Democratic Leadership in Middle Schools of Chihuahua Mexico: Improving Middle Schools through Democracy

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The purpose of this study was to analyse the effects of the implementation of a democratic approach to lead and manage middle schools in Chihuahua, Mexico. This research was based on a Likert questionnaire and semistructured interviews to explore the level of involvement of students, teachers, and parents in schools participating in a programme based on democratic leadership. A typology emerged of the style of democratic culture that is prevalent in schools participating: democracy in simulation, democracy in construction, and democracy in consolidation. Schools participating in the programme conceive that school improvement must be based on a shared responsibility of all members of the learning community. However, the results suggest that this aspiration has not been totally consolidated since findings showed that in general these schools are modestly performing as democratic schools.

Keywords: Democratic leadership, school change and improvement, Mexico

The aim of school change and improvement is to make better educational processes to offer an education with quality that enables all students to succeed. Change in schools is about improvement, solving problems and confronting challenging issues (Starr, 2009). School leaders are key agents to inspire and sustain authentic lasting change and continuous improvement that promotes all students to receive high quality learning opportunities in the best learning environments. However, school improvement is difficult to be carried out only by the school leaders. There is a need to genuinely involve students, teachers, parents in the planning, implementation and monitoring of change. New tendencies for leading and managing schools are based on shared responsibilities by all members of the learning community in participative environments. In democratic approaches, there are opportunities for meaningful involvement in the decision making processes of students, teachers, non-teaching staff because the challenges schools are facing far exceed the capacities of individual leaders. Wallace (2001) found that shared leadership is more effective than transformational leadership. Democratic schools engage all members to work as a team in the planning, implementation and monitoring. There is a sense of ownership when projects are implemented with the participation of all members of the school. This was the approach adopted by 30 middle schools in the northern sate of Chihuahua Mexico. In 1999, the Project of Pedagogical Renovation (PPR) was launched in several middle schools, and it is still implemented. It was proposed as an alternative model for leading and managing schools based on democratic and equal participation of students, teachers, school leaders, and parents. This project aims for equal participation of all stakeholders in decision making with the

emphasis on improving teaching, learning, and democracy in school. Each school addresses its problems as a collective, giving all members equal and active participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of improvement plans. This research is an evaluation of this project in all schools participating in the programme. The purpose of this evaluation study is to explore if the democratic approach to lead and manage middle schools proposed by the PPR enables the meaningful involvement of all members of the learning community in its improvement on a daily basis. The questions that guided this research were: at what levels middle schools participating in the PPR have achieved the outcomes proposed by the programme? And, is there evidence of meaningful involvement of students, teachers, school leaders and parents in schools participating in the PPR programme?

LITERATURE REVIEW

School Change and Improvement

Change in schools is about improvement, solving and confronting challenging issues. Change is an endless process since schools are regularly implementing curriculum and instructional change, changing the nature of leadership and councils, and adapting themselves to the highly demands of standardised testing in the accountability era (Starr, 2009). Standards and accountability have become a central issue in current educational reform in many countries (Moller, 2009), and meeting them every school year is synonymous with improvement. Currently, change and improvement in schools are externally motivated by the imposition of academic standards which state what students are expected to know and be able to accomplish. In relation to change, Fullan (2001) pointed out that it could be initiated either externally or locally in the school in which "teachers may or may not be centrally involved" (p. 51). However, for more meaningful involvement of all members, change must be originated within the school through collaborative approaches. In this sense, Reynolds (2007) reported that the way to improve schools must come from its people rather than from external sources. Finnigan

(2010) found that headteacher support for change based on shared approach is associated with the increase of teacher expectancy of positive outcomes of their students. For this reason, making schools successful takes more than just individual efforts of school leaders. It is necessary a focus on collaborative leadership in which all members of the learning community have clear and shared goals, the ability to work together, and high expectations for everyone in a climate of support.

School Change and Improvement Based on Democratic Leadership Approaches

Schools experience the challenge to continually make meaningful improvement in curriculum, instruction, assessment and in leadership. It cannot be assumed that school improvement could be achieved and sustained only by the efforts of school leaders. Democratic approaches of leadership (e.g. Gunter, 2001; Harris et al., 2003) have been proposed to address the current challenges schools face. In democratic approaches, decision-making authority and influence are spread throughout the school providing opportunities for all members to participate in key decisions. In this respect, Eisner as cited by Van Veen (2006) points out that teachers need to feel that they are a part of the improvement process. Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) suggest a bottom-up orientation in which improvement is owned by the school staff. Bell et al. (2003) concluded in their review of the impact of school headteachers on students outcomes that "leadership that is distributed among the wider school staff might be more likely to have an effect on the positive achievement of student outcomes than that which is largely, or exclusively top-down" (p. 3). Following the same line of thought, but taking school leadership at the student level, Kent (2005) reports that teachers fears about students providing negative feedback proved to be groundless when students participated in formal structures of leadership. Instead, students demonstrated a remarkably clear perception of effective teaching and learning. In this study it was also reported that teachers felt that they had a lot to learn from the voice of students.

Responsibilities to lead and manage school change and improvement currently have been addressed by shared, collective and democratic leadership approaches. Distributed leadership fits within the collective and democratic approaches. It emerged as an alternative to the charismatic leader portrayed as super talented individual that transforms schools. In regard to the origin of distributed leadership in education, Hartley (2007) pointed out that the two explanations of the emergence of distributed leadership are the failure of the 'charismatic hero' associated with transformational leadership and the greater complexity of tasks school leaders are currently facing. Yukl (2002) defined distributed leadership as "a shared process of enhancing the individual and collective capacity of people to accomplish their work effectively" (p. 432). Distributed leadership means multiple sources of guidance and direction (Harris, 2004). Spillane et al. (2001) stated that distributed leadership "incorporates the activities of multiple groups of individuals in a school who work at guiding and mobilising staff in the instructional change process" (p.13).

There is evidence of school improvement based on democratic approaches. For instance, Diosdado (2008) conducted a study in secondary public schools in Philippines implementing democratic school leadership via advisory school councils. The study revealed that the experimental group had higher levels of commitment, empowerment, and trust compared with the control group after one year of implementing democratic school leadership. Hallinger and Heck (2010) found that collaborative school leadership can positively impact student learning in reading and math. Katz and Earl (2010) also reported that networked learning communities either internally as a collective or externally as a group of schools can influence pupil learning. In another study conducted by McCowan (2010) in two Brazilian schools that when increased pupil participation in school decision-making, it indicated significant enhancement of democratic culture and changes in the teacher-student relationship.

The Project of Pedagogical Renovation

In the state of Chihuahua, Mexico PPR was launched by the by the Educational Research Department (DIE, for its abbreviation in Spanish) an agency of the ministry of education. This programme was launched in 1999 as a pilot phase in 10 middle schools. By 2004, it was implemented in 30 middle schools state-wide, and currently it is implemented in the same 30 schools. The involved population participating in the programme considering all schools is 15,000 students and 700 teachers.

The PPR was implemented as an alternative to improve the situation prevailing at that time characterised by poor academic performance in national and international assessments, and also high failure and dropout rates particularly in the schools that were invited to participate. The proposed strategy to improve students' outcomes was through the involvement of all members of the school in the solution of their problems. The new model to lead and manage middle schools proposed by the DIE aimed to improve teaching and learning and reduce failure and dropout rates. The project, grounded in critical pedagogy, aimed to transform middle schools by implementing democratic environments with a new participation of all members of the school: "Everything that happens in the school is questioned by all stakeholders: teaching, leading and managing practices, students' and parents' participation, school organisation, explicit and hidden curriculum, and school culture" (DIE, 2004, p. 10). New organisational structures were proposed to enable more meaningful participation of students, teachers, school leaders, and parents. The main structure is the Encouraging Project Group (GAP) formed by students, teachers, school leaders, and parents. The GAP is responsible for collectively planning, implementing, and monitoring all actions geared for improvement. Other structures established were the Student Council, Parent Council, The Youth Committee of Human Rights, and Class Councils. Although in traditional organisational structures there has been participation of students and parents, in the new structures there are new and more engaging ways of participation.

THE STUDY

The evaluation of implementation of the PPR and its outcomes was conducted in the thirty middle schools in Chihuahua, Mexico. Interviews and a Likert questionnaire survey were the methods adopted to collect data. In the case of interviews, ten participants were interviewed: two administrators of the programme, four school heads and four teachers randomly selected in the thirty schools. Thematic analysis was the procedure adopted in the analysis of interview transcripts. The questionnaire was designed around opinion statements to explore if the democratic approach proposed by the programme has enabled equal participation of all members of these schools in the decision making processes, and also their perceptions of the progress achieved at school. The questionnaire measured variables on a 6-point Likert-type scale with a score of 1 representing "totally disagree" and a score of 6 representing "totally agree." The questionnaires were sent to all teaching staff and to the student council of each school. The ethical part in this research was given the highest importance. It was granted ethical approval by Birmingham University in the UK, and BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) were adhered to throughout the study.

FINDINGS

A typology emerged from the interviews and questionnaires of the style of democratic culture that is prevalent in these schools. The distinctive attribute of these schools in comparison with traditional schools is the emphasis on the culture of democracy to find solutions to their problems. There are three possible categories emanating from the interviews and results of the questionnaire: a democracy simulated, a democracy in construction, and a democracy in consolidation.

Democracy in Simulation

Six schools were identified to seemingly have a culture of simulation. The administrators of the programme interviewed commented that with all 30 schools participating there are schools that seemingly have not progressed as the programme had intended. These schools apparently decided to participate in the programme for the financial and material benefits offered. It was reported that these schools lost enthusiasm after the initial period of five years in which there was financial benefits to be part of the programme. An administrator expressed this concern:

> As you know many of schools need infrastructure. So, apparently the main reason schools decided to participate was the financial aid offered in the first five years of the programme because once the financial support ended it was evident their lack of commitment.

Seemingly in the first years, these schools just established the new organisational structures in paper to be part of the project, and apparently these structures were rarely operationalized. Leadership and management styles did not change compared to the traditional ways to lead schools in Mexico where most of the decisions are made by school heads. A teacher described the experience of leadership and management style present in her school:

> I was part of the team responsible for writing down the school improvement plan. We were supposed to meet regularly to create collectively the project; however, the school head suggested that we just filled the form provided by the DIE following the guidelines to create the document required. There were cases of teachers that did not know that they were responsible for a committee in the improvement plan since the assignment was done by the school head and never communicated to teachers […] things continued to be the same in relation the way the school was managed. I honestly do not consider that our school has changed much for being part of this programme.

Other aspect that could have influenced these schools to be labeled this way was their geographical location since four of them are established in the most remote rural areas of the state. This distance made the support, mentoring and feedback from the team of advisors and administrators of the programme difficult. Also in distant schools, there was a high turnover of teaching staff and school heads because new teachers and headteachers

appointed to this type of schools are usually reassigned to the urban areas after a year or two in service. This aspect has been present in these schools making the progress difficult.

Continuity of the programme, because of the constant change of staff and rather long waiting periods between the staff changes, has been difficult.

Table 1

Results for democratic decision making and new organisational structures in schools categorised as democracy in simulation.

A) Democratic Decision Making		
Aspect	**Students**	**Teachers**
Students, teachers, and parents are given equal opportunities to participate in school decision-making	35% Totally agree	30% Partially agree
The school leading and managing style is characterised for being collaborative, distributed, and democratic.	45% Partially agree	38% Partially agree
Knowledge and understanding of the project aims, purposes, and goals in relation to school democracy and participation.	42% Partially agree	40% Partially disagree
Perceived improvements in school infrastructure, teaching practices, and student outcomes due to the democratic approach to lead and manage the school	34% Partially agree	38% Partially agree
B) New Organisational Structures		
Aspects	**Students**	**Teachers**
The Project Encouraging Group (GAP) in this school is performing according to the objectives of programme	38% Partially agree	42% Partially agree
The Student Council in this school is performing according to the aims intended by the programme	40% Totally agree	43% Partially agree
The Parent Council is participating in the school's improvement and performing as the programme intends	46% Totally agree	41% Totally agree
The school improvement's plan was designed jointly by students, teachers, school leaders, and parents	30% Totally agree	43% Totally agree
Students, teachers, school leaders, and parents meet together regularly to give feedback and assess the progress of the programme	43% Partially agree	47% Partially agree
Class Councils are performing in this school according the intended aims of the programme	53% Partially agree	50% Partially agree

The School Youth Committee of Human Right in this school is performing according the programme aims	52% Totally agree	45% Partially agree

Table 1 summarises the results of the six schools where there has not been meaningful progress in democratic practices. The results present the average of the responses shared by participants of these schools that obtained the highest rate by the respondents. In the responses related to democratic decision making, the lowest answer was for the item that addressed if students, teachers, and parent are given equal opportunities as school leaders to participate in school decision making, with 35% of students totally agreeing, and 30% of teachers partially agreeing. Other facets addressing democratic decision making were assessed low (see table 2). For the new organisational structures factor, the lowest answer in the case of students was for the item that explored if the improvement plan was designed jointly by students, teachers, school leaders, and parents. In the case of teachers was for the aspect evaluating if the parent council was participating actively in the improvement of the school as the programme intended. However, other aspects evaluating the performing of the new organisational structures modestly assess the promotion of democracy in these schools.

Democracy in Construction

These types of schools have shown an increase of democratic practices and meaningful involvement of all members of school in decision making; however, they are still making efforts to establish a truly democratic culture. The administrators of the programme considered 16 schools which seemingly are in this situation. Leadership style that has been in some cases autocratic or passive has been reported that might influence that these schools have not reached the desired aims. These schools have established the new organisational structures, but still struggled to consolidate their performance as the programme intends. In these schools usually emerges that some of the new proposed structures work better than others. In some schools, students are more active and involved, whereas in others teaching staff, parents, or school leaders are more engaged in the project. A headteacher described the experiences in the school he leads:

> I see that students and teachers are more involved than parents in the programme. We have struggled a bit to engage parents since in this school parents are not used to participate. It would be much better if they attend and show more active participation in the council meetings we frequently have.

A feature that emerged in all these schools was that they were not able to remove the traditional hierarchical structures. A shortcoming of the programme was that the schools participating had to keep the traditional structures because it is mandatory that all schools in Mexico have organisational arrangements in which school heads make all the decisions and have all the control with little participation of parents, students, and even teachers. Therefore, schools participating in the programme had two types of structures: the traditional and the new proposed by the programme. This sometimes caused confusion in the operationalisation, functions, and degree of participation that students, parents, and teachers are entitled. A teacher said:

> I think it does not make sense to be part of a programme that tries to innovate offering new ways of participation for students, parents, and teachers, and at the same time with the new ways to organise schools, it keeps the old ways. I think the ministry of education contradicts itself.

Table 2 provides a summary of the results for schools in the process to consolidate their democratic practices. The results indicate that the aspect exploring if participants of these schools knew and understood the aims, purposes, and goals in relation to democratic decision making was ranked the lowest with 54% of the students partially agreeing and 52% of the teachers totally agreeing. Other aspects evaluating democratic processes and the performing of the new established

organisational structures showed similar results. The highest ranked aspect was if students, teachers, and parents are given equal opportunities to participate in school decision-making with 57% totally agreeing, and in the case of teachers for the aspect evaluating if the improvement plan was designed collectively with 56% totally agreeing.

Table 2
Results for democratic decision making and new organisational structures in schools categorised as democracy in construction

A) Democratic Decision Making		
Aspect	**Students**	**Teachers**
Students, teachers, and parents are given equal opportunities to participate in school decision-making	57% Partially agree	54% Totally agree
The school leading and managing style is characterised for being collaborative, distributed, and democratic.	56% Partially agree	59% Partially agree
Knowledge and understanding of the project aims, purposes, and goals in relation to school democracy and participation.	54% Partially agree	52% Totally agree
Perceived improvements in school infrastructure, teaching practices, and student outcomes due to the democratic approach to lead and manage the school	58% Totally agree	59% Totally agree

B) New Organisational Structures		
Aspects	**Students**	**Teachers**
The Project Encouraging Group (GAP) in this school is performing according to the objectives of programme	57% Partially agree	51% Totally agree
The Student Council in this school is performing according to the aims intended by the programme	51% Totally agree	52% Partially agree
The Parent Council is participating in the school's improvement and performing as the programme intends	55% Totally agree	52% Totally agree
The school improvement's plan was designed jointly by students, teachers, school leaders, and parents	52% Totally agree	56% Totally agree
Students, teachers, school leaders, and parents meet together regularly to give feedback and assess the progress of the programme	53% Partially agree	55% Partially agree
Class Councils are performing in this school according the intended aims of the programme	51% Totally agree	52% Partially agree
The School Youth Committee of Human Right in this school is performing according the programme aims	54% Partially agree	55% Partially agree

Democracy in Consolidation

These schools are regarded as the schools with more progress by the administrators of the programme, participants interviewed, and by participants who completed the questionnaire. There were identified 8 schools of this type. These schools have shown an active participation in exchanging strategies, improvement projects, and innovative practices at regional meetings. The programme has established regional networks of schools

participating in the programme and these schools usually support other schools with less progress. School leadership is stable since in these schools there has not been change of school heads in more than ten years. Similarly has happened with teaching staff since many teachers have been teaching in the same school for many years. School leadership is reported to be a key element in the progress of these schools. School heads have enabled the meaningful involvement and participation of teaching staff, students, and parents in the decision making processes, and the implementation of new projects geared to improve teaching practices, student outcomes, reduce failure and dropout rates, community involvement, and infrastructure. Headteachers delegate and share their power across the school. There was mentioned by participants interviewed some examples of improvement projects that emerged from the students or teachers, and how headteachers offered the support and means to implement them. In general teachers, students, parents, and heads seem to have adopted the programme with enthusiasm. One teacher provided insights into the role of headteachers in the success of the programme in their school:

> Ever since the school decided to participate in this programme the level

of collegiality and shared leadership has increased. I perceive that the vision of improvement is shared by everybody in the school, by teaching staff, students, and parents. It is fair to recognise the leadership and effort of our headteacher for the success of this project.

Table 3 provides a summary of democratic decision making and new organisational structures of these schools. The results indicate that the aspect exploring if students, teachers, and parents are given equal opportunities to participate in school decision-making students was the highest assessed by the students (71%), teachers on the other hand, assessed leadership style as being collaborative, distributed, and democratic with 68% totally agreeing with the highest score. In the case of new structures, the aspect exploring if the improvement's plan was designed jointly by students, teachers, school leaders, and parents was the highest assessed by students with 74% totally agreeing, and for teachers the Project Encouraging Group (GAP) is performing according to the objectives of programme with 70% almost totally agreeing.

Table 3
Results for democratic decision making and new organisational structures in schools categorised as democracy in consolidation.

A) Democratic Decision Making		
Aspect	**Students**	**Teachers**
Students, teachers, and parents are given equal opportunities to participate in school decision-making	71% Totally agree	65% Totally agree
The school leading and managing style is characterised for being collaborative, distributed, and democratic.	67% Totally agree	68% Totally agree
Knowledge and understanding of the project aims, purposes, and goals in relation to school democracy and participation.	63% Partially agree	63% Totally agree
Perceived improvements in school infrastructure, teaching practices, and student outcomes due to the democratic approach to lead and manage the school	70% Totally agree	67% Totally agree

B) New Organisational Structures		
Aspects	Students	Teachers
The Project Encouraging Group (GAP) in this school is performing according to the objectives of programme	73% Totally agree	70% Totally agree
The Student Council in this school is performing according to the aims intended by the programme	63% Totally agree	64% Partially agree
The Parent Council is participating in the school's improvement and performing as the programme intends	65% Totally agree	64% Totally agree
The school improvement's plan was designed jointly by students, teachers, school leaders, and parents	74% Totally agree	69% Totally agree
Students, teachers, school leaders, and parents meet together regularly to give feedback and assess the progress of the programme	70% Partially agree	68% Partially agree
Class Councils are performing in this school according the intended aims of the programme	62% Totally agree	64% Totally agree
The School Youth Committee of Human Right in this school is performing according the programme aims	64% Totally agree	66% Partially agree

DISCUSSION

Findings showed that most schools participating in the PPR are performing modestly in relation to the purpose of creating more democratic schools by increasing collaboration of students, parents, and teaching staff in decision making processes. Teachers and students that took part in the study in general assessed modestly the degree in which the PPR has enabled collective and genuinely shared participation in the leading and management of these schools. Schools participating in the PPR are supposed to base their improvement on shared efforts and equal contribution of all members of the learning community. In the programme aims these schools are regarded as democratic and collaborative in comparison to the traditional schools. A document from the DIE (2004), states that "all members of the learning community must have the opportunities to actively participate in its improvement" (p.10). Change and improvement in Mexican middle schools have been mainly related to raising students' outcomes in standardised exams, and by reducing failure and dropout rates. This conceptualisation of school improvement concurs with the assertion made by Moller (2009) in which he acknowledges that there is an international tendency to base school effectiveness on the results students obtain in standardised tests. Improving academic results

of schools has challenged the traditional approach of transformational leadership to lead and manage educational institutions. Hartley (2007) points out that one of the reasons for the emergence of shared approaches to leading schools is the complex challenges school leaders are currently facing.

From the findings it could be perceived that many of the schools participating in the programme still struggle to truly establish a participative and collaborative culture. It is important to acknowledge that the participation of these schools was voluntary; however, it was offered material and financial benefits to these schools when they were invited to participate. In Mexican public schools the government is responsible for providing the resources and materials needed. Parents could help if they consider but it is not mandatory to pay any fee since public education must be free. However typically schools are poorly equipped and many need improvements in their building, infrastructure and also many of them lack materials that support effective teaching. Perhaps school leaders decided to participate in the programme for the opportunity to obtain additional resources to equip schools and improve the building and infrastructure. That could be the case of schools in which their democratic decision making was described as simulated. The materials and financial resources were given to schools in parts the

first five years of the programme. Seemingly the initial enthusiasm decreased once schools did not received the financial and material benefits for being in the programme since it also represented additional work mainly for school leaders and teaching staff to genuinely involve students and parents. The results also indicate that many schools are still in the process of construction of their democratic culture. On the other hand, there are only few cases in which schools are implementing the project as the programme intends. This confirms that in general the results have been modest.

Another element that must be taken into account is the truly openness of the ministry of education to the new organisational structures that promote more shared and collective participation in the decision making processes. Schools participating have to give reports for two departments of the ministry regarding the governing and organisational structures. In one department of the ministry schools have to give continuos reports of the traditional organisational structures, which is mandatory in all public schools. These structures promote little participation of students, teachers, and parents, whereas for another department, the responsible of the programme, schools have also to show evidence of the new structures performance. This represents a double load for schools in the inspecting processes. This even causes confusion in the names of structures since sometimes participants do not know if the main governing structure of the school is called the *Consejo Tecnico* (School Council) or the *GAP* (Encouraging Project Group), or in the case of students *Sociedad de Alumnos* (Students Society) or *Consejo Estudiantil* (Student Council), or for parents *Sociedad de Padres* (Parents Society) or *Consejo de Padres* (Parents Council) for traditional and new proposed structures respectively. Seemingly the traditional and new structures are similar, but the main difference is in the degree and level of participation. Being present the traditional organisational structures perhaps contributed to a gradual return to the traditional ways of participation of teaching staff, students, and parents once there were not economic incentives in those schools

that pretended to have implemented the project properly and for those that are still struggling to consolidate their democratic culture. Apparently not being freed from the traditional structures did not enable to consolidate the democratic culture intended by the project.

In the present study we can assume from responses of students and teachers that new organisational structures have been just established but performing modestly.Traditional structures for leading and managing schools in Mexico give little space for meaningful participation of students, parents and even teachers in which important decisions are usually made by school leaders or in higher levels of the system. The proposed structures by the PPR incorporate all voices and perspectives. In this regard, Hopkins (2001) suggests a bottom-up orientation in which improvement is owned by the school staff as positive. Democratic approaches to lead and manage schools via the implementation of organisational structures that spread the decision-making, authority, and influence throughout the school have proved positive impact on schools. Diosdado (2008) found in Philippine secondary schools that implementing democratic school leadership via school councils contributed to an increase in the level of commitment, empowerment and trust of the staff. McCowan (2010) in a study conducted in Brazil reported that schools that increased pupil participation in decision-making showed a significant enhancement of democratic culture and betterment teacher-student relationship. It seems that many schools participating in the PPR programme have complied with the formalities and requirements of being part of the programme establishing and renewing every year the proposed organisational structures but just partially creating the conditions for fully enabling the meaningful participation of all members. In the long term, the culture of democracy, participation, and collaboration has not been established.

CONCLUSION

Meaningful change and improvement in schools are accomplished by the contribution of all members since this will enhance the sense of ownership of the improvements'

processes. In a collaborative school culture, teachers pursue a clear, shared purpose, engage in collaborative activity, and accept a collective responsibility for student learning. Parent involvement is also fundamental in students' academic achievement, attendance, and student attitude towards education. For effective contribution parents need to feel welcomed, respected, trusted, heard, and needed. Likewise, students' meaningful participation is also crucial since engaging and empowering learners as active protagonists in the design, implementation, and evaluation of improvement could transform schools in truly collaborative learning spaces. The current effectiveness agenda categorises schools as successful or failing based on the results of standardised tests without taking into consideration in many cases the contextual aspects that could influence the obtained results. Collaborative environments that increase the participation of students, parents and teaching staff in the decision making could be beneficial in improving students outcomes and other elements such as dropout and failure rates that categorise schools as successful, stable, or failing as in the Mexican case.

The PPR was launched in 30 middle schools in the state of Chihuahua Mexico with the premises of meaningful involvement of all school members in their improvement. There had not been a formal evaluation to know if the objectives of the programme have been achieved in schools participating after more than 10 years of being operating this project. This research was carried out with the aim to explore if the democratic approach to lead and manage schools proposed by this programme has enabled the improvement of these schools. Three types of schools were identified regarding their level of democracy enhancement: in simulation, construction, and consolidation. Most schools were classified as democracy in simulation and in construction. This confirms that the progress achieved by the programme has been limited. Findings showed that in general these schools are modestly performing as democratic schools even though the new organisational structures have been implemented and are continually renewed every school year, which in theory must enhance the meaningful participation of teaching staff, students, and parents. In many

cases, the reason to participate in the programme was the material and financial benefits offered. Some schools are just simulating the increase of democracy, other have progressed more but are still impregnated by the traditional approach to lead and manage schools, and other few have enthusiastically implemented the project and as a mean of improvement being leadership a key element in their success. A factor that probably has not enabled the consolidation of more schools participating in the programme has been the fact that these schools have to keep the traditional structures with the new proposed programme limiting the true transition to new forms to lead and manage schools.

Author Biography

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