THE LOCAL AS CLIENT

EDUCATIONAL DECENTRALIZATION AND PARTNERSHIP IN NICARAGUA

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis

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April 24, 2006

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THE FLETCHER SCHOOL

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What has characterized the educational landscape of the developing world perhaps more poignantly than any other trend in recent history is a definitive march towards decentralized school management. A succession of events has unmistakably placed the power of decision-making in the hands of local and regional in-country authorities, replacing in irreversible fashion the bureaucratic and bloated management schemes of yesteryear. Developed and developing world governments have learned to incorporate such a trend into daily operations as they realize the veritable power of local actors to reform educational practice. The decentralization movement, spurred on by a variety of motivating factors, holds serious promise for education systems worldwide. The prospect of empowering schools and surrounding communities to serve as decision-makers and formulators of policy is a powerful one indeed.

Nicaragua serves as the ideal nation upon which to focus an analysis of the decentralization movement. For decades, the state has struggled through perilous, centralized planning of its education sector. In recent years, though, the nation has witnessed a transformation of sorts with respect to educational management. School leaders and local citizens have been targeted as the heirs of the education policy domain. Initiatives aimed at decentralizing educational authority have introduced the possibility of a political power shift from the center to the periphery. Citizens find themselves in a greater position of authority, as school directors and local politicians are scrutinized by community members. Efficiency and accountability represent the desired hallmarks of modern day pedagogical practice.

Implementing such change, though, has not been without its notable challenges. In the developing context, political instability represents an unfortunate reality. Sustainable educational policy becomes difficult to implement, as turnover in governmental administrations prevent long-term strategic approaches from coming to fruition. As well, nations such as Nicaragua struggle to provide the needed resources, financial and otherwise, to meet the demands of a decentralized management scheme. Local leadership capacity must be strengthened if citizen participation is to serve as the paradigm for the future. A gap in the capacity to carry out decentralization reform has arisen across communities.

With these pressing issues in mind, an innovative partnership is offered between local communities and the international organization. Although seemingly opposite with respect to political engagement, the two entities together offer much towards resolving the decentralization divide. Three viable avenues are suggested as a means of uniting the local and the global and improve educational practice both in Nicaragua and throughout the developing context. Global networks of viable information sharing ought to be in place. Local educational challenges need to be legitimized on the world stage. Fundamentally, though, local educational agents, their needs, and best practices must serve as the focus of any educational management reform. It is through the power of these communities, and the parallel support of international organizations, that the global decentralization campaign depends.

CHAPTER I

THE POWER OF THE LOCAL:
THE CASE OF NICARAGUA

"Nicaragua is potentially one of the richest countries in Central America…Yet Nicaraguans today are among the poorest Central Americans and Latin Americans."[1]
– John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker

Introduction

The poignant words of authors John Booth, Christine Wade, and Thomas Walker illuminate the sobering socioeconomic context of a Central American nation whose promise has distinctly outpaced its reality. Not unsurprisingly, a cursory glance at the Nicaraguan educational system reflects a discouraging reality of unfulfilled potential and a marked disparity between the Haves and Have Nots. True to the written word, the pedagogical promise of Nicaragua seemingly matches its regional position; only Haiti is poorer in economic terms throughout the Western Hemisphere.[2] What may appear as an unquestionable history of disappointing pedagogical performance, though, demands a more nuanced assessment. A more insightful investigation of the Nicaraguan educational experience illuminates isolated examples of positive transformation. Although disparate in their location, these pockets of hope reveal that viable change can occur, in some cases, with a mere modicum of provision. Constructing a successful educational model – both in Nicaragua and in the developing world more generally – depends to a large extent upon uniting the experiences of the local arena with a more global infrastructure.

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[1] John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2006), 69.
[2] *Foreign Assistance Priorities for the Western Hemisphere* (accessed April 1, 2006); available from http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/rm/30070.htm.

The concept of the Local is one that has received decent attention in theory particularly during the recent history of Nicaragua, yet there is little evidence of the independence or strength of local areas. The notion of the "Local" refers most readily to those areas of sub-national and, particularly, to sub-municipal educational governance. In the modern day, schools themselves have assumed a larger portion of the governance equation, yet their contributions to seminal knowledge and information structures have been characterized by latent neglect. The central Ministry of Education has proven to be the sole determinant of pedagogical policy in Nicaragua. The work of local districts and their schools has been subsumed under the, "…historically highly centralized administration of education…" typical of Nicaragua in particular and Latin America, as well as the developing world, more generally.[3] Although powerless to affect meaningful change for much of the history of the nation, the Local has notably generated more attention in recent years. Such localization has been made manifest in the trend towards decentralized educational management. Under the guise of this new management paradigm, Nicaraguan schools and the surrounding districts that oversee them assume the responsibility for decision-making control. Theoretically, then, the Local ought to be key actor in the development of the education sector. What has been demonstrated by history, though, is that this has not been the case in the development of the educational sphere. A conceptual reconsideration, therefore, is necessary.

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[3] Wendy Hunter, "Education Policy Reform in Latin America: New Opportunities, Old Constraints," in *Latin American Democracies in the New Global Economy*, Ana Margheritis, ed. (Coral Gables, Florida: North-South Center Press, 2003), 178.

The Power of the Local

Defining the concept of the "Local" holds particular value within the Nicaraguan

context. In recent years, educational actors have increasingly focused on the value of sub-

national systems of governance which have long been neglected.[4] Indeed, educational

management reform has been dominated as of late by support of the most local of

educational actors. This represents a distinct shift in the attitude of old, which was marked

by centralized, bureaucratic education policy decision-making. Despite the notable targeting

of the local area, though, sub-national systems of governance continue to lack the legitimacy

necessary for instilling formative pedagogical change. Calls for stronger capacity of local

officials have increased in recent years, reflecting the reluctance of some education

practitioners to offer a blind faith in decentralized educational management. Theoretically,

the Local – that is, the local school, its director, teachers, parents, and surrounding citizenry –

ought to serve as the primary driver in forming educational policy. As the harbinger of

knowledge about the particular needs of a community, the Local is most well suited to

determine which learning resources ought to be available to students. This call for the

localization of knowledge, according to Fernando Reimers, is characterized by "…research

to insure that local decisions will be correct using the knowledge appropriate for that

circumstance."[5]

The history of educational reform, both in the developed and developing spheres

around the globe, is an account of varied attempts at transforming the process and structure

of student learning. From a focus on increasing classroom access for disadvantaged

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[4] Stephen Denning, "Technical Cooperation and Knowledge Networks" in *Capacity for Development: New Solutions to Old Problems*, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Carlos Lopes and Khalid Malik, eds. (London: Earthscan Publications, Ltd.), 234-235.

[5] Fernando Reimers and Noel McGinn, *Informed Dialogue: Using Research to Shape Education Policy around the World* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 68.

populations to improving the quality of teaching, numerous amendments to the practice of education have been implemented. In most cases, as is evident in the Nicaraguan example, the source of reform has come from the national ministry of education. Through a distinctly top-down fashion, central authorities have long determined the fate of students, imparting policy upon the nation and all of its diverse regions as a whole. This unilateral, uni-dimensional policy approach, however, appears no longer relevant in the modern context. The need for strategic change is not endemic to the Central American nation, but prevails throughout all nations which have sought to improve their overall system of education. One lesson that has been most clearly presented regarding educational management is that the Local ought to carry more weight in the educational policy decision-making process. The bureaucratic practice of the central Ministry of Education cannot adequately attend to the needs of the varied geographies and diverse populations within Nicaragua.

Nicaragua proves the ideal example with which to investigate the Local phenomenon. Various national initiatives have been implemented aimed at devolving educational control. For decades, though, the flow of information regarding educational practice stemmed from policies formed in the capital of Managua and farmed out to sub-national regions. Those who implement such policy change have been asked to do so with little opportunity for formal feedback. Hence, a situation has been created where, as Donald Winkler explains, "Those delivering instruction to children are, in principle, accountable to central decision makers who are not directly accountable to the school's clients: parents and civil society."[6] Implementing a decentralized educational management framework, though, ought to change the landscape radically. Again, Winkler conveys the notion that "When the locus of

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[6] Donald R. Winkler and Jon Herstein, *Information Use and Decentralized Education*, accessed December 5, 2005; available from http://www.equip123.net/docs/e2-Information%20Use%20Paper.pdf.

important decisions is moved to the school or local government, local decision makers and schools, in principle, become directly accountable to their clients."[7] The challenge remaining for Nicaragua, as well as all those whose pedagogical priorities include decentralized governance, is to introduce the Local as the primary "client".

The flow of information in Nicaragua must be re-oriented. In practical terms, this calls for a reorientation of the conventional educational management information system (EMIS) which has put central bureaucracy at the helm. A paradigmatic shift demands that "…the traditional EMIS…be replaced with an educational information system that serves parents as its principal clients, not education ministry planners."[8] This innovative change acknowledges the power of the Local and in some cases, the innovative work that it has done, as a catalyst for change. Throughout Nicaragua, what occurs "on the ground" and "in the trenches" can serve as a source of informational value. In some instances, teachers, school directors, and local communities have rendered educational success in the face of unforgiving economic conditions. With few resources at their disposal, these community leaders have managed to create replicable systems of educational practice that ought to be shared with other regions, both in-country and throughout the world. It would be in the best interest of all educational practitioners to "…improve our understanding of why some sub-national governments do better than others," writes the World Bank's Emanuela di Gropello, "and find effective ways of sharing those 'best practices.'"[9] To a limited extent, Nicaragua has initiated the process of transforming the delivery of quality education. Decentralization

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Emanuela di Gropello, *Education Decentralization and Accountability Relationships in Latin America* (accessed January 30, 2006); available from http://wdsbeta.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/IW3P/IB/2004/12/17/000160016_20041217173134/Rendered/PDF/WPS3453.pdf.

efforts implemented thus far have begun placing parents at the center of decision-making, permitting them to regulate teacher management in various schools.[10] In terms of transcending the educational practice of old, however, much remains.

The Nicaraguan Educational Context: A History of Reform

Author Robert Arnove describes the history of education in Nicaragua as a "contested terrain" where policy has mimicked the ebb and flow of radical political change in the nation.[11] Consistent educational and political reforms represent the few constant trends in Nicaragua, which has borne witness to countless experiences of change. Throughout the most turbulent years of political upheaval and renewal, the classroom has assumed a primary role as the primary target of such contestation. Education became, according to Arnove, "…a battleground of opposing social forces and historical projects: one aimed at setting the country on a socialist path to development; the other, at reintegrating the country into the world capitalist economy."[12] Particularly after the rise of the socialist Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, or FSLN) regime in 1979, education was employed as a social catalyst. National

Map of Nicaragua
Source:
www.infoplease.com/atlas/country/nicaragua.html

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Robert F. Arnove, *Education as Contested Terrain: Nicaragua, 1979-1993* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994).

[12] Ibid., 1.

curriculum designs encouraged the liberation of a citizenry that had witnessed and suffered through inadequate economic and social development.[13]

During this period and the years that followed, pedagogical aims were intended to fulfill overarching political goals. The explicit emphasis on engaged, critical, and participatory citizens during the early 1980s owed to the desire by political leaders to reverse the years of severe underdevelopment that the nation had experienced. The classroom was targeted in particular as a primary vehicle through which the desired social reform could occur. Consequently, this focus on education en masse contributed to the expansion and democratization of the educational system. The outreach to citizens was unprecedented; regions once neglected found themselves participants in an educational programming experiment. Primary, secondary, and tertiary levels all participated in the buildup of student populations. As well, the economic model of the nation, aimed primarily at overcoming decades marked by dependence, prioritized the accumulation of capital. The state was charged with leading the path towards progress and did so through control of the major aspects of the economy.[14] Arnove describes the educational consequences of this state-centered model:

> The educational implications of this new economic model of capital accumulation were an education system that helped overcome the traditional gaps between intellectual and manual work and between school and community and attempted to form a new type of individual who was more predisposed to altruistic and cooperative behavior and more willing to make sacrifices on behalf of the nation.[15]

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[13] Ibid., 2.
[14] Ibid., 1-20.
[15] Ibid., 21.

An analysis of turbulent period of the 1980s reveals that the educational environment moved in lockstep with the Nicaraguan political sphere. The FSLN directed the country towards an overall policy of national survival, in stark contrast from the aims of overall national development. The massive decrease in Ministry of Education (MOE) staff from 37,670 to 30,239 in 1988 alone reflected the need for drastic economic austerity measures on the part of the government.[16] As well, a significant shift in educational management occurred with the beginning of a transformation towards decentralization. Mirroring increased political liberalization within the FSLN leadership, educational content increasingly fell under the control of local and regional areas.[17] Arnove and Torres characterize the educational changes during the Sandinista period of 1979 to 1990 as "…the case of a revolutionary society attempting to use education as a principal means of effecting radical social change and overcoming the historic traits of a 'conditioned state'."[18] This nascent form of devolved educational control, though, would serve as one of the last attempts by the Sandinista regime to influence the educational arena.

The Nicaraguan populace voted in 1990 to replace the FSLN with a fourteen-party coalition directed by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. The new government sought to implement a path that diverged from the previous era of government, as Chamorro advocated for a "facilitative" state apparatus and a plan to incorporate the nation into the world economy. Arnove explains that the pedagogical transformation called for "…socialist-inspired values…to be replaced by values of Christian inspiration."[19] The neo-liberal economic policies drafted by the Chamorro government sought to bring the rampant

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[16] Ibid., 44.
[17] Arnove, 45.
[18] Robert F. Arnove and Carlos A. Torres, "Adult Education and State Policy in Latin America: The Contrasting Cases of Mexico and Nicaragua", *Comparative Education* 31 (1995), 318.
[19] Arnove, 57.

hyperinflation and severe debt under control. As well, the goal of crafting a more efficient, and thus more effective, governmental structure called for a slimming of central control. In sum, political and economic priorities diverged from the previous era of leadership. Nicaraguan education reflected this transition, as evidenced by a description of pedagogy at the opening of the Chamorro era: "We are in the presence of an education project conceived as part of a new national socioeconomic project. Each political system develops its own education project; this one is the project of the government that calls itself 'National Salvation.'"[20]

What these different time periods demonstrate, despite the diverse approaches to political control of the nation, is the common theme that pedagogical practice can be manipulated to serve highly political interests. As well, it tends to reflect the ebb and flow of systemic socioeconomic forces. In the modern day, the nation ascribes to the general principle of neo-liberalism as an overarching guide for its government structure. In alignment with this theory, the education sector has notably adopted a trend towards decentralized, local management, which is explained in further detail within Chapter II. Based loosely upon the 1988 "Law 40", or "Law of the Municipalities" (Ley de Participación Escolar), the foundation for the current municipality structure was formulated. Without explicit reference to the specific functions of municipal governments, the opportunity for sub-national entities to share in the responsibility of central government was created. The constitutional reform of 1995 acknowledged the fundamental role of municipal governance, recognizing as well the weaknesses associated with an overly bureaucratic, centralized government. Few references to particular municipal functions were included in the updated

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[20] Juan Bautista Arríen, "The Transformation of Education: UNO's Political Project", *Envío* 10, no. 10 (September 1991), 27.

constitution. In 1997, Law 40 was overhauled as items such as funding sources for municipalities were clarified. To this day, the duties of these sub-national entities remain ambiguously open. Establishing a legal precedent that advocated for decentralized structures has proven to be the key objective for the Central American government, rather than highlighting the specific tasks associated with more local forms of governance.[21]

Today, the prevailing educational issues faced by Nicaragua reflect the experiences of other Central American nations. One of the prominent areas requiring change is the serious problem associated with access to the classroom for many students. In 2000, Nicaraguan gross primary school enrollment rates totaled 70.9%, while merely 55.8% of secondary school students found themselves in the classroom.[22] Providing access and retention to students has proven most difficult in those areas of severe impoverishment within the nation, where enrollment declines in parallel with the level of income. Additionally, the Nicaraguan context is marked by a financing predicament within the education sector. The dearth of necessary resources has resulted in a situation of dependency upon international aid agencies to provide the appropriate funding.[23]

Given the diversity of its people, Nicaraguan leaders face the particular challenge of providing an equal access to schooling for a disparate population. Indigenous populations have traditionally fallen behind in key educational metrics. Limited learning opportunities, due in part to restricted knowledge of the Spanish language, prevent many rural areas and their indigenous people from experiencing an education of decent quality. As well, the value

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[21] Manuel Ortega Hegg, *Cultura Política, Gobierno Local y Descentralización: Nicaragua* (San Salvador, El Salvador: FLASCO, 2001), 25-28.

[22] Robert F. Arnove, Stephen Franz, Marcela Mollis, and Carlos Alberto Torres, "Education in Latin America", in *Comparative Education. The Dialectic of the Global and the Local*, Robert F. Arnove and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 313-337 and *Latin America and the Caribbean: A Regional Report* (accessed December 11, 2005); available from http://www.iadb.org/sds/doc/edu-104e.pdf, 41-43.

[23] Arnove, Franz, Mollis and Torres, 313.

of learning has been critiqued for several years due to the poor training of school teachers. Owing primarily to the deficient funding situation, little professional development occurs on a regular basis. Recruiting the proper school staff has proven to be a veritable hurdle, as negligible salaries prevent top talent from entering into or remaining within the education profession. Akin to the challenges faced by Central American counterparts, local communities must battle the ubiquitous challenge of teacher absenteeism.[24] Improving the quality of education, therefore, requires attending to several outstanding issues.

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[24] Ibid., and Juan B. Arríen, Miguel de Castilla Urbina and Rafael Lucio Gil, *La Educación en Nicaragua Entre Siglos, Dudas y Esperanzas* (Managua, Nicaragua: UCA – PREAL, 1998), 157.

CHAPTER II

THE *LOCAL* MADE MANIFEST:
EDUCATIONAL DECENTRALIZATION IN NICARAGUA AND BEYOND

"All politics is local."
–Tip O'Neill, former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives

Educational Leadership Par Excellence

Creating a successful educational experience depends upon transcending the debilitating socioeconomic conditions that plague the nation. Despite the hardships that limit both the access to and quality of learning in Nicaragua, though, there are instances of positive pedagogy taking place in various parts of the Central American country. These stories of hope, marked by courageous attempts at overcoming the most debilitating of conditions, ought to be heard. Lessons learned these school leaders provide a viable framework for the future of educational management in Nicaragua and beyond.

Within the context of what Nicaragua classifies as "severe poverty",[25] the Gran Ducado de Luxemburgo primary school exemplifies the best intentions of the decentralization approach. Situated in the outskirts of the capital city in the town of Ticuantepe, school administrators and local citizens refuse to submit to otherwise debilitating socioeconomic conditions. Students and citizens of the local area are provided with the most meaningful of educational experiences. The director of Gran Ducado, Mario Rojas Merlo, works tirelessly to provide every opportunity possible for his students. In addition to the three shifts of students who pass through the halls of the school – the last of which includes local parents seeking to gain the primary school education they never received – Rojas constantly seeks to augment classroom learning with whatever resources are available. Often,

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[25] Mario Rojas Merlo, personal communication, July 11-12, 2005.

the local community is called upon to provide time and support for the mission of the school. Rojas considers it duty as principal to constantly strengthen and update the professional dimension of the teachers.   No less impressive is the transformative work taking place in the Centro Escolar Modelo Monimbó primary school. Like her Gran Ducado school director counterpart, Esmeralda Bremis endeavors to provide her students with significant educational opportunity. In particular, Bremis has targeted parents as the key to pedagogical success. Through regular meetings with these local citizens, the director reinforces classroom messages and petitions school-related support. The parents themselves have pooled their collective resources through formal organization, meeting regularly to discuss effective avenues for school improvement. As well, the group shares its message of parental participation through "knowledge sharing" meeting at neighboring Nicaraguan schools. With an ambitious vision yet little disposable income, this united force discovers creative means to enhance the overall learning experience.[26]

Both schools represent the positive potential of decentralized management. The school directors see it as their mission to provide every possible opportunity for students, from arranging countless professional development sessions for teachers to rounding up local support for school initiatives to authoring grants for support of relevant vocational education programs. In recent years, under the guise of a shift towards decentralized control of education, the work of both Rojas and Bremis has received ever more attention. In a practical way, they are called upon to shoulder the effort of making decentralization manifest in their home communities. Given precarious financing situations, they and other school directors throughout the nation, will likely be called upon to do more with less. In an ideal state of decentralization, pedagogical concerns ranging from curriculum to teacher

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[26] Esmeralda Bremis, personal communication, July 5-7, 2005.

development will be determined by these local agents. Seeking support from the local

community, the transition to decentralization theoretically includes more profound

participation from parents and concerned local citizens. What is evident, though, is that such

theory does not automatically translate into a perfect reality. The need for resources – most

notably, the capacity to guide schools through competent leadership – is more vital than ever.

Nicaraguan Attempts at Decentralized Educational Management

The work in both Monimbó and Ticuantepe offer a glimpse of the decentralization

movement in Nicaragua, which has for several years represented the foundation of

educational reform in the nation. Relative to other nations in the developing world, the

Central American state has made significant progress in terms of localizing educational

control. In the wake of the autocratic governmental regime of the 1970s and 1980s,

Nicaragua, in similar fashion to several other Latin American nations, sought to reverse the

unidirectional government strategy of years past. Decentralized educational management

schemes were therefore implemented as a means of improving national administrative

services and restoring the political will of the general populace.[27] The Nicaraguan

decentralization experience began with a pilot test-phase in 1993-1994, when the nation

experimented with the notion of school autonomy and increased educational decision-making

for a limited number of municipalities. This was followed by a decision to expand the test

cases further in 1995 by including hundreds of primary and secondary schools throughout the

nation. The third major phase commenced in 1996 with the objective of further supporting

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[27] E. Mark Hansen, "Educational Decentralization: Issues and Challenges," (accessed December 5, 2005); available from http://www.thedialogue.org/publications/preal/preal9en.html.

the move towards school autonomy by highlighting examples of school quality achieved through decentralized management.[28]

The pursuit of a decentralized framework for the educational sector stems from a variety of objectives, as evidenced by the table in Appendix A. Most prominently, the nation sought to establish more democratic roots after years of autocratic political control. The more popular participation within the education sphere would theoretically represent a positive departure from the political turbulence that Nicaraguans had encountered.[29] As well, the move towards more local control was targeted as an avenue of reducing conflict at the level of the central ministry by placing power in the hands of communities and schools themselves. School councils would assume control over the hiring and firing of school administrators and teachers, engendering a stronger role in the overall school-related decision-making processes.[30] Such a move would also serve to reinforce the legitimacy of the state by transferring some of its responsibility to external actors. Decentralization also translates into democratization, made manifest through the creation of institutions populated by municipal representatives and parents of students. Philosophically, the decentralized approach reflected an attempt at restoring the "client power"[31] of those local agents who have a vested interest in educational outcome. More practically, the nation also viewed the transition towards decentralized management as a manner of redistributing financial responsibility to municipal levels, thus reducing the burden of the state apparatus.[32]

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[28] Castillo A., Melba, *La Descentralización de los Servicios de Educación en Nicaragua* (Santiago, Chile: Naciones Unidas Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 1998), 32.

[29] E. Mark Hansen, *Educational Decentralization around the Pacific Rim*, (accessed January 30, 2006); available from http://www1.worldbank.org/education/globaleducationreform/pdf/Hanson%20Editorial.pdf.

[30] Ibid.

[31] di Gropello.

[32] E. Mark Hansen, "Educational Decentralization: Issues and Challenges."

The shift towards decentralized educational control finds its roots in numerous other motivating forces. Local entities are considered to be harbingers of the most pertinent knowledge relating to their surrounding communities. According to the "asymmetric information argument", "It is generally assumed that services will be provided more efficiently by sub-national units because they have a better knowledge of local conditions, characteristics and preferences than the central actor…"[33] Decentralized communities are therefore considered the most competent to serve as primary educational managers given the direct connection to their constituents. Furthermore, moving away from centralized control increases the possibility of leadership marked by accountability. With unhindered access to school directors and sub-national leaders, community members may theoretically press for answers to crucial pedagogical concerns. Within the Nicaraguan framework, displayed in Appendix B, accountability extends from the school itself, which represents the center of the decentralization process. The "compact" relationship between the center and the school and the "client power" relationship between the local community and the school together represent the key components of accountability.[34]

Achieving a workable decentralization model in Nicaragua has not been without its challenges. In particular, the teachers' union historically has represented a formidable opponent to education reform. As a new governmental administration assumed leadership in the early 1990s, the representation of teachers was consolidated under a single union, the National Association of Nicaraguan Educators (Asociación Nacional de Educadores Nicaragüenses, or ANDEN). ANDEN stood steadfastly opposed to the suggestions of autonomous school operations, resulting in large-scale strikes and demonstrations by the

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[33] di Gropello.
[34] Ibid. and Castillo A., 30-31.

union.[35] Also, the attempts by Nicaraguan officials to decentralize control represent a

relatively unprecedented approach to educational development. With little historical

precedent to guide the developing nation, Nicaragua engaged in the practice of "action

learning".[36] The nation has adapted to decentralized educational management through

experimentation with decentralization, rather than through the guidance and lessons of

comparable national examples. The program reveals as well the attempt by the Nicaraguan

government to affect change immediately by building a program without a strong legal

foundation. The nation has uniquely embarked on implementation of deconcentrated

management without constructing a specific legal apparatus, instead focusing on legislation

that ambiguously refers to decentralization topics.[37] Such a tactic reflects the Nicaraguan

desire to move forward on the decentralization front as profoundly as possible without the aid

of ornate, sustainable strategies. Rather than advance after conducting preliminary studies,

the Ministry of Education deemed the decentralization campaign to serve as priority action,

choosing instead to gain insight as the country moved forward.[38]

As noted, the transition towards decentralization within Nicaragua has been made

manifest through two primary programs. Most prominently, the Autonomous Schools

Program (Centros Autónomos Modelo, or CAM)[39] represents an innovative approach to

strengthen the decision-making ability of schools. Beginning in 1993, the government

instituted a process of strengthening primary and secondary school autonomy through viable

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[35] Merilee S. Grindle, *Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 79, 155.

[36] E. Mark Hansen, "Educational Decentralization: Issues and Challenges."

[37] Alec Ian Gershberg, "Education 'Decentralization' in Mexico and Nicaragua: Legislative versus Ministry-Led Reform Strategies," *Comparative Education* 35, no. 1 (1999): 73-77 and Ortega Hegg.

[38] Ibid.; Alec Ian Goldberg and Michael Jacobs, *Decentralization and Recentralization: Lessons from the Social Sectors in Mexico and Nicaragua* (accessed January 30, 2006); available from http://www.iadb.org/res/publications/pubfiles/pubWP-379.pdf.

[39] Castillo, 32.

community participation. Administrative responsibilities such as the management of teachers, maintenance of schools, and all fiscal duties were transferred to groups of elected community members. Consisting of parents, teachers, and school directors, these councils have even assumed the role of providing pedagogical guidance in some instances. Through no coincidence, the Autonomous Schools Program began in the wake of a national civil war and was deemed an attempt at appeasing a population demanding a sense of pacifism. The power of the local client, therefore, is expressed through the dynamic participation of council members, including school officials and resident citizens.[40]

A more limited decentralization strategy, The Municipalization of Education Program (La Municipalización de la Educación), was also implemented prior to the Autonomous Schools Program. Embarking on a more conservative version of deconcentrated management, the Municipalization Program aims to transfer power from the central Ministry of Education to municipal governments rather than the schools themselves. Similar to its successor program and the independent councils that govern educational centers, a Municipal Education Council (Consejo Educativo Municipal, or CEM) encompasses a variety of pedagogy-related actors, including the mayor, municipal officials, an MOE delegate, teachers, parents, and representatives from both the religious community and the private sector.[41] By virtue of the CEM, participant schools fall under the direction of a broad-based group of educational leaders and avoid the centralized control of years past. As well, through the operation of both the Autonomous Schools and Municipalization Programs, the nation may increase its decentralized capacity while also determining the extent to which that decentralization ought to be institutionalized.

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[40] di Gropello.
[41] Goldberg and Jacobs.

The notion of political participation in Nicaragua is one that is clearly reflected in the movement towards decentralizing educational control. In recent years, meta-level forces have encouraged political power sharing both in Nicaragua and in other Central American populations. Although the transition towards democracy has not been a smooth one, citizen participation has notably increased over time.[42] The decentralization movement represents democracy made manifest. Local-level community participation marks this newest trend, as citizens and government officials work more in concert with one another. Central American nations have experimented with these concepts in myriad ways, as demonstrated by Appendix C, which outlines the recent move towards citizen control of the education process. Relative to its regional counterparts, Nicaragua has displayed notable progress in shifting away from state control of education. Instituting a program of community-based management appears in line with the general transition the nation has undergone in recent years. Following the election of the Chamorro government in 1990, the nation has embarked on a distinctly neo-liberal path. Neo-liberal prescriptions during that era included:

- Reduction in public spending, including education
- Reduction in the number of state employees
- Establishment of free trade zones
- Attempts at reducing the external debt[43]

The transition towards decentralization in school management is embedded in a larger movement both in Nicaragua and throughout the Central American region.

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[42] John A. Booth and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 148-150.

[43] Harry E. Vanden, "The Effects of Globalization and Neoliberalism in Central America: Nicaragua and Costa Rica," in *Neoliberalism and Neopanamericanism*, Gary Prevost and Carlos Oliva Campos, eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 164-165.

Decentralization as a Paradigm

In recent years, one of the prevailing trends within the educational field throughout the world has been the growing tendency towards decentralized management. Most notably in the developing context, and in similar fashion to the Nicaraguan case, the governmental ministries of yesteryear, marked by bureaucracy and inefficiency, are slowly and somewhat assuredly being replaced by a wave of innovative management systems. Local governments, schools, and elected community councils now find themselves assuming pedagogical responsibility, as well as financial concerns, teacher management, and ensuring accountability for educational quality. Promoted for years as a markedly positive move in the direction of educational improvement, decentralization and local control is today seen by many nations as the *only* way to properly manage the educational apparatus. This tendency towards decentralized management appears, at least in the present context, as an irreversible trend. Nations have clearly decided to embark upon the path towards deconcentrated management schemes and with it, abandon the ineffective strategies of centralized control.

Strengthening the case for this educational paradigm has been an overarching, system-level set of forces that encourage decentralized practice. The predominance of neo-liberal thought and its attendant focus on market mechanisms reflects current thought aimed at making social sectors more efficient and effective. More generally, the umbrella of globalization has reformed education systems in notable ways. A globalized economy demands a greater adherence to the forces of privatization, which has been targeted as a means of ensuring quality and flexibility in the modern economy. The education sector seeks new resources for its operations amidst a policy environment hostile to the expansion of the social sector. Most centrally, information and knowledge are viewed as essential for

competitive survival. The education sector must produce talented individuals who can

effectively respond to the dynamics of an economy that is truly worldwide in nature. With

an increased emphasis on the notion of "productivity," decentralized educational control

serves as a logical extension of such thought. Martin Carnoy explains this modern concept:

> If the local educational authorities see themselves, and are seen, as responsible
> for educational delivery, reformers reason, educational quality will
> improve…Decentralization is therefore cast as a reform that increases
> productivity in education and hence contributes significantly to improving the
> quality of a nation's human resources…[44]

Further, Carnoy proposes that a "…well-organized public administration will…be the key to

educational improvement in the globalized economy."[45] With the recent trend towards

consolidation of communities and their constituents, the opportunity for open critique and

accountable performance is notably enhanced.

Another significant trend emerging from the globalization movement has been the

gradual withdrawal of state involvement. Through an investigation of the consequences of

the new world of educational management, authors M. Fernanda Astiz, Alexander Wiseman,

and David Baker argue that the "center" can no longer hold against the power of

globalization.[46] Most significantly, the trend towards economic globalization and the

amplification of a worldwide market has distinctly altered the shape of social systems around

the globe. "Concomitant with economic globalization," the authors write, "a wave of

conservative thought spread worldwide in the 1980s and 1990s, yielding neoliberalism as a

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[44] Martin Carnoy, *Globalization and Educational Reform: What Planners Need to Know* (Paris: UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, 1999), 53.

[45] Ibid., 83.

[46] M. Fernanda Astiz, Alexander W. Wiseman and David P. Baker, "Slouching towards Decentralization: Consequences of Globalization for Curricular Control in National Education Systems," *Comparative Education Review* 46, no. 1 (2002): 66.

'hegemonic policy discourse.'"[47] Beginning in the 1970s, in fact, global debates countered

the "Keynesian consensus" that had earlier supported the centralized government model.[48]

The state, which was largely beholden to a national welfare framework, underwent reform in

the wake of globalized tendencies. Advocates of "…a neoliberal model promoting state

withdrawal, privatization, and localization" logically tabbed deconcentrated management of

the education field as a necessary development. The shift away from bureaucracy and

centralized state control, a tendency in place for two decades,[49] has offered a precursor to the

educational decentralization movement, as the preoccupation with local control continues to

grow.

The systemic international trends that have ushered in an innovative approach to

Nicaraguan educational management have made their mark throughout both developing and

developed contexts. Similar to the Central American nation, governments may opt for

localized management schemes for a variety of reasons. Politically, the shift towards

decentralization reflects a distinct shift towards democratic, civil society participation. The

underlying concept of decentralization – that is, to shift decision-making power from a

central governmental authority to those local agents who have a direct, vested interest in the

educational outcome of a particular community – likely boosts the perceived popularity of a

governmental administration. More practically, states may also opt for the practical,

administrative offerings associated with decentralization. Concerns with the fiscal or

resource burden of maintaining competent education systems may inspire the transition

towards local control. Whether for practical or idealistic motivation, sub-national or local

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[47] Ibid., 69.
[48] N. McGinn and T. Welsh, *Decentralization of Education: Why, When, What and How?* (Paris: UNESCO, 1999), 27.
[49] Noel McGinn and Susan Street, "Educational Decentralization: Weak State or Strong State," *Comparative Education Review* 30, no. 4 (November 1986): 471-490.

areas are seen to possess the intrinsic knowledge and skill to offer insight into how resources ought to be properly managed. As well, the argument for efficient control of education is often cited as a reason for localizing educational systems. Avoiding the bureaucratic efforts of the national government, decentralization theory states that consistent and creative solutions may be implemented by knowledgeable, local actors. Such a concern is of particular importance within those states that witness near-constant turnover in administration, and where educational policy is consistently revised on a regular basis.[50]

The process of shifting educational control to sub-national levels in Nicaragua and countless other nations falls within the framework of territorial decentralization, or a redistribution of control among the various tiers of government. This transfer of decision-making power from one level to the next typically aligns with a three-pronged development pattern. At the general level, a nation embarks upon deconcentration when a central authority establishes offices in various parts of the nation and staffs them with governmental officers. A more embedded process of decentralizing control occurs through delegation, which promotes a stronger degree of decision-making power at the local level. In reality, though, much of the authority to determine policy remains with the central government. At the most extreme end of the territorial decentralization spectrum, or devolution, the legitimate decision-making power veritably moves to local authorities who are free of seeking central authority approval. It is the stated goal of the national administration to move the Nicaraguan education system as close as possible to the devolved end of the management

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[50] Donald Winkler, *Understanding Decentralization* (accessed December 5, 2005); available from http://www.equip123.net/docs/e2-Understanding%20Decentralization.pdf; Mark Bray, "Control of Education: Issues and Tensions in Centralization and Decentralization", in *Comparative Education. The Dialectic of the Global and the Local*, Robert F. Arnove and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowmand and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 204-228.; and "Decentralization in Education," in *EQ Review: Educational Quality in the Developing World* (accessed December 5, 2005); available from http://www.equip123.net/EQ_Review/3_4.pdf; McGinn and Welsh, 22-30.

spectrum. [51] Ultimately, it is the parents and local community members that ought to drive the process of educational management and school control.[52]

Since the inception of the decentralization movement, Nicaraguan efforts have aimed at devolving responsibility to community councils, particularly through the Autonomous Schools Program, whereby the schools – and the local councils that manage them – emerge as the vibrant actors in the process. The Municipalization Program has endeavored to share educational control sub-national levels, yet the distance between these regional authorities and the schools themselves remains considerable. The Nicaragua government, as well as all nations that desire to employ a decentralization strategy, seek to empower the school as a change agent. This predominance of educational entities has been developed most notably by Brian Caldwell, who lists school-based management as an ideal on the decentralization spectrum. Working in concert with a non-intrusive central government apparatus, school-based management calls for, "…the systematic decentralization to the school level of authority and responsibility to make decisions on significant matters related to school operations within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards, and accountability."[53] The primacy of the school appears as well in analysis of international aid agency preferences. Such transnational organizations have sought to fund the decentralization experience and support the leadership initiative of schools, as a recent United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural (UNESCO) study reveals.[54]

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[51] Bray, 205-206.
[52] Arríen, Urbina and Gil, 142.
[53] Brian Caldwell, *School-based Management* (Paris: The International Institute for Educational Management; Brussels: The International Academy of Education, 2005), 1.
[54] Brian Caldwell, *A Theory of Learning in the Self-Managing School* (accessed November 5, 2005); available from http://www.cybertext.net.au/tct/context/caldwell.htm.

Additionally, Jaap Scheerens identifies the central importance of schools as social actors. In the contemporary world, these institutions assume a diverse set of roles and purposes. Included among these multifarious goals, argues Scheerens, is the preparation of students in a "productive" sense – both in terms of intrinsic, academic learning and in the formation of employable skill – and in "responding to external stakeholders", including communities and local or municipal governments.[55] Over time, the perceived function of the school continues to transcend the social value of previous generations, as citizens demand more effective institutions. In addition, the work of the school and its inclusion in a larger social dynamic becomes evident. Although schools are increasingly promoted to the forefront of pedagogical management, their operation does not occur in isolation. Even the most ardent decentralization proponents recognize the essential value of involvement and network-building with a larger social apparatus. Supporting the role of the school as a social promoter requires interaction with integral political, legal, and economic institutions. Thus, the central government, although seen by some educational reformers as detrimental to pedagogical change, continues to influence educational outcome. Caldwell suggests that a central ministry of education does not dissolve as a consequence of decentralization, but instead ought to assume a role of general policy formation, learning-standards creation, and evaluation.[56] Other educational reformers propose that in parallel with a decentralization strategy, "…central authorities should concentrate on setting goals, generating resources to meet special needs, and monitoring performance."[57]

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[55] Jap Scheerens, *Improving School Effectiveness* (Paris: UNESCO; International Institute for Educational Planning, 2000), 23-32.

[56] Caldwell, *School-based Management*, 1-5.

[57] Mark Bray and M.V. Mukundan, *Management and Governance for EFA: Is Decentralisation Really the Answer?* (accessed January 19, 2006); available from http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file_download.php/5ac6f3ae42ac5be976b6d1bc870708e1Management+and+governance+for+EFA.+Is+decentralization+really+the+answer.doc.

The proper role of decentralized agents and their interaction with a centralized apparatus continues to serve as a key topic of debate within the educational reform arena. Discussion about the topic suggests that "…the usual either/or categories of centralization or decentralization used to describe patterns of curricular governance become less accurate, and even misleading…"[58] Instead, the extent to which any central education ministry involves itself in the life of a school ought to be measured on a relative scale and be contextualized according to the particular needs of a state. Richard Elmore shares this sentiment, advocating that in the world of political and administrative decision-making, there are no absolute values.[59] Programs of centralization or decentralization inevitably include some point between the two extremes. Investigation of the "best practices" associated with cases of decentralized educational management highlight the need for the state to assume an innovative role in order to generate some level of success.[60] The goal of a decentralization campaign, therefore, is to create the proper balance between the local and national elements of educational management and more broadly, understand the role of the school within a larger social and political environment. The increased emphasis on the school level does not signal that other vital elements of society are ignored. On the contrary, the decentralization approach is a comprehensive one.

The discussion of centralization versus decentralization has surfaced as a critical aspect of the strategies suggested for the accomplishment of the Education for All (EFA) framework. Established through the 1990 World Conference on Education for All and

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[58] Astiz, Wiseman and Baker, "Slouching Towards Decentralization: Consequences of Globalization for Curricular Control in National Education Systems," *Comparative Education Review* 46, no. 1 (2002): 73.

[59] Richard F. Elmore, "School Decentralization: Who Gains? Who Loses?" in *Decentralization and School Improvement*, Jane Hannaway and Martin Carnoy, eds. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993), 33-54.

[60] A. de Grauwe, C. Luggaz, D. Baldé, C. Diakhate, D. Dougnon, M. Moustapha, and D. Odushina, "Does Decentralization Lead to School Improvement? Findings and Lessons from Research in West Africa," *Journal of Education for International Development* 1, no.1 (2005): 1-15.

strengthened through the 2000 World Education Forum, EFA establishes minimum goals associated with education quality and access to schooling.[61] Current scholarship suggests that a strategy based upon localized management of education offers serious potential for meeting those goals concerning quality of schooling. Evaluation of the EFA goals and progress thus far also underscores the need for discerning the proper centralization / decentralization framework for a state. Different contexts – both in the developing and the developed world – call for a blend between the two ends of the educational management spectrum.[62] In recent years, though, reform has occurred through the promotion of the Local.

Regardless of the degree to which decentralization is offered as a strategic solution to pressing educational ills, there is near-universal recognition of the need to transform an educational system – developing or otherwise – into one that is led by empowered schools and their local communities.

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[61] "'Education for All' in Development," *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2003/4* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2003), 29; "From Targets to Reform: National Strategies in Action," *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2003/4* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2003), 209-216.
[62] Astiz, Wiseman and Baker, 66-67, 71-73; Bray and Mukundun.

CHAPTER III

ASSESSING THE VALUE OF DECENTRALIZATION:
DISCERNING THE PATH TO SUCCESS

"Ministries of education around the world have attempted to decentralize delivery of education services, but frequently decentralization has not been implemented because real decision-making authority, capacity, or funds have not supported the espoused goals to decentralize."[63]
– Fernando Reimers and Noel McGinn

For Better or Worse?

Improvement in learning achievement represents one of the underlying goals of decentralized educational management. Discerning whether an innovative leadership scheme truly transforms the manner in which students are educated, and thus meeting its intended purpose, has proven relatively difficult to discern. Some cursory analysis suggests that in fact localized control of pedagogical matters has enhanced educational experiences throughout the developing world. Other studies, however, are notably more hesitant in ascribing success to sub-national school control. Whether the experience of communities throughout both Nicaragua and other developing contexts has proven to be favorable, though, has not hampered decentralization attempts. States such as the Central American one continue to push educational control to the local arena for the multitude of reasons cited earlier. What has become more clearly apparent within the decentralization field is that states will continue to face potential obstacles in improving the management of their schools over the coming years.

Within the Nicaraguan context, decentralization serves as a priority strategy for the Ministry of Education, evidencing a collective national faith in this innovative approach.

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[63] Reimers and McGinn, 48.

Recent scholarship reveals that the recent focus on local control requires further effort to realize a complete implementation. National education plans call for more profound participation by schools and communities in the decision-making process.[64] The public perception of decentralization efforts reflects such conviction that local agents ought to prevail. When polled about the merits of decentralization, 74.6% of Nicaraguans expressed that they are either "Very Much in Agreement" (43.5%) or "In Agreement" (31.1%) with the efforts by the state to devolve control.[65]

Current research aimed at analyzing the value of sub-national educational management remains ambiguous in offering any definitive assessment. Some contexts have demonstrated notable pedagogical performance as a result of transferring educational control to schools. In Nicaragua, preliminary studies revealed that math scores improved within autonomous schools.[66] Attendance rates and test scores markedly rose within a test case of independently operated Indonesian schools.[67] Although not exclusively attributed to decentralized management, a survey conducted in Argentina found that the combination of school autonomy and parental participation rendered favorable outcomes in the classroom. Such findings offer rich prospects for the decentralization strategy employed by various states:

> First, as decentralization moves responsibility from the center toward the province/state level and/or toward local governments, the results should be directly relevant if this raises autonomy and participation in schools. Second, if the results are interpreted to represent a more general effect of moving

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[64] Arríen, Urbana and Gil, 135-142.

[65] Ortega Hegg, 123.

[66] *Time to Act: A Report Card on Education in Central America and the Dominican Republic* (accessed November 1, 2005); available from www.thedialogue.org/publications/preal/TimetoAct.pdf, 14.

[67] Caldwell, *School-based Management*, 9-10.

decision-making *toward* users and the local community, the results have relevance even if little happens to autonomy and participation in schools.[68]

Additionally, assessment of decentralized practice in Benin, Mali, Guinea, and Senegal highlights the innovation that has occurred within this West African region as a result of localizing school control. The devolution of sub-national authority, increase in the responsibility of municipal education offices, autonomous resource management on the part of schools, and proliferation in community participation have collectively improved the educational experience in the region. A notable limitation to the study, though, concerns the lack of learning-related data.[69] Although significant qualitative progress as a consequence of local control emerges through the analysis, little quantitative data supports the theory that decentralized management and learning improvement are intimately linked. Conversely, though, there is little data available to suggest otherwise.

Management of the educational apparatus will continue to be investigated – and utilized – as a feasible solution to outstanding educational issues. Brian Caldwell notes in particular the increased focus on research and analysis concerning experiments with localized school management.[70] Learning outcomes, namely subject matter test scores, are targeted as the means of evaluating self-management schemes. Recent literature centered on autonomous school leadership has sought to connect the notion of local control and improved learning, yet little definitive data appears available. Such research does reveal, though, that decentralization campaigns appear to be the model of choice, at least for the foreseeable

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[68] Gunnar S. Eskeland and Deon Filmer, *Autonomy, Participation, and Learning in Argentine Schools: Findings and Their Implications for Decentralization* (Washington, D.C.: Development Research Group, World Bank, 2002).

[69] Grauwe, Lugaz, Baldé, Diakhate, Dougnon, Moustapha, and Odushina, 4-14.

[70] Brian Caldwell, *A Theory of Learning in the Self-Managed School.*

future. Examples abound throughout the world of nations whose intention is to provide

schools and surrounding communities with increasing decision-making power.[71]

The Decentralization Divide

In order to build a successful program of devolved organization within the education

sector, states must overcome a number of potentially debilitating factors; such hurdles are

markedly more pronounced within the developing context. As states struggle to provide the

necessary resources to properly implement a decentralization plan, a veritable

"decentralization divide" arises. This situation occurs when certain communities or actors

must carry out educational reform with only a modicum of available resources while others

are well prepared to render change. As well, factors such as a lack of political will to reduce

the role of the state in educational governance or of promoting the role of civil society

contribute to a distinct lack of decentralization progress. Decentralization undertakings on

the part of governments have often lacked the clear vision and pragmatic plan to

institutionalize reform. Central American states have failed to discern a viable end for the

decentralization process; lacking a tangible goal hinders any assessment of progress.

Included in this critique is the realization that the "proper" roles of various actors – from the

central ministry of education to the schools themselves – is not explicitly determined. The

result, therefore, is incomplete participation on the part of decentralization participants who

lack a united focus in their approach. Reimers and McGinn attribute the definitive lack of

decentralization progress in the modern day to a weak foundation at its inception: "…the

strong pressures in favor of decentralization during the 1970s and 1980s were inspired more

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[71] Donald L. Winkler, *Educational Decentralization in Latin America: The Effects on the Quality of Schooling* (accessed April 4, 2006); available from http://www.equip123.net/archive/e2-001.pdf.

by hopes and ideology than by rigorous inquiry and analysis."[72] The authors "conclude" that

localized educational management does not necessarily improve or weaken the quality of

learning delivery, "…in part because it does not automatically lead to changes in the

organization of the school, and therefore does not lead to changes in the teaching process."[73]

Often, the failure to realize a viable decentralization scheme relates to the gap

between what is required by an autonomously operating school and the supply of physical

and human resources available to support such institutions. A key requirement of

implementing an approach to devolved educational control is that schools and surrounding

communities possess the necessary capacity to shoulder greater management responsibility.

In general, local areas have demonstrated that they are not properly outfitted to assume

increased leadership and therefore be adequately accountable for educational outcome.

These "…deficiencies in control, oversight, training and technical assistance to schools" [74]

create situations of severe capacity gaps. The lack of resources and the harmful effects have

proven evident within autonomous schools of poorer Nicaraguan regions, where initiatives to

provide schools with greater control have been undermined by the capacity divide:

"…because teachers' wages are low, the financial resources managed by the schools have

been used to create economic incentives for teachers, which can amount to up to 80% of

what teachers take home."[75] Clearly, the decision by a state to localize school management

does not guarantee a positive pedagogical experience.

The sudden transition towards increased local management thrusts education actors

into new and different roles from those they assumed in the past. Finding competent

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[72] Reimers and McGinn, 12.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.

leadership, though, poses a significant challenge. It is not unusual for a nation such as

Nicaragua to face a dearth of educational managers, as many school administrators, for

example, never underwent adequate leadership preparation. Most school directors and

supervisors were trained to serve as teachers, with little emphasis on managing curriculum

and budgets. As a result, "…the capacities of school boards to govern schools, or school

directors to manage schools, or teachers and others to work collectively to reform the school

are often weak and need development."[76] Traditionally, school administrators ascended into

such positions out of seniority or through political connections rather than having survived

rigorous examination or assessment. Preparing teachers and other local participants has been

largely neglected or underestimated.[77] The adoption of decentralization signifies a new

group of responsibilities must be assumed by all those involved in the new management

system. In some cases, the projected roles and responsibilities of the various education

players remain largely unclear. Questions arise regarding the function of the state, school

directors, teachers, and local officials. A lucid strategic approach must therefore precede any

shift towards decentralization. As well, in order to build the proper level of competency to

exist, a proper change management program must be an inherent part of any conversion to

local control.

The disparity between what is necessary for successful devolution and what schools

have available for such a process includes the mandates issued by central governmental

authorities. Indeed, a notable discrepancy exists between what policymakers advocate for in

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[76] "Decentralization in Education", 1.
[77] Reimers and McGinn, 50-51.

terms of decentralizing their national contexts and the actual conduct of decentralized

practice.[78] Juan Prawda provides a set of precursors to decentralization success:

- Full political commitment from national, regional, provincial, municipal, and local leaders

- A model addressing the issue of which educational functions and responsibilities could be more efficiently and effectively delivered at the central level, smaller decentralized government units, and/or the private sector, and explicitly defining the degree of accountability of the different participants

- An implementation strategy and timetable

- Clear operational manuals and procedures

- Continuous training for the skill levels to be performed at the central and decentralized units of government

- Relevant performance indicators to be continuously monitored through a management information system by policy makers and senior government officials

- Adequate financial, human, and physical resources to sustain the process

The listing reveals that most states, particularly in the developing world, lack these requisite

dimensions of the decentralization formula. In particular, strategic designs of properly

deconcentrated education approaches, focused on both short- and long-term trajectories,

appear glaringly absent from many contexts. With the limited historical experiences of other

states at their disposal and a general lack of critical resources, a nation may be ill equipped to

implement a decentralization plan.

Financial resources, or the lack thereof, pose a significant obstacle for many local

communities. First, the local councils which typically assume control of school management

face the burden of cleverly managing local budgets. Absent a fiduciary specialist,

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[78] Juan Prawda, "Educational Decentralization in Latin America: Lessons Learned," *International Journal of Educational Development* 13 no. 3 (1993): 253-264.

communities face formidable challenges in balancing available funds. Secondly, the financial base with which communities are expected to render change is typically rather negligible.[79] Often, a motivation for governmental decentralization includes the lack of money at the central ministry level. These rather insignificant budgets are then divided among local areas, with which there is little possibility of completing the decentralization vision. Local leaders find themselves faced with an expanded mandate, including a greater decision-making burden, yet with fewer resources to support that strategy. Consequently, nations undergoing educational reform must turn to the assistance of international donors or carry out their decentralization reforms.

Additionally, the problem of assessment stands out as an issue requiring resolution. Without a proper decentralization end goal in sight, it is difficult to determine the focus of any program of localized control. Conventional wisdom aligns educational outcome with decentralization success; improved test scores therefore mark progress in communities. When such advances are not registered within a local area, though, there may be difficulty in isolating the particular elements of devolved control that led to disappointing results. Also, the timing of educational evaluation requires a multi-year process in order to accurately determine whether an innovative experiment such as deconcentration was ultimately successful. By the time that the determinants of success or failure are adequately captured and the proper adjustments are instituted, several more years may have passed.

A transition towards local school management presupposes an active participation by civil society. Community residents must willingly and effectively take part in the localizing

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[79] *Time to Act: A Report Card on Education in Central America and the Dominican Republic*, 14.

process in order for decentralization to take hold.[80] In general, a vested public provides the

necessary critique of the education system. Within the decentralization framework, civil

society inherits the duty of guardians of the education process. Those locales that face social

constraints such as apathetic civic participation face a profound challenge in assuming

control of the education sector. Communities that seek to decentralize must seek creative

inroads to mobilize parents and local citizens. These individuals serve on local education

councils and generally fulfill the role of pressing education officials for producing the highest

quality pedagogical experience. The process of devolution is one that cannot in every

situation be expected to develop organically; it must be managed and motivated by

convincing local officials who can mobilize communal support.

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[80] Khalid Malik and Swarnim Waglé, "Civic Engagement and Development: Introducing the Issues," in *Capacity for Development: New Solutions to Old Problems*, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Carlos Lopes, and Khalid Malik, eds. (Sterling, Virginia: Earthscan Publications, Ltd., 2002), 85-99.

CHAPTER IV

PARTNERS IN EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION IN THE DECENTRALIZATION ERA

*"The process really needs to be turned inside out, with the first priority being encouragement
for recipients to initiate the process. This starts from a deep understanding of local
knowledge and practice – assessing the capabilities and potential of individuals, institutions
and the society as a whole, and working out ways to build on these incrementally."*
– Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Carlos Lopes, Khalid Malik[81]

Responding to the Decentralization Divide

Successful implementation of decentralization programs in geographies such as

Nicaragua reveals the notion that progress is disparately distributed, as achievement is

restricted to the most resource-rich regions. On occasion, the anomalous examples of

communities that persevere despite a resource dearth appear, as evidenced by the exemplars

presented in Monimbó and Ticuantepe. In general, though, as developing nations such as

Nicaragua move closer towards fully devolving control to schools and local communities, the

prospects for generating successful pedagogical management have been tempered by the

reality of the omnipresent capacity divide. Local areas characterized by ample access to a

resourced citizenry stand in sharp contrast to those communities that lag behind in

infrastructure, financial base, or overall leadership capacity. At this critical crossroads

between decentralized control and the need for proper resources, the call for an innovative

approach appears more urgent than ever.

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[81] Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Carlos Lopes, and Khalid Makik, "Institutional Innovations for Capacity Development," in *Capacity for Development: New Solutions to Old Problems*, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Carlos Lopes, and Khalid Malik, eds. (Sterling, VA: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 2002), 13.

Research on the decentralization paradigm has sought to provide a credible response to the prevailing decentralization divide. McGinn and Welsh, for example, highlight two decisive factors in rendering educational change:

> Two kinds of conditions must be met for implementation of any reform, including decentralization: there must be political support for the proposed changes; and those involved in the reform must be capable of carrying it out. Most decentralization reforms have failed to reach the objectives set for them, because they did not meet adequately one or both of the two conditions.[82]

Other studies center the reasoning for the decentralization divide on exogenous pressures. International agencies have been charged with contributing to an incomplete devolution process in Africa. Jeanne Moulton writes that educational ministries "…have been pressured by the international community to raise enrollments quickly. This has led to putting priority on building schools and supplying inputs, at the expense of the longer, slower process of strengthening management systems."[83]

McGinn and Welsh provide a four-track approach to strengthening the base of decentralized educational control. Those domains which must be soundly structured include the legal arena, where there ought to exist an explicit provision within the national constitutional, complete with the "…power, authorities, and accountability…" bestowed upon local and national governments.[84] Secondly, the authors recommend that bureaucratic concerns are accounted for, including all rules in connection with educational governance. As educational authority moves from one level to another, "…laws and regulations must be negotiated among political parties, parliamentarians, civil service commissioners, particular

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[82] McGinn and Welsh, 76.
[83] Jeanne Moulton, *Capacity Building for the Improvement of the Quality of Basic Education in Africa* (accessed December 5, 2005); available from http://www.adeanet.org/publications_biennale/docs/background/implamentation/capacitybuildingmouleng.pdf.
[84] McGinn and Welsh, 85.

ministries, trade unions and professional associations."[85] Thirdly, McGinn and Welsh

propose that the civic domain ought to serve as an area of focus, where in particular an

assessment of the central ministry human resource capacity should occur. National

governments would be well served, therefore, by carefully delving into the available resource

pool and determining the extent to which they are capable of advocating for and

implementing a decentralization strategy. Finally, the authors emphasize the crucial role of

civil society. A litany of activities are suggested to strengthen the notion of "civic capacity",

which is measured by "…the degree to which the citizens participate in governance from

local to national levels, their electoral participation, and the density-number, integration and

co-operation of their non-government sponsored civic associations."[86] Among the initiatives

suggested are the promotion of basic organizational and communications skills within

communities and the strengthening of political participation processes.[87]

Within Nicaragua, various proposals have been suggested as means towards

accomplishing decentralization objectives. Besides the omnipresent financing dilemma,

societal suggestions are offered. Juan Bautista Arríen proposes that the notion of citizenship

must be strengthened so that national education concerns are acknowledged as a priority –

and responsibility – of the entire population. Political willingness, both on the part of

Nicaraguans and civic institutions, represents another critical element of educational success.

In addition, Arríen argues that teacher training ought to serve as a higher priority for the

government. The value of education must be promoted to a greater extent as a multi-sector

and inter-sector concern, given its significance in promoting decent health, a competitive

labor market, and a flourishing civil society. Further, Arríen notes that a flexible education

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[85] Ibid., 88.
[86] Ibid., 91.
[87] Ibid.

plan ought to be in place that seeks cooperative international support, both in the form of financing and technical assistance.[88]

Solutions to the capacity gap have been offered from other regions of the world that have struggled to localize educational control. In Pakistan, for example, the push for devolved school management has been in place for less than a decade, yet the nation has thus far generated lessons about the most successful means of governing the education arena. Not unsurprisingly, a clear outline of the anticipated tasks of all actors involved in devolved management contributes to a successful educational experience. As well, closely supervised training sessions aimed at qualified, vetted candidates has proven to be another contributing factor in generating sub-national success.[89] Additionally, nations surveyed in the West African context provide examples of best practices at work. Those countries that completely transferred decision-making power to local communities with the support of municipal governments witnessed marked improvement. As well, an accountability framework has proven to be an important component to the outcome of a decentralization campaign.[90] Such lessons represent a multitude of improvements to the decentralization process that have been gathered over the last decades.

A decentralization strategy is aimed at achieving a fully devolved system of educational management whereby schools and surrounding communities serve as participant decision-makers. Schools, therefore, ought to serve the interests of their constituents in the most effective manner possible, seeking to consistently enhance the educational experience.

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[88] Arríen, *Innovar la Educación*, 102-105.

[89] David Watson, *Capacity Building for Decentralised Education: Service Delivery in Ethiopia and Pakistan* (accessed December 5, 2005); available from http://www.ecdpm.org/Web_ECDPM/Web/Content/Content.nsf/80ba021853007405c1256c790053145c/c27405 5054a40741c1257058002d6443?OpenDocument.

[90] Grauwe, Lugaz, Baldé, Diakhate, Dougnon, Moustapha, and Odushina, 4-7.

Such ongoing commitment to pedagogical improvement would categorize innovative local

schools as veritable learning organizations, where teachers and directors alike engage in

continuous professional development. Brian Caldwell terms this form of organizational

management "…a 'new professionalism' in education that is research-based, data-oriented,

team-focused, and outcomes-driven."[91] The author suggests that institutions such as

universities could serve as supporting partners in the drive to bestow primary and secondary

schools with the capacity that they require.[92]

Other literature presents the school as learning entity as an ultimate outcome of

decentralization. Jeanne Moulton shares the aspirational concept of such progressive schools

in Africa, stating that these educational entities must be responsive and prepared to adapt to

dynamic environments:

> In the learning-organization model, the school director and school
> management committee are empowered by increased authority and funding,
> and the school becomes more responsible to the community for educating its
> children. It promotes participative decision-making and encourages teachers
> to become more autonomous in implementing the curriculum. In spite of the
> continuing concern with the entire education system as a grand mechanism for
> delivering inputs, the shared vision of a school as a 'point of delivery' is
> giving way to one of a more 'self-managed center' that controls its inputs and
> outcomes.[93]

Furthermore, Moulton points out this innovative thinking associated with ongoing

development of schools is logical since the very purpose of such entities centers on the

encouragement of learning.[94] McGinn and Welsh also praise "the market strategy" if indeed

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[91] Caldwell, *School-based Management*, 18.
[92] Ibid., 19.
[93] Moulton, 21-22.
[94] Ibid., 22.

the creation of "centres of excellence" represents the ultimate goal of societies.[95] Donald Winkler identifies the characteristics of high-performing schools and points out that leadership and staff ought to be singularly focused on student learning. They must demonstrate a "…sustained commitment to quality improvement…",[96] upholding a basic tenet in the learning organization framework.

Attributed primarily as a spillover of the private sector into the development arena,[97] the notion of a learning organization serves as an ideal for schools in Nicaragua. In a contemporary society that prizes the value of knowledge, any institution that can imbue a culture of constant learning ought to be well positioned, states the learning organization theory. Besides focusing on educational delivery to students, Nicaraguan schools have sought to impart the value of information on school staff, calling upon teachers and principals to serve as learners themselves. The boldest Nicaraguan attempts most clearly evidence themselves by means of the Autonomous Schools Program. In stark contrast to the centralized management trend of decades past, the nation envisages its autonomous schools to serve as vibrant change agents. As well, such schools ought to carry the nation into the next century of learning by cleverly building off of past experience and institutionalizing lessons learned. In a nation as resource-deprived as Nicaragua, though, implementing such transformative change has proven to be a serious challenge. The installation of such an ambitious program represents merely part of the solution; the strengthening of human capacity emerges as a primary objective.

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[95] McGinn and Welsh, 95.

[96] Donald R. Winkler, *Educational Decentralization in Latin America: The Effects on the Quality of Schooling*, 20.

[97] Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Carlos Lopes, and Khalid Makik, "Institutional Innovations for Capacity Development", in *Capacity for Development: New Solutions to Old Problems*, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Carlos Lopes, and Khalid Malik, eds. (Sterling, VA: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 2002), 247-270.

Building the Case for the International Organization

In considering a viable solution, or group of solutions, to the critical educational management issues facing a nation such as Nicaragua, external actors often emerge as the logical support system. Recognizing that resolution of the existing capacity gap requires some form of exogenous assistance, the challenge remains to build a collaborative approach with an organization that will work in concert with the Nicaraguan educational system. As well, the changing landscape of the modern economy and its attendant demands upon individuals increase the pressure to locate an equipped partner organization. Often, the likely candidates to serve as development partners include local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that may prefer a community-driven, local approach to its work. A projected vision of educational development in Africa suggests that the state itself must play a prominent role. A careful assessment of the capacity divide reveals, though, that an even more inclusive equation is necessary for school success. In place of the traditional NGO or the historically preferred state level support, another candidate presents itself: *the international organization*.

The emergence of the capacity divide, particularly in recent years, has created a situation where the conventional educational actors – that is, both the central government and the schools themselves – have seen their traditional responsibilities reformulated. In concert with decentralization theory, a central ministry of education ought to embrace a new role aimed at evaluation and monitoring. Absent its policymaking function, or at least with a reduced decision-making purpose, a national government would be well served to adopt a position more focused on assessment of newly decentralized schools.[98] As well, given that the most pressing concern for states focuses on capacity, central ministries ought to "…create

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[98] Moulton, 24.

the capacity for change in the system, and ensure that it is flexible and adaptable enough to learn constantly and implement effectively."[99] Others argue that the state and its ability to formulate policy ought to remain a focus for developing world governments. The centralized capacity of a government, marked by an ability to implement a nationally consistent education policy, represents an ideal path for the state. Carnoy offers that there exists, at least partially, national traits to education policies. Despite the transition towards decentralization in many parts of the world, little has substantially changed in terms of educational management.[100] The tension between centralization and decentralization advocates will likely continue, yet new role for the state appears inevitable.

Just as the central ministry has received notable attention, so, too, has the suggested involvement of non-governmental organizations. The new educational landscape includes the elevated importance of NGOs as adept educational leadership actors. Given their ability to perform on a local level, the non-governmental agencies would serve as likely candidates to promote community development and encourage a role of prominence on the part of schools within local areas.[101] As well, a specific sub-group of NGOs, or universities, could justifiably assume greater responsibility. Targeted by various authors, institutions of higher education have an essential role to play in furthering research on the innovative forms of building capacity. Universities could also promote the formation of leadership ability by playing host to innovative training centers whose target audience includes school teachers and administrators.[102] An obvious shortcoming in contemplating non-governmental organizations as providers of educational guidance is the financial limitations that such

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[99] Ibid.
[100] Carnoy.
[101] Moulton, 23-24.
[102] Ibid., 23 and Caldwell, *School-Based Management*, 18-19.

entities face. Akin to the state itself, there exists a dearth of appropriate resources to fund the capacity buildup required by the modern day educational landscape.[103] Indeed, then, a new actor must be considered.

Upon first glance, the international organization may not appear as the idealcandidate to assist in a localized education scheme. Enmeshed in situations of pressing geopolitical importance and focused on promoting cooperation among states, institutions of global governance seemingly share little in common with the concerns of Nicaraguan schools. A careful analysis of the imperatives of local communities, though, reveals that if properly targeted, international organizations could indeed serve as viable partners with sub-national locales. Alongside one another, the global reach of transnational institutions offers promising development potential for the local arena. Positing that international organizations and local schools ought to serve as colleagues in educational change represents only part of the development equation. Constructing a formidable relationship between the two requires an understanding of what a global governance institution truly offers for the educational arena and how such potential advantages could be leveraged to assist local schools.

In some respects, the educational landscape has already begun the process of internationalizing its presence. Recent decades have shown that institutions of international reach have increasingly played a larger role in shaping the educational experience. International organizations (IOs), or intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), represent those "…organizations whose members include at least three states, that have activities in several states, and whose members are held together by a formal intergovernmental agreement."[104] As the definition implies, much of that international organization has tended to focus on the

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[103] Carnoy, 53-54.
[104] Margaret P. Karns and Karen A. Mingst, *International Organizations: The Politics and Processes of Global Governance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2004), 7.

inter-state level of leadership. Coordination at this higher level of leadership tends to consist of behavior focused on the establishment of norms, providing opportunities for joint decision-making, or supervising previously-established rules. As well, regional organizations have joined the fold of institutions exerting influence over the educational arena. Similarly operating at the state level, these regional bodies assume much the same function yet with a specific geographic focus.[105]

The enlargement of global influence in the educational sphere, particularly in recent decades, has occurred through a variety of ways. Development assistance, either as monetary aid or technical knowledge, represents principal means of support offered by international organizations; in some instances, that assistance has targeted decentralization campaigns. As well, international organizations have endeavored to leave an imprint through information sharing and reporting on the progress of states. Gathering state representatives together for regional or global conferences and seeking multilateral cooperation represent other common activities. Through a multitude of practices, international organizations often affect national education policies and priorities.[106] Much of that influence, though, tends to focus on interaction among those at the top of governmental ladders rather than at the local levels. In order for such multilateral coordination to have political traction, that interaction merits serious reconsideration. The power of the international organization offers meaningful promise serves to benefit the Local, yet a truer partnership – that is as decidedly influential on an international level as much as it is on a sub-national plane – needs to be forged.

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[105] Joel Samoff, "Institutionalizing International Influence," in *Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local*, Robert F. Arnove and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 63-69.

[106] Ibid. and Karns and Mingst, 8.

The Notion of Partnership

The concept of partnership is a curious one and deserves close analysis. Employing a number of concepts in its definition, a partnership according to Human Resources and Social Development Canada represents "…a relationship where two or more parties, having compatible goals, form an agreement to do something together."[107] As well, it has come to signify "…truly working together, sharing intellectual and financial resources…", according to the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP).[108] UNFIP, which delves into the realm of public-private partnerships, highlights the benefits associated with leveraging the advantages of many different sectors in a unified goal.[109] Each party, or sector, offers something unique to the collective whole, enriching possible solutions for all participants. At the core of the concept, then, there are at least four salient characteristics: collective authority, a joint investment of resources, mutually beneficial results, and shared risked, responsibility and accountability.[110] The potential benefits to partnering are numerous. The opportunity for collective gain can be enhanced through an alliance. The participation of multiple entities reduces the risk to any one individual or group and reduces the possibility of accomplishing a particular goal. A partnership could include a union of parties that may have otherwise not participated. Also, the combined effort of several partners can provide solutions not envisioned or viable by a single body.[111]

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[107] Flo Frank and Anne Smith, *The Partnership Handbook* (Hull, Quebec: Human Resources Development Canada, 2000), 5. The mission of the Human Resources and Social Development Canada department is "…to improve the standard of living and the quality of life of all Canadians by promoting a highly skilled and mobile workforce as well as an efficient and inclusive labour market." *Human Resources and Social Development* (accessed April 5, 2006); available from http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/home.shtml.

[108] Amir A. Dossal, "UNFIP: Partnership Beyond Borders" from *UN Chronicle Online Edition* (accessed April 5, 2006); available from http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2004/issue1/0104p6.asp.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Frank and Smith, 5.

[111] Ibid., 7.

Partnerships can take on various forms, ranging from consultative or advisory relationships to fully collaborative affiliations.[112] In the case of consultation, there is little authentic partnering at work, as one party typically provides the other with seminal information or services (although a consultative relationship could also result in the generation of ideas). Collaboration inherently involves sharing "…resources, risks and decision-making."[113] A partnership could also take the form of a middle ground approach through an operational relationship, where a strategic direction is established and then one partner leads its implementation. An attractive partnering between the international organization and the local arena would include collaborative action, whereby both parties pledge their united support. An operational effort, however, appears more practical, as the agendas of each party differ significantly. At a minimum, the instructive lessons of history profess that the international organization and schools / communities both have a vested interest in avoiding any "partnership" based upon dependency.

In contrast to the potential offerings of well functioning partnerships, numerous potential dangers exist when uniting various groups. A mismatch in the mission or goal of a project or program can provide serious difficulties. One or more partners may lack the necessary commitment to sustain a relationship.   Furthermore, a partnership could be marked by a significant power difference between the involved parties.[114] A relative disparity in what participants bring to any relationship can clearly shape an unstable arrangement. Achieving collective goals becomes a notably more difficult task in the face of such discrepancy in available budget, comparative influence, or political will.

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[112] Ibid., 8.
[113] Ibid., 8.
[114] Ibid.

Despite a relative power imbalance between the international organization and the local arena, a union remains possible. A successful partnership that aims to build the capacity of actors relies upon a number of key elements. Discerning a united mission upon which both parties agree is of utmost importance. As well, a strategic approach must be considered and include the purpose of the relationship as well as the roles and responsibilities of the actors involved. A learning component ought to be an inherent aspect of operations. Both parties should seek to collectively learn from past experiences. Flexibility, therefore, represents another critical characteristic. As partners journey together toward the future, new and innovative action may be implemented as lessons are gathered from evaluation and assessment of joint activity.[115] Dossal offers that multinational issues can be resolved through the presence of cooperation and mutual respect.[116] Such mutuality provides a precarious situation, though, as an innate political and financial imbalance exists between the multilateral organization and the local domain. Recognition of inequality or the "construction" of a more balanced playing field, therefore, needs to serve as a precursor to collective action.

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[115] "Towards Partnership in Organizational Capacity Development," from Evaluating Capacity Development: Experiences from Research and Development Organizations around the World (accessed April 2, 2006); available from http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-43625-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html.
[116] Dossal.

CHAPTER V

THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION AS LOCAL PARTNER:
AVENUES FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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*"We want them to **accompany** us."*[117]
– Mario Rojas Merlo, Nicaraguan primary school director,
referring to a desired partnership with international organizations

Avenues for Change

A partnership between the international organization and local schools in a context such as Nicaragua could likely include a variety of avenues in order to affect meaningful change. Most fundamentally, an ideal partnership would combine the collective power of an organization whose reach is truly transnational with the particular insight of the local school and community. Such a relationship would transcend the boundaries of support and focus instead on sustainability. In order to instill a sense of long-term development, a prudent goal includes the aforementioned ideal of building schools as learning organizations. An innovative learning organization is one that "…can continually respond to its changing environment by trying new approaches and adapting its functions and structures."[118] As mentioned, these entities engage in a process of endless self-improvement, seeking to learn from past experiences and continually improve upon future operations. Within this ongoing learning framework, a culture of ongoing quality enhancement is firmly instilled in its operation.

A projected vision of schools as learning organization, at least from an American and European perspective, transcends the notion of decentralization. In addition to the increased accountability measures characteristic of devolved institutions, the learning organization

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[117] Rojas Merlo.
[118] Moulton, v.

willingly takes risks and dynamically responds to a changing environment.[119] Instituting a

culture of continuous process improvement into the educational system itself represents a

vital step in improving the quality of education, particularly in those countries struggling to

provide a rudimentary educational experience. Given the unpredictability of political

administrations, educational initiatives may fluidly change hands before any meaningful

progress can occur. Encouraging a learning organization culture within schools, though,

contributes to a more enduring version of innovation and serves as a buffer against drastic

political change. A further impetus for promoting the learning organization model concerns

the tender subject of financing. The critical funding necessary for implementing reform is

not guaranteed within any particular locale. In some instances, the amount available to

schools for educational reform may diminish or disappear altogether. Schools find

themselves faced with an omnipresent pressure to inject creative approaches to educational

change, often with only a modicum of financing at their disposal.

The international organization emerges, then, as an institution well-equipped to aim

schools not merely in the direction of independent, decentralized management but also

towards becoming sustained learning institutions as well. The capacity for individuals and

institutions at the local level appears in greater need than ever. In light of these pressing

needs, three notable avenues are presented as the most salient in which the international

organization can contribute to and strengthen potential partnership with the Local.

Localization

As evidenced by the case of both Ticuantepe and Monimbó, Nicaragua has rendered

several positive experiences with respect to the work done within its schools. School

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[119] Ibid., 21-22.

directors and supporting communities have discovered creative means of delivering to their students transformative educational opportunities. In both communities and in several other success stories around the globe, examples abound of creative educational engineering. Entrepreneurial individuals determine imaginative ways of enhancing the quality of learning for students. This type of change, driven decidedly from the ground up, represents a potentially powerful force within the education arena.

As international organizations seek viable ways to partner with schools and communities, a primary recommendation includes localizing their work to the greatest extent possible. The concept of localization embodies a number of ideas. Most fundamentally, the focus of these transnational institutions ought to be oriented to the Local as the client. The conventional focus of international organizations naturally centers on inter*state* relations. Shifting attention to the local arena may prove a significant challenge for such multinational organizations, yet the push towards decentralization demands such a reform. Given the effort to devolve the management of education, policy formed at the central level carries less traction in the modern day. Considerations of local challenges and capacities ought to be a primary concern, while latitude to implement such policy must be inherent in its creation. So, too, must the international organization adhere to this newfound focus participation by local agents. Reform recommendations generated by international organizations will carry weight to the extent that schools and communities themselves have been dutifully engaged in the education policy process.

Fundamentally, then, the process of localization signifies a call for a reorientation of the international organization. Information gathering at the global level often assumes the national level as the most appropriate source of data. For the international organization,

though, this means that information devices need to be as "grounded" as possible and seek information from a variety of local sources. The international organization provides an opportunity for increased dialogue space from a number of local actors. Employing communication infrastructure with cross-border contact, the potential for conversation – driven by the power of what takes place at the local level – can be notably enhanced through the international organization. Creating meaningful education policy, therefore, acknowledges a goal offered by Fernando Reimers and Noel McGinn, where "…stakeholders…reach a negotiated but informed dialogue."[120] When taking into account the multitude of policy possibilities, then, the advice of Reimers and McGinn again carries weight: "…the consideration of alternatives should take place…in the real world where concrete persons and groups express…multiple interests."[121]

Fundamentally, the international organization can facilitate a more poignant and participative conversation among the numerous actors involved in the education process by realigning the process. Acknowledging and communicating with the various stakeholders whose vested interest focuses on educational quality and whose experience lends credence to their knowledge carries weight in the decentralization era. Solutions to pedagogical issues may already exist within the collective memory of communities who have overcome obstacles. The challenge, then, is to draw these examples of positive social catalysts out of the community and "deliver" them to their proper recipients. The international organization offers a platform to develop that locally-generated knowledge and restore a focus on the local agent as the rightful client.

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[120] Reimers and McGinn, 26.
[121] Ibid., 27.

Logistics

A fundamental approach to realizing the learning organizations concept is to construct a viable network of pertinent information. A second avenue by which international organizations and local schools can increase the effectiveness of their relationship is through the power of knowledge sharing and delivery. Literature on the information and communication technologies (ICT) revolution has surged in recent years, owing to countless innovative approaches in data sharing. Just as use of the Internet has been forecast as a means of improving educational access worldwide, ICT use is targeted as a powerful tool in sharing information *about* educational practice with teachers and administrators across the globe. Knowledge management has proven to be a theme of utmost significance in the contemporary world. Beyond its use in the private sector, ICT have proliferated in the public and non-profit arenas; information sharing represents a vital prerequisite for institutional survival.

Within the educational domain, the value of information continues to be acknowledged as a required component of success. Whether at the intra-school or interstate level, networks encourage a necessary form of collaboration. The emphasis on building capacity has targeted such information networks as a means towards modernization. Professional development of teachers and administrators and capacity building more generally constitute a recent focus on improving educational quality. School needs now include regular training focused on pedagogical practice for teachers and lessons in planning and strategic leadership for administrators. Lessons are delivered from noteworthy examples within the education sector and are borrowed as well from practices of private organizations. As a result, a "new professionalism" has arisen, focused on education that is "…research-

based, data-oriented, and outcomes-driven."[122] The ultimate goal of this information-sharing

framework is offered by Brian Caldwell:

> This [knowledge management] refers to building the intellectual capital of the school, and involve the creation, dissemination and utilisation of professional knowledge that takes account of a rapidly expanding knowledge base, and the need for access to that base in a timely and easily understandable manner.[123]

Akin to other industries driven by constant learning, the education sector has focused its

attention on improving everyday pedagogical practice. Given the very purpose of schools as

learning institutions, improving knowledge within and between them ought to be an inherent

part of their operation.[124] David Hopkins explains this vital link: "It is impossible to detach

the improvement of the ways in which students learn within schools from the ways in which

schools themselves develop as learning organizations."[125]

The incorporation of ICT into the educational sphere, acknowledged more accurately

as the aforementioned education management information system (EMIS), has focused on

both inter-school and international dimensions. In general, consensus support exists for

developing fully the capabilities of knowledge management, as technology has been targeted

as a determinant of improving educational quality. Further, the inclusion of ICT in school

operations has been further legitimized by means of worldwide decentralization campaigns.

With devolved educational authority now the norm, EMIS platforms represent the means by

which pedagogical "best practices" and "lessons learned" can be shared with other

educational actors, both nationally and around the world. Exemplar models of successful

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[122] Caldwell, *School-based Management*, 18.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.
[125] D. Hopkins, "Understanding Networks for Innovation in Policy and Practice," in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Networks of Innovation: Towards New Models for Managing Schools and Systems. Education and Skills* (Paris: OECD, 2003).

teaching and management constitute much of what is targeted through the use of ICT. Networked schools or classrooms take advantage of the experiences of others while distributing their own versions of best practices.[126] Theoretically, then, information would be available to at least a variety of participants in the education sector. Principals and policy planners would incorporate and customize what has been achieved in other settings into their own locales.

The posting and use of data signifies an attempt at sustainable informational exchange. A long-term solution to educational ills carries particular significance in the modern day, as political administrations often lack the continuity to realize meaningful reform. In a survey conducted of twenty-two developing and developed nations around the world, the average tenure of an education minister was found to last less than 2.5 years,[127] while several ministers last less than a single year in their position.[128] Efforts to imbue change are often thwarted by regular turnover in political administration. Networks of information, however, offer a means of collecting and storing educational capital, both for the present and the future.

Naturally, implementing a practical EMIS framework is not without its challenges. The very infrastructure necessary for schools and states to participate is absent in many contexts. As well, the training of school officials and teachers serves as a missing component. The notion of a network operated by an international organization has raised concern. Because knowledge management would likely occur through an institution whose headquarters are located in the developed world, questions are raised over the true value of shared data for developing nations. Joel Samoff presents the potential conundrum:

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[126] *Information and Communication Technologies in Schools: A Handbook for Teachers or How ICT Can Create New, Open Learning Environments* (Paris: UNESCO, 2005).

[127] Javier Corrales, *The Politics of Education Reform: Bolstering the Supply and Demand; Overcoming Institutional Blocks* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1999), 10.

[128] Reimers and McGinn, 52.

> What is deemed valid and legitimate information (termed "knowledge") will become increasingly centralized in the North. Information that is collected in the South will be shaped and framed by its interpreters, that is, those who create and manage the development knowledge databases and information systems….The centralization of the determination of what is knowledge entrenches the role of the elite education and research institutions in the world, nearly all located in the most affluent countries.[129]

Further criticism centers on the clients involved in the educational information exchange. EMIS focuses on collecting information from and delivering information to higher levels of policy and governance, with little reach extended to the local arena. Doing so ignores a critical population that ought to be more fully involved in the informational exchange.[130]

Despite these challenges, there are notable examples where ICT use has excelled in promoting a transformation of educational quality. Global learning networks (GLN) have been utilized to connect students throughout the world, opening up possibilities of bridging educational gaps. Where access to classroom learning may be hampered, GLN have been tabbed as a viable solution.[131] The technology employed through these networks holds promise for the exchange of ideas among teachers and administrators. Such technology could be leveraged and utilized by international organizations as a means of building connections with and among schools. Nicaragua has begun taking measures aimed at constructing such networks, yet much work remains. In recent years, the call for intra-national systems of information sharing and evaluation of school performance has been

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[129] Samoff, 69.
[130] Winkler and Herstein.
[131] "Global Learning Networks: Creating Communities of Learners Globally and Locally," *Context* 21, no. 146 (April/May 2001): 1-20.

raised.[132] Participation by international organizations could extend such a system to regions within a country or conceivably to other decentralizing and developing nations worldwide.

The challenge remains, though, to reform the information sharing framework so that the most pertinent actors – including the local level – are united. Two exemplary institutions highlight the information disconnect. EURYDICE represents the "information network on education in Europe,"[133] providing insight into education initiatives in each country. The expressed intent of the program, though, is on the policymakers at the national level. Information is shared, therefore, among policy "elites". As well, the Caribbean Network of Educational Innovation for Development (CARNEID), made possible through UNESCO, seeks to "advance educational innovation for development through networking among educational institutions and personnel in the Caribbean."[134] Although ambitious in its projected goals, CARNEID remains underutilized with little or no new information posted in recent years. As well, the discussion aims at uniting the upper echelon of policy decision-makers.

Harkening the words of Donald Winkler, a systemic reform is needed. The conventional EMIS, Winkler writes, "…has focused almost exclusively on gathering information at the local level to inform decisions at the national level and almost no effort has been made to inform clients about their schools."[135] The international organization could enhance informational exchange by strengthening the voice of local agents, "allowing" them to participate in the transnational discussion and liberating them from their positions as silent

[132] Juan Bautista Arríen, *Innovar la Eduacíon* (Managua, Nicaragua: IDEUCA, 2001), 218-219.
[133] *EURYDICE: The Information Network on Education in Europe* (accessed February 15, 2006); available from http://www.eurydice.org/accueil_menu/en/frameset_menu.html.
[134] *Caribbean Network of Educational Innovation for Development (CARNEID)* (accessed February 15, 2006); available from http://www.unesco.org/ext/field/carneid/.
[135] Winkler and Herstein, 1.

recipients of educational policy. Building viable networks that encourage such local contributions signify a necessary means of strengthening school practice and creating veritable learning organizations.

Legitimacy

Thirdly, the work of the Local and the Global must carry with it an inherent focus on strengthening the message of education in-country and around the world. A significant advantage offered by the international organization lies in its ability to promote agendas on a global stage, akin to the numerous international conferences convened over outstanding educational issues.[136] The demand for greater attention on educational management reform appears as a two-tiered process. Representatives to international organizations represent a crucial part of promoting improved educational quality. Convincing these principals of the importance of education holds little promise unless national leaders implement suggested educational change. International organizations, therefore, may seek partnership with local NGOs through a networking fashion so as to provide "traction" to education agenda items discussed at multinational levels. Indirectly, civil pressure would theoretically focus on national governments, ensuring that proposed educational change ultimately occurs. Evidence of such coordinated practice has revealed itself thus far within the relief arena, as the Microsoft Corporation has pledged to support the coordination of humanitarian organizations work in an effort to improve institutional effectiveness.[137]

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[136] Collette Chabbot, *Constructing Education for Development: International Organizations and Education for All* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 136-161.
[137] Stephanie Strom, "Grants Given by Microsoft for Relief Aid," *New York Times*, February 22, 2006, 15.

Legitimizing educational reform worldwide requires commitment from all nations, a process for which the international organization is ideally suited. Promoting the legitimacy of education on the international stage, though, presents a serious challenge. Within the international system, there are indeed imbalances in political power. "There are actors more powerful than others, activities with a greater impact than others, identities more influential than others, and relations more prominent than others", writes Jean-Marc Coiceaud.[138] The inherent rank order of states within transnational bodies tends to over the long term promote certain agendas, while others receive little formal consideration. As well, Coiceaud highlights the notion that, "…the stamina of diehard actors, activities, identities, and relations may be positive factors…[yet] they can also be a source of pathology, an obstacle to the redistribution of power sometimes required for international dynamism or justice."[139] Promoting educational priorities and the necessary multilateral support needed to render effective action involves overcoming the traditional stranglehold on the global agenda.

The process of engendering support, though, is aided by at least one notable advantage: the modern conception of the value of learning. The demands of the global economy dictate that the classroom experience and knowledge more generally is of utmost importance.[140] Convincing nations of the need for support of the education arena and particularly, that of management reform, ought to be aided by the changing perception of knowledge. The message conveyed by such organizations ought to focus explicitly on the Local, as these sub-national agents lack authentic recognition. Schools and communities should serve as the focus of educational efforts, and through networks and other means, they

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[138] Jean-Marc Coiceaud, "Conclusion: International Organizations, the Evolution of International Politics, and Legitimacy," in *The Legitimacy of International Organizations*, Jean-Marc Coiceaud and Veijo Heiskanen, eds. (New York: United Nations University Press, 2001).

[139] Ibid., 535.

[140] Carnoy, 14-15.

ought to be supported in their drive towards independent management. Doing so runs somewhat contrary to the modern conception of how and with whom education-related knowledge is communicated. It is necessary, though, if meaningful change is to occur.

A Mode of Conclusion

In Nicaragua and beyond, the decentralization movement appears somewhat incomplete. Resource disparities are rampant, making full realization of localized control a desired goal. Leadership talent appears as a premium. For these and many other reasons, the international organization provides a partnership solution, raising the possibility that local communities can inherit the burden of educational leadership.

At the core of the required systemic change is a re-conceptualization of the Local. If decentralized practice is to take hold, then schools and citizenry must be empowered to assume management control. The focus of information networks or global discussion ought to target what occurs in communities throughout both Nicaragua and the developing world context. There is much to be learned from those actors for whom educational development is a daily focus. There is even more to be learned from their worldwide counterparts. These collective experiences offer the potential to radically reconfigure the quality of learning. Work remains in operationalizing the very notion of the Local. Vigorous effort must be dedicated to formulating a strategic framework through which the international organization, school-related actors, and other participants can operate in concert with one another. Indicators of achievement, whether focused on the pedagogical or political domains, need to be determined. Fundamentally, though, the focus ought to remain on reconfiguring the unit of analysis. The filter through which all effort must be examined is the degree to which local schools and communities are empowered.

The prospect remains that educational decentralization offers serious promise for improving school management and consequently, the quality of learning. In order to translate such potential into reality, though, immediate action is needed. Partnerships must be formulated before international divides grow even more profound. Educational priorities need to be professed worldwide. Global networks await construction. As the desire for quality education continues to grow, so, too, does the demand for inspiring pedagogical leadership. Doing so will require a worldwide partnership, emanating from the Local and made manifest through the international organization.

With a close eye on the future, the call for meaningful activity is greater than ever. Bearing in mind the ultimate goal of improved learning, the words of the Costa Rican philosopher, Manuel Formosa, offer a reminder of the need for priority action: "It is clear that the new society will not come about just by thinking about it. But there is no doubt that one must begin by setting forth what is important; because, if we do not, we will never achieve it."

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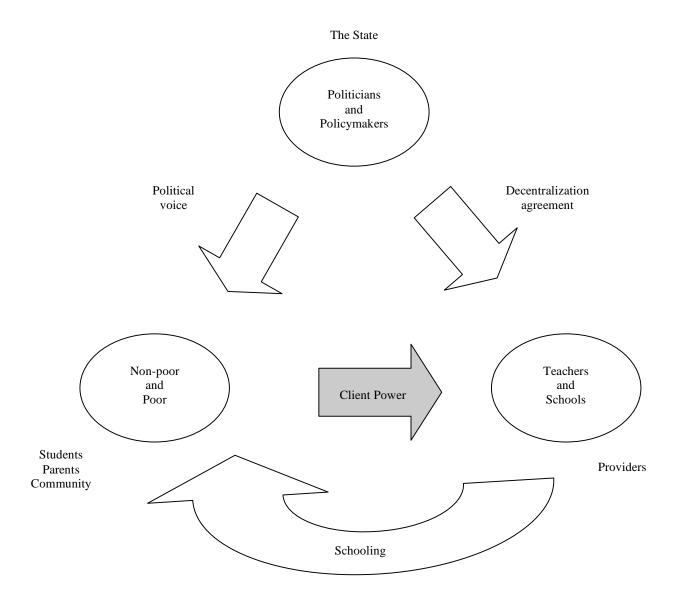
DECENTRALIZATION: MOTIVES AND OBJECTIVES

World Bank	McGinn and Welsh	Human Development Report (not specific to education)
1. Education Finance • Generation of resources through local taxation • Reduce operating costs • Shift financial burden from central government to regional or local government, community organizations and/ or parents 2. Efficiency and effectiveness • Elimination of bureaucratic procedures • Improved motivation and productivity of officials • Centralized planning leads to expensive education • Better allocation of resources to match needs • Increased school-level authority eliminates need for central decision-making and improves administration and accountability 3. Redistribution of political power • Decentralization promotes legitimacy and greater community voices • Legitimacy to local institutions • Weakens political opposition 4. Quality • Decision-making close to each school • Focus on local cultural and learning environments • Greater local accountability through incentives for quality performance 5. Innovation • More suppliers leads to a variety of experience • Innovation through competitiveness	1. Quality • More inputs for schooling • Improved quality of inputs • Increased relevance of programs • Increased innovation • Better range of options • Reduced inequalities of access • Better learning outcomes 2. Operation of systems • Greater efficiency in allocation of resources • Greater efficiency in resource use • Increasing match of programs to employer requirements • Better use of information 3. Sources and levels of funding • Increasing the overall sum of money for education • Shifting the source of funding from one social group to another 4. Benefits for central government • Lessens external political problems • Reduces bureaucratic headaches • Relieves central government of financial burden • Increases political legitimacy • Reduces corruption at central level 5. Benefits for local government • Increases revenues for local use • Increases capacity of local government • Improves responsiveness of central government to local needs • Redistributes political power	1. Faster responses to local needs • Local authorities respond to local conditions • No more waiting for central permission • Opportunities for women to participate 2. More accountability and transparency; less corruption • Money that is diverted corruptly from development programs often declines 3. Improved service delivery • Reduces absenteeism – so enhanced services at no extra cost • Greater public concern regarding discipline • Increased accountability and better monitoring 4. Better information flows • Better early - warning systems 5. More sustainable projects • Local involvement in design, execution and monitoring • Participatory budgeting and accounting enhances efficiency, transparency and gender responsiveness 6. Redress of regional inequalities • Lessens potential conflict • More equitable distribution of national funds 7. Increased energy and motivation • Encourages local solutions • Promotes innovation • Reduces workload in hierarchical systems 8. Expanded opportunities for political representation • Stronger voice in public policy • Increased representation among women and marginalized groups

Source: "From Targets to Reform: National Strategies in Action," 211.

ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK IN NICARAGUA
THE "SCHOOL AUTONOMIZATION" MODEL

The State

Politicians
and
Policymakers

Political
voice

Decentralization
agreement

Non-poor
and
Poor

Client Power

Teachers
and
Schools

Students
Parents
Community

Providers

Schooling

Source: di Gropello, 6.