachers meetings including an in-service training course on the reformed curriculum, the issue of relations with the parents came up. It was also discussed in formal teachers interviews conducted among all the teachers in one of the primary schools in order to obtain the teachers' perspective on parental participation. All teachers thought it important to be able to count on parental support with their individual children's education and to lend a hand with practical tasks in the school. It was rare to hear teachers favouring a regular partnership with parents. The reasons for this will be discussed below.

In the MH, the director takes against a merely bureaucratic pretence of school-parent collaboration. His attitude is consistent with the special training he has received at regional level to promote school quality improvement with a more active role of the head teacher's leadership both in the school and outside it, procuring parental participation via the activation of the CEPS. The course director came to a parents meeting in the secondary to speak of this as was mentioned above. Yet nine months later the director had done little to actually form the CEPS.

The meeting to announce the importance of CEPS given by head teacher's tutor, met with respectful silence, and after the tutor and the head retired, some parents recognized that they needed to be more active in collaborating with the teachers. But afterwards, some parents commented on the difficulties they felt in doing so – they felt they did not have much time, and that it did not help that when called to meetings they were usually kept waiting.

All of this reaffirms the parents; sense of being kept at arm's length from the school and being kept out of any genuine partnership with the school. This is achieved through filtering the information that gets to the parents (tactic 1) and simulating real social participation (tactic 2).

In the previous section we showed how official top-down administrative procedures impeded parental participation. Here, at local level, teachers employ discretionary practices in a way that compounds this exclusion of genuine partnership with parents and society, in spite of official exhortations to the contrary. Although parents did not generally make explicit that this might be a reason why they participated so little in the school, one parent following the meeting just referred to came close to it: "They (sic. The teachers) don't take any notice of our comments so there is no point in participating. They don't listen."

Why all these efforts to exclude parental participation on the part of the teachers? In the first instance they are worried about increased demands on their already crowded schedule. In addition, union regulations are an inescapable part of teacher's working conditions. Loyalty to the union is exchanged for its support and protection. As the union representative said when questioned on the issue of complaints against teachers: "My primary responsibility is to defend any teacher accused of malpractice".

When I asked what would happen if she knew that the parents had good cause to complain, she did admit that she would also have to take this seriously. Nevertheless, the defence of the 1.5 million strong teachers union considerably outweighs anything that an individual parent, with limited funds, might put up.

It would be wrong to suggest that the Buenavista teachers are in favour of

shielding professional abuse of are against any kind of parental collaboration. Indeed interview data suggests they favour a closer relationship with parents. But the institutional incentives favour paper compliance over active interaction with parents, and teacher customary practice leans towards closing ranks over exposing colleagues to parental wrath. In a the school district training workshop of the reformed curriculum (24 January 2012), the majority of teachers expressed disquiet about how to handle difficult children and their parents complaints something that indicated that they see themselves as victims of family and social disintegration for which they feel inadequately prepared.

In one teacher training session the subject of school-parent-society relations was specifically covered as a unit in the course. A lively discussion emerged on parent lack of commitment and bad example to their children, and how difficult it was to correct them.

If we punish them, we risk incurring parental wrath. I had a parent come and complain to me the other day because I sent the kid home because he was bullying another child. The parent came shouting at me the next day, threatening to take me to the Human Rights Commission.

All three of the schools under close observation had officially registered CEPSS, yet none of them until the time of completing this paper (June 2012) had activated them and complied with the requirements of regular meetings (once per month or a minimum of once per term). One of the three schools invited us to participate in the CEPSS, as “community” members, but as of June 2012 no meeting had taken place. This is an example of tactic, behind or slipping through the formal rules to subvert the spirit of the practice the rules are supposed to promote.

The bureaucratic discretion that the teachers engage is in part to ward off parents getting too close to the teachers’ professional domain, but it is also a way of dealing with the flood of directives issuing from the SEP authorities whose many departments make no effort to coordinate and regulate the flow of their directives. The authorities also fail to conduct any follow up, monitor and evaluate the impact of their directives (Alba Martine, 2011) Neither have attempts been made to identify obstacles to their fulfilment such as lack of teacher preparation, bad timing and institutional problems that hinder the activation of the CEPSS. As such schools make what efforts they can to carry out official instructions under the normal conditions of excess demands and insufficient support and supervision. This most commonly results in the various discretionary tactics described above, especially (according to the frequency the term crops up in our interviews) bureaucratic pretence or simulation or pretence and the consequent failure to enjoin parental participation, so traditionally absent from Mexican school life.

Since parents do not see the institutional pressures on teachers, profoundly resent their high-handed behaviour about what they consider an abuse of their relatively comfortable position. Two mothers, objecting to the schools’ only seeking parental participation when they needed money, put it this way:

Mother 1. They (sic. The teachers) demand money shamelessly considering that we are hard up but they are fine, thank you very much. They may not earn much but it they have a job for life.

Mother 2. It’s just not right, the teachers, with their admittedly small, but at least

secure salaries, waste so much time in class when we who are hard up, depend on our children getting a decent education to make their way in the world.

Other explanations varied from lack of time, being kept waiting by the school when they did turn up and because they did not know exactly how to collaborate with their children's education. One parents said:

It is difficult for us to help with our children's learning because, for example in my case, I really do not feel competent to help them. I have some schooling but not enough to do much for my children.

This comment took the discussion to parents questioning the way parents were expected to supplement the class work the teachers gave, but in their homes, via large and complex homework activities. Three parents made the following observations:

Sometimes the pupils do not have enough time to copy out the homework.

Other occasions, the homework the teachers give from the textbook says that the pupils have to ask the teacher such and such a question. So this means they are giving work that should properly be done in the classroom.

It seems to me that the teachers want us to take on their job of supervising homework and even their teaching.

In sum, parents are not on an equal footing with teachers, who close ranks against undue parental involvement in school matters. Parents perceive this and rarely try to cross the line or cross into the school compound without good reason. However, while accepting and even respecting the teachers' turf, they do object to abuses of the teachers' authority, through arbitrary use of their power over their children for illicit purposes, and sometimes even unethical and corrupt purposes.

### **THIRD PHASE: THE LACK OF CHOICE AND VOICE**

The whole point of participation by users in the educational services is to drive up the quality of the service by making it accountable to its users. Since the users pay for the system either indirectly through taxes or directly through fees, it makes sense that they should have a say in what they receive. Furthermore, they are outside and distinct from those providing and operating the system and thus give an "external" view of its effectiveness. Ideally an independent inspection should monitor its operation in an even more disinterested and precise manner. Unfortunately Mexico has not yet established such an agency.

Neo-liberal policies promote user participation because they treat users as customers, whose consumer preferences reward good schools and punish bad ones effecting a clean up of the educational system that avoids excessive and often ineffective bureaucratic intervention. Social democrats, socialists and communarians favour user participation for reasons of social justice and democratic principles: users have a voice in the education of their children, thereby acting as a counterbalance to high-handed bureaucrats and otherwise unaccountable teachers. Whether neo-liberal or socialistic, the purpose is to put pressure on educational

providers to respond to its users desires for good quality education.

Mexico has officially accepted parental participation, as we have seen, through APF and CEPSS. Nevertheless, as we have also seen, neither the policy nor the practice has allowed this to happen. Apart from institutional obstacles, there is another impediment to parental participation. For this to be effective, both the neo-liberal and the social democratic approaches depend on parents being well informed and able to detect differences in provision: in the neo-liberal case, choose the preferable option or in the socialistic case, put parental pressure on the service to improve it. To do this, first, there must be a range of schools permitting comparison. In remote areas of Mexico there may only be one school within easy reach of the community, thereby leaving parents without a choice.

Second, even where there are several schools in the locality, parents must be able to perceive a difference between them. In the case of Buenavista, there are 8 primary schools, but differences in overall quality are not perceived. In our interviews the overwhelming reason for parents to transfer their children from one school to another is because of strong objections to the teacher concerned, because of chronic absenteeism or abuses. Only very rarely are children transferred because of teaching performance. However, this does not mean that parents have no qualms about teaching quality. Of the of the most frequent comments in the parents meetings, were on this matter. Also in the state level interviewees commented on teachers' abilities to explain clearly, or to make the class interesting. It was extremely rare for parents to say that the teachers themselves were deficient on their subject matter rather the complaints were about getting the contents across to the students. Nevertheless, criticisms of teaching ability did not normally translate into parents transferring their children.

This could be because (a) the social costs of doing so were too high, as suggested in the previous section; (b) parents had insufficient bases for comparison or (c) that having made a comparison they could not detect a difference significant enough to justify transferring their child from one school to another.

On the issue of the costs of transference (a), we have already seen there are indeed costs attached to such an action. Besides the emotional disruption to their children, they risk having their children labelled as problematic not just within but also among teachers as a group at school district level.

Possibilities (b) and (c) turned out to be connected in an unexpected way. It was difficult to obtain from parents clear comparative opinions on local schools. At no point did parents refer to ENALCE data or any other "hard data". Such few comparisons that they made were hearsay. Mostly parents only expressed opinions on the school they knew, their own, according to what we heard in the group meetings and in our ethnographic interviews. However, two conversations with mothers who had some comparative experience of schools, threw light on why parents appear to be reticent about expressing and acting on valuations of school quality – either through school choice or through pressure on their current school.

One mother told us that she withdrew her boy from a school where the teacher had obliged him to look after her child during class time. In a follow up conversation we asked her to tell us what she thought of the new school. She said:

J. I think it is slightly better. The teachers make more of an effort there. Maybe it is because the head teacher is strict with them.

C&E. Did you move your boy to the second school because it was better?

J. No, I didn't know this at the time, I moved him because his teacher at the other place was treating him wrongly. But now that he has been at this [sic. second] school for a while I can see that it is better.

There are at least three important lessons here. One is that the motive for the move was not about teaching quality; the second is that the ability to compare and then judge followed rather than preceded the move; the third is that even now that J. can compare, it is the teacher's behaviour rather than the academic or pedagogical skill that predominates in the judgement.

The same conclusions emerge from another case of three sisters F, H and G from Buenavista, one of whom (F) lived for while in her husband's birthplace, a village some 40 Km away. Here daughter did her preschool and early primary schooling there. They then moved to Buenavista placing her children in the same school as her sisters' children. One of the sisters, H, takes up the story:

H. I don't understand it. My lad, JL is bright, just like his cousin J (F's daughter) but J gets all the prizes in school and JL gets nothing. Why is this? Is it because boys mature slower than girls? J is more attentive than JL. But I also think it is because J had a head start with good preschool teachers. Here the teachers are lazy, they don't put in the time or effort.

C&E. Why don't parents speak out about this at the meetings?

H. I have done so, but they ignore us. Many are afraid of reprisals against their children.

A few months later, another of the sisters (G) told us that she had moved her son to another school because the teacher hit him. Furthermore, her daughters' 5th grade teacher was denying her whole class the school breakfasts ostensibly for bad behaviour. G complained to the head teacher and threatened to take the matter to the next level. Fortunately the matter was resolved before this was necessary.

Again, the themes of comparison and differentiation feature. In this case they occur after a transfer occasioned by a geographical move. The ability to differentiate provokes a desire to rectify or improve matters and in the case of one sister, take action, via both school choice and pressure on the system. A further aspect worth noting is the exchange of information, in this case among family members, instilling solidarity in a shared situation.

One final point in this section. Although parents with grounds for comparison do perceive the kind of differentiation that might lead to complaints or action, they do not see such significant differences that make action very common. Respondents tended to see schools as broadly equivalent, whose distinguishing features were their physical endowments and equipment, individual teacher conduct, not teaching quality as such.

In summary, parents have limited grounds for comparison, and find it a risky enterprise to complain too much about perceived shortcomings of the educational service they currently receive, but, according to data presented earlier, parents are ambivalent about educational quality, on the one hand thinking it more or less satisfactory, but fearing also that it may be substandard, especially in international terms and in relation to the big cities, like Guadalajara.

#### FOURTH DIMENSION: PARENTS OPTING OUT

The research question dealt with in this chapter is: why do parents tend not to participate in the education of their children? A simple summary of the previous three sections could be stated as the reverse of this question, namely: why do any parents bother to participate in the education of their children? (given all the discouragements and obstacles).

So far we have concentrated on how the educational services impede parental participation. But in the data presented above, the parents clearly see themselves as responsible for not doing more to support the school, the teachers and their own children with their education. We asked the parents in the group meetings and individually, why they were not more active in these respects. The immediate reply was because they just don't have time due to their multiple commitments in the household and at work. Whilst, as we have seen, this is certainly true, we have also shown that it is a comment that should not be just taken at face value. We have presented a series of institutional factors inhibiting parents making more of an effort. But over and above the schools imperviousness towards their participation parents admit that they should do more for the school and their children. In the primary school parents meeting one parent said: "I know we should do more. We should support the teachers by helping to discipline our children better and making sure they do their homework and concentrate on their lessons in school."

Another mother added to this: "Our role is to teach our children to respect the teachers and each other. We also should make sure the children arrive on time and properly dressed with their books and other utensils."

What is instructive is that these comments that were the most explicit expressions of parents responsibility in this meeting, made no mention of participation in school matters. A discussion did occur about more parents needing to help out with school breakfasts. But over and above these operational matters, neither in this meeting, nor the others, nor in the interviews were substantive educational aspects of participation raised. This confirms Martínez et al's point mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, the parents' admission of falling short in doing what they *did* consider their role is worth pursuing.

The claim of having heavy workloads and little time, confirms with what is known about this as many other, migrant towns in Mexico (Ortiz Gonzalez 1998 *inter alia*). At any one time, more than half of Tizapán is living and working elsewhere. Whilst this has permitted an inflow of remittances to sustain the family and even to support public works and other charitable activities on a modest scale, it also lays a heavy work load on the ones that stay, predominantly the women, the aged and children. Those who remain in the municipality have to distribute both income-earning and domestic work on a household whose main earner is often away for lengthy periods.

Families not benefiting from remittances experience other demands on their time and effort, that of finding work locally that is characteristically low paid (hence outward migration). It is common to find women spending large amounts of time working in the fields, as domestics or in small trade while their children are in school, or looked after by older siblings or grandparents. But older children have their own school commitments, and grandparents may be able to care for children for short periods, but their child-caring has its limits because of failing health, other family obligations and

commitments, for example to the local church. Religious obligations can tie up as much as 5 hours a week of family time with its services, catechism and feasts. Social services, to which between a quarter and a third of all Tizapán families are registered, carry workfare obligations apart from tiresome and lengthy bureaucratic procedures.

What are the consequences for the children and their schooling? As the parents admit, it reduces the time and energy available for monitoring and supporting their children's schooling in its various aspects. The parents clearly feel guilty about this, hence their comments already noted. Two responses to this feeling were identified by three of the educational psychologists working in the area. In the words of one of them:

Nowadays in Tizapán, and elsewhere, it is seen badly if parents punish their children too severely. In one sense this is good, to do away with cruelty, but the bad side is that though the children now have rights, they do not have obligations. Parents don't put limits on them. They have lost authority. Then add to this that the mothers, the ones traditionally with most responsibility for the children, now go out to work, because what the husband earns is insufficient, well then the mothers harbour a sense of guilt towards the children for not attending them, so they spoil them.

Christopher Lasch spoke of a similar phenomenon in different context whose contrast with Tizapán is instructive. In his "The Culture of Narcissism" (1979), he analyses what he saw as a growing trend among the middle class in mainly urban USA. He drew upon authors of the social history of childhood who have studied the long term trend placing childhood at the centre of social life. He situated our contemporary sanctification of childhood with the late 20th century economic trends. The terms of trade for educated women between (increasingly automated) household labour and salaried labour have increasingly favoured middle-class women's replacing their own domestic labour with hired help and developing their careers -- backed up by the feminist movement. But this has placed a burden of guilt on working mothers to emotionally compensate their children for their absence as working mothers. The spectre of middle class children abandoned to the urban nightmare has been emblematically portrayed in the Hollywood film "Home Alone". Lasch shows how doting parents assuage their guilt through a mixture of over-protection, spoiling them with gifts and filling up their free time (and parental absences) with leisure and cultural activities and classes.

If in the US case described, it is middle class upward mobility that drives the recent trends in childhood neglect/overprotection; in rural Mexico it is something more fundamental. This is the pressures on and the fragmentation of the family as a result of economic insecurity and labour out-migration. Parents tend to make themselves scarce when confronted by teachers' demanding funds, in-kind contributions, organizational support in the running of the school, and even sharing the teachers' teaching load through homework, all under the Damocles sward of potential reprisals against their children. They evade these demands, even at the expense of neglecting what they *do* consider their responsibilities towards their children. Parents end up turning their back on the school that in the circumstances seems partly justified by their workloads and their annoyance towards the school.

The points just made in this section complete the enactment of a divorce of convenience. The two parties, parents and teachers have failed to reach an agreement. Each sees the error in the other's behaviour. Conciliation has proved im-



possible because there are no conciliators or arbitrators in Mexican education. Instead the authorities, the administration and the teachers' union, set the rules for all aspects of schooling, including parental participation. The weaker party, the parents, resent this but consider they can do little, so, with a deep sense of failing in their responsibility for their children, they withdraw from the school, agreeing to discharge their educational responsibilities on the teachers during the school day, and the teachers doing the same, through excessive homework for the rest of the time. Like all divorces, the children are the ones that suffer from this broken relationship, this divorce of convenience. A potentially productive, fertile marriage is turned into the educational equivalent of a broken home.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have outlined four stages in our participant research. These correspond to the four levels of increasing complexity of parent attempts to penetrate the schools' operation with their participatory contributions, as stipulated in the official Modernisation Agreement of 1992. However, the absence of mechanisms to check whether this policy had any check and whether parents were rally able to involve themselves in school matters. Our awareness of the parental attempts to do this constitutes the first stage of our research. The second stage took us to our appreciation of teacher resistance to parental intrusions into what they saw as their terrain, something they held to in the face of the bombardment of controls instructions and controls from the educational administration. In the third stage, we learned that parents had never been involved in school matters and that initial attempts to establish dialogues with the school ended up with parental retreat for fear of reprisals against their children. In the fourth stage we came up against the precarious structural, material constraints originating in the household economy discouraged taking on any undue extra efforts beyond immediate family needs such as parental participation in schools. Households are particularly vulnerable in places like Buenavista where families are fragmented through economic migration of some of their members. In these four stages we learned how ineffective the existing parental participation policies are however well intentioned they may be.

There is an old saying in English that goes, "Silent speaks a thousand words". This echoes Thomas Moore's defense against accusations of disloyalty to his king in Peter Shaffer's play, "A Man for All Seasons", that silences may mean many things. In this paper we have examined the silent of parents about their children's schools, something that has been interpreted as apathy or disinterest. There is another quote, of the poet Longfellow, "What can I say better than silence is?" (1825). Sometimes silence is a way of saying something more eloquently than words, especially when the persons addressed ignore us. A mother or father with a complaint faces the monolith of the educational authorities and its teachers whose union is the largest in Latin America, a Goliath that even David would shirk of confronting. The public educational monolith lacks any independent channels for parents to express and resolve their concerns satisfactorily (Aguayo 2010: 244-5).

If the national educational authorities are beyond the reach of the ordinary citizen, at school level teachers have a whole range of stratagems to keep parents at arm length. They range from inflexible and often arbitrary imposition of rules and regulations that protect teachers from having to deal with everyday parents' concerns. For their part, teachers also find themselves constrained by unmanageable and often un-

workable teaching loads, along with a barrage of bureaucratic demands, time consuming and questionable evaluations not to mention the kaffian procedures they have to fulfill and sustain their service conditions. Even where parents dare to cross the line into what teachers consider their professional preserve, it is very unlikely that they could achieve any desire improvements. Because in many cases, teachers know the parents have no alternatives and they have no incentive to respond to parents' demands. In these circumstances, parents turn their back on the school in what we have term "a divorce of convenience". This complicit understanding translates into parents leaving their kids at the school gates consigning them to teachers during the school shift and the teachers returning them to their parents when is over. This consent to mutual avoidance is carried out like any good divorce whereby the children are passed from one side to the other with minimum interaction between the two parties. The teachers are happy to be left alone controlling scholarly matters and the mothers already overburden by family maintenance are more than happy to have as little contact with teacher as possible given the way they are customarily treated.

What we have called participation reticence is the fruit of dysfunctional educational arrangements that militate against parental participation in the school. Something is known to be a cornerstone of educational success. How could we transform this vicious circle into a virtuous one? In our research we only saw one example of successful parental intervention when parents gathered together against an abusive teacher. In other parts of Mexico there more consolidated examples of sustained parental participation. These isolated experiences confirm that it is possible to create a virtual circle to achieve a semblance of what exists in the best of cases such as Finland.

There is a German proverb that says "Silence is fence around wisdom". Silence and reticence to participate is not simply down to parents' apathy or disinterest but originates in the circumstances already described. This speaks volumes even if it is not the most effective action. At international level we have examples that emphasize how indispensable school-community participation is for achieving the best educational results. It is high time Mexico, so obsessed by "reform" at the present time, wised-up the international best practice on this matter.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Aguayo, S. (2010). *Vuelta en U. Guía para entender y reactivar la democracia estanca-da*. México, DF: Taurus, Santillana Ediciones Generales.
- Alducin, E. & Basañez, M. (2006, April). Los valores mexicanos. *Este País*, pp. 62-65. *Diario Oficial de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, December 30, 2007.
- Ezpeleta, J. (2004, June). Innovaciones educativas. Reflexiones sobre los contextos en su implementación. *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa (RMIE)*, 9 (21), 403-424.
- Foster, G. (1965, April). Peasant society and the image of limited good. *American Anthropologist*, 67 (2), 293-315.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Juárez, L. (2011, February). Insatisfacción. *Nexos*. From [www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leera\\_rticulov2print&article=2099277](http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leera_rticulov2print&article=2099277).
- Lasch, Ch. (1979). *Culture of Narcissism*. London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Longfellow (1825). *Monturi Salutamu*.
- Martin, Ch. (2004). *La educación primaria en tiempos de austeridad*. México, Distrito

Federal: Aula XXI, Santillana.

- \_\_\_\_\_. (2007). The reform for EFA in Mexico. In David Baker Alexander W. Weismann (eds.). *Education for all: Global promises, national changes*.
- Martínez, A., Bracho, T. & Martínez, C. (2007). *Los consejos de participación social en la educación y el Programa Escuelas de Calidad: ¿mecanismos sociales para la rendición de cuentas?* CIESAS/Universidad Autónoma de Veracruz.
- Ortiz, M. (2000). ¿Dónde está el porvenir? Las expectativas de los jóvenes hacia el trabajo local, la educación y la migración en *Tizapán el Alto, Jalisco*. Tesis, Departamento de Estudios de Educación, Universidad de Guadalajara.
- Santizo, C. (2010). *Guía para promover la participación social en los procesos de tomas de decisiones de las escuelas*. México, Distrito Federal: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Cuajimalpa (unpublished).
- Schmelkes, S. (1997). *La calidad de la educación primaria. Un estudio de caso*. México, Distrito Federal: SEP-FCE.
- Scott, J. (1985). *Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. University of de Yale.