Nicaragua's Experiment to Decentralize Schools: Views of Parents, Teachers, and Directors

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Abstract

In 1993 Nicaragua introduced a reform granting managerial and budgetary autonomy to school-based councils. This qualitative analysis conducted in 12 primary and secondary schools reports how teachers, parents and school directors are interpreting and implementing the reform. The data are drawn from focus-group meetings or key informant interviews with school-based staff and parents which were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed by a multinational team of researchers. The research focuses on three key areas: the variability in school contexts, how different school-based actors interpret “autonomy”, and changes in the schools resulting from the reform. The analysis reveals that the highly variable school contexts into which the school-based management reform is introduced have an important effect on how the reform is adopted and received. Cohesive schools with a strong sense of mission and schools in somewhat wealthier areas report more successful experiences, highlighting effects on accountability and shared responsibility. By contrast, internally fractured schools in poorer areas tend to emphasize negative, frequently financial aspects of autonomy.
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Summary

The Nicaraguan Government in 1993 began to grant management and budgetary “autonomy” to selected secondary schools. Today, all secondary and many primary schools have been pulled into the decentralization initiative.

By 1995 the Ministry of Education, with support from the World Bank, had committed to conducting a thorough formative evaluation of this bold experiment in partially delinking local schools from the central Ministry.

This paper reports initial findings from the process evaluation -- based on qualitative evidence drawn from 12 schools -- as one component of the Ministry’s overall evaluation effort. This paper does not attempt to answer the broad question, Is decentralization working well? Instead, this study analyzes how parents, teachers, and school directors are interpreting and implementing the substantial decentralization of management.

Drawing from over 80 completed interviews and focus groups, we attempted to classify the positive, disinterested, and negative reports of school staff and parents about how autonomy is playing out inside their schools. From this inventory of salient issues, we pursued distinct lines of analysis that speak to three basic questions:

- **How does a school’s history and community condition how school autonomy is implemented?** Schools have had fairly institutionalized patterns of authority and leadership, long before the advent of decentralized governance. We heard much about how autonomía fell onto the micro-politics and social norms that lend cohesion or chaos inside the school organization.

- **How do parents, teachers, school directors actively interpret and make meaning around the Ministry’s school autonomy initiative?** We report how different elements of autonomía come to be viewed as more salient than others: parents’ worries about rising student fees, or teachers’ focus on how to improve student progress, for example.

- **What the major points of success, resistance or indifference as decentralized governance unfolds in autonomous schools?** Our research focuses on four major issues: parents’ participation; the altered character of school management and leadership; shifts in school-level financing and spending; and how pedagogical practices and classrooms are touched by autonomía.

This paper presents the diverse voices and viewpoints of school-level actors. From this evidence, we cautiously advance specific suggestions for how the decentralization program might be adjusted.
I. Introduction: Evaluating the Local Process of Decentralization and Reporting Views from the Grassroots

The political push to decentralize school management has seeped outward from the West over the past decade, spreading across continents into many policy circles. Domestic leaders and international agencies have come to believe that expanding school choice and making schools "autonomous" from public bureaucracy will lead to all sorts of positive outcomes. This faith has grown stronger as policy leaders and local activists have come to disdain what they see as cumbersome and costly bureaucracy and increasingly doubt the effectiveness of central Government. Many now embrace the market metaphor for how public institutions should be held more directly accountable to deliver on their promises.¹

This paper focuses on Nicaragua's ongoing effort to decentralize the daily management of its local schools, a serious policy reform first begun in 1993 by the center-right party of Violetta Chamorro. The Nicaraguan initiative to implement a program of "democratic education" (educación democrática) is an important case from the developing world, since the Chamorro Administration's policies were formed in counterpoint to the centralized policies pressed by the leftist Sandinista government. The latter's policies were largely pushed by a top-down structure that was ironically continuous with the administrative centralism of the Somoza education ministry but, of course, radically different in its educational aims and content.²

The West's latest push to de-center school management away from the State or local bureaucracy originated in Britain and the United States, where central Government already held limited authority vis-à-vis local provinces or school districts.³ These Reagan-Thatcher era reforms focusing on school-based management were taken up by development banks and developing-county governments anxious to reduce the size of state bureaucracies and raise school effectiveness. In the case of Latin America, control over school funding, curricula, and personnel issues has long been centralized. This administrative centralism represents both a remnant of colonial administration and a manifestation of contemporary concern over how to best equalize school resources between rich and poor communities.
Formatively Evaluating the Reform

Nicaragua's version of school reform focuses on decentralizing management and budget decisions to local school councils (consejos directivos). The policy theory argues that when school-level actors -- including parents, teachers, and the school director -- assume political and financial control, accountability will be more direct and resources will be allocated more rationally to raise student achievement. While private schools do operate in Managua and in secondary towns, the decentralization program is not aimed at raising parents’ ability to choose from among different schools (as emphasized elsewhere in voucher experiments, magnet or charter school arrangements).

Instead, Nicaragua's “theory of action” is founded on the argument that autonomous schools (centros autónomos) will be self-governing organizations that are more directly subjected to parental pressure and involvement, and better able to draw resources from the local community via tuition fees (cuotas) and contributed labor. School councils now have wide ranging legal authority: the power to hire and fire school staff, including the school director, to adjust teacher salaries (incentives), set and collect student fees, to select from available textbooks, and to carry out evaluations of teachers. The consejo in theory can allocate available teaching posts and cash to any mix of school inputs, training programs, or curricular area that it sees fit.4

In late 1995, a collaborative research team of Nicaraguan Ministry staff and North American researchers began to design a formative evaluation of how school-level actors understand and respond to the government's decentralization initiative. Our objective is not to judge whether the reform is "working" throughout Nicaragua. Instead, our aim has been to ask local actors' about their own views -- including parents, teachers, school directors, and regional Ministry staff -- and to analyze how this ambitious structural change is enabling or constraining these actors at the grassroots, inside their schools. Parallel to our qualitative study, the government and the World Bank have undertaken a quantitative study to assess implementation, employing school survey and student achievement measures.5
This paper draws exclusively on qualitative interview data, focusing on how local school actors across 12 sampled schools see and define autonomy (autonomia) through their own eyes. We attempt to discern patterns, such as conditions across a range of communities that constrain implementation, or elements of the reform that remain not well understood or difficult to implement. We also highlight variation in how different actors interpret the bundle of organizational changes that school autonomy advocates intend to push forward. For example, we will see how school directors see decentralization in a much different light than do parents. But our main purpose is to illuminate how key actors situated in particular schools, each with a distinct history and set of organizational dynamics, construct meanings about "decentralization," connotations that may resemble or depart from conceptions of the reform held by policy makers and ministry officials in Managua.

To repeat: these qualitative data are not sufficient to judge the efficacy of a complex reform that remains in its infancy. Instead, we report on how different school-level actors are constructing the meaning of school autonomia -- and specific elements of the reform that seem helpful or problematic as local actors struggle to improve their schools.

We also emphasize that this is report is one among several that will stem from the Ministry’s evaluation project. This particular paper is co-authored by two scholars based in the United States. The roles of the entire research team are described below.

**Organization of the Paper**

We begin in Section II by delineating the core aims, expressed by Nicaraguan policy makers, in devolving political and fiscal authority to local school councils. This reform manifests a simple model for how school actors’ actions are to change, as well as the underlying social norms and economic incentives that are to reshape the motivations of these actors. In turn, this model offers a framework for assessing whether organizational changes are in reality occurring, as seen through the eyes of school-level actors. This framework is introduced in Section III. A good deal of theory and empirical evidence has been developed in other contexts
which points to institutional factors that may limit implementation of this idealized model of decentralization. We briefly articulate these theoretical perspectives, for they lend order to the successes and barriers experienced by school actors in the Nicaraguan context, as they attempt to become independent of central authority and regulation.

Second, we move to an analysis of the data in Sections IV, V and VI, summarizing what we heard from school actors in the 12 sampled schools. This paper focuses on the reports of parents, teachers, and school directors. They will refer to the other two sources of data also included in our study: the local delegación (the Ministry’s regional education office) and the consejo directivo (with which we conducted a focus group discussion). We have organized the views of these focal actors along the following three sets of questions:

- **Variability in school contexts.** How does the school context condition or interact with the implementation of “school autonomy.” How is authority and political power understood within the local school? Is decentralization altering these sources of authority and influence?

- **The contrasting meanings of “autonomía.”** How does the interpreted meaning and key elements of autonomía del centro (school autonomy) vary among parents, teachers, and school directors?

- **Organizational changes inside schools.** How the school’s organizational structure and financing change under autonomy? We focus on four specific areas: parent participation, management and leadership, spending patterns and parental fees (cuotas), and classroom pedagogy.

These three areas complement and play off one another in a number of key ways. First, the perceptions of school-based actors of the effect of autonomía can be quite divergent,
especially in schools that lack cohesion and a shared mission, prior to the onset of decentralization. Second, the \textit{a priori} conditions found inside schools, from material conditions to a recent history of cohesion or contention, vary sharply across schools. These deep-seated exogenous forces at the school level appear to interact with changes in the school’s micro-politics. For example, when the focal point of authority shifts to the new \textit{consejo} in what has been a divided school, the results can be quite negative. Rather than asking whether the school autonomy experiment is working, yes or no? We might more usefully ask, What elements of decentralization are working under what types of school conditions? Third, different observers differ in the criteria they employ for judging whether an organizational innovation is "working," calling for different kinds of evidence to substantiate claims of effectiveness. Is decentralization working in the sense that authority is shifting down to local \textit{consejos} and directors? Can we claim that the reform is working only if student attainment or achievement levels rise in decentralized schools? If parent involvement rises but not student achievement, can we still declare victory? Perhaps we will learn more from schools that are struggling to decentralize but student performance remains unchanged, that is, where the experiment is \textit{not} working.

Finally, in Section VIII we interpret and draw tentative conclusions from these three lines of analysis. The school's context and local history -- set long before the Government began its decentralization initiative -- continue to shape how this new policy reform is playing out. Drawing inferences about the policy initiative itself is difficult, since the very meaning of the reform is embedded within particular school situations. Given the formative spirit of our process evaluation, we will put forward tentative claims about which elements seem to be working and where weaknesses in the \textit{autonomia} initiative (or intransigent contextual forces surrounding schools) will likely persist over the long run. We are learning much about how a school's context can mitigate against successful implementation and what features of the school organization serve to enhance the aims of decentralization.
How Do We Determine If Schools Are Decentralizing Successfully?

Central policy makers often tacitly assume that a universally applied remedy is received by local schools in uniform ways: by lifting the heavy hand of central regulation and bureaucratic control, a thousand (organizational) flowers will bloom and school actors will assume wise leadership with complete information. This, of course, rarely transpires in private producer or consumer markets. The internal dynamics of firms and the institutionalized facets of their environments or sectors condition their ability to flourish in deregulated contexts. The voices of local actors that you will hear below testify to the exogenous force of a school's prior history, surrounding economic conditions, and its coherent (or chaotic) management structure. It is into this soil that the school autonomy mandate is planted.

This is young and massive policy experiment that is still being nurtured at the grassroots, inside schools and communities. We will be direct and candid when we see common constraints on key elements of the decentralization program. For example, in several impoverished school contexts it unlikely that a sizable share of parents will ever pay higher cuotas or student fees, as expected by the Ministry. We will advance evidence that points to small victories in the push to decentralize school management. For instance, when school directors exhibit keen interest in pedagogical improvements, autonomia allows them to shift resources into teacher training, often reinforced by the central Ministry's parallel push to implement metodología activa, a Deweyian form of active learning and pedagogy that has become quite popular in many schools.

Our interviews and focus groups were conducted in 1996, about two years into the program. A portion of our sampled schools were only in their first year of autonomia. This is not an ethnographic study: we have conducted few observations of actual behavior in our 12 sampled schools. Instead, we have a collection of reports and perceptions from school actors about how decentralization is taking shape. We have collected a rich volume of data, drawing from individual interviews, focus groups, and informal conversations in the sampled schools.
II. Nicaragua’s School Autonomy Reform

Government's Aims and Assumptions in Decentralizing School Management

The story begins with the objectives -- articulated by central policy-makers -- of their decentralization initiative. These official aims helped to focus our interview questions when we visited schools, defining specific elements of the reform where one expects to see change. We also aimed to learn about the pre-existing character of the school, including its leadership, forms of parental involvement, and degree of interest in classroom and pedagogical improvement.

Figure 1 provides a simple model of how Nicaragua's version of school decentralization intends to alter organizational processes within the school, as well as strengthen linkages with parents and the community. In turn, as the school's management becomes more democratic and participatory, and locally generated revenues increase, spending patterns are to become more rational, allocated to efforts that directly improve pedagogy and boost student achievement. We have included a vector of influence related to the school's particular community context and organizational history. We will return to how these two factors condition or interact with Managua’s decentralization thrust to determine whether intended management and financing reforms are observed within particular schools.
Figure 1. Decentralization as a Model of Action

**Decentralization Policies**
- Deregulating central controls (personnel, budgets, curriculum, and pedagogy)
- Shifting financing of schools to local levels

**School Organizational Change**
- Direct accountability and parent involvement
- Rise in local financing
- Stronger focus on pedagogy and student achievement
- More rational, efficient spending decisions

**Intended Outcomes**
- Teachers who are more committed to pedagogical improvements
- Gains in student learning

**Local Conditions & Organizational History**
- Poverty
- School cohesion or chaos
- Historical support for the school
This basic model is energized by theorized mechanisms and assumptions inherent in decentralization schemes. First, school-level actors presumably know the most about constraints on student achievement; they will make more rational spending decisions in ways that more effectively boost "output." Second, parents can now press directly for greater accountability, to ensure that teachers are working effectively and instructional "production" occurs in a more consistent and effective manner. Third, as parents become more involved with the school and in their child's learning, they will be willing to contribute additional revenue to the school. Fourth, as front-line workers (the teachers) participate more democratically in school decision-making, their morale and engagement will rise. The intellectual roots of these key mechanisms stem from economics (where demand signals and accountability to the consumer demand are fundamental) and from organizational theory which emphasizes how greater worker motivation can result from democratic participation with in the local unit that is situated closest to the client (in this case, students and parents).6

How are these theoretical mechanisms incorporated into the Nicaragua decentralization initiative? What school-level organizational effects are intended by policy makers in Managua, as they expand the number of primary and secondary schools that are granted autonomia? The designers of decentralization have been very clear and explicit about the ultimate aims of this initiative: to raise student achievement and to lower the rates at which children repeat grades or simply leave school. These intended end results are blended with intermediate organization-level changes that we expect to see.

In 1995, the Ministry's Dirección General de Descentralización issued a clear guide to its policy aims and how schools that agree to decentralize should change. This specific set of expectations is entitled, "Normativa de Funcionamiento de Centros Autonomos" ("Norms for Administering Autonomous Schools"). Indeed, this policy statement offers a new normative set of six principles for how "autonomous schools" should behave.7
Schools should raise their academic performance (rendimiento académico) so that students will cover more material and learn it more thoroughly.

Parents should be integrated into the administration and development of the school.

Resources should be allocated more efficiently within the school, including human and material resources.

A norm of transparency should be set to encourage greater local involvement (una cultura de transparencia económica, moral y ética).

Decision making within the school should aim to benefit the students as the first priority.

Additional financial support should be mobilized to ensure access for all children.

This policy pronouncement requires that schools keep information on their grade repetition and drop-out rates. The logic for raising student fees or cuotas is presented, including how exemptions will be controlled. Salary incentives for teachers are discussed, including criteria for determining which teachers should receive these wage augmentations, financed in part by higher student cuotas. The composition and functions of the school governing council (consejo directivo) are delineated. The school director's role is adjusted, theoretically to be subordinate to the consejo authority, a body which includes the director, parents and teachers as members (and a student at the secondary level). Finally, the central Ministry of Education's responsibilities are specified, including provision of training and technical assistance to each consejo, aid in setting-up each autonomous school's local bank account, providing approved textbooks to the schools, ensuring that national laws are observed pertaining to student expulsion or the firing of teachers, and overseeing evaluation activities. In sum, Government is to charter
the independent governance of participating schools and centrally fulfill certain obligations to these schools.

The Chamorro Government began, in 1993, a pilot effort to transform the old consejos consultivos into full-fledged governing councils, involving 20 hand-picked secondary schools. In 1994, an additional 33 secondary schools agreed to become autonomous. By the end of 1995, over 350 additional primary and secondary schools were participating in the reform. The initiative now includes some rural schools, organized into nucleos where a centrally located school performs management functions and operates the bank account for the school cluster. Our sample of 12 schools cuts across these various types of primary and secondary schools.

To become autonomous, a majority of the teachers must sign, along with the director, a petition indicating to the Ministry that they want to participate in the decentralization initiative. The central Ministry or the local delegado reportedly initiated this process in several schools, not the school director or teachers, especially during the initial two years of the program. We heard several reports of coercion, mainly reported by teachers, around this mechanism of how autonomy is “requested.” This initial process is not clearly understood and warrants further research. In some cases, the local education official, the delegado, or the town's political leaders pushed for school autonomy. In other cases, school staff were told that they would be shifted to local government control if they did not petition for autonomy. Local educators generally felt more comfortable with remaining under the Ministry of Education, albeit with autonomy, rather than face the less predictable influence of the local political leadership (alcaldes). Where participation in the decentralization program is viewed as coerced, rather than voluntarily chosen, teacher and director views are predictably more negative.

Once autonomy is approved by the Ministry, training is supposed to commence for new consejo members and school staff. They are to become familiar with the objectives of decentralization and the micro mechanisms necessary for realizing the benefits, including how to operate consejo meetings democratically, how to encourage greater parent participation in school activities, how to collect student cuotas more consistently, how to allocate salary incentives, and
so forth. We will detail how information about decentralization -- despite clear policy statements emanating from Managua -- at times becomes quite hazy at the grassroots. Information appears to flow unevenly through the local delegados and technical pedagogical or staff development officers (known locally as técnicos). And the bits of information that flow into schools via workshops is then bent and reinterpreted by directors and staff in various ways. We will examine how these information flows, bounded and biased, hold implications for the meanings attached to autonomia and levels of commitment to reform inside schools.

Overall, one must keep in mind that this reform is focused on administrative and fiscal decentralization of school management. Schools establish their own bank accounts into which the Ministry shifts its financial allocation; consejos assume management and budgetary responsibility; efforts are made to widen parent participation and pursue instructional improvements via the director and consejo. The entire effort aims to craft a more responsive, more accountable, and more transparent school organization.

The Nicaragua experiment resembles only a handful of related decentralization efforts, such as the Chicago reform in the early 1990s that moved budgets and authority down to the school level -- and substantially cut back the system's bureaucratic apparatus. The Nicaraguan model of decentralization differs from school voucher or choice experiments as found in Chile or the U.K. which push parents to operate as free market actors, aiming to stimulate the creation of new types of schools and (theoretically) will let ineffective schools whither and die.

We should emphasize that the topic of decentralization has long been debated in Nicaragua. The Somoza regime delivered education and social services through 15 departmental offices spread across the country. In 1982 the Sandinista government -- aiming to improve popular participation and management of services -- moved to six regional offices. The Chamorro reforms may represent a more radical form of decentralization: school budgets and personnel control are vested with the school-based consejo directivo. We will report, however, how regional delegados (delegates of the Ministry of Education) continue to play an influential
role, often linked to the way teaching posts or instructional materials are distributed among schools in the region.

**Parallel School Improvement Efforts**

Nicaragua's education ministry has not focused solely on decentralizing school management, halting all centralized action on other fronts. This is a crucial point in how the State is attempting to adjust its central role. In our school visits and interviews we heard much about three Ministry initiatives that are centrally directed and involve the regional education office (the delegación). First, the Ministry has designated a series of "model schools" (centros modelos) that allegedly display strong management and student performance. This designation holds real currency and status in local communities. It also may bring additional resources for teacher training or infrastructure improvements. Second, models schools at times gain access to the Government's Fondo de Inversión Social de Emergencia (FISE), a fund supported by international donors to finance infrastructure projects, including improvements in school facilities. Third, the Ministry is investing heavily in a new approach to classroom teaching, the metodología activa. Many teachers and school directors that we interviewed are excited about this innovation that emphasizes a Deweyian or constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Students are encouraged to become more active participants in the classroom; field trips and community visits provide new material for classroom lessons. Teacher-made materials also are used when standard textbooks and workbooks are in short supply.

Overall, these three initiatives provide new resources and status to a subset of schools, often the same schools that are participating in the decentralization experiment. They have become "autonomous," but at the same time these schools are more likely to receive support from these centrally run programs. As we will see from the reports of school staff and parents, the central Ministry remains quite vivid in the overall picture. It is the Ministry that is seen as the source of innovation and discretionary resources, especially for facilities improvement and
pedagogical reform. School autonomy has not resulted in a Ministry that recedes to the backdrop. Within certain delimited areas, the Ministry remains in center-stage.

**How Is Decentralization Constrained or Ignored?**

Our interviews with school staff and parents illuminated the salient *school-level processes* on which successful implementation depends. We introduced above the theoretical intentions and anticipated benefits of decentralizing management of a multi-layered organization. Many people have studied how these local processes can be subverted, insufficiently energized, or simply ignored.

Economists and decision theorists talk much about *bounded rationality*, how the calculus involved in optimizing intended outcomes is often constrained by *incomplete information*. Parents, for example, may prefer to hold teachers accountable but they have incomplete information about whether the teacher arrives on time or whether the teacher is using optimal pedagogical practices. Local decision-makers may earnestly aim to allocate school resources to those inputs and social processes that raise student achievement levels; but they may have little information on which specific spending strategies will, yield higher performance most efficiently. We will hear much about the Ministry's efforts to provide richer information about decentralization, including workshops for new *consejo* members, coaching by the local *delegado*, and school visits by Ministry officials. Yet information gaps continue to be wide and consequential.

Similarly, the allocation of incentive pay --for teachers who are punctual and seemingly effective in raising achievement, for example -- should be grounded in clear information about how to perform according to unambiguous criteria and that are known to boost student achievement. Yet teacher incentive or merit pay schemes have broken down when performance criteria are unclear or seem arbitrary, a common problem in areas of production --like teaching -- where optimal methods or "technology" are difficult to specify. In addition, the value of the incentive must be sufficient to alter teacher behavior over time.
Decentralization initiatives also can be threatened by contests over political authority and power. Donald Winkler has documented how, across several Latin American cases, traditional local authorities can block any new distribution of power implied under decentralization. In the Nicaraguan case, we will detail two types of power struggles that are unfolding. First, there is confusion around the local delegado's authority, even contention over this office’s utility under decentralization. The delegado continues to have an active role in influencing the allocation of teacher posts: even when a local consejo decides that they can afford to hire an additional teacher (or is attempting to rid the school of an ineffective teacher) this regional education officer wields considerable influence. This may help equalize the distribution of teaching posts across the local region, but confusion abounds over who controls the movement of such posts.

Second, we will see how teachers hold varying views of their own power and authority within the school. The Ministry's decentralization scheme charters the consejo with the most authority. The teacher representatives (two) often are those with the most seniority. Remaining teachers then vary in how much influence or participation they express within the school. Some teachers fear that the director and leading parents have gained too much power over school affairs; other teachers report democratic and highly participatory social relations.

Finally, decentralization may be slowed by highly institutionalized organizational routines and taken-for-granted or cultural assumptions regarding authority, expertise, and participation. We will hear, for example, about how many parents do not assume that they hold the authority or the knowledge to participate in the school's decisionmaking. Teachers often are not clear about how to work as colleagues, rather than as independent actors working in their isolated classroom. Institutional arrangements set material constraints, as well. For example, banks simply don't exist in many peri-urban and rural areas, making the decentralization of school finance very difficult. Some directors must take a full day to get to the closest town with a bank. As report the voices of school-level actors in this analysis the social and material facets of such institutional constraints will become more vivid and numerous.
What Can We Learn from a Process Evaluation?

Policy makers and donors want answers to the bottom-line question, Is decentralization working? Our process evaluation, however, will not unambiguously answer this question. You will hear how some elements of decentralization are motivating school-level actors to take a larger and more participatory role in addressing a variety of problems. You also will actors speak of severe constraints -- informational, economic, and social -- that stifle anticipated gains from autonomous school management. In short, the qualitative evaluation illuminates micro processes that manifest examples of small victories and sticky constraints on successful implementation. Several of these factors also are discussed within the quantitative evaluation work being conducted by the Ministry and the World Bank.

Remember that the move to decentralize school management is a young reform. Most of the 12 schools that we studied had been granted autonomy only within the past 12-18 months. Decentralization should be seen as a long, iterative process -- moving through rounds of adjusting roles, forms of authority, patterns of participation. Our interviews and focus groups occurred while most schools were suffering from significant growing pains. We highlight constraints on decentralization that will likely persist -- particularly severe levels of poverty that render as unrealistic the Ministry’s expectations that parents pay higher cuotas (to finance teacher incentive pay). Many other constraints and information gaps, however, may well be addressed by an active central Ministry over the next few years.

The parents, teachers, and directors we interviewed taught us one crucial lesson: The extent to which decentralization takes hold greatly depends on the strength of the school's a priori leadership, teacher cohesion, and level of parent participation. Policy makers view decentralization as holding universal ingredients; but which elements actually stick to the school, and which fall away, is conditioned by the school's own context and prior history. We do endeavor to provide a general picture of what decentralizing mechanisms might be pursued in the future, and where idealized aims don't measure up to the conditions found in many local schools.
With this backdrop in mind, we next turn to our research method, then to the voices and viewpoints expressed by parents, teachers, and school directors.

**III. Evaluation Method: Sampling for Variability among Schools, Communities, and Actors**

**Selecting Schools**

The entire sample for the process evaluation includes 18 primary and secondary schools. Our principal aim was to study decentralization under widely varying conditions. This sample size provided wide variability in local conditions while allowing sufficient time to thoroughly study each school. Qualitative research does *not* attempt to sample actors or units that are representative of the entire population (of organizations or individuals); the goal is not to make general inferences that characterize the entire system, as with survey research that draws data from large samples. Instead, process evaluations dig more deeply into a relatively small number of cases or settings to understand local dynamics and the emic perceptions of actors embedded within their particular contexts. Our fundamental objective is to report the views and voices of local actors, capturing and lending order to their varied perceptions of what action is unfolding in their schools.

To ensure variability in schools and their community settings, we sampled schools along five dimensions. We began by partitioning the school sample between 8 primary and 10 secondary schools. Remember that several secondary schools had joined the decentralization program early on, prior to inclusion of primary schools. Second, we selected three pairs of secondary schools that joined the effort in 1993, 1994, and 1995, respectively. Third, we selected "control schools" to assess variability in school management and organizational dynamics among schools who remained outside the decentralization program. Fourth, we utilized 1995 survey data to assess reported levels of activity and participation to ensure variability among autonomous schools. This exemplifies the advantage of conducting both
qualitative and quantitative evaluation research simultaneously. We wanted to be careful not to attribute certain organizational actions to decentralization which were simply typical of all schools. Finally, we selected 3 rural primary schools, operating under the rural school clusters or Núcleos Educativos Rurales Autónomos (NER), and 3 urban primary schools. Our research spent 2-3 days in each school in 1996, conducting individual interviews and focus groups, as well as engaging in less formal conversations and observations.

Our research team has completed all interviews and the data analysis for 12 of the original 18 sampled schools. The remaining six schools will be included in the Ministry’s report on the process evaluation. The present paper focuses on these 12 schools. Table 1 provides basic data on the 12 schools, drawing from the quantitative research work being done by the Ministry and the World Bank. This survey research includes directors, teachers, and several parents from a large sample of primary and secondary schools. These basic descriptors for the 12 schools included in the present analysis illustrate the diversity of schools found throughout Nicaragua.

To ensure anonymity for each school, we have assigned an identifying code to indicate whether it is a primary or secondary school, and an autonomous or control school. Thus, school PA1 is a primary school that has been granted autonomy. School SC2 is a secondary school that has not been decentralized (a control school).
Table 1. Twelve Schools Included in the Process Evaluation

<table>
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<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Student-Teacher Ratio</th>
<th>Teachers’ Experience</th>
<th>Director’s Education</th>
<th>Mothers’ Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PA1</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>8.5 yrs.</td>
<td>5 yrs</td>
<td>5.5 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA2</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA3</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC1</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC2</td>
<td>1,619</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA1</td>
<td>1,720</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>SA2</td>
<td>1,177</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>15.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA3</td>
<td>1,028</td>
<td>29.4</td>
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</tr>
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<td>11.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA5</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC1</td>
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<td>43.6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC2</td>
<td>156(134)*</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* School has a primary education component, as well. Figures in parentheses are for primary-age students. The pupil:teacher ratio combines primary and secondary enrollment and divides by all teachers in the school.

Many primary schools are of moderate size, with enrollments below 400 children in many cases. But PC2 had an enrollment of 1,619 when visited in 1996. The allocation of teacher posts is not equitable across schools: Under 20 students are enrolled in PA3 for every teacher employed, versus over 46 pupils per teacher in PC2.

Secondary schools are typically quite large and display varying staffing characteristics. Enrollment levels in the five autonomous school studied ranged from 710 students in SA5 to 1,720 in SA1. As with primary schools, the allocation of teaching posts is widely uneven. In
one control school (SC2), almost 21 pupils were enrolled for every teacher; in contrast, this ratio equaled over 54 to 1 in SA5. The director in SA4 had completed six years of teacher preparation and university training after graduating from secondary school. In contrast, the director of SC2 had only finished her secondary school diploma. Among parents sampled for the community survey, school attainment levels do not extend far beyond primary school, on average.

**Interviews and Focus Groups**

Our evaluation design focused on how three sets of actors understand and view the decentralization process inside their particular school: parents, teachers, and school directors (la directora o el director del centro). We also aimed to learn how the consejo operates and attempts to guide the process of school autonomy. Finally, we interviewed a professional staff member in the local education office, either the delegado or the técnico, the pedagogical or staff development specialist. To understand the consejo's internal dynamics, we conducted a 60-90 minute interview with the entire council. To maximize variation among the teachers and parents with whom we spoke, separate focus group sessions were conducted with 3-5 individuals from each of these two groups at each school. These sessions lasted up to two hours, but typically were about 90 minutes in length. The present paper focuses on the individual interviews of directors, and the focus group sessions with parents and teachers.

A series of guided interview questions were developed for each individual interview or focus-group session. Confidentiality was ensured for all individuals. We were careful to neither share information from one session to the next, nor to mix different actors into the same focus groups. We aimed to compare and contrast the views of the three groups -- parents, teachers, and school directors. The interview protocol led with warm-up questions designed to establish rapport and a spirit of candor. All interviews were conducted by native Nicaraguans. We began by asking about the strengths of the school (independent of their participation in decentralization). We asked about who exercises leadership (liderazgo fuerte) in the school, or
from the community, for the benefit of the school. Parenthetically, the leadership question proved to be problematic in schools with apparently weak leadership, or where teachers and parents saw "leadership" not as rooted in an individual but in the collective action of the school staff as a whole.

We then moved into a set of questions that asked about what "descentralización" or "autonomía" meant to them, that is, what does this push by the Ministry connote in their minds? We explored whether “autonomous management” led to changes in the school, be they positive or negative changes. To pursue this topic, each interviewer had a set of five changes that are intended by the program, such as vesting authority in the new consejo, involving more teachers in school-wide decision making, broadening parental involvement, boosting cuotas charged to parents, and expanding staff development opportunities. We were careful not to cue particular responses, while attempting to stimulate their reports and interpretations of changes that appeared to be linked to the process of decentralization.18

Research staff were trained to use these protocols as flexible guides for individual interviews or focus groups. This training, conducted over a week within the Ministry, involved simulated interviews that were videotaped and reviewed, as well as pilot interviews in actual schools, leading to adjustments in the protocols. All research staff received instruction in qualitative methods and how to conduct focus group interviews. Two of the five team members had worked on similar studies or had completed graduate level training in research methodology. Once field work began, in the spring of 1996, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. In total, 82** interview sessions were completed and transcribed across the 18 sampled schools. In some cases, the local delegado was unavailable for an interview or the parent focus group could not be organized. Completed interview transcripts were generally between 16-20 pages in length.
Collaborative Research Team

Process evaluations require the careful collection of qualitative data from local actors involved in reform. This is a labor intensive endeavor, organizing and conducting individual interviews, focus groups, informal conversations, and simply residing in local settings, observing the “natural life” of the organization. Technical knowledge is crucial: much has been learned about qualitative forms of research, including how to collect information and analyze it. The research team must also include members with local knowledge and a sensitivity to what local actors are saying, how they see and perceive the scene and their own actions. This is difficult when the reform being evaluated is controversial and political charged. One must strive to understand a teacher’s or parent’s view of the dynamics in question, unclouded by other interpretations that are swirling about.

Our research team brought together a diverse set of researchers and policy analysts -- all dedicated to learning about how local schools actors, parents, and education officials are making sense of the decentralization movement. The process evaluation was originally advanced by Patricia Callejas, chief of evaluation and research in the Ministry of Education, working with Elizabeth King and Laura Rawlings at the World Bank. Bruce Fuller and Magdalena Rivarola were asked to work with the Nicaraguan team to craft the evaluation design -- to design initial interview questions, construct a diverse sample of schools representing various local settings, devise a method for coding interview and focus group data, and assist in analyzing the mountains of transcriptions produced in Nicaragua.

This paper is an initial analysis of our rich qualitative data. It is one input into the Ministry’s evaluation effort. This paper stems from two years of collaboration with our colleagues in Managua and Washington. Liliam López and Nora Gordon provided constant nurturing and guidance for this work within the Ministry. Working under Patricia Callejas, the Ministry’s evaluation staff aided our work on the overall design, adjusted interview protocols, and conducted all data collection activities in the 18 schools over a six-month period in 1996. Under the overall coordination of Ms. López, this difficult and illuminating work was done by
Adolfo Huete, Reyna López and Zayda Rugama with the assistance of Orlando Vásquez, Cecilia Aguilar, Mercedes Aguilar and Vidal Téllez. Nora Mayorga de Caldera, with the Ministry of Education-based World Bank Basic Education Project, ensured that the necessary resources were flowing to sustain this work.

The marriage between the Harvard team (Mr. Fuller and Ms. Rivarola) and the Managua team was arranged by Elizabeth King at the World Bank. Ms. King and Laura Rawlings have provided technical coaching and moral support throughout the three-year life of the process evaluation. Additional reports and research papers will follow this one, drawing from what has become a rich and intriguing data set. The Ministry has collected a wide range of both survey and qualitative evaluation data, including information on how well children are performing in decentralized schools.

Data Analysis Procedure

To identify thematic areas for more focused analysis, and to reduce the amount of narrative data contained in the original transcripts, a 2-4 page summary was constructed for each interview or focus group session. These summaries distilled the lengthy transcripts down into more discrete sets of evidence, matching fundamental themes that emerged across schools. These basic topics include: What is the meaning of, or the most salient connotations linked to, decentralization? What are key characteristics of the school organization, including strengths and problems? What are positive (then, negative) changes in the school that the actors see as being linked to school autonomy? These summaries served to index verbatim quotas that were pertinent to major themes.

The process of building and discussing these summaries led to the delineation of seven specific themes on which the present analysis focuses. Evidence on these themes was then arranged into three separate matrices, detailed below, that allow the reader to focus on particular thematic areas and illuminate contrasting views held by (1) different school actors within a school, (2) actors across different schools, and (3) actors within decentralized versus the, non-
autonomous “control” schools. The seven thematic domains for which rich evidence emerged from interviews include:

- The *variable meanings* that school actors attach to the Ministry's decentralization program. This variability is driven both by the actor's vantage point (for example, directors versus parents), and by the school organization's prior character and context.

- The *history, context, and organizational culture* found within each particular school. Each school's *a priori* leadership, cohesion, and contextual level of poverty provide consequential conditions under which autonomy is well received, or not.

- The nature of *authority and power* within and outside the school often shift as school actors implement *autonomía*. The perceived authority of the school director, the local delegación, the Ministry, and the Government often come into question.

- The intensity and forms of *parent participation* may not be changing appreciably under school autonomy. In fact, the lack of improvement in participation is the subject of much debate among school-level actors.

- Various topics related to *school leadership and cohesive organization* are discussed by parents, teachers, and directors alike. These questions are attached most frequently to debates over the consejo's and the director's credibility and inventiveness.

- Rising school fees or *cuotas* is one of the most controversial facets of decentralization, as voiced by various actors. This is linked to the broader domain of *school financing and spending*, particularly whether new revenues are sufficient to implement teacher pay incentives as promised under the Ministry’s original plan.
Classrooms and pedagogy. Decentralization will not yield achievement gains unless its organizational reforms raise the engagement, motivation, and skills of teachers. We did here much discussion over how some classrooms are changing and whether teachers are truly more focused on improving classroom practices.

How best to display the abundance of qualitative data collected across our many interview sessions is a difficult question. We want to provide the reader a deep understanding of each salient theme -- domains that point to early successes and sharp constraints on the decentralization process. At the same time, our evidence reveals the importance of each school’s local context and organizational history. Thus we display some data to highlight between-school differences. Within a particular school, parents, teachers, and school directors sometimes vary in how they see and assess key issues linked to implementation. One data display highlights this between-actor variability within schools. A key finding overall is that where we observed more consistent agreement on the school’s strengths and most pressing problems -- that is, where organizational cohesion was already strong -- the positive benefits of decentralization are more readily reported.

Analysis One - How do school context and sources of authority condition the implementation of school autonomy? Schools vary in their local settings and in their institutional histories. This is manifest in the cohesion and sense of professional commitment that is shared among teachers and directors. The more we visited schools, the more clearly we perceived the influence of these contextual dynamics. We first acquaint you with how these school contexts differ and implications for how authority and power are distributed within the school and its environment. This is referred to as the school’s “micro politics.”

Analysis Two - How cohesive or disparate are the interpreted meanings of autonomia, as expressed by parents, teachers, and school directors? The Ministry’s written statements on the meaning and key objectives of decentralization appear to be quite clear. Yet policies change at
the center over time, including the Ministry’s move away from compulsory school cuotas to a policy of voluntary increases in fees. Locally, the interpretation of policy varies, as delegados and Ministry staff conduct training sessions for consejos and directors throughout the country. Individual parents, teachers, and school directors also actively interpret the multi-faceted connotations of autonomia within their own school. You will see how these ambiguities in meaning is constraining implementation, mainly by creating confusion and differing expectations about what should be happening within the school under autonomy. A common implementation process requires a common set of meanings and values attached to key elements of the reform. This has yet to be accomplished in many schools. Our analysis reveals important areas of conflict among key actors within several of the 12 schools.

Analysis Three - What are the major benefits and problems associated with school autonomy, as expressed by parents, teachers, and school directors? Across the 12 schools, four bundles of benefits or problems were most frequently discussed: [1] gains or shortfalls in parent participation, [2] shifts in school management or leadership dynamics that advance or hinder more accountable management, [3] the benefits and burdens associated with trying to raise cuotas, as well as shifts in spending, and [4] how the consejo and teachers are focusing on student performance and pedagogical innovation, or failing to do so.

For each analysis we display representative pieces of our qualitative evidence. These data matrices serve to communicate the actual voices and viewpoints of these school-level actors. We detail selected school cases to avoid separating specific issues from the school contexts in which they are embedded. It is tempting to isolate particular issues; this is valid when the identical concerns arises across many of the 12 schools. But often, an issue is linked to a school’s particular context and organizational history. Thus we attempt to articulate the types of contexts where decentralization is growing roots in richer soil, in addition to pinpointing problems that arise across schools, independent of variation in their contexts. Policy improvements are more likely to succeed when one can identify a manageable number of common constraints, impeding reform across a variety of school contexts.
IV. Analysis One
School Context, Authority, and Micro-Politics

Two Contrasting Schools

Long before the Chamorro Government began its push to decentralize, many schools had established distinct reputations and identities within their communities. Nicaragua’s schools range from large, high quality secondary schools to tiny rural primary schools staffed by one or two teachers. We begin our analysis by detailing such contextual differences including both the school’s recent history and the surrounding community. It is into these variable settings that autonomous school management attempts to take root. We focus on the nature of authority and power within schools as a key element of the school context.

Table 2 provides details for all 12 schools regarding their contextual features and issues of authority or micro-politics. This table displays representative pieces of evidence, drawing on the voices of specific school actors. The narrative which follows provides a thicker backdrop for selected schools and illuminates how autonomy prompts positive (or negative) changes in the exercise of authority around an agenda for change (or to preserve the status quo).

Let’s begin by looking inside two, starkly different secondary schools. In many ways, school SA5 displays the optimal conditions, the most fertile soil into which “autonomous management” can draw essential nutrients.* The school, granted autonomy in 1995, is located in a small municipality. The school’s enrollment was just 710 students when our research team visited in 1996, small compared to many secondary schools. Parents who participated in the Ministry’s family survey had completed just over five years of schooling on average. SA5 had been unable to obtain a full complement of teachers. Almost 55 students were enrolled for every one teacher, a significantly poorer staffing ratio relative to most other secondary schools. The staff was comparatively less experienced, as well, averaging less than seven years of tenure on average. The director, however, had completed four years of teacher preparation and university training.
A particular phrase was mentioned by teachers and other school actors during our visit to the school: calidad de educación (the quality of education). The phrase was a mantra of sorts, signaling actors’ shared commitment to making an already good school even better. The director built from the school’s historical reputation of being a serious and seemingly effective institution: “Before autonomy we already had a strong administrative system. We like to do things well.” The teacher focus group confirmed the director’s view of a cohesive, motivated staff. In fact, the school seems to have been working largely independent of the central Ministry long before the advent of decentralization:

“I have been working here for seven years... this institution always has been well known for good student discipline, respect for teachers and parents.” Another teacher comments, “Autonomy is a new process, but the institution has always had its own goals and perspectives. Even before the school became autonomous, it has been achieving its goals.”

The director talks of a “collegiate system” in characterizing social relations among school staff, emphasizing teachers’ professional commitment and a semi-democratic organizational structure. This has nurtured a strong sense of membership and identity within the school, seemingly shared by teachers and students alike. Youths wear standard uniform, enlivened by a colorful ribbon and school emblem (escarapela) worn on their shirt. Students also carry their “attendance card” to school each day, helping to keep track of who attends only sporadically. Student government leaders are elected each year. SA5 consistently participates in regional achievement competitions in math and spelling; their students reportedly do quite well in these academic contests.

The teaching staff’s level of commitment is remarkable and generally recognized by the director and parents. As described by the director:

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*i We guaranteed each participating school and individual that their comments would remain confidential. This helped to gain candid reports and viewpoints. We label each school by its code number, not by its actual name.*
“Teachers’ disposition is important. They see their students are not doing well, so they call them and give them extra classes. When teachers miss a day due to health problems... we don’t have the necessary resources to hire a substitute teacher... they complete the lost classes over the weekend or on free time.”

Decentralization policies, in some ways, simply allow SA5 to enlarge practices in which the organization was already engaged. Teachers had long been paid salary incentives, linked to the tradition of granting a traceavo, a “thirteenth salary” bonus. The school operates a modest cafeteria, selling food and beverages to staff and students, reportedly generating significant income.

What is important about the school director is that decentralization offers her additional tools to exercise stronger leadership. In fact, one teacher alludes to the fact that management has become more complex and hierarchical with the new consejo. The consejo is chaired by the town’s former mayor, who shares the director’s commitment to improving the school’s performance. The director highlights two examples of how the Ministry’s authority and policy priorities have become more forceful within the school under decentralization:

“With parents involved more in the school, teachers have become more accountable.”
And the Ministry’s emphasis on assessing student outcomes leads the director to say, “The Ministry is evaluating us by retention rates [and] graduation rates.”

Parents have long paid a modest cuota. Under decentralization, cuota revenue appears to have risen. This allows the principal to gain more authority through modest forms of patronage, such as granting small loans to teachers. Teachers deemed as meritorious earn up to 50% above their base salary, as reported in the teacher focus group.

The director appears to support all of her teachers, even the controversial maestros empiricos, hired without teaching credentials under the Sandinista Government. She has used rising cuota revenue to support their required training programs. The director is visibly
supportive of ensuring that they will meet the new credentialing requirement. In other schools this class of teachers is viewed as being of lower quality, too political, or both.

Next let’s turn to SA3, a secondary school that represents a much less supportive context and institutional history. Located in Managua, it is among the largest and the first wave of urban secondary schools to undertake autonomy. The director begins by emphasizing the impoverished and dangerous community context:

“We are harassed by gangs... they already have hurt teachers and students. There is a teacher who got so hurt with head injuries that she is unable to fully resume her job. The police are not responding to our demands.” One teacher echoed the director’s concerns with basic security: “We are struggling alone, armed with stones, clubs, whatever we have... all the men [teachers] go and chase the gang. Parents are even willing to pay an additional córdoba to get police protection... but they [the police] will not pay serious attention to us.”

The director reports little support from local government, despite attempts to get stronger police protection and to win support for improving the school’s facilities.

The teachers interviewed worried about the school’s questionable reputation. In recent years the newspapers have published reports of “sexual harassment of students and economic blackmail of staff.” A sense of improvement and more positive leadership is in the air. One teacher reports:

“I have seen changes. I can not tell you how many awful things I have seen before... although it is not a full cleaning, there is now more follow-up of teachers to make them more responsible, more honest, more humane, closer to their students and fellow teachers.”
Decentralization may be helping to create a sense of transparency. Says another teacher, “Every time the assistant director writes a report, a meeting is called and they explain the report, analyze it.”

Yet the school remains sharply divided, with several teachers voicing stiff opposition to their version of autonomy. Some teachers complain of “arbitrary” decisions by the director: “If someone does not agree with the situation, that person is marked, one feels discomfort, under pressure from the director’s office.” Three teachers and one support staff member decided not to sign the petition for autonomy. Claims one teacher, “… teachers who did not sign the autonomy got fired, they are not here. One just left who did not sign.”

Teachers remain deeply worried about basic working conditions. It is unclear to several how decentralization will affect their retirement program. Salaries remain very low. The basic salary reported is 506 córdobas per month. “A domestic maid is asking 700 córdobas and she gets extra salary for Christmas and holidays.” One teacher expresses fear that there is no agency that can recognize teachers as higher status or professional workers:

“…We are not meeting our goals of [raising] our salary... which is the priority. Who knows how much time we have to wait until the Ministry of Education, or who may be concerned with it, recognizes our work as professionals, give us our proper place?”

This parenthetical allusion to “who may be concerned with it” expresses an understanding that authority over salary levels is now split between the central Ministry and the local school, the latter dependent upon its ability to raise revenues from parents and the community.

The director of SA3 is trying to use the tools of autonomy to strengthen his management hand:

“If we were to become dependent upon the Ministry again, we would not be able to get [some of] these benefits. Teachers are more accountable within this project. When we
were a state school, they would attend only if they wanted to. Now we have a commitment to push this school forward.”

Yet the director remains distant from many of his teachers, even combative in tone. He is distressed over the “unethical behavior” of some teachers:

“We find that some teachers are charging 10 córdobas for private classes in their homes. We are trying to remove that kind of behavior. Education is not a business, it is a vocation. If it had been a business, we would be in a market.”

Contention between the director and the maestros empiricos, who must return to colleges for additional training, is reported by both parties. These teachers, one of whom has an engineering degree, vocally resists the training requirement. In our focus group, one of these teachers expresses pro-Sandinista positions, including the stance that education should truly be free for all children. According to the director these teachers say, “That by the Constitution education is free. [But] they are not leaders. They are leaders to destroy you... they [seek] to destroy the director.” Teachers talk of the “integration problem,” their inability to work cooperatively with the director and with fellow teachers, “there is separation, disunion among teachers.”

Student enrollment at SA3 has been declining at over the past two years. One teacher in the focus group attributed the decline to rising unemployment and economic conditions, matched with rising cuota levels. Another teacher alleges that the decline is an attempt to remove unruly students, an issue that deserves more careful investigation. Despite this enrollment decline, classes typically contain up to 65 students during the morning shift with smaller classes in the afternoon.
Issues of Context and Authority

As these glimpses into two schools demonstrate, the notion of autonomy will play out quite differently based upon each school’s historical context. At the same time, however, a common set of issues arise across schools -- in terms of contextual constraints and confusion over the realignment of authority. Students of formal organizations have long been curious about how sources and channels of authority are formed, then institutionalized (what Max Weber termed, the organization’s “legitimate order”). Actors inside organizations come to take for granted which offices or individuals will provide material inputs (like textbooks), expectations for performance or accountability (like showing up for work each day), and the social norms that govern hierarchical, democratic, or professional forms of cooperation (such as, whether and how teachers work with the director to improve pedagogy). The habitus of any social collective -- its daily customs, sources of authority, and conventional wisdom that lend cohesion to any organization -- is difficult to thaw-out and recraft.

In the Nicaraguan context, decentralization explicitly intends to shift authority and power over budgets from the central Ministry to the school’s consejo and director. Let’s first focus on this issue. How is the transfer of authority understood? What ambiguities arise over who should have power and can credibly express leadership within the school’s micro political system? As formal authority moves from Managua down to the consejo and director, the exercise of this newly chartered local authority is constrained (or nurtured) by several forces. Next we delineate how these context-specific factors influence implementation. We begin with perhaps the most powerful contextual constraint: pervasive poverty in many communities.

Severely impoverished communities. The Ministry’s theory of decentralization is powered in large part by the assumption that discretionary revenues will rise, as cuota levels are raised, local organizations contribute support, and funds are spent more efficiently. These theorized building blocks of decentralization are difficult to observe in many schools that we
visited. Many school directors talk of how poor parents can not afford to pay higher fees. In some cases, schools can collect a 5 or 10 córdoba (equivalent to 50 cents or $1) monthly fee (cuota) from only one-third or a quarter of their students. In the words of one urban primary school director (PC1):

“The children lack books, but the problems are more global, cultural, and moral... not only economic.” Due to the “disintegration of the family... the children are needy... they treat the teachers like mothers, seeking attention.”

A secondary school director (SA1) acknowledges that parental involvement remains sharply limited, despite being granted autonomy in 1993. The parents report, “We have no time. We are busy selling things on the street.” The director argues that “economic factors are strongly affecting academic achievement.” Another urban director (SA2) attributes his students’ low performance to high levels of unemployment and poverty. Many delinquent youths attend the school, “some are prostitutes.” Students attending the evening shift are often robbed when they leave the school campus.

Burglaries are common in some schools. One rural primary school (PC2) suffers from break-ins at night. School furniture is often stolen, then sold in the market, “even charts, materials, and pictures that were hung on classroom walls.” The teachers worry that many students work as street vendors, “some are even thieves.”

Rural schools continue to face basic constraints that are exogenous to internal organizational issues. These constraints often rein-in the consejo’s attempt to exercise their new authority. One rural primary school (PA3) serves the children of sugar plantation workers. In certain times during the year, there is no fresh water within walking distance. Cases of cholera and diarrheal disease are commonly reported. Many children are pulled out of school during the harvest season by parents who rely on their youngsters’ additional earnings. The land on which
the school is situated is owned by the plantation, leading to delays in facilities improvements, according to the director.

*Contests over authority and the school’s social order.* Few in Nicaragua are surprised that the decentralization program is controversial. It is energized by a concern that former governments -- be they autocratic or socialist -- operated highly centralized, bureaucratic regimes. School autonomy imports a North American affection for market remedies to public problems. And horizontal relations at the grassroots inside historically top-down institutions are novel in many communities.

The issue is not only that decentralization challenges deep-seated expectations that Managua will exercise authority and control over budget allocations. In addition, the devolution of local authorities is in the plural -- that is, schools become contested terrain in the eyes of a complex set of *local actors*. These are players -- alcalde officials from the mayor’s office, the Ministry’s local delegado, new consejo members, and the director -- who before deferred to Managua over basic policies and decisions. They were simply asked to follow central dictates over curriculum, personnel practices and teacher posts, and even teaching methods. These actors have never before had to cooperate laterally to tackle major budget and personnel decisions, to figure out how to motivate teachers and parents to become more committed to the school institution. The reform appears to have emphasized the vertical task of exercising greater accountability, for example, consejos that evaluate teachers and award salary incentives. But at the same time a multi-faceted democratic contest is unfolding over authority, which rarely focuses on the technical task of boosting student learning.

The first major aspect of this local contest unfolding at the local level concerns the reform’s underlying legitimacy. Many local activists oppose decentralization on ideological grounds. The director of SA5 recounted the controversy that ensued when he decided to petition for autonomy:

“Many people make political use of autonomy here, even the Catholic and Protestant churches. The priest once used the pulpit to talk badly about autonomy. Politicians also
say that autonomy is privatization. Autonomy [becomes] the target, not only here, but at the national level. Politicians use teachers for everything.”

It is important to note, however, that several pro-Sandinista teachers acknowledged the positive benefits that flow from their own school’s autonomy. Granted our interview team was announced as being part of a Ministry study. Yet these same teachers were candidly critical about the weaknesses that they perceived, as well.

The legitimacy of decentralization also is questioned by teachers who believe it is not delivering on its promises. Many teachers reported in our focus groups that they signed the autonomy petition when promised higher salaries. Teachers at PA3 complained that budget allocations were not sufficient to even cover prior wage levels. They also claim that the local delegado can still hold up these transfers from the Ministry, accumulating negotiating strength over the issue of how to cut back the number of teaching posts. Several teacher focus groups expressed concern over the abolition of the traditional thirteenth salary (treceavo), as salary incentives are rationalized into the consejo structure and made more transparent.

The consejo’s new authority and potential exercise of power are the subject of much debate within schools. One teacher at PA3 argued that the consejo now has “more power than the director [after receiving their training]... they want to get rid of teachers.” In contrast, these teachers are quite appreciative of the central Ministry’s inservice training, linked to the metodologia activa. Here the unanticipated juxtaposition emerges of a consejo with limited credibility alongside an activist Ministry that is gaining legitimacy in the eyes of these particular teachers.

Contestation over the consejo’s authority. There is little doubt that the Ministry’s intent of chartering the consejos with strong influence is being felt in the majority of schools that we studied. The long-term issue is whether consejos can build legitimacy and delineate a clear set of powers. One teacher at SA1 expressed the worries of teachers who see the consejo as acting with too much authority: “They are acting as the new patron.” Even the director complains of
their “abuse of power. They thought they could fire teachers!” This is a fact which appears legally debatable under the Ministry’s decentralization policy but predictably of great worry to teachers. This director talks about the consejo as if it’s an outside committee, external to the school’s culture.

Some teachers see the consejo as granting parents more authority in school governance, an explicit objective of the decentralization scheme. But how that authority is exercised is a subject of debate. Whether consejo members act to provide incentives and positive encouragement -- or engineer forums for public criticism of school staff -- is a key juncture of autonomous schools. In the largely divided secondary school, SA1, one teacher protested that the consejo and parents only come to meetings “to criticize us in a destructive way... putting all the responsibility on the shoulders of teachers.” Another teacher boldly states, “We are ready to stop recognizing the consejo as legitimate.” Teachers in SA4 claim that the director is manipulating parent opinions through the consejo. In a bitter dispute over whether teachers could be reassigned to the least desirable evening shift, teachers claim that working with the director:

The delegado... took two parents from the consejo directivo and put them against 90% of the parents, against teachers and students. These parents voted for what the delegado wanted. They sacrificed the whole community... the morning shift... who went to [other shifts]... there were even teachers who lost their jobs.”

Other directors report that the consejo helps to broaden their own authority and influence within the school. The director at SA3 reports that parents serving on the consejo are committed and skilled. This in turn has motivated stronger parental involvement, as well as direct accountability for teachers, including pushing teachers to show up for work and to arrive on time. PA1’s director reports that the consejo enriches school-wide discussion of important issues. The consejo “informs teachers about objectives and activities... [this] serves to motivate teachers.”
Importantly, actors within the same school may disagree over how authority is redistributed after being granted autonomy. In PA3, for example, teachers report that who holds influence has not changed, since most parents are illiterate and not very involved in the school. Yet the director complains of how she has lost influence to what she perceives as an activist consejo.

*Debates over the regional office’s authority.* The delegado’s role remains pivotal in many local communities -- a source of power that has become more contested under decentralization. The delegados are actors that often operate on the edge of the school. They can, however, become embroiled in controversy, often over budget or staffing issues. The delegado is a key link to the central Ministry and often to the mayor or local politicians who become involved in education issues. One example is when new teaching positions are being requested or when the delegados believes a school is over staffed and goes after existing posts. The decentralization initiative promised to give the school-level consejo control over personnel issues. But this can become complicated politically.

The delegado has played a key role within the organizationally fractured secondary school, SA1. The director distrusts the consejo. The teachers we interviewed reported little respect for the director or for parents who are active in the school. One teacher summarizes:

“We have not gotten full support from the consejo directivo. When we [have] meetings to analyze the problem of low academic achievement or to hand-in grades, we ask them for ideas, proposals, how to work together... but they would not say anything. They are silent, or they only become judgmental against teachers. They do not look at themselves.”

Another teacher added, “Before, the Ministry was the only regulator. We prefer going back to the Ministry... to put an end to autonomy if necessary... to get rid of the consejo.”
The parent focus group revealed their lack of trust and respect for the director. This is where the local delegada entered the picture. One parent reviewed events that occurred early in the 1996 school year:

“The director is doing her job... But she does not communicate well with parents. At the beginning of the year, in a general meeting, we wrote a minute stating that the director would no longer be in the school. But she is still here. We agreed upon the director leaving, but the delegada in El Cañon took her side and supported her. She is still here.”

The delegada had earlier wielded influence by convincing the director to reduce enrollment, lowering average class size. This was a popular move in the eyes of teachers.

Disputes also arise over the number of teacher posts that the delegado may attempt to take from a school, or delay in approving new posts. This influence may be quite reasonable from a regional perspective: the distribution of scarce teaching posts should be equitable and fairly determined. But school-level actors, when considering autonomy, were promised greater control over personnel issues. The director of SA2 expresses a clear sense of betrayal. The Ministry granted autonomy; the school was named a model school. And now the delegado is pushing to take two teaching and one administrative post from the school. A teacher in the same focus group expressed disappointment that supervision of teaching and inservice training did not increase after being granted autonomy. She is averse to such aid coming from the delegado, “who acts like he is in charge of a military academy.”

The frictions with the delegación offices, of course, predate decentralization and are common in autonomous and traditional schools alike. For example, one of the control secondary schools (SC1) is growing in terms of rising enrollments. But the director expresses frustration with the local delegado for not approving additional teaching posts.
**Organized opposition to cuota increases.** The pressure to raise cuotas is a lightening rod issue in many communities, sparking debate over the school leadership’s credibility. One director in a poor community (PA3) emphasized the local church’s opposition to decentralization. One major reason: rising cuotas could take income away from the local parish as parents are forced to pay first for schooling. Many parents continue to express grave reservations about the rising pressure to pay higher fees, as we detail below. A few parents see this move as understandable, given their shared desire to pay teachers a bit more and improve classrooms. Many others who spoke in our focus groups see higher cuotas as confirming fears that decentralization will place a greater financial burden on their shoulders.

**The Ministry’s ongoing, at times erratic, institutional authority.** Inconsistent signals from the Ministry at times serve to erode the reform’s legitimacy. The most commonly cited example is how “the Minister himself” backed-off the compulsory nature of the cuota, once constitutional challenges were pushed forward (the words of one teacher at PA2). Several school staff members mentioned that the cuota is now just voluntary. This is clearly a political dilemma. Relaxing pressure on school directors and consejos has been well received. School staff can now spend less time pushing parents to deliver more revenue, a distasteful task that often is reportedly placed on teachers. The downside is that without addition cuota revenue implementation of incentive pay for teachers become unlikely.

An important question also arises over which schools have been able to gain more revenue by increasing in the cuota. If schools located in less impoverished communities are able to boost their revenues, but not those situated in the poorest areas, then Nicaragua’s school finance structure will become more unequal. This disparity will be difficult to monitor since it may be powered by locally set cuotas and non-transparent fees.

Another example of mixed signals is that the Ministry is pushing visibly to improve teachers’ pedagogical skills via the metodologia activa and the model schools initiatives. The press on consejos to monitor repetition and drop-out rates is another centralized attempt to focus the school leadership on student outcomes. But many school staff complain that basic textbooks
arrive late in the school year, or never (e.g., PA1, PA3, SC1). When this key ingredient contributing to pedagogical gains is missing, skepticism predictably rises around related ingredients. One teacher in the PA2 focus group complained that the books that finally arrive “do not follow the official Ministry syllabus.”

Some school actors express doubts that Ministry policies will stick over the long haul. One teacher at SA1 referred to the metodologia activa program as “the newest orientation coming down from the Ministry.” Our interviews occurred within eight months of national elections, prior to the election of Arnoldo Alemán as the new President, succeeding Violetta Chamorro. The director of SA3 expressed concern over the political stability of decentralization policies:

“There is fear of a new government putting a halt to this (decentralization) process. We should go to the newspapers and radio... no government will accomplish what we have with autonomy. [We can not] become dependent upon the Ministry again. Teachers are more accountable with this project. When we were a state school, they would attend if they wanted. If not, they would not [come to school].”

In a few schools there is a feeling that the Ministry never had a strong presence, another case of how school histories condition interpretations of new reforms. We saw this above with SA5, the cohesive school with a historically strong reputation. The director of PA2 expresses a similar sentiment, “the Ministry has given up power... but they never did come to our school in the past.” One teacher in SA1 reports:

“I have been working here for 15 years, and I only have seen two visits by the central Ministry. One was a supervision team of seven people some years ago. Your visit today is the second from the Ministry of Education. There has only been a little contact between the central level and teachers.”
Contact with the local delegación can be more common in some schools. But if this office has little presence in the school, then school staff come to see the overall Ministry as providing very little enabling assistance.

_Persisting elements of the school’s institutionalized structure._ Two structural facets of the 12 schools repeatedly surfaced that hold telling consequences. The first -- the structure of class shifts during the day -- applies mainly to secondary schools. Schools will sometimes assign students to shifts according to their achievement levels. More commonly, however, they simply have a morning and afternoon shift where students are more randomly assigned, then an evening shift that serves youths who must work during the day. For teachers, the evening shift is the least desirable, given youths’ irregular attendance and low average performance. Teaching at night also means that one must cope with surrounding communities that can be threatening and dangerous.

Historically, negative connotations have been associated with the evening shift. The director of SA2 talked about the evening shift students as “very poor, rough, and delinquent.” The director is attempting to make the school “more personal” while upholding high standards of behavior and “social control.” He continues to describe the evening shift students: “Some are prostitutes... who are sometimes stronger than normal students.” The director at SC1 reports that gangs come by at night and steal money from the evening students (similar reports by SA3’s director).

School improvement efforts undertaken within the framework of decentralization aim to raise achievement. But the strategies employed within secondary schools may differ across the shifts. In general, school staff express a significant degree of futility in altering the character of the evening shift which generally appears to serve the most disadvantaged students. But the institutionalized nature of the evening shift and the strong influence of contextual factors raises questions as to whether real gains can be made for this important segment of the student population.
A limited history of instructional leadership. The second institutionalized facet of schools -- including both primary and secondary schools -- is that we heard very little about directors who actively supervised teaching or engaged their staff in advancing pedagogical improvements. Directors are supportive of the new metodología activa; they are enforcing the training requirement for the maestros empiricos. But we heard only a faint expectation that teachers would receive professional coaching or advice from the director about how to improve their classroom practices. The técnico staff person within the regional office is supposed to focus on this important domain. But the presence and perceived utility of the técnico’s work varies enormously across schools. In general, teachers look to the central Ministry or the delegación office for curricular and pedagogical help, not the director. Ironically, adjusting the director’s role to become more of an instructional leader may be more difficult under decentralization, since many of the directors we interviewed now report being preoccupied with administrative matters.

Analysis One Summary

Policy makers often ignore the highly variable local contexts into which new programs and policy intervention are dropped. We can not assume universal patterns of implementation, given differences in schools’ institutional histories and the character of communities and families that surround them. Analysis One details the wide variability in the organizational culture and cohesion observed across the 12 schools. Autonomy is well received among school staff who already hold a shared commitment to the school’s values and mission, where most teachers concur with the director’s commitment to raising student performance. The ability of parents to pay higher cuotas makes an obvious difference in their receptivity to autonomy, as well as the school’s ability to raise revenues to afford teacher incentives and mount strategies aimed at improving classroom practices. For schools with weaker school leadership and divided commitments among staff members, granting of autonomy reportedly leads to only incremental changes. In some schools, autonomy may exacerbate problems and conflicts. As parents exert
more authority through the consejo, for instance, some teachers see themselves as under attack. When parents can not pay additional fees, directors and teachers feel that promised gains in revenue -- a key plank in the decentralization campaign -- are not materializing.

Related to variation in local contexts, we have observed common contests over authority and power that often flare up. These conflicts are minimized under conditions of high levels of trust and when the roles and positive commitment of each party are clearly visible. Contests over authority appear to become destructive when trust and communication are in low supply, resources are scarce (or competition for teaching posts is high), and when the consejo seems to push for accountability in a hierarchical and critical manner. The degree of positive, constructive spirit that emanates from consejos -- seen through the eyes of teachers in particular -- certainly varies across schools. Training efforts by the Ministry are reportedly helpful. But consejo members act within their highly localized settings, long after training sessions are completed and forgotten.

The roles of delegados and their técnicos seem ambiguous, as viewed by school-level actors. Regional planning and allocation decisions should serve to advance the equitable distribution of teachers and instructional materials. But school-level actors now have been promised control over staff posts and personnel decisions, within the constraints of national labor laws. Nor is the contribution of técnicos clear in the schools we studied. This deserves more research. The proponents of decentralization promise that more attention will be paid to student achievement and the a priori classroom practices that drive student learning. The introduction of metodología activa is being received quite well by teachers. But the entire delegación office seems disconnected from efforts to improve pedagogy, further eroding its perceived utility in the eyes of teachers and school directors.
V. Analysis Two
The Contrasting Meanings and Interpretations of Autonomia

The more we sat and talked with parents, teachers, and directors an intriguing finding emerged: These pivotal actors often act from quite differing conceptions of what autonomia or descentralización means. This includes its connotations, implied elements of organizational and personal changes, required, and intended effects. We found that these differences in basic definitions and conceptions of autonomy can vary across actors within the same school, and between schools.

Analysis Two focuses on mapping these fundamental differences in the interpreted meanings attached to “autonomous school management.” The extent to which these meanings are shared appears to be a manifestation of organizational cohesion and shared understandings about how one’s school is trying to improve. Parenthetically, one key advantage of a process evaluation -- building from in-depth qualitative interviews -- is that these disparities in emic understandings do at times emerge. In turn, the underlying causes of unity or conflict within the organization are brought into clearer focus. The issue of whether shared meanings and a common belief system precede strong leadership and structural unity, or vice versa, is a significant issue. It is a question that is beyond the scope of the present study.

One challenge underlying the decentralization initiative is that it attempts to introduce a new vocabulary and logic for how to motivate action with the school. The role of, and process by which, consejos operate represents quite novel social dynamics in many schools. Incentive pay for teachers that is truly contingent on performance, however defined, is a new concept. Many directors are trying to learn quickly the intricacies of banking and accounting, as funding streams are decentralized down to delegados and consejos. The tracking of student achievement (linked to repetition and drop-out rates) involves a new form of analysis, not to mention backing-up causally to discuss how achievement can be raised. In short, the meanings and understandings implied by this new vocabulary are pivotal to successfully realizing the intended
effects of decentralization. Analysis two aims to build a better understanding of how school actors construct their understandings or interpretations of autonomía.

**Divergent Meanings Voiced by School Actors**

Let’s begin by focusing on two quite different schools and the contrasting meanings that school actors attach to autonomía (the term that holds more currency locally than descentralización). PA1 is an urban primary school situated quite far from Managua. Located within an impoverished section of the town, the director successfully pushed to reduce the 5 córdoba cuota to just 2 córdobas per month. This constrains the material effects of autonomy: “With little income from the córdobas there is little we can do. Contribution, yes, rifas, (raffles) yes. But a fixed contribution each month, we can not ask for that.”

What is interesting about most actors at PA1 is that they share an upbeat interpretation of how autonomía is playing-out within their school. The director has a participatory view of how the consejo should operate: “This style of management ... makes the school more open to the community and more attractive to parents.” For the director, autonomía gives her more flexibility to involve teachers and parents in a lateral form of school management.

At the same time, the director talks as if she is following the desires of the parish priest in detailing her optimistic feelings about decentralization:

“If it is an improvement. We know the Ministry is trying to do the best thing. Nicaragua is catching up with the developed countries. It is costly, but we must walk down this path, this direction.”

The director defines autonomy as part of a broader program, legitimately crafted by the central Ministry, to move the society forward.

The director is not spouting empty rhetoric. By all accounts she has broadened participation, encouraged the organization of more social events for parents held at the school
(including the very popular Mother’s Day celebration), and helped to construct a credible consejo. She has instituted an “attendance book” for teachers to encourage accountability.

The only negative facet of autonomy that this director mentioned was linked to the extra time required for keeping her own accounts and traveling to another town in which the closest bank is located. Again, she defers to the authority of the Ministry: “We are being held accountable... this is what we are told to do [the procedure for setting up accounts].”

Well, critical readers might claim, this director is simply putting a positive spin on decentralization, a careful script enacted for visitors from Managua. This dynamic may be at work. Yet members of teacher and parent focus groups, with some contradictions, articulated similar meanings and understandings of what autonomy means and implied actions. One teacher, when asked what autonomy meant to her, said: “With autonomy the teacher needs to be more accountable, to be on time, to plan her classes better, to teach better.” Another teacher concurs with the director that changes linked to autonomy will be more social than economic in character:

“Autonomy means becoming more independent of the Ministry in how to manage the school, with [resources] from the parents and the community. But here the contributions of parents are very low, they are poor.”

Another teacher emphasizes the participatory benefits, echoing the director:

“To me autonomy means having parents involved in the teaching and learning process... where parents can participate not only economically but with authority to say whether the subject being taught is good or not for their children.”
The teachers are enthusiastic about *metodología activa* yet unsure as to how well they are implementing this particular reform. Similar to the director, one teacher is curiously eager to follow the Ministry’s specification of the new pedagogical method:

“Since we are implementing the *metodología activa* we need help. We do not know the method very well. We are making great efforts to follow the guidance from the Ministry.”

This combination is fascinating in terms of two logics of organization being combined within the minds of key actors. There is high consensus between the director and teachers around the meaning of, and implied actions stemming from, decentralization. At the same time these actors continue to see the central Ministry as the high authority, a legitimate agency whose guidance is to be followed.

Turning to parents, one mother in our focus group stated: “[Autonomy] means to share responsibility with the Ministry of Education. Half the Ministry and half the parents.” Another parent argued in a positive tone: “To be able to make our own decisions. To not be told this or that.” And another mother hit more directly on the economic facets: “Helping the teachers with the *cuota*. We are giving money monthly to help teachers ... this is autonomy for me. Also to help the school.”

The parent focus group discussion centered more on the *cuota* and the hardship it imposed on many local families. A portion of the parents -- including one who sat on the *consejo* -- were certainly attuned to the social and participatory benefits. This latter mother argues:

“We have to get more training. It is like my child’s first communion. You have to get training to know what to do. With more training we would know our function, our obligations. The *delegado* is not providing any training for us.”
Once again, we see this intriguing combination of an authoritarian logic -- parents must be trained to participate appropriately -- mixed with a more democratic conception that more influence exercised by parents is a welcomed element of autonomy.

In a few schools we observed an enculturated resistance to the Western conception of “leadership.” This surfaced in PA1. It may be a case where indigenous social rules converge with the spirit of participatory management within schools under decentralization. The director had reported that the consejo was “democratic, not authoritarian... they are not telling us what to do. They consult with parents. They are not by passing the director, and the director is not imposing her will upon them.” When we asked the parent focus group who the “leaders” are at their school, she shot back without hesitation:

“I do not like the word, ‘leader’ [lideres]. They are not leaders, but they are looking for ways of helping, collaborating, advancing the school [referring to members of the consejo].”

This construction was echoed in SA5 when a teacher resisted the notion of individual leaders:

“I do not think there are leaders here. Everybody contributes, working together. Ideas emerge out of the school’s needs. We consult and send our ideas to our representative on the consejo. They discuss it.”

Next let’s turn to PA3, the primary school that is located on a sugar plantation. It is not entirely valid to compare this poor rural school to one based in a medium-size town. But PA3 is an important case, given that simple yet divergent meanings are attached to autonomy by a very small number of key actors. The school itself has just two teachers, plus a director who teaches part-time. The director, teachers, and parents hold rather undifferentiated conceptions of what autonomy means. They also express beliefs about how each other define autonomy.
The two teachers split apart economic from social elements of autonomy. Economic elements are largely moot at this point at PA3. These parents -- almost all impoverished plantation workers -- can ill afford to give any money to their modest school. Yet the element of autonomy that is playing out in the teachers’ minds is related to rising levels of parent participation:

“Now that they are getting more training, more organized, it seems that parents [and the consejo president] have more power than the director. They wanted to get rid of teachers, so we no longer support autonomy. We are waiting to complete one year, then we are giving it up. We are going to write letters.”

This turn of events goes against the intention of autonomy as originally understood by at least one of the teachers: “For me autonomy means that parents are going to be more concerned with their children’s education.” Part of this disappointment is linked to an expectation that autonomy would bring more economic support from parents. More broadly, this teacher had come to assume that parents would change their behavior to press their children to do better in school. This meaning associated with autonomy created an expectation for real behavioral change inside families.

During the parent focus group we asked, “What does school autonomy mean for you and your school?” There was anxious silence, the few parents glanced at each other with quizzical looks. One parent responded uneasily, “We did not know the school has become autonomous.” A second ventured, “Yes, I have heard of this idea. It’s the monthly cuota, yes?” No parent member of the consejo apparently was present.

These parents were quite complimentary of recently hired teachers. In one mother’s words:
“The teachers are working hard. The second and third grade teacher is doing her job. [My daughter] has made great progress. She did not know anything... I put her here when she was 5 years-old, and she never learned anything. She just passed from grade to grade. She finally learned how to read when she was 13 years-old [last year]. She [a new teacher] taught her how to read.”

Another parent similarly praised the teachers: “They make efforts to come here. Sometimes the students don’t come due to the heavy rains, but the teachers do.”

The director also sets aside the economic connotations of autonomy, focusing instead on raising student achievement, an element rarely so salient in the minds of most school directors:

“Autonomy is to achieve more retention and more students passing. It is not only an economic issue, cuotas or something like that. Above all it is to improve retention and passing rates, as well as to integrate parents [into the school].”

But the director remains skeptical that more than a few parents will become active in the school:

“Here in the village, parents are a little bit unfriendly. They leave all the work to the consejo. There is no communication between parent and me, in general. If anything is wrong in the school, they would visit me, only when there is a problem.”

In sum, one might argue that autonomy would be more successfully implemented in small scale settings, such as those represented by PA3. Yet we find that many parents are simply unaware of the decentralization initiative unfolding within their school. The reform does mean something in the eyes of the director, largely focusing her attention on raising achievement. She has set aside any hope of significantly raising more revenue from cuotas, although she understands that this is a key element of the Ministry’s policy intentions. The one teacher
originally expected that autonomy would pull-in parents and lead to a stronger push on their children to do better in school. But then the few parents who became involved in the consejo criticized the teachers, rather than putting forward more cooperative strategies.

Each school actor appears to work from a narrow, partially informed interpretation of what autonomy involves. These interpreted meanings and salient connotations at times are not shared among key actors. This yields no common language or shared set of expectations about what new organizational opportunities decentralization might open up. In the absence of broad based parent understanding, it is only the parent members of the consejo that are visible in the eyes of teachers. This, too, narrows options and cooperative pathways for school improvement. The director expresses a fairly complex set of meanings around autonomy, a complexity and sophistication that is not shared by other important actors inside and outside the school. This limits her ability to mobilize these actors to advance the positive elements of decentralization.

**Salient Meanings of Autonomia, Looking Across Schools**

Moving beyond these two primary schools, we analyzed the data to delineate the most salient connotations or interpreted meanings attached to autonomia. These major themes and illustrative reports appear in Table 3. These data are drawn from the eight autonomous schools contained within our sample (setting aside the four control schools).25

*Table 3 here*

Gaining *school-level control or independence* from the Ministry is a commonly articulated meaning that is attached to autonomia. This is not surprising. Yet beneath this interpretation lay different variations. For example, one director reports:

“We are depending less on the Ministry. We are deciding our own issues. We are like a little Ministry, especially the consejo.”

A teacher, also emphasizing administrative independence, expresses a differing interpretation: “It’s only an administrative change, it does not reach teachers.”
Another teacher similarly sees independence as simply moving administrative tasks from Managua down to her school: “It is untying ourselves from the Ministry... all the bureaucratic procedures are now done here.” And one director questioned whether the shifting of administrative burdens down to the school was really a positive move:

“There are more administrative tasks. Get the money from the Bank, buy things, file a receipt. This is too much work.”

We did hear praise for the Ministry’s willingness to decentralize authority and decision-making power. Most directors we interviewed were appreciative of having the possibility of making their own decisions, working with the consejo. But the commensurate rise in the number of administrative and communication tasks is seen as a real problem. When other elements of decentralization fail to materialize -- cuota revenue and parent participation fail to rise, friction opens-up with the consejo, and instructional materials still never arrive -- the added bureaucratic chores become more salient and distasteful.

Our data clearly reveal that many directors and teachers are focusing on student progress and accountability mechanisms, and this emphasis is linked to the act of becoming autonomous. School directors and teachers talk about “raising achievement,” adopting the two indicators that have been centrally endorsed by the Ministry: lowering grade repetition rates and drop-out rates. Above we introduced evidence on this general theme for selected schools. Here we illustrate how a new focus on achievement is central to understandings of autonomia expressed by actors in several other schools.

One director links rising local accountability with receding central authority: “The Ministry has given up power... we have a priority to become accountable.” This prompts the important question, How will the central Ministry aid or sanction schools where local accountability proves weak or ineffective? That is, if autonomy means that accountability is now centered with the school, how does the Ministry define its own role? What happens when schools report that they have been unable to lower drop-out rates?
The issue becomes even more salient as initial expectations of closer “teacher supervision” and pedagogical improvement are not met, that this previously assumed element of autonomy proves to be false in some schools. In the words of one concerned teacher: “I expected more supervision of my teaching... since we are an autonomous school and a model school.” Here the meaning of autonomy has been clearly communicated; schools are focusing on real outcomes, including the question of how to raise student achievement. But when the implementing mechanisms -- more intense aid and supervision of pedagogy -- are not put in place, this crucial element may fall away or simply no longer be perceived as a credible element of decentralization.

Parents in some schools are relatively silent on the tandem issues of achievement and accountability. They implicitly see autonomy as altering social relations inside the school. And the most salient, persisting connotation is the press to pay the cuota. Parents very rarely talk about changing their own behavior to help their children do better in school. The cuota issue is so controversial and difficult that it comes to be seen as the exclusive type of contribution expected of parents.

The only notable exception to surface in our data is linked to parents interest in democratic participation. As one mother put it: “For me, autonomy is working together with a group of parents, teachers, and the director. This is happening here.”

We did hear from a number of parents who see autonomy as involving more frequent participation by a wider circle of parents. Reports of more social events and meetings were heard in several schools. This is a positive start in the eyes of many. But again we must emphasize that “participation” is defined by parents as involvement with the school institution, not changing their own behavior vis-à-vis their children. This second step was mentioned by several teachers, but raised by not one parent that we interviewed. Relatedly, two school directors talked about how they are publicizing the names of students who are doing well in school, explicitly aimed at encouraging parents to push their children a bit harder. But at the
receiving end, it remains unclear whether parents understand that school autonomy means holding parents more accountable, not only putting new demands on staff inside the school.

The consejos do operate as a focal point -- or a crisp signal -- of increasing parental participation. That is, the meaning of democratic participation, associated with school autonomy, is given life and form by the consejo. Where the consejo organizes social events and more regular contact with teachers, a wider circle of parents appears to become more involved in selected schools. Where this new action fails to occur -- and remember that the consejo has many organizational issues to address -- we heard few reports of rising parental participation.

Importantly, some teachers interpret parental participation to mean more than delivering their cuota or attending social events. As one teacher emphasizes: “Having parents involved in the teaching and learning process, not just economically.” These teachers express the belief that parental participation will encourage them to somehow aid their children directly:

“To me, parents are going to be more connected to their children’s education [under the autonomy program]. They have to contribute more to help...”

But again, what remains hazy with this set of meanings is how common forms of participation -- attending consejo meetings or social celebrations -- is linked to home practices that could directly boost their children’s school performance. The contextual forces linked to family poverty that mitigate against real change inside households are pervasive, as discussed above. Yet somehow autonomia implies, for some teachers, that parents will be changing their behavior in ways that will alter their children’s school performance.

The Managua architects of decentralization believe, that by raising the parental cuota, directors and consejos will gain more discretionary revenues. This rise in local financing will help energize greater rationality in how budget allocations are made. Consejos will have more money with which to work, and since they are closer to the school’s problems and strengths, rising discretionary revenues will flow to the most effective remedies. At the same time, Government is providing additional financing to selected schools for facilities improvements through the FISE, and for pedagogical improvements via the metodologia activa initiative.
These local finance mechanisms -- and resulting budgetary rationality -- do play-out in the theorized way in a subset of our sampled schools. As we saw above with SA5, significant numbers of parents can afford to pay a 15 córdoba cuota each month. In turn, school revenues rise and fresh teacher incentives can be financed. In SA5 new revenues have been so robust that four additional staff positions have been supported since the school became autonomous. The large-scale survey component of the Ministry’s evaluation program should shed light on how many schools have shared SA5's positive experience, and the community conditions that enable this success.

Several school actors certainly define the push for higher cuotas as a shift in who shoulders the school finance burden. Directors and teachers recognize that the Ministry is still covering most salary costs (with the historical exception of the treceavo). For many parents, the press for higher cuota levels is among the most salient connotations of autonomia. Here are the responses of three parents when we asked, “What does school autonomy mean to you?”

“We are responsible for higher cuotas... [to pay] for electricity, water, the phone... this what autonomy means for me.”

“Now the Government is no longer sending the amount of resources the institution needs... now the burden is on our shoulders.”

“Help the teachers through the cuota, also to help the school.”

But over time it remains unclear in many schools we studied whether cuota revenue will really rise appreciably. Teachers in several schools have become skeptical as to whether autonomy really means that local resources will grow in the future:

“[Autonomy means] gaining resources from parents and the community... but contributions are very low, they are very poor.”

“Money is coming from a different place [not from Managua].”
“During the [decentralization] workshop we were told that we should ask parents for a cuota of 5 córdobas, but we should say it is voluntary.”

In some schools the Ministry’s credibility has been undercut by over promising gains in local revenue that were to result from autonomy. When these benefits fail to arrive, faith in the entire decentralization initiative is damaged. Predictably, where the allocation of new local resources is not fully transparent both the consejo and the Ministry lose legitimacy. In the words of one teacher:

“We hear that in some communities FISE is helping, through some political party. But we do not know clearly where and who to go to.”

Many teachers expressed initial enthusiasm for autonomy -- for it meant higher salaries. Many teachers reported that this was claimed explicitly in Ministry presentations and workshops. School directors also seized on this expectation in trying to sell their teachers on the autonomia idea. Said two directors:

“I was the first to embrace autonomy to improve our salaries.”

“Autonomy is helping to raise teacher salaries.”

A related, yet unanticipated, issue relates to teacher compensation: Some new consejos moved quickly to consolidate unofficial fees charged parents that had sprouted in a number of schools. As one teacher expressed her early fears over autonomy:

“We were concerned that income would go to one pot, [previously earned] from teacher businesses, charges for examinations, and teaching materials.”
In this particular school [PA3] the consolidated fund equaled or surpassed the earlier private streams flowing to individual teachers after factoring in new cuota revenues. The fund became more transparent as well. But in other schools a few teachers and directors reported that these earlier charges for remedial tutoring or exams were viewed as less legitimate, threatening these sources of side income. In this way the public transparency encouraged by some consejos discourages private entrepreneurship previously displayed by some teachers. Perhaps ironically, earlier market relations are replaced by a more public collective process that all teachers must follow.

Many teachers believe that their initial expectation of higher salaries has been dashed, simply given the extreme poverty that characterizes families in the surrounding community:

“We can not say that we have met our goals regarding salaries... our economic needs which is the priority.”

For this teacher, autonomia may mean different things. But the connotation that it would raise her salary is the dominant connotation. In turn, some directors have simply tried to discount this interpreted meaning of autonomy. In the concise words of one director: “Teachers misunderstand, they expect higher salaries.”

Finally, some school actors believe that autonomia means nothing related to school improvement or organizational reform. Instead, the Ministry’s push for decentralization intends to weaken teachers’ rights and job security. Several parents and teachers we interviewed feel that autonomy is consistent with the Government’s attempt to inject market principles, even privatization into the education sector. The push for autonomy does draw from a distinct set of economic ideals and political ideology that continues to be widely debated in Nicaraguan society. This holds direct implications at the grassroots, inside particular (not all) schools for the meanings that come to be attached to autonomia.

When a critical mass of teachers believes that they were coerced into signing the autonomy petition, this can result in a widespread feeling of ill will. We have already talked about SA5, where at least three teachers either left the school or were fired (certain aspects of
this event are reported differently by other actors). In our focus group one teacher reported: “There are teachers who did not sign the autonomy and got fired. Four teachers they are not here.” The other teachers agreed with this summary of the event. Similarly at SA2, the director had a difficult time convincing some teachers to sign the petition. Several teachers thought autonomy meant “getting rid of people.”

We can not estimate from our small school sample the extent to which teachers have felt coerced into signing the autonomy petitions. It is an issue that might be addressed by the Ministry. Given the various meanings of decentralization that are circulating among local educators, at times fed by mixed signals coming from regional training sessions, it is not surprising that some teachers become worried about job security or employment rights.

The fact that higher cuotas were interpreted as the linchpin to autonomy (e.g., leading to higher teacher pay) has resulted in quiet resistance and sharp questioning by many parents. During our focus group discussion at SA1, one parent captured this sentiment:

“The monthly cuota is going from 10 to 15 córdobas, and [there is] a registration fee. They think because the school is autonomous, they can charge what they want. Everyone was saying, ‘it is like we are putting our children in private school’.”

At SA5 where disunity marks the entire school, decentralization is seen as changing the character of public education in the eyes of one parent:

“It is like the institution is privatizing itself. They now say education is no longer free. You have to pay for everything.”

Another parent in the same focus group:

“If Government is not willing to spend in education, this [autonomy] is the solution for the problems they have. Education should be a responsibility of the Government.”
The director at SA2 felt compelled to clarify: “Autonomy is not privatization.”

The Ministry’s designers of decentralization certainly do not equate autonomy with privatization. Managua’s assertive and inventive push to aid local schools through the FISE for improving facilities and via metodología activa for classrooms represent new activist roles for the central State. This governance strategy is mixed in the sense that it combines decentralized school management with centralized leadership in selected areas where the Ministry can play an effective role. But by leading with higher cuotas -- as seen through the eyes of many parents and some teachers -- the entire initiative has come into question within some communities.

**Analysis Two Summary**

Policy makers often implicitly assume that their well intentioned reform is well understood by those at the grassroots, school actors who are the objects of policy change. Yet we have seen how directors, teachers, and parents are discerning actors who try to make sense of this array of actions that are somehow linked to their school’s autonomía. The meanings attached to this construct -- alternatively labeled, autonomía or descentralización -- vary across actors within schools and across different schools. Government will never be able to harmonize how the reform is interpreted and understood. But we have attempted to catalogue the most common forms of understanding, and the disconnect between the active interpretations of policy makers and school-level actors.

Two overarching distinctions flow from our comparative analysis of school actors’ interpretations at PA1 and PA3. First, school staff members and parents who view autonomía as an essentially positive change point to improvements in the social organization of the school, notably a tighter feeling of accountability and shared responsibility. In these schools -- or among certain actors within a school -- autonomía means more attention to teacher reliability and performance, as well as a micro-political structure within the school and community that has become more attentive to how students are performing. By contrast, staff in schools that exhibit less cohesion and generally more negative views of decentralization tend to emphasize the
economic facets of autonomy. Teachers express concern that cuota revenue is so minuscule, they will not see anticipated pay raises. Parents complain of the burden placed on them to come up with cuota payments more frequently or at a higher level. In these circumstances, autonomia is viewed generally as a school finance reform.

Second, the meaning of autonomia gets mixed-up with other -- more centralized -- reforms which the Ministry is leading. As we heard from teachers at PA1, much enthusiasm is evident around Ministry-led training in metodologia activa. This appears to be the single, most popular central initiative among the teachers with whom we spoke. Teachers then quite naturally link this innovation to autonomia, since the latter is also being advanced by Managua and encourages greater attention to student progress and instructional improvements. Staff in schools that have received the “model school” designation or funding from the FISE also bundle-up these associated connotations -- they are interpreted to be part of a package of positive actions taken by the central Ministry that affect their school. But these positive actions are a blend of centralized initiatives that integrate well with the spirit of decentralization -- to focus the attention of directors, teachers, and parents on how to improve the quality of instruction and character of the school’s infrastructure and social organization.

Looking across all of the decentralized schools, Analysis Two revealed several meanings or connotations associated with autonomia:

- **Gaining school-level control or independence from the Ministry.** Staff in several schools expressed positive reactions to their new-found ability to manage their own organization. Some teachers do believe that autonomia is only “an administrative change” which may affect the director but not teachers’ day-to-day work. Several directors complained of having to spend a larger slice of time on administrative matters, keeping account books straight, and taking too much time to get to the nearest bank. Notwithstanding, these negative connotation it is common to hear directors and teachers alike talking about the potential benefits of working more independently of the Ministry.
A new focus on student progress and accountability. All schools were attentive, to varying degrees, of the Ministry’s push to focus on student progress (usually indicated by student promotion and drop-out rates). How achievement should be improved is a question that directors and teachers are struggling with. For some, autonomia connotes tighter supervision of teachers and putting pressure on teachers, or parents, to encourage students to do better. In other school settings, a focus on achievement led teachers to be more innovative, to assess pupil performance on a more regular basis, and in some instances to have more contact with parents regarding their child’s school work.

The cuota. Many parents with whom we spoke simply associated decentralization with rising cuotas. A few parents reported improvements in teacher attendance or more frequent social events at the school. But the most common meaning attached to the notion of decentralization was the salient issue of how many parents could actually afford to pay higher fees. How the Ministry and local consejos can move this basic understanding into more productive and energizing ground is a major challenge.

Democratic participation. Very few teachers reported that autonomia means wider participation in the school’s affairs. They do appreciate having one or two teachers on the new consejo. But most teachers we talked to did not report significant gains in their direct involvement in school-wide issues. Several parents, however, did express this connotation. Participation at times led to conflict and confrontation, particularly when parents pushed teachers to be more effective.

Weaken teacher rights and market principles. Staff in a significant number of schools expressed concern that autonomia simply means a weakening of teachers’ rights, wage levels, and job security -- as the central State attempted to devolve government schools
into a market arrangement. This swirl of connotations is highly politicized throughout Nicaraguan society. This interpretation can be attributed in part to teachers who remain loyal to Sandinista ideals and political philosophy. But these connotations linked to autonomia are understandable when parents can not afford to pay higher cuotas or when student progress seems more constrained by family poverty than school effectiveness. Passing authority down to the consejo -- when no new resources can be squeezed out of impoverished parents -- comes to be interpreted as a misguided action by the central State which will not likely boost the school’s quality nor the students’ rates of learning. These negative connotations can rather quickly erode early support for decentralization.

Analysis Two can not provide direct evidence on whether these interpreted meanings of autonomia lead to certain behaviors of directors, teachers, or parents. However, we have emphasized that coherent school-wide action is much less likely to unfold if actors inside the school and community do not hold a common understanding and shared ways of describing what autonomia holds for their school.

VI. Analysis Three
Major Organizational and Resource Issues

One’s interpretations of autonomia interact with concrete action and occasional contention within the school. Analysis Three focuses attention on the four types of action that were most commonly raised in our interviews and focus group sessions. The four sets of salient issues include:

• Parent participation. Are parents becoming more involved in the school? If so, through what forms of participation? How do teachers and the director respond to parental involvement?
Management and leadership. How does autonomy alter the character of leadership and the daily actions taken by the consejo and the director? Are these “leaders” within the school pushing for greater accountability and higher performance expectations?

Spending shifts and cuotas. The question of how school actors respond to pressure for higher parental fees is quite contentious in several schools we visited. In addition, we heard of strident debates over how additional revenues are being spent, particularly in providing incentive pay for teachers.

Classrooms and pedagogical improvements. Directors and teachers are talking much about how to raise “achievement,” that is, lowering repetition and drop-out rates. This new-found focus is one positive and widely shared benefit of decentralization. What constraints and positive dynamics are being discussed that may influence whether student achievement in fact rises over time?

Table 4 summarizes how school actors reported action and contention along these four salient issues. We have organized their voices and reports school by school. This illuminates how the same issues variably play out among different school settings. With simple symbols we also indicate whether the school actor’s report of action is interpreted in a positive (P), negative (N), or neutral (F) manner. This graphically displays whether the school -- summing across parents, teachers, and the director -- is moving ahead in a positive manner on these four key issues.

Let’s look, for example, at primary school PA1. We heard from both the director and the families focus group that the consejo was helping to organize more festivals and social events at the school. Parents also aided an effort to raise money from parents and community organizations to repair the school’s roof. The director spoke of what she believes is clearer and
more frequent communication with parents, stemming from autonomia. One example is that one parent believed her daughter could not come to school unless she had a proper pair of shoes to wear. The director found this parent and explained that this was no longer a requirement of the school.

The director at PA1 expressed negative feelings about one change associated with autonomous school management: more paperwork and more time traveling to the neighboring town to get to the bank. Yet other management issues were reported with a positive interpretation by the director and teachers alike. Teachers now reportedly get paid on time. Parents help with student attendance, “encouraging their children to attend more regularly.” And when we asked about staff changes, parents reported that an ineffective teacher was pressured to leave the school through the consejo. In this way, the parents who sat in the focus group, at least, felt that they could exercise accountability to rid the school of poor teachers.

As in other schools situated within impoverished communities, the cuota issue has been very difficult. The monthly fee was actually lowered from 5 to 2 córdobas per month. The director and teachers recognize that this lack of new revenues means that incentives and improvements requiring more financing will not materialize in the short run. Parents remain confused as to whether the cuota is mandatory or voluntary. Some parents worry about the pressure they feel to pay the cuota; others see it as voluntary and appear not to agonize over whether and how to pay it.

The director and teachers report that the consejo provides a “stimulus” [estimulo] to raise student achievement levels. Every two months the consejo publicly announces which students are doing well. A public mural has been designed and painted, where students’ names are added if they appear on the merit list. The director and two teachers are heavily involved in the metodologia activa training programs; they are bringing these techniques and ideas back to the entire teaching staff. Major problems, however, remain with scarce textbooks and instructional materials. Many school actors question why the Ministry emphasizes fundamental
organizational reforms but fails to distribute essential instructional materials in an effective manner.

**Parent Participation**

Next let’s look across schools within each of the four thematic areas. This allows us to review major constraints on implementation and reveals success stories within particular schools. We also specify in Table 4 which school actors emphasized each particular issue, be they parents (P), teachers (T), and/or directors (D). This helps to establish some minimal level of reliability or triangulation on whether the action occurred in the reported manner, or whether the reporting of events occurs through the eyes of just a single actor.

Across a few schools, directors and parents report that their consejos are organizing more celebrations or social events at the school. This is a popular mechanism for getting mothers and fathers to at least visit the school and talk with teachers and other school staff. This is becoming a common indicator of parental participation. At SA3, for instance, the director claims that 70% of the parents attend school fairs. Parents also occasionally help with school repairs and painting classrooms.

Other directors are deeply disappointed with share of parents that attend meetings or lend a hand around the school. The director at SA4: “We sent a notice saying that children would be expelled if their parents did not attend meetings.” The director at SA5 complains: “They only come to register their child.” We only heard from one school director who tries to meet with parents individually, “every two months or so.”

Parent participation overlaps with how the director is trying to manage the school -- since the consejo has become the principal management partner. The director at SA1 is worried that parents on the consejo

“...are the only ones involved with the school.” Sometimes parents do not understand what their role is... because of a lack of education.” Later the principal complains, “They
thought they had the authority to fire someone” [authority the consejo arguably does possess].

Not surprisingly, some parents see school staff members as off-putting and disinterested in their opinions and involvement. During our parent focus group, one mother said: “we feel mistreated and humiliated by teachers.” Parents interpreted remarks by teachers as critical and disrespectful. At SA1, parents moved to push out the incumbent director, as reported above, but the local delegado intervened to block this move. The director of SA4 expressed the belief that the consejo “has a few parent leaders.... but they need training and guidance.”

From this qualitative evidence it is difficult to assess the level of additional parental involvement that has followed decentralization and subsequent encouragement by some directors and consejos. Hopefully, the quantitative evidence linked to the Ministry/World Bank survey study will be able to estimate this more precisely. An important issue is whether the granting of more formal and potential authority actually results in greater parental involvement. Our interviews and focus groups certainly reveal a great deal of variability in the extent to which a broader circle of parents are becoming involved. These data also suggest that involvement often comes in the form of social events and festivals, certainly a positive first step. A few parents are taking active roles in serving on consejos, although they are often met with skepticism and even opposition from teachers. Teachers sometimes see parent members as requiring training and “not understanding their roles,” a limiting attitude on the part of school staff that may undercut parents’ status and influence over time. The director seems pivotal in this arena. If the director is inviting and skilled in working with parents -- beginning with those serving on the consejo -- then parents will likely feel welcomed and respected. But if the director is trying to work around, or independently of, the consejo or vocal parents, this attitude is read clearly by other parents and participation will remain limited.
Management and Leadership

Many school directors report positive management benefits stemming from decentralization. Directors and teachers alike talk much about “improved discipline” of both teachers and students. There reportedly is an overall tightening-up of the school’s organizational cohesion, motivated mainly by the consejo’s and the director’s ability to sanction teachers who do not consistently attend school. This accountability process also includes positive rewards for committed and seemingly effective teachers -- to the extent that extra school revenues can be raised. On the overall issue of improved accountability:

Teachers in PA2 emphasize that “better teacher discipline” has occurred after the school became autonomous.

Parents in PA3, reported above, praise the teachers for their regular attendance, “We see them coming to school even in the heavy rains.”

Teachers in the SA3 focus group argue that “we are trying to improve teacher and student discipline.”

The director in SA5 points out that teachers “lose pay if they do not come to work... they are accountable to the consejo.

It appears that teachers are indeed sensitive to the evaluations and sanctions that the consejo can exercise, even if the sanction is simply social disapproval or negative visibility in the eyes of consejo members. Less apparent attributes of teachers -- such as, whether they are raising children’s achievement levels -- are rarely discussed within this school-level accountability process. This is interesting since there is much discussion of autonomous schools’ focus on “achievement,” that is tracking children’s repetition and drop-out rates year to year. Although these outcome indicators are being taken more seriously, we heard almost no once voicing how to hold teachers accountable for boosting academic performance. We did hear of teachers who were asked to leave the school, but more work is required to understand what these teachers did that was so egregious. And for average teachers who may not be effective in the classroom, we heard of no evaluation or sanctioning process that would encourage them to improve their pedagogical practices.
Directors complain about the rising load of administrative responsibilities. This may undercut any policy makers’ intentions that the director should attend to instructional improvement or innovative management practices. We have already heard from directors with schools in small towns or rural area that don’t have banks. This makes the transfer of funds from Managua, drawing of teacher salaries, and book keeping tasks very time consuming for some directors. The PA3 director worries that the increase in “bureaucratic work” following autonomy has led to “a disconnection from doing technical work with the teachers.”

Some directors now must work with a consejo that has demanding members (which they are supposed to be), and at times they tackle difficult issues. Several directors reported that their consejos were over stepping their authority or that the members needed more training to learn their “proper role.” And when significant decisions are made, resistance or impassive reactions are common. The director at SA4 successfully pushed to move the primary grades to the morning and secondary classes to the afternoon and evening. She won this battle but at an enormous political cost, with several teachers calling for her resignation and many parents up in arms.

Teachers are not always happy with this new management structure. To the extent that the director or the consejo can mobilize new resources in ways that yield clear benefits to the school or to teachers, then “management” of course looks more credible. At SA1, for example, the teachers heaped praise on their director for successfully obtaining funds from the FISE to improve school facilities. At SA5, rising cuota revenues translate into higher teacher wages and additional staff positions. Under this scenario, directors and consejo members gain substantial legitimacy in the eyes of teachers and parents alike.

Yet teachers in more impoverished schools -- which are more typical, looking across our 12 schools -- complain of “having more responsibilities” under autonomy but “not receiving any additional pay” [PA2]. Teachers in some school worry that the consejo is simply taking a critical posture toward teachers, not offering positive support. One teacher at SA2 told us that the consejo only meets “when there are problems.” Whether this is true or not is somewhat
secondary to the perception that the consejo just puts out brush fires; it does not try to positively address long-term problems.

Finally, we heard of very few innovative management practices. The policy designers talk of how autonomy will encourage school managers to marshal scarce resources more carefully, more efficiently. We did hear from teachers at SA5 that each week one teacher supervises clean-up and facilities maintenance activities, involving students and parents. In addition, setting in place a contingency for teachers between showing up for work regularly and getting paid is indeed an innovation in some schools. And a few schools have created a system of “attendance cards” where teachers and parents keep track of how many days each child has attended school. This again is conceptually simple but an innovative way of encouraging more regular attendance. Beyond these mechanisms we did not hear of many organizational innovations aimed at motivating teachers or students, or for the conservation or spending of scarce budget resources.

**School Finance, Spending Priorities, and Cuotas**

The decentralization of school management is motivated in part by a belief that local actors can more rationally allocate resources to inputs and processes that will raise teacher effectiveness and student performance. We indeed did hear much about school-level finance issues, revolving around the cuota controversy, as well as spending priorities. It is important to emphasize that the amount of discretionary resources available to the consejo and director depends on their ability to raise additional revenues -- an exercise that reportedly yield little new monies for schools situated in impoverished communities. The only significant exception is when a skilled director is able to obtain funding from the FISE for facilities improvement. We also heard from two schools where commercial stores in the city or town granted loan terms to teachers, as a contribution to the school. There are other modest sources of support that flow outside of teacher salaries, but they are viewed as linked to the central Ministry: inservice training via the metodologia activa initiative and the free milk program.
We have already reported concerns related to the cuota, expressed by parents and school staff alike. Teachers often are called upon to collect the fee revenue from their students and gently pressure those who have not paid. Thus teachers and parents both talked about the confusion around whether the cuota is defined as mandatory or voluntary (Table 4, PA1, PA2, SA1, SA3). Many parents in our focus groups expressed anxiety over the fact that they could not afford to pay the cuota, defining it as an obligation to the school that they could not meet. This tension is relieved by redefining it as voluntary. Then, the school loses the opportunity to gain more revenue. And without new revenue, teacher incentive pay can not be implemented or the increments are very small. Many teachers believe that they were “promised” pay raises under decentralized management, a commitment that cannot be met when cuota revenues fail to materialize. Teachers also reported cases where parents could not afford to pay higher fees and withdrew theirchild from school (SA3). One director summarized, “Parents feel they are carrying the burden of decentralization” (SA5).

Importantly, parents in some schools have historically faced a variety of fees, including a registration fee at the beginning of the school year and fees charged by teachers to sit for examinations, to obtain materials, or to receive remedial instruction. One result of decentralization is that these hidden fees have become more transparent, even consolidated into the single cuota in some schools. As one teacher at PA3 candidly reported earlier in the paper, she was concerned that all side sources of income would consolidated into one revenue account.

The granting of autonomy does spark important debates around how discretionary resources should be allocated by the consejo and the director. One can certainly debate whether allocation decisions are more rational or lead to gains in student achievement. But most schools in our sample shared a stronger sense of democratic participation in arguing over how spending priorities should be set. Teachers at SA2 complained that the consejo was spending too much on facilities improvement and not enough on salary augmentations. Teachers also lost their transportation and breakfast subsidies, as spending was rationalized by the consejo. At SA1 there is debate over whether evening-shift teachers should receive higher pay, given that students
are more difficult and conditions at night are at times plainly dangerous. Teachers complain, at SA4, that the old treceavo wage practice has been eliminated and not replaced by the promised “incentive system.” SA5 has successfully raised substantially more cuota revenue. One parent worries that half the school’s salary bill is now covered by cuota income: “Everybody is saying this is a private school.” She is concerned that many parents can not pay the high cuota, and the school’s image is one of exclusiveness.

Autonomy has made school-level finance and spending discussions much more transparent, encouraging broader participation in spending debates among school staff, and even a few parents. This is a double-edged sword, however. Democratic participation at the school site is a distinct benefit of autonomy. But it also spurs political demands on the consejo and the director -- most of which can not be met given severe resource constraints felt by most schools that we studied. As micro political demands heat up, it is not clear whether budget priorities are being set in a more rational way -- that is, investing in school inputs and teachers who most effectively raise student performance. We are not suggesting that allocation decisions would be any more rational at central levels. The point is simply that micro-politics within many schools are now more participatory and lively, compared to when school actors had no control over resources. But human-scale political demands do not necessarily lead to “rational” budget decisions. Many consejos invest limited resources in facilities improvements. This in fact is the major input emphasized by central sources of funding, like the FISE. Facilities improvements are “rational” in the sense that they receive support from many parents and school directors, despite questionable effects on the quality of classroom instruction.

Another resource issue that besets many schools is the insufficient supply of basic instructional materials. Many with whom we spoke believe that this is a responsibility of the Ministry, to provide basic textbooks and instructional supplies. Some schools have resorted to charging parents for these materials, cited as another factor that raises the drop-out rate (SA1). The Ministry is viewed as sending a contradictory message: address drop-out and retention rates, but don’t assume the Ministry will distribute basic instructional materials to help improve these
indicators of student progress. Teachers and parents at PA3 reported that historically they have received few instructional materials from the Ministry. The director has been requesting additional student desks over the past few years and has reportedly received no response. All actors at explicitly PA2 told us that autonomy has done nothing to alleviate the scarcity of instructional materials.

Classrooms and Pedagogical Improvement

Decentralization has clearly helped to focus many schools on student achievement. This -- observed across several schools -- is a major and consistent piece of good news. One can fairly debate whether repetition rates are the optimal indicator of student performance. But this indicator, along with drop-out rates, is being tracked with greater care than prior to autonomy. Note that this mechanism for accountability involves a partnership between the consejo and central Ministry.

At PA2, parents were excited about how “the best group of children gets recognition” through a new bulletin, circulos de estudio.” Teachers also are informing parents about daily homework assignments. The consejo at SA2 similarly publishes how each student is doing, then hosts meetings to discuss issues pertinent to each grade level. At SA1 teachers report that classroom visits by the director are helpful in gleaning new ideas about how to improve their classroom practices. This is part of the director’s effort to “monitor achievement.” Teachers at SA4 even complained that they were promised more feedback on their teaching [evaluación de los maestros] and more inservice training.

The metodología activa initiative is quite popular among school staff, as introduced above. Teachers at SA1 told us, “Teachers must be creative [under the new method]. Some parents see it in a positive light, “A more active form of education is in the school... [teachers are] forming study groups in the classroom.” But to other parents, this does not seem like real schooling. One director (PA3) faces opposition to metodología activa.
“Parents say that their children are just playing [in the classroom].” Other parents worry that some teachers are not sufficiently attentive to “slower students.” Parents at SA2 criticized a few teachers who they claim “are not patient with slower students... they just wait to charge them money [for remedial instruction].” Again, we are seeing limited communication with parents. To the extent that metodología activa departs from traditional forms of instruction, significant levels of parent apprehension are predictable. Yet many parents remain outside the conversation over how to best improve student achievement.

Analysis Three Summary

Beyond school context and actors’ own interpretations of what autonomía really means, this reform leads to concrete actions and local debate over how best to improve the local school. If the only aim of decentralization were to spark school-level discussion of how to raise additional resources and raise the school’s effect on student learning, the reform could be declared a success. We discovered no shortage of strong opinions and contention around the actions and behaviors that have been sparked by autonomía. In many cases this indeed is good news. It represents lively democratic participation among several actors within the school. In other cases, sharp contention is dividing school staff, or separating active parents from teachers who feel attacked and unsupported.

Analysis Three revealed four major issues that beset the school-level implementation of autonomía. These issues are pivotal. They must be addressed effectively if school staff and parents are to construct a positive view of decentralized governance. If these problems persist -- and some will, given surrounding contextual constraints, including severe family poverty -- simply granting administrative independence will have a necessarily limited effect on the school’s ability to obtain more resources or to raise the achievement of its students.

- Parent participation is reportedly on the rise in several schools. Our qualitative data can not answer the questions, How widespread are these gains in parent involvement? And
which parents are most able to become more involved? But overall, our interviews revealed encouraging cases where parents are becoming more involved in the consejo and in social events that are encouraged by Ministry-led training programs on decentralization. The character of this involvement is narrow in most cases. Many directors and teachers voice awareness that parents could play a stronger role at home, encouraging regular attendance and completion of homework. Yet parents do not report hearing about these concerns, nor indicate any changes in how they encourage their children. More research is required to understand the breadth with which parents are becoming more important actors in the teaching-learning process. In a few schools, we heard of downright hostility and disrespect between teachers and parents. This falls far short of the spirit of democratic participation, highlighted within the Ministry’s rhetoric surrounding the aims of autonomia.

• Management and leadership improvements were reported by several directors. They believe that -- in concert with the consejo -- teachers can be held more accountable, and a spotlight can illuminate how students are progressing. Many directors also believe that administrative and budgetary autonomy brings new flexibility, enabling the director to exercise stronger leadership. Autonomia alone does not ensure that the director, teachers, and parents together will pursue a common course. You have heard reports of divisiveness and conflict among staff within a small subset of the 12 schools involved in the process evaluation. This contention at times is linked to disparate understanding among school staff over the proper role and authority of the consejo, and of parents, an issue on which the Ministry and local delegados might more forcefully address. A equally serious shortcoming is the lack of leadership that is aimed at improving classrooms and the instructional process. The Ministry has certainly moved school staff to focus on students’ rate of progress through the grade levels. But it is the rare director who focuses daily on classroom innovation and improvement. Enthusiasm for
metodología activa is strong and encouraging. Whether directors follow-up on this external, Ministry-led training program to encourage ongoing pedagogical change remains to be seen.

- **School finance and spending priorities** are certainly being debated within schools that have been granted autonomy. Confusion and opposition over the issue of higher cuotas is the heaviest weight hanging around the neck of decentralization. Throughout this analysis you have heard from teachers and parents who dislike the pressure created by the Ministry’s expectation that autonomia necessarily means that existing cuotas should be enforced and increased, largely linked to teacher incentive pay. This places many teachers in a conflict-of-interest position: they want to develop good relations with parents, yet to earn more money they must push parents to pay their cuota each month. On the one hand, in communities where more córdobas can be raised, new teaching posts, facilities, and instructional materials become affordable. On the other hand, in the poorest localities where parents seem simply unable to contribute more, resentment and cynicism grow over the central Government’s intentions and policies. This is a difficult dilemma for local educators and Government policy makers. Beyond the cuota issue, flexibility on the spending side is being well received by most directors and teachers. The ability to control the modest amount of discretionary resources available is much appreciated, at times creatively exercised. The ongoing role of delegados in approving new teaching posts might receive more careful discussion within the Ministry. This, too, is not an easy issue. Some local education offices may be trying to equalize the distribution of teachers across schools. The grossly unequal differences in the ratio of students per teacher, discussed above, reveal that maldistribution is rampant. Yet when delegados deny new teaching posts or slow down the transfer of incompetent teachers, the spirit of autonomous management is violated. This represents a second dilemma.
which the Ministry might engage and offer clearer guidance to delegados and school directors.

• Much more work remains to be done on how decentralization can steadily push improvements in pedagogy and classroom instruction. The Ministry’s strategy -- as interpreted by many school staff members -- is to focus on student progress (promotion and drop-out rates). Again, the response of many teachers we interviewed to metodologia activa is warm and enthusiastic. But how this “pullout training program” actually affects day-to-day classroom pedagogy is not clear. Nor are the linkages between the work of the consejo and the director with regard to instructional improvements at all clear. Some schools are taking innovative steps, such as meeting with parents when students are falling behind or providing tutorial classes (for which private fees are not levied). But many directors and teachers see decentralization as an administrative reform, not one that intends to seriously improve pedagogical skills or innovative classroom practices.

VII. Conclusions and Formative Recommendations for Improving Decentralized School Management

What implications do these findings hold for the future of Nicaragua’s bold decentralization experiment? We respond to this bottom-line question in two ways. First, the voices and viewpoints of school actors, we argue, urge us to think about this experiment in new ways. Second, these vivid local reports support specific programmatic adjustments that might advance the positive effects of decentralizing school management. Some issues, such as how strongly the Ministry should push cuota increases, represent difficult dilemmas which empirical evidence alone cannot resolve.
Remember that qualitative data gathered from 12 schools is insufficient to substantiate generalized claims. Where the reports of parents, teachers, or directors were similar across schools, we do suggest that the Ministry seriously pursue trouble spots, either through an additional analysis to determine how widespread the problem truly is, or to make programmatic adjustments. Our findings should be considered along with the quantitative evidence provided via the Ministry’s school survey and student achievement research.

How do the findings of our process evaluation encourage us to think in novel ways about the decentralization of school management?

Policy makers often expect to enact organizational or economic changes that lead to real behavioral change on the ground -- in our case, inside schools and classrooms. Neoconservative, and even centrist, governments increasingly make policy to rationalize incentives or to enable “rational choice” by parents or other clients of public services. But even these “weak” or “efficient-State” strategies express a theory of action: local financing through cuotas will spark greater parent participation, for instance, or school-based political control will open-up channels of direct accountability, raising teacher effort and, in turn, student achievement.

After listening to the voices of these diverse school actors such tidy causal flows of action, moving down from Managua and leading to teacher transformation in a distant primary school classroom should not appear all so predictable. We are not arguing that policy makers’ theory of action is wrong. We are suggesting that the perceptions, voices, and reported lack of behavioral change by school actors point to a variety of institutional factors that impede the aims expressed by advocates of decentralization.

Analysis 1 and Analysis 2 offered clear windows into seeing how local institutional and economic constraints powerfully impede successful implementation. We saw how each school’s
history and local context sets deep-seated conditions into which the autonomia reform is dropped. Schools in severely impoverished communities -- or schools that have long been poorly organized or ineffective -- will not likely raise cuota revenues. Whether the policy is ill conceived or not is immaterial; local conditions will undermine it.

One key local arena pertains to how authority has been historically arranged inside the school and whether micro-political dynamics have been aimed at the task of raising teacher performance and student achievement. It is not surprising that when schools already had an authority structure dedicated to boosting student performance and a fairly participatory political structure, autonomia was well received by most school actors.

On the topic of authority, our findings suggest that the Ministry might think more carefully about the advantages of centralized authority. Government’s investment in the FISE and metodologia activa has been received locally with consistent enthusiasm and praise for the Ministry. Both initiatives are cited as important supports for ensuring that autonomous management gains support among teachers.

Analysis 2 allowed us to explore the variability in the interpreted meanings that school staff and parents assign to the operational concept of autonomia. Some see it as an administrative reform that is unrelated to pedagogical improvements. Several eager teachers see greater accountability, a stronger focus on student progress, and metodologia activa as an interlocked set of ingredients, embedded in autonomia. Parents in these 12 schools see the cuota and more frequent social events as the reform’s major pieces. We are quick to emphasize that reform predictably plays-out differently across diverse school settings. On the other hand, when a narrow interpretation of autonomia leads to resistance or impassivity, the Ministry might adjust its training and programmatic approach to widen a common understanding of the reform. The
related instance is where few directors interviewed expressed interest in working with teachers to improve their pedagogical practices, beyond investing in off-site inservice training. That is, the director’s own role is rarely questioned, and usually they have more administrative responsibilities under their autonomous management.

In sum, even before we ask whether the behavior and commitments of school staff and parents change we must ask (1) What are the local community and school dynamics into which autonomia is being placed, particularly whether the institutionalized character of authority and participation is consonant with the aims of decentralization, and (2) do school actors and parents hold similar or divided conceptions of what autonomia means, for their own actions and for the altered social and political norms of the school organization. When we fail to observe intended behavioral change within autonomous schools, we might look to contextual histories and actors’ constructed meanings for understanding this breakdown in implementation.

We did frequently view -- across several schools and actors -- shared concerns and points of resistance to autonomia. Analysis 3 looked at four major sets of issues. What are the implications of these particular findings?

It would be naive to expect flawless implementation of an organizational reform of this scope and magnitude. The Ministry has commissioned an ambitious evaluation effort with the expressed purpose of informing mid-course corrections in the decentralization program. Findings from our process evaluation suggest that some elements of autonomia will be difficult to sustain or appear not to be energizing intended effects. We term these, first-order problems.

These fundamental issues include the contentious push to more consistently collect and raise cuotas. A subset of the schools clearly benefit from this element, allowing them to hire
additional teachers and improve their facilities. But the more typical response in the schools we studied was quiet resistance on the part of parents, yielding little new revenue.

Concurrently we observed across schools widely varying staffing levels and student-teacher ratios, suggesting gross inequalities in the pre-existing school finance system. It is difficult to see how the new decentralized finance scheme will narrow the unequal level of staff resources allocated across schools.

Another first-order problem pertains to the mixed level of parent participation. This may be linked to many parents’ concern or opposition to higher cuotas. It may stem from the limited capacity of consejos and directors to spur wider involvement by a larger circle of parents. Family poverty and the institutionalized view that schools are formal organizations belonging to the educators, not to parents, also may play a role. Whatever the underlying causes, we heard few reports of rising levels of parental engagement. We heard almost no report of how parents could aid their children’s school work inside the home.

A few second-order problems emerge from qualitative evaluation data. These issues arise from the good news and early successes of the autonomia initiative. For example, several of the schools we studied are taking seriously the Ministry’s push to monitor student promotion and drop-out rates. But it remains quite hazy as to whether school directors are taking on an instructional leadership role -- or becoming ”petite bureaucrats” now faced with even more administrative chores. Metodología activa is often pointed to as the effort aimed at improving classroom practices. But whether these pedagogical changes stick over time depends upon whether the director (and perhaps the consejo) encourage teachers to pursue teaching innovations.
Another second-order issue is the question of who really has authority over teacher posting. The regional delegados are presumably working with a fixed number of available posts and trying to be fair in how they are distributed. But the decentralization program promises consejos that they have the power to fire an incompetent teacher or add a post if new revenues can be found. Total control at the school level may exacerbate school finance inequalities. Yet autonomia has little real meaning if consejos lack influence in this process. The Ministry could address this issue with greater clarity.

Finally, how teacher incentive schemes are being implemented within schools remains very murky. Distorted incentives are a real possibility: teachers under pressure to raise promotion rates may do so to gain additional pay, even though students are not learning at a higher rate. In addition, we heard from teachers that the extra (incentive) pay is usually minuscule, given the lack of additional cuota revenue. Few would argue against the policy goal of holding teachers more accountable and motivating a stronger commitment to classroom innovation. But when schools create an extrinsic reward system which cannot actually be implemented, teachers’ intrinsic and professional commitment to pedagogical improvement may be inadvertently subverted.

Our process evaluation has revealed micro-processes inside schools that appear to be stimulating positive change. Managua’s push to decentralize management has indeed set in motion positive changes inside many schools. On other fronts, the voices of parents, teachers, and school directors illuminate contextual constraints and shortcomings in the autonomia initiative. If we keep listening to these local voices, the benefits of decentralization will likely become even more vivid. Policy makers and local educators also will continue to learn about the
constraining power of the school’s institutionalized habits -- and poverty’ ever present drag on long-term school reform.
Endnotes


7 Ministerio de Educación, "Normativa de Funcionamiento" (Managua: Dirección de Descentralización, 1995).

8 For a thorough review of the Chicago decentralization experiment, see: Alfred Hess, Jr. G. A. (1995), Restructuring Urban Schools: A Chicago Perspective. New York: Teachers College Press. In addition, since the 1960s specific streams of funding have move directly to local school councils in the United States, subject to variable regulatory controls. This includes funding for disadvantaged children (federal Title I) and a variety of state-government funded categorical aid programs. Evaluation research has revealed some organizational level effects, for example, school-level control of these funds can encourage more participatory planning among school principals and teachers. But significant effects on student achievement, linked to this decentralized approach to financing and implementation are difficult to find. See: Bruce Fuller and Jo Ann Izu, "What Shapes the Organizational Beliefs of Teachers?" American Journal of Education, 94, 501-535, 1986.


15 For reviews of how qualitative or ethnographic methods are used for program evaluation purposes, see: Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman, Data Analysis with Qualitative Data, Second Edition (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995). [Second edition]


17 For an overview of the Ministry/World Bank quantitative evaluation study, see: Nicaraguan Evaluation Team (1996).


22 All locations have been renamed to protect confidentiality.


24 This teacher continues: “They [parents] have to contribute more to the school... with a broom, giving a hand, economically or by participating. Before, la dirección (director’s office) would give us brooms. But now that we are autonomous we are told that we must buy our own brooms. Whatever we need, we have to buy it now.”
Since the control schools had no first-hand experience with autonomy, actors often expressed speculative understandings of decentralization. Some of these schools are hiring teachers who have decided to leave autonomous schools. There are certainly a number of rumors and connotations that circulate among educators. To the extent this folk knowledge includes negative connotations, fewer primary schools may petition for autonomy.