School autonomy in Mexico during the COVID-19 pandemic: Unclear government policies and demands from school communities

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Abstract. This article investigates the processes of school autonomy in Mexico that emerged at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic through an analysis of the cycles of federal government intervention to secure continuity in distance education. After a review of academic studies and official government documents as well as interviews and focus groups with actors from basic and baccalaureate education, it is concluded that, historically, school autonomy was an ambiguous policy project in Mexico and was not part of the government's response to the pandemic emergency; nevertheless, some school communities demanded recognition of their autonomy to collectively take decisions and act.

Keywords: COVID-19, school autonomy, collaborative schools, educational policies.

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the world saw most of its students leave their classrooms. In Latin America alone, over 95% stopped in-person learning (ONU, 2020) and schools in the region were closed longer than anywhere else (UNICEF, 2021). While the existence of a physical space where students and teachers congregate does not in itself assure desirable results in education, it is also true that continuing formal education using a distance format presents great difficulties for educational systems that are designed for in-person learning yet suffer from high levels of inequality, an overburdened curriculum, scarce use of technology, and excessive centralization (UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO & CEPAL, 2020). In Mexico, for example, most students on all educational levels receive their formal education in schools, i.e., in-person (SEP, 2020).

Although the news about the rapid spread of COVID-19 came to light at the end of 2019, in March 2020 almost nobody was ready to deal with the emergency in education. According to official pronouncements, the early closure of schools was for the good of communities; however, when decisions were made about which activities were "essential," it was decided that education was in the "non-essential" group and therefore in-person classes would be resumed when the federal government gave the go-ahead, meaning that there was no longer a "grave risk of contagion" (SEP-SSA, 2021). Meanwhile, the government invested in the production and broadcast of a TV program, *Aprende en Casa* (Learn at Home) and later a radio program and some school workbooks, in addition to issuing directives at various times regarding processes such as the school calendar, evaluation criteria, passing grade levels, and so forth.

Later, when teachers were questioned about the use of *Aprende en Casa*, the only survey in which the program was generally assessed positively was the one organized by the Secretariat of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP) and administered by the National Union of Workers in Education (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE). However, other surveys carried out independently demonstrated that both the clarity and the use of the program were limited (Hermida-Montoya & Martínez-Bordón, 2020; Pérez & Gaitán, 2020).

Constructing specialized knowledge about this crossroads in the education system requires attention to the challenges that school communities faced and the decisions they took to deal with the public health crisis so that teaching and learning processes were not interrupted. It is also necessary to investigate the role of the government in all this, given the state's responsibility to guarantee the right to education as well as the historical

discourses regarding the "recognition" of those who are in charge of education in the schools.

Taking this into consideration, the present study analyzes the processes of school autonomy that developed in basic and baccalaureate education[1] during the pandemic, from the point of view of public policy. More specifically, the goal is to: (i) analyze the policy cycles developed by Mexican federal authorities in response to the pandemic, with emphasis on the directives regarding school autonomy—as part of school management policy—based on their antecedents during the previous six-year period,[2] the inclusion and definition of the "public problem" in the agenda of the current government, and the design of policy intervention until its implementation in the first months after the schools closed; (ii) identify and characterize the exercise of school autonomy by educational communities during this period; and (iii) problematize the category of school autonomy itself.

2. Literature review on school autonomy

The management of school systems may be more centralized and vertical or else more decentralized and horizontal when it comes to the relationship between to the central educational authorities and the rest of the actors involved. When the knowledge and capacity of teachers, administrators, and families to make decisions and act to improve the school is taken into consideration, this is called school-based management, which is defined as the "decentralization of authority from the central government to lower levels of government or schools" (World Bank, 2014, p. 2)

Theoretically speaking, school autonomy is a product of this style of decentralized management—albeit with nuances that will be discussed later. At the same time, it can be understood as decision-making about the school carried out from within it. This is very different—to a greater or lesser degree—from a centralist way of governing an educational system and is aimed at dealing with the specific needs of the student body and its context, according to the institutional capacities of a particular school (Adams, 2020; Gairín, 2015; Hooge, 2020; Keddie, 2016; Martínez-Íñiguez et al., 2020; Silva & Fraga, 2021). Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that a more specific, complete definition of this phenomenon is not possible since

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1   Translator's note: The Mexican school system is organized as follows: preschool (educación preescolar): ages 3 to 5-6; primary school (educación primaria): ages 5-6 to 11-12; secondary (secundaria): ages 11-12 to 14-15; and baccalaureate (educación media superior or bachillerato): ages 15-18. Basic education includes preschool through secondary.

2   Translator's note: the presidents of Mexico are elected for a term of six years, which is why the authors refer to "*sexenios*," or six-year periods.

school autonomy is a process that is rooted historically and spatially in each context. Consequently, each form of autonomy has different components, levels, and emphases depending on the country in question (Hooge, 2020) and is constantly being reconfigured over time and as a result of changes in the political environment (Keddie, 2016; Macarini & Pereira, 2019).

Some of the areas about which decisions can be made in an autonomous school model are the organization of teaching and learning, the curriculum, evaluation, human resources, staff professional development, organizational structure, physical infrastructure, administration, the search for financial resources, student admissions, and the involvement of families and external actors interested in education (Macarini & Pereira, 2019; Hooge, 2020; Neeleman, 2019).

It should be noted that in the strictest sense, the terms "management" and "autonomy" are not synonymous, because the former does not necessarily refer to autonomous decisions but can denote the administration and application of heteronomous decisions dictated from above, especially in highly centralized educational systems (Du Plessis, 2020; Hooge, 2020; Macarini & Pereira, 2019; Silva & Fraga, 2021). Thus, there is a need for terms that conceptually link management with autonomy, such as "autonomy in management," "self-management," and "school-centered management," or, failing this, the definition of the term "management" can be explicitly expanded to refer to school organization resulting from decisions made by the school community (Baronnet, 2015; Keddie, 2016; Páez & Tinajero, 2020; World Bank, 2014).

When it comes to current discussions about school autonomy, there is a proposal to define this category as "a school's *right* [emphasis ours] to self-government—encompassing the freedom to make independent decisions—of the responsibilities that have been decentralized to schools" (Neeleman, 2019, p. 34). This definition has two components that are worth discussing: on the one hand, there is the elevation of school autonomy to a "right." Viewed in this way or as part of the right to education, school autonomy can—through citizen demands—gain more terrain than the government itself occupied up to that time, as has occurred in relation to various issues on the public or "citizen" agenda (Casar & Maldonado, 2010). On the other hand, the issue of assigning this category to certain processes of school decision-making and action is still considered debatable.

This article employs a broader conception of school autonomy which recognizes that autonomy can occur—at least to a certain degree—without receiving formal permission and in this way, schools sometimes acquire greater independence because school communities take decisions and actions

because they are not well enough served by their governments (Casanova, 2021; Gairín, 2015; Lennert & Mølstad, 2020). This is what introduces the nuances mentioned above into the link between school autonomy and the focus on school-based management (SBM), because while it is desirable to have an educational system managed entirely in this way, it is not indispensable to the development of processes of autonomy; that is, school autonomy is explained theoretically as the decentralized management of education systems, but school autonomy can also develop in centralized systems. There are even references to an "autonomy continuum" in educational programs and policies that use SBM, to refer to the degree to which decisions are delegated to the local level (World Bank, 2007).

This focus, however, is less present in the academic literature, largely because such research primarily concentrates on countries where there are high levels of formal recognition of school autonomy, including on the legislative level. This is the case of Australia, Spain, the United States, Finland, England, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Adams, 2020; Christ & Dobbins, 2016; Flanders, 2017; Gobby, 2016; Hooge, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Keddie, 2016; Paradis et al., 2018; Regan-Stansfield, 2018; Ruff, 2019; West & Wolfe, 2019).[3]

A second characteristic of the current literature is that the majority of studies have a vision of the right to educational autonomy as an extension of the right to self-determination of peoples of African descent, indigenous peoples, or minority linguistic communities (Baronnet, 2015; Erdocia, 2020; Gutiérrez, 2020; Zuluaga & Largo, 2020). Such studies are intended to elucidate the areas where the imposition of the central governments is felt at its extreme. But it also leads to the following question: Does school autonomy only make sense for pre-colonial populations and/or in clear opposition to central governments? This article seeks to visibilize school autonomy as a need that is demanded in multiple and diverse schools.

Finally, a third unfinished theoretical discussion of relevance to this article is related to the actors who themselves exercise school autonomy. In order to systematize the specialized literature reviewed, a preliminary typology of school autonomy is proposed that allows for the classification of practices according to two crossed criteria: the scope[4] within each school

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3   This does not necessarily mean that maximum autonomy has been achieved in these countries nor that there are no authors that study these educational systems and recognize school autonomy that goes beyond what has been legislated.

4   The discussion is ongoing as to whether a third, higher level should be added to this typology which corresponds to initiatives of local authorities whose scope is the entity under their jurisdiction. At the same time—especially in the United States and in Spain—these practices have been

and the scope for autonomy of the actors that form part of the project. Thus, on the one hand, we can speak of "pedagogical autonomy" or "didactic autonomy" when, in the practice of teaching, decisions are made whose effects are primarily felt in the classroom (Al-Bataineh et al., 2021; Casanova, 2021; Canbolat, 2020; Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021; Lennert & Mølstad, 2020; Martínez-Celorrio, 2017; Montero, 2021; Paradis et al., 2018; Roz & Pascual, 2021; Shalem et al., 2018).

On the other hand, there is "collective autonomy," when the decisions made have a reach beyond what occurs in the classroom. This type of autonomy can then be subdivided into: (i) "indirect collective" or "leadership," when the person who promotes initiatives for the whole school staff is a key figure in internal decision-making— such as the school director—and consequently the actions taken involve the alignment of the whole school or a considerable portion of the staff (Gairín, 2015; Hooge, 2020; Limon & Aydin, 2020; López, Rodríguez-Gallego, & Ordóñez-Sierra, 2018; Montero, 2021; Reyes-Juárez, 2017; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Weiner & Woulfin, 2017); (ii) "direct collective" or "democratic," when the agreements reached about actions to be taken are agreed upon collectively, with clear rules of horizontal participation (Gairín, 2015; Casanova, 2021; Franco, 2020; Lorea et al., 2012; Moliner et al., 2016; Susilo, Kartowagiran, & Sulisworo, 2019). Recent studies on school autonomy note that the direct collective mode has been significantly less studied. This is evident in Neeleman's (2019) literature review in which this aspect may not be stressed, but the lists and typologies constructed show that studies have emphasized the decisions and actions promoted by directors, which are not necessarily collective. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that different forms of management can exist simultaneously in schools: they can be centralized in some areas and autonomous in others, and the latter can sometimes be through the leadership of directors or achieved democratically among different members of the school educational community.

In this article, "school communities" are considered as key units in education systems made up of teachers, administrators, students, and families, where the first two are the principal individuals charged with guiding the processes of teaching and learning within the school in the broader framework of an educational policy that creates the conditions for the development of educational centers and the achievement of learning objectives (Bolívar, 2014; Hooge, 2020; INEE, 2019b; Reyes-Juárez, 2017).

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studied as forms of "local autonomy"—granted by law, it should be noted—whose relationship with the literature on Mexico is the discussion about decentralization and educational federalism.

To finish this literature review, it is important to note that, more than two years after the pandemic started, there has been an increase in studies about its implications for education, especially in terms of technological challenges and educational inequalities. Despite this, it is interesting that few studies deal with the central issue of the school autonomy processes that developed during this period. Those that do exist are principally exercises in the systematization of concrete experiences in Argentina, Chile, and Spain (Almandoz et al., 2021; Cárdenas, Guerrero, & Johnson, 2021; Llorens-Largo et al., 2021; García-de-Paz y Santana, 2021; Soto et al. 2021). And while there are studies like this one that deal with school autonomy in Mexico, Australia, Israel, and Spain, none use an approach focused on the policy cycle. In addition, they do not include the experiences of school communities. Instead, they review normative documents—primarily legal—and/or administer surveys that result in conclusions about federalism and the role and value of school autonomy, at the classroom or school levels, during or after the pandemic (Eacott et al., 2020; Navarrete, Manzanilla, & Ocaña, 2020; Ramot & Donitsa-Schmidt, 2021; Rodríguez & Gómez, 2021).

3. Methodology

This research analyzes the decisions taken by federal and state educational authorities before the pandemic and during its course, which were marked by the arrival of a new national government (that announced substantial policy changes in the field of education) and describes the decisions and actions taken by educators on the ground to respond to urgent needs in a context of crisis. In order to fulfill this objective, we took a qualitative approach that allowed us to "capture the subjective reality of its participants" (Lancy, 1993, p. 2) and reconstruct the connections between diverse elements of the social phenomenon analyzed. Following the suggestion of Bogdan and Knopp (1998) to use more than one data collection technique in qualitative studies so as to better understand the complexity of the perspective and the social experience of the subjects, we decided to design and connect two large methodological components. The first consisted in finding and reviewing the specialized literature on school autonomy before and after the pandemic in addition to analyzing the response of the government to the emergency, using the "cycle of public policies" model.

In the case of the academic literature review, we decided to do the main search in EBSCO, a service that brings together specialized databases in education and other fields. In the title field, and limiting the search to 2016–2021, we searched for the following terms in Spanish and English "autonomy" AND "school" OR "scholastic" OR "education." A total of

1,403 academic articles were found. We then added the terms "COVID" OR "COVID-19" OR "pandemic," obtaining 341 results in all the fields.

In addition, we searched for the following terms (without limiting dates): "autonomy," "management," and "COVID" OR "COVID-19" OR "pandemic" in the archives of four of the most respected Mexican journals in the field of education (*RMIE*, *Perfiles Educativos*, *REDIE* and *RLEE*) in order to increase the precision of the literature review about this aspect of educational policy in Mexico. We then reviewed each of the resources found to discover their pertinence to this study, followed by an in-depth review of 74 texts in English, Spanish, Catalan, and Portuguese.

In the case of the analysis of government measures to assure distance education continuity, the "cycle of public policies" was used as a model of analysis that allowed us to clarify the different stages or phases of government intervention, and then evaluate their efficacy, efficiency, and pertinence, or lack thereof (Aguilar, 2010). This model shows that educational policy interventions have different phases or interconnected moments and, ideally, are consistent with one another, which creates a "cycle" (Aguilar, 2010). Although in practice these phases do not necessarily follow a linear order, viewing them in this way allows for a systematic approach to a given educational policy (Aguilar, 2010; Merino & Cejudo, 2010). The policy cycle reveals that every intervention has its antecedents in other decisions and actions taken by the government—promoted by the same authorities or by those of an earlier time—and are initiated from the moment that a public problem enters the agenda of the government. The diagnosis of a problem determines the design of measures intended to deal with it as well as their implementation, with the desired results or not. These then can be evaluated and monitored by members of civil society as well as by the government in order to retain, discard, or reform the policy in question (see Figure 1).

With a view to analyzing the government response to the COVID-19 emergency, we reviewed documents related to the key policies of the previous six-year period (2012–2018) and the current one (2018–2024). This made it possible, above all, to examine how the public problem was defined and the intervention designed. We complemented these sources with the testimonies of various educators regarding the implementation and results of the intervention.

Figure 1
Cycle of public policies (analytical framework)
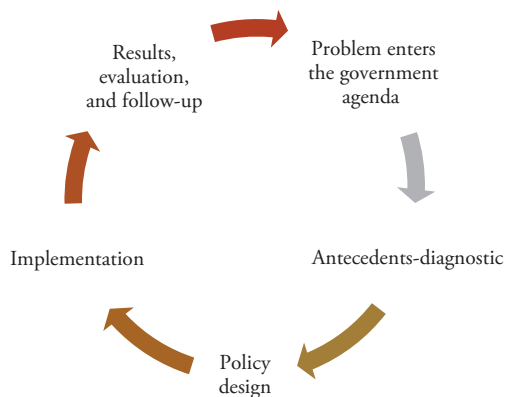
Source: compiled by authors based on Aguilar (2010) and Merino and Cejudo (2010).

The second main methodological component was empirical and consisted of semi-structured and in-depth interviews with individuals and focus groups. The former allowed for the reconstruction, in the most valid manner possible in qualitative terms, of the representation of "what is" an individual's experience, without imposing the preconceptions of researcher(s) (Edwards, 1993). Focus groups, on the other hand are interviews designed for small groups in which the atmosphere is less formal and in which the participants, who share common characteristics, can ideally speak about a complex problem with greater freedom through the facilitation of a moderator (Berg, 2004).

Thus, in order deepen our understanding of the processes that occurred in schools during May and June 2020, we held individual interviews and focus groups with people involved in basic education (preschool, primary, and secondary) and the baccalaureate (teachers, administrators, pedagogical-technical advisors, academic coordinators, tutors, zonal supervisors, and others), at a time when the 2019–2020 school year was still not over. In the case of individual interviews, these were carried out with a sector head overseeing the work of 10 supervisors on the pre-school level, a teacher in a normal primary school, and two preschool teachers.

The five focus groups took place with a variety of individuals from different educational levels, modalities, and subsystems: a preschool collective made up of seven teachers and their director; a group of 16 primary school head teachers; nine primary-level zonal supervisors; five secondary school directors; and 16 baccalaureate teachers—some of whom also had other

roles in their schools. All the interviews were recorded (audio) to be systematized and analyzed later, and the participants' anonymity was assured. In all cases a semi-structured format was followed, based on a question guide that divided the conversation into three parts: perceptions of government interventions, the responses of the interviewees' centers of education to the suspension of in-person classes, and the outlook for the future.

While the results obtained in this research cannot be generalized—and they were not conceived with this intention—it was possible to recover the experiences of educational staff in 20 of the 32 federative entities in Mexico, constituting a broad spectrum in terms of both geography and educational modalities. There was also variety among those interviewed; for example, the directors, academic coordinators, pedagogical technical advisors (PTAs), and zonal and sectoral supervisors shared their own experiences as well as those of the individuals that they coordinated.

4. School autonomy as an educational policy project in Mexico: an analysis of the policy cycle

4.1 Antecedents: the previous federal government's interventions in matters of school autonomy (2012-2018)

According to the policy cycle framework, to understand the definition and the implementation space of a government intervention such as *Aprende en Casa*, it is necessary to look into its antecedents. During the 2012–2018 six-year term, the federal government carried out a constitutional reform and, among other things, designed the "*La Escuela al Centro*" (School to the Center) strategy to deal with what it considered the main problem with education: its low quality, understood as deficient student learning achievements, on which school processes—it maintained—had a high impact (SEP, 2013). The president of Mexico put it this way:

> In order to improve the daily functioning of schools, they will have […] less bureaucracy, and, *especially, more management autonomy* [emphasis ours] […]. The school community will have a greater capacity to decide how resources are used and how schools operate, as well as to influence the contents of the curriculum. (Peña Nieto, in Presidencia de la República, 2017)

The words of the president, as well as the changes made to the General Education Law (Ley General de Educación, LGE-2013) and other policy documents (Acuerdo 717; NME; PSE 2013-2018), visibilized management autonomy as a key element in improving the quality of education as well as identifying the areas where school communities were given formal per-

mission (to a greater or lesser degree) to be able to decide on their own, if they met the minimal school standards (see Table 1).

Table 1

Formal scope of school autonomy recognized in the 2012–2018 six-year term

Area of decision-making	Scope of decision-making permitted
Infrastructure*	Improvements in terms of dignity
Educational material*	Purchases
Operation*	Resolving basic problems and reporting on all activities and measures taken in the school
Participation (among students, teachers, and parents)*	Promoting conditions for participation, under the leadership of a head teacher
Curriculum	Selecting from a fixed list of activities to be carried out, organized into five preestablished areas

Note: the areas marked with an asterisk (*) are recognized judicially.
Source: compiled by authors based on Acuerdo 717 (2014), LGE-2013 (1993/2017) and SEP (2013, 2017).

This proposal also had its roots in the decentralization proposed by the National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education (Acuerdo Nacional para la Modernización de la Educación Básica, ANMEB), which provided for an increase in the number of individuals involved in the distribution of the social function of education from that stipulated in the General Education Law of 1993, as well as the Quality Schools Program (Programa Escuelas de Calidad, PEC) which, for almost fifteen years (2001–2015), promoted the improvement of the strategic planning powers of school communities.

As Table 1 shows, when it comes to the results of educational policy intervention, while there was progress in recognizing some areas of school autonomy, not all were enshrined in law. In addition, other dimensions mentioned in the literature are missing (Hooge, 2020; Neeleman, 2019). Finally, the formally recognized scope of action for each area is limited, and there is a lack of clarity in how these areas should be operationalized (CEE, 2017). The design problems also became evident during the implementation stage. For example, the school "clubs" or workshops, which were the main format for exercising the curricular autonomy under this educational model (SEP, 2017), led to an increase in inequalities between those schools that had the resources to effectively use this flexibility and those that did not (Benavides & Manzano, 2019). Another priority of this government was to "recover the state's stewardship over education." This hardly fit with a less centralist vision of the educational system, despite being aimed, on paper, at making access to the teaching profession easier, among other measures related to the operation of the School Technical Councils (CTEs) (Luna, 2020).

4.2   School autonomy in the current government's response to the pandemic[5]

In the strategy that the current government designed to continue formal education during the pandemic, there was no specific and clear measure to promote school autonomy. For this reason, the methodology used here sought to identify elements related to this policy in other decisions, actions, and omissions in the general strategy of *Aprende en Casa,* and to monitor whether or not they fitted with the general education policy of the current six-year term and that of the previous government.

To this end, the first step was to analyze the public problematics as they were initially defined in the government agenda. In view of the public statement by the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring the global spread of COVID-19 as a pandemic (WHO, 2020), the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) took the decision to suspend in-person classes throughout the country starting on March 20 and to start broadcasting *Aprende en Casa*, the television program aimed at students from primary to the baccalaureate, on March 23 (SEP, 2020a). A week later the *Aprende en Casa* portal went online for students on the pre-school, primary, and secondary levels (SEP, 2020b), and a month later, a website for baccalaureate students became accessible online (SEP, 2020f).

The central component of this decision was the high risk of catching COVID-19 through in-person classes. The issue of the poor health conditions in Mexican schools was not considered when taking the decision (INEE, 2019a), nor was the high level of centralization involved in decision-making about the challenges faced by the educational system (Hooge, 2020; OCDE, 2020). That is, the point was not to formally strengthen the capacities of school communities to decide and act to deal with the emergency but simply to avoid in-person classes,[6] which would only resume once the epidemiological green light was given by the corresponding agency (SEP-SSA, 2021).

The absence of a school autonomy component in the definition of the problem influenced the design of the strategy, whose main component was the television program. The format of *Aprende en Casa 1*—which is

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5   Translator's note: the government headed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador.
6   This was also the case in the following two versions of the program: *Aprende en Casa II* and *Aprende en Casa III*, whose numbering increased as the terms without in-person classes in Mexico went on. Nevertheless, with each new iteration the problems associated with the lack of in-person classes were redefined in the discourse without this necessarily resulting in strengthened school autonomy.

discussed in more detail here—brought together the various grades, from basic education to baccalaureate. It is worth noting that almost a month later a new element was officially added: deliverable folders containing answers to the questions asked during the television and radio programs, which were to be "an aid for evaluating those students who had access to the program"[7] (Moctezuma, in SEP, 2020d). In addition, two days before this directive was made public, the Secretary of Public Education pointed out that the television program was based on textbooks, so these could be used for additional help (SEP, 2020d). After this, the federal authorities said that "no one will end up not learning" because more than 90% of the population have television sets and "all the students [have] their textbooks."

While it was "recommended" that teachers "stay in touch" with their students, it was not made clear what this contact should involve—only that it was to take place through the GSuite platform—nor was there information about any available government support for teachers and students to access the required technologies, or about any other operational implications regarding what was meant by "stay[ing] in touch." Later, on June 1, an agreement was published that set new dates for the end of school cycle as well as guidelines that "should be followed" to evaluate (grade) students, putting off the sanitization of school facilities until epidemiological approval was given (Acuerdo 6/12/20, 2020).

Having reviewed government policy actions and directives, it can be seen that the closest the government came to strengthening school communities during the educational emergency was through nine new actions proposed by Secretary of Public Education Esteban Moctezuma for a secure return to school (SEP, 2020g) and the GSuite training programs, although these were focused on teaching rather than on improving management. In addition, our review of the key policy documents reveals problems related to inconsistencies in the strategy over time and its lack of cohesion, which were not necessarily justified by the emergency. Such problems are directly related to the leeway for decision-making and action that school staff were permitted or not—and which did not necessarily coincide with the reappraisal of the work and teaching capacities outlined in PND 2019-2024, PSE 2020-2024, the constitutional reform of 2019, LGE-2019, and the *La Escuela Es Nuestra* (The School is Ours program).

The literature review alone allows us to conclude that the scope and possibilities of educational officials to make decisions about their school

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7   All translations from Spanish are by *Apuntes*.

was not explicit. This was regarded as an obstacle to the implementation of *Aprende en Casa* by many participants in the individual interviews and focus groups, as discussed below. It is important to clarify that the interviews conducted for this article refer to what occurred between March 2020 (when the third trimester of the 2020-2021 school cycle was underway) until the planning for the 2020-2021 school cycle, and that we therefore still need to find out exactly what happened out in the field after this.

In the case of Mexico, the strengths and weaknesses of an educational policy can be seen in the ruptures and continuities that it exhibits over time, including from one six-year term to another. While both administrations made assurances that the school is a priority in educational policy, the new General Law of Education (Ley General de Educación, LGE-2019), for example, completely erased the term "school management," while the law that had been in force under the previous administration was reformed expressly to include the term and to begin to provide clarity to the areas in which planned decisions could be taken in schools (art. 12, V bis, LGE-2013, 1993/2016) (see Table 1). Instead, LGE-2019 refers to the publication of an "operative guide" whose purpose is to:

> [...] support the planning, organization, and execution of teaching, pedagogical, management, and administrative activities and the supervision of each educational facility focusing on school improvement, paying attention to the regional context in the provision of educational services. (Art. 107, LGE-2019, 2019).

5. The spread of school autonomy amid the implementation of *Aprende en Casa*

5.1 The school decision-making process in response to the emergency and the limitations of authority

The interviews and focus groups carried out indicate that the strategy of the government—including its flagship *Aprende en Casa* program—was perceived more as a burden or a top-down imposition rather than a pillar of support. It was sometimes even an obstacle, since it meant more work for the teachers—and parents—especially when faced with the uncertainty about final grading, which was only clarified after an agreement in the Secretariat days before the end of the school year (Acuerdo 12/O6/20, 2020):

> The government coordinators told us that *we had to* [emphasis ours] continue working with the forms from *Aprende en Casa*.

> Doing this, of course, implied *more* work [emphasis ours]. There were many complaints from parents. (FG, high school directors, June 9, 2020)[8]

> Evaluation is another problem since now the supervisor says: "If the child doesn't hand it in to you, never mind, average the previous grades, and if he didn't hand them in, never mind, he passes anyway" [...]. What happens with those who did all they were supposed to do? [...] it's as if there are also flaws that the educational authority should see [...] because even they themselves [the students] found out through the media or communiques that if they didn't hand in their homework, they would pass anyway. (FG, primary head teachers, June 8, 2020)

To this, we have to add a problem that has not been mentioned often, even in public discussions among specialists: according to the people interviewed, the *Aprende en Casa* programming was equally new each day for both the teachers and the students. One preschool teacher commented:

> I was talking with a mother on the telephone [...] and she said: "Teacher, wouldn't it be possible for you to send me the questions from the *EscuelaTV* program the day before, so that, when the program is over, our girl can go ahead and tackle them [...]?" I took a step back and I told her "Oh, ma'am, I am sorry, but the TV schedule and programming *are done on the national level. I don't have access to the programming* [emphasis ours]. I know which subject but I don't know how they will deal with the contents and I don't have those questions." (FG, preschool teachers, June 15, 2020).

It is very likely that the teachers' lack of previous knowledge of the programming content and how it was to be handled was an obstacle to the possible incorporation of this program as an effective guide for the teaching and learning processes. While it is recognized that the public problem to be solved is not simple, these details are a reflection of the limited interest of the central government in involving, from the outset, those who it had argued are "the fundamental agents in the educational process" (Decree of 2019). It should be noted, however, that some teachers who live in the Valle de México area were called in for the filming and design of the contents of *Aprende en Casa II* and *Aprende en Casa III*. However, the contents continued to be unavailable to teachers ahead of time despite promises

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8   When coding the interviews, "II" means an interview with an individual and "FG," a focus group. In all cases, the general profile of the actors interviewed as well as the date are provided.

from the authorities that they would be when the broadcast of *Aprende en Casa III* started.

As noted above, the closest thing to strengthening school communities were the nine actions proposed by Esteban Moctezuma (SEP, 2020). Nevertheless, one particular fear shared by the primary school teachers and administrators interviewed in the focus groups was that authorities "would inform them" at an unexpected time that they "had to" use the resources from *La Escuela Es Nuestra* for the acquisition of preventive health items mandated by the central authority for the entire population as a "guarantee" for the return to schools. The school communities had planned to use these resources to meet the basic and historical needs of their schools—such as the construction of perimeter fences, roofs, and drainage systems. It should be noted that their concern made sense since Esteban Moctezuma, exactly one month after our focus group, announced that in order to guarantee access to supplies aimed at combatting the spread of COVID-19 contagion in schools "there is support from federal agencies, municipalities, and the *La Escuela Es Nuestra* program" (SEP, 2020h).

The distance between decision-making and what happened in the field was also apparent in the efforts of many of our informants to get in touch with their superiors. The sector head in Veracruz commented: "We don't have a way to communicate with our immediate superiors, there's no way. […] Things have never been worse, that's the truth […]. It seems like the idea is to make things more complicated, not solve them." (FG, primary school supervisors, May 29, 2020).

According to the testimonies of some educational actors, when they were able to communicate with their superiors—sometimes on the level of teacher-director, but mainly from directors upward—it was mostly for surveillance and control. In relation to this, the interviewees stated that they spent a great deal of time filling out forms and reports to demonstrate to their bosses that they were doing their work.

> A lot of time is wasted on administrative matters and, even now, facing this situation, there is this thing: "And send the evidence, and send the programming for 15 days," and I don't what else […]. The most important thing from my point of view [was] to tend to the kids, give them this follow-up, give them this feedback, not lose them. (FG, baccalaureate teachers, June 18, 2020)

The above quote reflects the concern of teachers about students dropping out of school. This was one of the issues most frequently mentioned by Moctezuma as a concern of the government, but testimonies such as this

demonstrate the divergences between the formal and what really occurred. In the same way, the decisions of our informant's higher-level supervisors about different aspects of government pandemic strategy were not only confusing but also not very opportune in relation to the time management and conditions that they faced in their work:

> The past week, we had our meeting with the supervisor and he told us that everything was going [to end] by July 17 and at the beginning of that week he tells that yeah, the classes were ending and that we have to turn in reports and the rest. So, in this case, we were going to disagree a bit with the supervisor, because we needed time to do it and carry out our process so as not to affect the students. (FG, secondary school directors, June 6, 2020)

> I can also see a great barrier, the chasm in the situations in which we work; ultimately this was something that the SEP had to pay a lot of attention to and, still, well, they said: "*Here it is, do it however you can* [emphasis ours], and the kids will learn and that's it." So, each one of us had to use our own measures, our own resources, to get to the houses of the kids. (FG, primary school directors, June 8, 2020).

Thus, the majority of the teachers to whom we spoke—especially those who worked in rural areas or in marginalized parts of cities—said that many of their students could not "connect" through any electronic media, whether the internet or the necessary television channels. Some teachers also said that the guides-workbooks prepared by the government were neither sufficient nor pedagogically adapted to the different educational contexts around the country. Indeed, the best situation reported was the use of the program as "just another tool" in the repertoire employed by each teacher, and one whose use depended on whether the content transmitted or the programming format—valued *a posteriori* by the teachers—fitted in with the strategy previously planned by the school collective and individual teachers.

Given what we have discussed so far, there is a clear need to look more closely at how school communities carried out their functions while negotiating the crisis caused by the pandemic. After finishing our fieldwork, we were able to identify two predominant decision-making paths among teachers and administrators, which started in the same place and had a similar destinations. Both paths began with the decision to plan a strategy to continue with educational processes, at least during the first weeks of quarantine—which, at the time, was thought to be sufficient—without

continuing to wait for instructions from educational authorities about the seemingly imminent physical isolation measures.

Later, these paths began to fork when it became public that the government's response to the emergency would be through a television program and continued to do so with a series of decisions—made and communicated when everyone was already in confinement—related to matters such as use of the Google platform, the school workbooks to be distributed, and the grading mechanisms. On the one hand, some school communities—apparently the majority—decided to follow the path indicated by the authorities and incorporate the strategies outlined, at least in the beginning. On the other hand, there were educational centers that decided to continue with the strategy that had been planned initially by the school collective itself, without placing value on the directives coming from the government since, in their view, the authorities "had many times demonstrated" their remoteness from the challenges faced by the schools, where the voices of school community members went unheard. Despite all this, the two paths ended up converging; all the school communities we were in touch with ended up favoring their own autonomous forms of education after noting—*a priori* or *a posteriori*—that there was a marked contrast between what they were instructed to do and the needs that they had to meet and that, undoubtedly, these required other processes of decision-making and action:

> As a strategy, here in Chiapas, the government gave us some school workbooks, [all of them] the same, called *Aprende en Casa*. But, well, in my case, I have 100 students, they sent me 30 [school workbooks], and how were we going to reproduce the rest? So, we put them aside. (FG, secondary school directors, June 9, 2020)

> I don't know the "*Aprende en Casa*" strategy to any great extent because it was not a resource that was based on our strategy of distance work as an educational center; still, I think the best distance work strategy is that which each educational center can create; each teacher, adapting to the characteristics of the situation and the needs of the students. (FG, secondary school directors, June 9, 2020)

The convergence of decision-making paths that led to school autonomy without formal recognition can be explained by, among other factors, the limited scope for autonomy that directors and teachers were granted in the guidance of the extraordinary session of the Technical Council for Schools (CTE) on March 23, 2020, after schools were closed. The objectives of the sessions—in addition to discussing the virus—was for "the collective

of teachers to develop a plan for home learning so as to maintain the educational progress of the students during the suspension [of in-person classes] due to the COVID-19 epidemiological emergency" (SEP, 2020m, p. 7). Under these circumstances, the possibilities for decision-making and actions by school actors in the face of the emergency can be considered "weak" on the "continuum of autonomy" of educational policy interventions proposed by the World Bank. On this part of the continuum, schools are allowed autonomy regarding teaching and learning methods but not more ambitious levels of self-government (World Bank, 2007). According to our informants, this already limited level of autonomy was further reduced by the way that *Aprende en Casa* was broadcast. There was no bidirectional flow of information with teachers, and various instructions came down from the central government about actions that, according to the actors, had been previously considered as the conditions required.

Specifically, educational actors identified serious problems related to equity in the federal government strategy. This contrasted with the priorities laid out in PND 2019-2024 and PSE 2020-2024, given that, in the opinion of the teachers and other actors we interviewed, the *Aprende en Casa* strategies did not take into account the range of situations, whether geographical, economic, social, or familial (such as the number of children or the existence of single-parent families), faced by mothers, fathers, tutors, students, and even teachers. For example, the primary level supervisors of a sector in Veracruz noted that the program had not taken into account all the possible circumstances of students and their teachers; therefore, it was not inclusive. In the same way, primary school teachers and/or directors noted that there were difficulties in using the program broadcast by the government, in part because of poor internet and television coverage. They added that it did not provide the curriculum adaptations that each group of students required, according to their conditions. The decision-making and action processes of educational actors found that the program developed by the government was not their main support.

> I didn't really see the relevance of the *Aprende en Casa program*
> […]. Here in the community, we didn't have TV reception, the
> parents who have broadcast television also couldn't catch the
> channels […]. To be honest I didn't use [the] *Aprende en Casa*
> program, it was optional for those who were able to watch it.
> Sometimes, I did see it […]. I don't think that it was for every-
> body because, obviously, I think that everyone here agrees that
> each teacher knows how things are going: some of us are going
> faster, others, slower, and everyone focuses on what their own
> group needs. So, [the] *Aprende en Casa* program was general,

making the assumption that all teachers are going along the same route, that we are in the same place in the program [of studies], and well, for sure that's not how things are. (FG, primary school head teachers (June 8, 2020)

When it comes to the *Aprende en Casa* program, I think that the main difficulty was that not all of them [the students] had internet; some parents started to work with their [cell phone] data but since it is a long program lasting two hours, it used up their data very quickly; so, they told me: "teacher, it's just that, it is a lot of money that has to be invested." So, this was also a reason for telling them: "You know what? let's work just with the school workbooks," because I think this was one of the biggest [problems], that not everybody had access to the internet, not everyone had the same conditions. Of course, I also gave my Zoom class every eight days because one mother told me "My son connects through my husband's cell phone and now he went to work and took it, today my child will not connect for another eight days, teacher." (FG, preschool educational actors, June 15, 2020)

The lack of equity in government interventions was one of the central motives for the implementation of school autonomy amid the need for education contextualization (Gairín, 2015), and is summed up in the words of a primary school supervisor: "If the authorities do not design these local strategies, we do it ourselves (FG, primary school supervisors, May 29, 2020). This same situation can also be appreciated in the words of a primary level sector head interviewed, who noted that "the strategy [of the authorities] has feet of clay […]. It was exclusionary and was designed for boys and girls who were more privileged" (II, head of primary sector, May 5, 2020). When this head was asked "What could have been done so that the strategy was not exclusionary?" he responded:

They should have started by mapping the educational needs of the different sectors of the population and [then] prioritizing the groups at risk […]. There was a need for differentiated strategies and, above all, *having confidence in the schools and the teachers so that they can organize themselves* [emphasis ours] according to their own realities and available resources. (II, primary sector head, May 20, 2020)

When speaking of having confidence in the organization of school communities, this educational actor explicitly emphasizes what is the focus of this article: the need for school autonomy to be part of educational policy,

even if this autonomy takes the form of processes that do not seek recognition or formal permission—especially when facing urgent challenges. "Autonomy in itself will not be consolidated if institutional reforms, such as an educational decision-making decentralization strategy, are not made in the education sector" (INEE, 2019b, p. 5).

These displays of autonomy can be appreciated in the quotes provided above and in others that we share below, in which educational actors intertwine their reflections about the utility and use of the government-implemented strategy—decisions, actions, and omissions—with their own decisions and actions in a challenging environment, often in defiance of directives from federal or state authorities in a top-down (vertical) format.

Of course, several of the teachers and directors interviewed noted that the best strategy is the one in which the educational centers make independent decisions about the directives of federal and state authorities:

> We have to, in planning, to diversify, being in the same group, and, in this case, the television program was only one program for three grades, it wasn't even [categorized] by grade, and later there was no sign, in whatever form, of children's diversity of learning or children's different levels of achievement. [...] So, they took the initiative and said "OK, you [teachers] know your children, know their characteristics, and depending on their level, let's start to plan and send them their homework." (Director, FG, preschool educators, June 15, 2020)

> It makes me sad to see that many decisions that the educational authority asks us to comply with are obviously made at a desk, and they [the decisions] make it clear that the person has never stood before a group of classes [...]. So, I believe that it is a challenge and I believe that the decisions that, as institutions, public or private, that we take, I believe that they are the right ones, because we know our families, our children, their shortcomings, their strong points. (FG, secondary school directors, June 9, 2020)

> The *Aprende en Casa* program is out-of-date, does not fulfill the objectives that we have for our subsystem [...]. No one knows better than us, within our schools, the shortcomings, the limitations. We have our SWOT [analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats] at our institution, only for a program to be launched for us on the federal level that is not contextualized to our necessities. (FG, baccalaureate teachers, June 18, 2020)

This perception—that it is educational actors in the field who are best equipped to decide about a widespread public problem that presents itself in so many different ways was expressed by most of the interviewees when they spoke of the need for greater formal flexibility. They suggested that each school should take the decisions that it considers best in order to prepare for an eventual return to in-person classes. They emphasized that these actors had taken "the pulse" of the needs—and possibilities—of students and colleagues. In the same vein, and given that a consideration of the future is important in ensuring the effectiveness of efforts to achieve school autonomy (Harris, in Murillo & Krichesky, 2015), from the end of the school cycle when the confinement began (2019–2020), some informants shared their plans for a possible return to classes without waiting for instructions "from above" or for in-person classes to be formally resumed. These plans, in direct response to the federal authority's proposals for standardization, included measures such as virtual learning that recognized situations in which contact was socioemotionally necessary, especially for children in preschool, the preparation of integral diagnostics, and some ideas about remedial measures for students who did not have access to materials for virtual education. As one secondary director put it, the idea of dividing the group "from A to L is not functional; at most what I need is, from what I know of my students and knowing who has no access, to bring them in first, give them the attention they need immediately" (FG, secondary directors, June 6, 2020).

5.2 Expressions of school autonomy during the pandemic: identification of four dimensions of direct collective or "democratic" autonomy

The extreme situation that compelled educators to make contextualized decisions to work at a distance with their students also sparked discussion about the need to work collaboratively inside school communities. In our interviews and focus groups, the majority of educational actors—especially those in basic education, and to a lesser degree in the baccalaureate—referred to the fact that their schools held meetings before and during the confinement in which they made decisions in a more or less collegiate manner about the strategies they would follow, the media or tools they would use to implement them, and, if necessary, the changes that needed to be made. These exercises correspond to a subtype of school autonomy that, in the literature review earlier, has been referred to as "democratic" to the extent that the decisions and actions implied direct participation by the school collective. In reference to this, special attention needs to be paid to the experience of one preschool collective:

> Every Monday we hold school meetings via Zoom, during which we make decisions about how we are going to work when some activity or another is coming up. The decisions are made by the group, they are suggested, they are accepted or otherwise, and on this basis, we organize ourselves for the work [to be done]. (FG, educational actors, June 15, 2020)

In this discourse, one can discern the outlines of three elements that Traver et al. (in Moliner el al., 2016) propose as key aspects to passing from what they call "individualist school cultures" to a "collaborative" one: (i) recognizing that the improvement project belongs to the whole educational community; (ii) making decisions by taking into account the plurality of voices respect, tolerance, and empathy; and (iii) working based on transparency that is informative and open to dissent, as examples of confidence and joint responsibility.

Of course, collective work developed out of a profound need that was felt in all the focus groups, and school actors often presented it as a way to improve education in the context of the pandemic. It was proposed, for example: "to strengthen collective work and work among peers [teachers], by trying to achieve a community of learning" (FG, primary school head teachers, June 8, 2020). One teacher noted that this was a priority, and not only during the pandemic:

> So, [I propose] that each school have an emergency action plan, in case of any contingency, whether an earthquake, flood, pandemic, anything that has ravaged us lately. And it is important that […] this emergency plan be prepared by people who work in each school […]. (FG, baccalaureate teachers, June 6, 2020)

Our fieldwork also made clear that decision-making in face of the crisis, while beneficial in terms of the optimization of resources—from finances and the use of time, to taking on emotional needs—was not accomplished without obstacles in any of the school communities, and in some cases it was not achieved at all. One teacher from Oaxaca told us:

> The difficulty we faced was organizing ourselves as a school technical council to create a single strategy for distance work based on the characteristics of our situation. […] I think that this was the greatest challenge that we faced. (FG, high school directors, June 9, 2020)

Based on the voices of the actors with whom we had contact, we can identify four dimensions of school management in which better collegial decision-making and action was possible. These dimensions are explored

next, taking into account the difficulties faced by school communities and the challenges they still face.

Co-formation among peers

The majority of the educational actors reported engaging in at least two co-formation actions with their peers. The first was socialization and the exchange of teaching strategies that could be useful in the conditions imposed by the pandemic. This occurred even before the beginning of the confinement measures, and, albeit in only a few cases, sometimes included virtual meetings, either with all members of the school collective or among small mutual-support groups.

The second co-formation action the actors reported was mutual help to acquire or improve digital abilities for educational ends. One secondary director, for example, reported that in his school a system of peer tutoring was created to follow-up on the need to use these tools. In the case of a preschool collective, all members took the same courses to develop techno-logical skills, and at the end of the sessions they met virtually to discuss and complement what they had learned. The director of the school mentioned that this was "key" to allowing teachers to make optimal use of digital tools in their work.

Coordination in diagnosing and monitoring student conditions

The preschool, primary, and secondary educational actors with whom we talked said that their school communities organized diagnostic exercises to obtain a better understanding of the conditions in which their students lived, and, based on this, plan strategies to continue distance learning. Those who worked in the most disadvantaged communities mentioned that these exercises were decided upon in collegial meetings, and, once the data was collected, students' conditions were discussed in these same spaces. The informants stressed that they had agreed what information about the students they needed to know; for example, whether they had a computer or cell phone, and, if the latter, if it was a smart phone (with capabilities such as a camera, a chat service installed, and so on), the type of television service they had, the working situation of their families, and, in some cases, the technological skills of the students and their relatives.

This type of diagnostics allowed the educational actors to collectively decide on the strategies to use in line with the academic level or socio-economic conditions of the students (FG, primary supervisors, May 29, 2020). For example, the data from the diagnostics were discussed at a meeting of a primary school CTE and it was decided that each group would be divided

into three subgroups according to level of knowledge, since each one used an expressly designed school workbook. Where large gaps between the school and students' homes or a lack of technological media were found, it was decided to visit their homes every once in a while—usually, every 8 to 15 days—to deliver, pick up, and evaluate homework. Thus, the staff of a rural primary school organized visits according to the grade the students were in (one week, 1st–3rd; the next, 4th–6th). There were also schools that agreed to leave their working materials at a place that was an equal distance between them and their students—a bodega, for example—and made the necessary arrangements to this end: leaving a list with the person in charge of the location so that they knew which materials to give to students or to receive from them.

The decision to carry out constant monitoring of students was also one that some school communities made together. An initial form of monitoring, which was more extensive, involved evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies to continue providing education during the confinement, as well as their transformation as new challenges or tools were identified and discussed or as instructions were received from educational authorities. Another type of monitoring was following-up on the situations, needs, and progress of students. This, in addition to promoting the reformulation of the above-mentioned strategies, also motivated the collective implementation of other actions to deal with additional challenges such as students dropping out of school, which is emerging as one of the most serious effects of the pandemic (Valora Consultoría, 2020).

Working through interconnected projects

In every preschool and primary focus group, at least one educational project was mentioned—for example, Art or Spanish—that linked homework content and the use of CTE sessions to plan and evaluate it. This was unexpected, because research on CTEs in Mexico had found that these councils were focused primarily on the deployment of centralist micro-management measures (Luna, 2020). Perhaps their potential as a space for school self-management was activated during the pandemic since it was space they were obligated to attend and coincided with the WHO's official recognition of the pandemic which occurred days before the ordinary session of the CTE on March 13, 2020. This initiated a path of reconceptualization of this space in some schools so as to avoid the organization of time and priorities that the federal government set out in the guides they sent for each session.

However, collective work was more difficult for teachers who worked on the basis of homework assignments, which was the case of high school

and baccalaureate teachers. When it came to the latter, only two of 16 teachers mentioned that they work with cross-cutting projects at their schools; the majority of the teachers reported working on their own. Of the two exceptions, one teacher commented that her school, she worked with activities integrated through modules and in a transdisciplinary manner, which considerably reduced the amount academic work required of the students—who were already tired out because of the economic situation and the health of their family members. The same was true of the teachers, most of whom teach between 400 and 500 students (organized into 10 groups of 40 or 50 students per teacher). After this experience, the teacher said she would "support a project that is collegial, transversal, led—of course—by a supervisor, and by the teachers, who are the ones who know exactly what is going on" (FG, baccalaureate high school teachers, June 18, 2020).

Curricular prioritization: key content and emotional welfare

Some teachers commented that in the meetings that they had with their school collectives—whether at the beginning and/or during the quarantine—the emphasis was on prioritizing content. For example, primary school supervisors mentioned that in the majority of schools, teachers met in order to select and ration the basic content. The directors of the secondary schools who were interviewed also said that their schools prioritized assignments because of the difficulties involved in taking on the complete curriculum in the midst of a pandemic. On both levels, Mathematics and Spanish were prioritized.

Based on various testimonies, we can conclude that during the pandemic—or at least during its first stage—priority was usually given to academic subjects over others. This made it more difficult, in a certain sense, to take care of the welfare—even the physical welfare—of both the student body and the school staff:

> I told them at an academic meeting [*junta de academia*] that we hold every eight days: "You know what? Now ask me how I feel as a teacher," because, the truth is, it's much, much more work so my whole body is affected, and so I got sick. […] I think that it is emotional help [that we need]. (FG, baccalaureate teachers, June 18, 2020).

It became evident that there was a need to prioritize the collective welfare of all members of the school community. In this sense, the testimonies of the preschool teachers stand out. These teachers noted that one of the decisions that they made as a collegiate body was to monitor the emotional state of the students. Therefore, whenever possible, each teacher communicated by

videoconference or phone calls with the students, emphasizing that these meetings were not necessarily classes but spaces for discussing and watching over emotional health:

> It was a moment for socializing, to say hello, [the children] shared their experiences, what they were doing with their time. I told them "Well, now we'll talk about what you like the most, about what we are doing, what we don't like […]" (FG, pre-school educational actors, June 15, 2020)

Other educational actors mentioned that the distance education experience encouraged them to make suggestions and reach agreements. This meant that when they returned to in-person classes, they carried out diagnostics from the viewpoint of comprehensive welfare, with special emphasis on the socio-emotional environment. It is worth mentioning that while there are multiple factors that lead to emotional exhaustion—beyond just the pandemic—the limited management autonomy permitted in Mexican schools could be a strong aggravating factor in this experience, since it has been demonstrated that the greater the levels of school autonomy, the more job satisfaction and motivation among teachers, in addition to high levels of happiness in the whole school community (Al-Bataineh, Mahasneh, & Al-Zoubi, 2021; Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021).

6. Final considerations: lessons from the pandemic for an urgent and sustained school autonomy project

The government's initial decision to implement a television program as its primary distance education measure in order to curb COVID-19 transmission was, at the time, a prudent decision in public health terms. It also relieved some of the pressure for a quick reopening of schools by centering "the welfare of school communities" on physical distancing rather than on the strengthening of schools—both in terms of infrastructure and formally recognized management autonomy.

Following our analysis of the actions carried out by the authorities based on a model of the public policy cycle, we can conclude that the context of the pandemic may have been new, but it was not an isolated episode that led to the near absence of school autonomy in the government response. During the previous six-year term (2012–2018) progress had been made in government recognition that the educational system should include management autonomy in schools, and this was implemented in a very specific way in curricular autonomy and in the design and implementation of the emerging *Aprende en Casa* strategy. However, there were also clear limits

to the scope that educational actors were afforded to make the decisions they considered appropriate in managing the emergency. Of course, the current government has centered its educational policy efforts on the issue of equity, maintaining a discourse stressing the school as a priority, even speaking about the reappraisal of teachers as a new element, but rendering still more hazy the areas in which school communities can formally decide the direction they want to take.

Although this blurring is driven largely by ruptures and not improvements in educational policy, the educational actors interviewed recount how they dealt with distance education in accordance with or despite the instructions they received from authorities. Some the testimonies collected for this study constitute a call for help from educational authorities, asking them to deal with structural issues—infrastructure, resources, teacher training, etc.—and to allow school communities to decide the best courses of action, instead of imposing orders and telling them what they should do. This research allows for a better understanding of the processes of direct collective autonomy that are already taking place in Mexico, even though they still face many challenges and have little visibility. This is a result, among other factors, of the same blurring of the political project of school autonomy in the country. Although the accomplishments of "didactic autonomy" (at the classroom level) are not unrecognized—especially in contexts that are as complex as the current one—it is important not to lose sight of the benefits of the collective work that the educational actors proved was a reachable goal in which they "improve their abilities to make complex pedagogical decisions, thereby becoming protagonists in school decision-making processes" (Moliner et al., 2016).

This study supports the central thesis proposed: school autonomy was a diffuse educational policy project in Mexico both before the pandemic and during the government response to the emergency. Nevertheless, before the pandemic and perhaps more emphatically now and in the future, some school communities have demanded—with words and deeds deployed in a situation of autonomy—to be considered as central and active members of the educational system and, therefore, participants in the decisions that should be made to improve schooling.

Studying the ways in which school communities responded to the emergency problematized the official vision of autonomy, which receives the greatest attention in the academic literature and which dictates that autonomy only exists where it has been formally granted, including by law. It hoped that this research will contribute to a broader definition of school autonomy, both on the theoretical and the practical level, through

a recognition of the expressions of school autonomy that play out despite the verticality that prevails in many educational systems around the world (OCDE, 2020).

In this sense, it is considered that school autonomy, and especially the expansion of its definition, is closely linked to the notion of "governance" understood as "the process of governing or management of society through which a society directs, governs, and manages itself" (Aguilar, 2006, p. 70). That is, school autonomy is not thought of as autocracy or anarchy, but rather as the recognition of the real, although limited, capacities of all the actors in social systems—in this case, the educational system—to decide the direction of a society and to carry out the actions intended to do this, which presupposes structures in the form of less vertical and much more horizonal networks (Aguilar, 2008).

This article also intends to contribute to the discussion about the need for a governance scheme in the Mexican educational system that is more decisive and long-term, and characterized by timely and horizontal leadership. This would serve as an acknowledgement of their own capabilities as well as those possessed by school communities to organize themselves autonomously, stemming from their experiences and proven knowledge in a terrain in crisis.

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