



The school in non-inclusive contexts: moral education, building citizenship and community development, an Argentinian example

Mercedes Oraisón* and Ana María Pérez
Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, Argentina

This article reflects on the school's role in the building of citizenship, especially in socially vulnerable contexts. We argue, and try to show, that effective participation in decision-making processes is a key tool to promote conditions that help in social transformation and the formation of active citizenship. We offer a brief description of the current socio-educational scene, characterised by poverty and school failure, both emerging from the profound social, economic and cultural crises that affected Argentina in 2001. The resulting need for social integration, links between State and civil society, people's empowerment and political development make it necessary for the school to become an institution of community development, promoting opportunities for political socialisation and moral education. We describe a two-year action-research project in a secondary school in the north east of Argentina that aimed to enhance the bond between the school and the community and to democratise relationships in the school. Based on that experience, we critically analyse the way in which the school offers or denies opportunities for genuine participation and, as a consequence, the way in which the formation of citizenship is managed, and make some recommendations for rethinking the school from a social and political point of view.

Introduction

The school can have a key role in promoting community participation and the processes of building citizenship. Community participation in the school setting is a strategy whose main goal is to rebuild the bonds between the school and the community and, at the same time, to enhance the opportunities of all those working in and with the school to be included in the decision-making processes about issues that affect them. In this way the school becomes a place of political emancipation, as it is a powerful social institution with enormous potential for promoting social

*Corresponding author: Centro de Estudios Sociales, Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, Plácido Martínez 1383, (3400) Corrientes, Argentina. Email: mercedesoraison@hotmail.com



movements and social transformations, thereby contributing to the construction of a more active citizenship and a more autonomous moral subjectivity.

To illustrate this, we describe and critique an action-research project designed to foster and encourage community participation and development processes in a high school in north east Argentina during 2006 and 2007.¹ As a result of this experience we derive and suggest some key points that constitute an invitation to envisage a new kind of school that may be able to adapt itself and understand the conditions that characterise contemporary society. It is our belief that such participatory experiences shared by the school and its surrounding community force the re-building of the school, giving a new meaning to its mandates and stimulating the imagination of new organisational forms.

As a background to the school intervention study we provide some information about the Argentinian ethnic, educational and socio-economic context and try to show how the movement from a welfare state to neo-liberal policies has brought about crisis and change in the Argentinian school.

The Argentinian context

The Argentine Republic is the second largest country in South America. Its continental area is 2,766,890 km², between the Andes mountain range in the west and the southern Atlantic Ocean in the east and south. Argentina borders Paraguay and Bolivia to the north, Brazil and Uruguay to the northeast and Chile to the west and south. It ranks third in South America in total population and thirtieth globally. The 2009 population estimate is 40,134,424 (República Argentina. Instituto Nacional del Estadística y Censo (INDEC) [National Survey and Statistics Institute], 2004, p. 26). Argentina is considered a country of immigrants; most Argentines are descended from colonial-era settlers and nineteenth and twentieth century immigrants from Europe, the majority from Italy and Spain. Some 86.4% of Argentina's population identify themselves as of European descent; an estimated 8% of the population is *mestizo* (of mixed race, usually Spanish and American Indian), a further 4% of Argentines have an Arab or East Asian heritage. In the last national census only 600,000 (1.6%) identified themselves as Argentines (INDEC, 2003).

From 1880 to 1920 Argentina constructed a national public education system relatively early by comparison with other nations in South America. Today the country has a literacy rate of 97% and three in eight adults over the age of 20 have completed secondary school studies or more. School attendance is compulsory between the ages of 5 and 17. The Argentine school system consists of a primary or lower school level lasting six or seven years and a secondary or high school level lasting five to six years. With the exception of the majority of graduate studies, education is funded by tax payers, so that the public school system is free from kindergarten to undergraduate education.

Argentina has an export-oriented agricultural sector and a relatively diversified industrial base. In 1913 the country was the world's tenth wealthiest nation per capita, but by 1998 had declined to 36th position (Wolf, 2001). Increasingly



burdensome debt, uncertainty over the monetary system, excessive regulation, barriers to free trade and a weak rule of law, coupled with corruption and a bloated bureaucracy, are some of the factors that contributed to this situation. Even during its era of decline between 1930 and 1980, however, the Argentine economy created Latin America's largest proportionate middle class; but this segment of the population suffered from a succession of economic crises between 1981 and 2002, when Argentina's relative decline became absolute. By 2001 and 2002, Argentina had defaulted on its debt, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had shrunk, unemployment reached 25% and the peso had depreciated 70% after being devalued and floated.

Since 2003, expansionary policies and commodity exports have triggered a rebound in GDP. This trend has been largely maintained, creating millions of jobs and encouraging internal consumption. Income distribution, has improved since 2002, but it is still considerably unequal and large social sectors are still living in conditions of social exclusion. In fact, the consequences of the economic, social, political and cultural spheres are still felt today: more than 50% of the population live below the poverty level, 25% are living at an even lower level² and inequality between rich and poor people has reached unprecedented levels.

From the welfare state to neo-liberal policies: crisis and change in the Argentinian school

As regards education, the process of decline and decay had already begun in the 1970s with the exhaustion of the welfare State and its withdrawal from the sphere of public education. This reached its climax in 1993 with the Federal Law of Education N° 24.195 (República Argentina, 1993), which rescinded the first educational law in Argentina (Ley de Educación Común N° 1420/1884; República Argentina. Ministerio de Cultura y Educación [Ministry of Culture and Education], 1884), which established compulsory, free and secular education for all and which gave the main role to the State. Liberal thought at that time considered that the State was the only power that had the right to legislate, regulate and prescribe educational provision for the people. Despite centralisation and bureaucratic excess, the State had supported the education service in a largely efficient and equal way.

The change in this conception, which came hand in hand with neo-liberal policies, started with the taking over of national schools by provincial states in 1978. This decentralisation process implied an irreversible break with the principle of equal educational opportunities for everyone, due to differential budgets and developmental levels in each of the 26 provinces. During the 1990s neo-liberal reforms were radical as the State delegated educational management first to the provinces and then to civil society (Grassi & Alayón, 2004).³ This helped to deepen regional differences and to fragment educational opportunities, giving rise to two alternatives: on the one hand, private schools competing with each other in order to attract different market segments; and, on the other, public schools with poor building and equipment infrastructure and meagre working conditions for teachers (Feldfeber, 2003).





In 2001, although the school had to face crisis and non-inclusion as well as poverty measures, it became the only State presence for many. Besides its pedagogical function it had to offer many other forms of assistance. Teachers had to address students' needs as a result of complex social problems, such as malnutrition, family violence and abuse, which impacted on their schooling. These were problems that schools were not prepared to deal with and for which they were also resourceless (Redondo, 2006).

Unclear roles as well as an inability to respond to mutual expectations in a risky and vulnerable context, helped not only to increase discontent among teachers, but also to weaken the bonds that tie the State, schools and families in their shared project. A relationship between teachers, students and their parents, based on social distance and lack of recognition of one another, was established. This came about because of structural changes in students' living conditions and the heterogeneity of the groups of students and their parents with respect to social, cultural and ethnic belonging.

The social distance between teachers and students, particularly in schools located in the suburbs, is demonstrated in the difference between the real students, with whom the teacher relates, and the abstract idea of the student towards whom the teacher directs the educative process. This abstract student is generally thought of as belonging to the middle class, having adequate nutritional levels and sharing similar perceptions, values and norms to those of the teacher. Linked to this is the idea of an ideal student, the student who is able to master the rules and codes of social life that the teacher considers indispensable to learning curriculum content. In this way, families are seen as having a crucial role, 'the family is the root of education', so that when the student fails, the blame is put on families who did not know how to prepare their children to learn (Prado de Souza, 2000, p. 135). So, the diversity that characterises classrooms and the complexity of problematic situations that demand solutions by the school are seen as dangerous, destabilising and disturbing.

Nowadays the school has become a mixed environment where the social and educational actors support diverse stereotypes and prejudices, which give rise to dissociation and mutual mistrust (Oraisón & Pérez, 2006, 2007; Sagastizabal, 2006). The school is not providing tools for students and their families to imagine and build a new future; rather it seems to reinforce the conditions that keep them in poverty.

Based upon these considerations, we consider that the close relationship between schools, education, poverty and exclusion presents a problematic arena in Argentina, which should be confronted. We present here some data from an action-research experience in order to support this statement.

We understand that to treat *exclusion* as a subject in itself presupposes that its equivalent term *inclusion* must be taken into account because both terms are antonyms in fundamental contradiction. In our understanding, inclusion as such is not defined only in terms of reaching a better life status, but it implies other institutional and symbolic conditions, particularly those related to building citizenship processes. In other words we define 'inclusion' as the possibility of being responsible for one's own decisions and of participating in those matters that involve you as an



individual. In this context, participation seems to be a privileged strategy to encourage social change and it also seems to be a tool that helps—through practice—to create autonomous and critical individuals. In such processes, its value derives not only from the possibility of involvement but also from the chance of being considered an equal by others.

That is why we wanted to inquire about the actions the school is taking and its capacity to set up situations that favour participation and the building up of citizenship processes or if, on the other hand, it is closing down opportunities for genuine participation not only by the students but also by parents and teachers themselves.

The school as a promoter of community action: an intervention model

Objectives

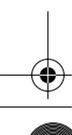
Project objectives defined the action-line priorities for our intervention-action project developed during 2006 and 2007. The school in which this project was carried out was selected from two institutions proposed by the Ministry of Education of Corrientes province. This secondary school had 500 students from poor and highly vulnerable neighbourhoods and was chosen precisely because of its social and cultural context, which strongly conditions its practices. During the first contact with the school authorities the school's serious communication and relational difficulties with the community were evident: they reported that students' difficulties in the school revealed parental negligence and maltreatment and that parents did not participate in school life and had no interest in their children's education, but only showed concern about adolescent failure, when students have to repeat the grade or when there is no further possibility of registration. Due to these problems, a project based on participative-action-research was developed, with the following objectives:

- to strengthen school and community links by means of building up consensus around which reciprocal actions could be oriented;
- to create and institutionalise community participation spaces in order to make school social relationships more democratic;
- to develop theoretical and methodological tools that will allow replication of this experience in other similar institutions; and
- to elaborate public policies that affect the school and the educational community so that the voices of those directly involved can move closer.

The overall goal was to create in the school the proper conditions for the formation of critical and active citizens and to consolidate a central principle of participative democracy: that rules and norms are created with the explicit consent of all concerned.

So as to work with the first objective we started by diagnosing the reciprocal expectations and demands between school and community, through parent interviews, student surveys and a teacher workshop. The sample of parents was randomly selected from the school's student list and a total of 10 mothers and 10 fathers were

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interviewed. Surveys were administered to the total population of students. The teacher workshop, which was included in a mandatory day of activities, was attended by 80% of teachers. In these three research activities we explored the school's image, the school community, opportunities for dialogue, communication and participation and actual participation practices.

Among the most noteworthy results of our analysis of these data we can mention two central issues: first, that there was a strong contradiction between the expectations teachers had of parents (e.g. that parents help children with homework etc.) and the way parents were described (e.g. as illiterate, with no education, promiscuous etc.), so that the teachers' expectations could not be sustained based on the claims they made about parents; and, second, that the school established a relation of asymmetry with parents, thus generating social distance, which prevented closeness and reinforced disassociation. These findings made us think of another way of working, which would allow both teachers and parents to voice reciprocal expectations with sensitivity and contribute to the dissolution of prejudices. Our intention was that this second activity would lead to an agreement between parents, school and students to allow the formation of an associative network that would put into practice a proposal for community improvement.

Strategy

This intervention was oriented to implement an 'associated management' strategy (Poggiese *et al.*, 1999), which could be understood as a new style of social affiliation. This strategy values training spaces for civic and community development but, most of all, it encourages an agreed way of management between the state and the society, that is to between social organisations and those who make decisions. This strategy is defined by the parties making a concrete and explicit deal of joint resolution.

We therefore proposed the creation of a voluntary associative network to include: representatives of teachers and school authorities, students', parents' and other civic organisations in the neighbourhood and the project team, working together with a delegate from the provincial Ministry of Education.⁴

Thus we tried to move forward in making expectations compatible and in the signing of a school–community contract, working together in a series of workshops in which a considerable number of parents (more than 40), some students (15–20) and a few teachers (12 at the first meetings, later only seven) participated. We tried out different ways to summon potential participants to the meetings, including: a note to parents, via the students from two members of the research team who gave a short explanation of the project and its goals, classroom by classroom; posters placed near the school; a note in the students' communication notebook, asking parents about a more convenient time to participate; an invitation card for the fourth meeting given to teachers and students in their classrooms; letters sent by regular mail to a sample of 100 parents inviting them to the fifth meeting and stating its topic.

We worked so that the participants could identify a community problem and organise themselves to propose a systematic action plan to solve it. At the fifth meeting



priorities were defined and we were able to reach a consensus about the lines of action. This was put into a practice at a participation-project-design workshop, which 40 parents and 17 students attended. The common project was to focus on the restitution of breakfast or 'copa de leche'⁵ ['cup of milk'] in the school, a practice that had been suspended by the school authorities because of lack of human and material resources. In order to achieve this goal the associative network worked out a plan of activities and a mothers' commission was formed to be in charge of different chores and responsibilities, together with the teachers in the team and the student helpers of each form.

Breakfast was served successfully every day at school from the moment this associated management experience started until the day we left the school because our project finished. Actions were undertaken as planned. The mothers were always present and worked efficiently, so much so that the time they needed to perform all the activities was gradually significantly shortened. Student helpers worked responsibly and showed their commitment to their assigned chores. Their classmates were orderly and quietly behaved during breakfast. Day by day, as demand increased, so did the amount of milk served. The attitudes displayed by mothers and students showed that they felt themselves valued and recognised by others.

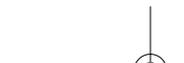
Results: gains and limitations of the experience

The restitution of the 'cup of milk' was valued at the very beginning as an initial activity that would allow us to move towards drawing up a constitution for the association—something that never happened. Its importance lay mainly in its symbolic value. This was above all because this experience brought about the modification of a highly arbitrary decision to cease the breakfast service, which violated rights acquired through State policy and which was perceived to have had an impact on the physical and intellectual development of the students. Moreover, the mothers' efficient participation raised questions about the teachers' stereotypes of parents' absence and lack of responsibility. This experience allowed the creation of a space for genuine participation and socialisation, giving recognition and identity to those performing the chores, helping to build a community with a notion of 'us'.

However, the associative network we intended to constitute became an unfinished project due to the lack of sustained participation of one of the component groups: the teachers. At first, a group of seven of the 40 teachers working in the school participated voluntarily. But only five continued until the project finished and we left the school. We may interpret the teachers' lack of participation in several ways: first this project was seen as extra work for teachers; and, second, some teachers saw the school traditionally, centred on pedagogical activities, and were explicitly against the provision of breakfast in school as inappropriate. Nevertheless, our main interpretative hypothesis is built around participants' representations of the 'other', by means of which each group organised their practices and placed themselves in relation to participation.

Social representation theory, from European social psychology (Moscovici, 1986; Jodelet, 2000, 2008) holds that social representations operate as behaviour mediators

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and we act in the world according to how we think it is. From the implicit theories built on daily communication and interaction practices in the school context teachers construct social representations about their students, their parents and teaching practices, which act as mediators for their conduct and affect their behaviour. Devalued images of students and their families create conduct built upon social distance or compensatory attitudes towards their poverty, which produce systematically devalued pedagogical practices.

School—poverty—exclusion: reading of an empirical case

Translating this hypothesis into the focus of the investigation, several workshops and interviews were carried out with the different groups of participants in the associative network—teachers, school authorities, students and parents—with the purpose of learning about matters of concern, expectations and reciprocal demands and the images they had built of one another. From the findings we highlight two main issues: the management of participation in the school and factors influencing lack of participation and its consequences.

Participation management: rules and practices

Nowadays at school there are some structures in which, on a legal basis, all members of the educational community can participate (Ley Federal de Educación N° 24.195 [República Argentina, 1993] and Ley de Educación Nacional N° 26.206 [República Argentina, 2006]):

- the Cooperadora Escolar [School–Parents’ Association] formed by teachers, parents and students, which manages school funds;
- the Proyecto Educativo Institucional [Institutional Education Project], written annually, to decide and plan curricular activities, which allows all in the school community to voice their interests, expectations and priorities, and to organise fundraising to enhance the school’s resources and implement the Project; and
- the Acuerdos Escolares de Convivencia [School Agreements of Coexistence], these are opportunities for teachers, students and parents to define rules and norms in accordance with which all the members of the community must behave.

However, participation in such structures in this school was scarce and limited. Parents were reluctant to respond when summoned to school and the school authorities and teachers had no desire to organise meetings where the participants would feel equal. Parents were mainly summoned to:

- receive information: either about their child’s performance at school (particularly when it was not good), to get report cards and be informed about scholarships; or, less frequently, to listen to talks about teenage problems, such as drug addiction;



- take part in the School–Parents’ Association, though in practice elections to positions in this group usually took place in a meeting poorly attended by parents, so, in effect, its functions were almost always performed by the same limited group of people year after year, under the direction of the head teacher.

Teachers usually said that ‘always the same parents come’ and ‘they are those who need it least’, referring to parents of the students who do best at school. They also thought that lack of participation was due to a lack of interest and concern about their children’s performance at school. As one teacher said:

...They don’t come because they don’t want to. Because here we show them their mistakes, we give them hints, which they are supposed to work with, so they believe we are going to question and argue with them about their behaviour and they just don’t come. They are defensive...

Conversely, teachers perceived the parents’ response to be different when distribution of scholarships is at stake. Yet teachers still criticised the parents’ behaviour, they believe it reflects a materialistic interest and that parents do not always spend scholarship money on their children’s studies.

The school did not organise any other meetings and from the teachers’ perspective, participation was understood as getting information because the interlocutor only plays a submissive and passive role. This behaviour, together with a representation of ‘the other’—parents and students—based on their economic needs (‘they are poor’, ‘they are unemployed’) or cultural needs (‘they are illiterate’), plus the incidents of home violence teachers know about, helps to consolidate this worthless image which, in turn, reinforces their asymmetrical relationship. Moreover, teachers resent some parents’ negligence and poor behaviour, which teachers attribute to the parents considering that ‘it is the school’s responsibility to be in charge of their children’. As one teacher put it:

Some of them don’t know how to be a parent, they walk out on their children...they are not aware, but when we call them in, they come to us in a ‘cocky’ way [cocoritos].⁶ They come here arrogantly and they demand the school’s action to solve their kids’ problems.

The reason for this is these groups’ distant attitude towards the ideal family model—that of middle-class culture to which most teachers belong. Another teacher described the local context:

We have several problems here because there are, for instance, beaten up mothers, who are supposed to put up with their partners. There are only a few lawful marriages. At home there is promiscuity, abuse and violence. Unfortunately, all this becomes our reality. There are many kids who come to school without having breakfast, either because it’s more convenient or comfortable for their mothers or because they just don’t have anything to eat. There are kids who have special needs and they can’t get it. That is our community.

On the other hand, contrary to the image teachers possess of parents, they remarked on the good will parents show when they are summoned to school, even though they

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admitted that, in meetings, parents receive information about their children, but they are not allowed to respond or give their own opinions.

Parents, by contrast, were concerned about teacher absence, as one mother explained:

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So, one day he doesn't come, or the maths teacher, or the science teacher...there is always one who is absent, so the kids are out of school at 11.30 or 10.30...this is how frequent teachers' absences are.

And what do you think is going on?

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...Well, that is exactly what we don't know. It only says: absent, but they don't tell parents, if it is because of an illness, or a family problem, nothing. It only says: absent teacher...

Likewise, some parents reported having expressed their willingness to take part in activities in school or beyond, but without getting favourable answers from the authorities:

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But here I volunteered to do any task and they never told me: come, let's do something. I believe the headmistress, to the people she chooses, she has to tell them, okay, look what can you do?

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Summing up, the concept of participation on which the educational community is organised becomes restricted, divisive and mainly conditioned by an undervalued image of the interlocutor. Thus, apart from strictly disciplinary interactions, it does not turn into a suitable training opportunity.

Next we analyse the factors influencing, and consequences of, these practices.

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Factors influencing lack of participation and its consequences

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The distinctions maintained by teachers and parents in relation to themselves and 'the other' allow us to understand and explain the ways in which the circumstances of participation are settled in practice.

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The school establishes an asymmetrical relationship with parents, which prevents them from moving closer and reinforces the distance between them and the school. When it has an active presence, it establishes that 'others' should accept the school's authority. Several studies (Cerletti, 2006; Oraisón & Pérez, 2006; Sagastizabal, 2006) have made it clear that this kind of participation is what is generally expected and approved by the educational institution.

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The consequence of this situation is a school that breaks away from its community, becomes enclosed in itself and is incapable of meeting the demands of the social context in which it is located and which it does not accept as its own. The teachers' behaviour is justified by what they interpret their job as being. This interpretation is defined as the transmission of the curriculum, or 'the pedagogical', as they call it. Hence, they consider any other activity not linked to the teaching of their own discipline⁷ as an increase in their workload. This idea is sustained by the survival of the traditional school mould that restricts teaching to the classroom situation and

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does not take into account the value and potential of the school environment as a learning environment for the whole person, that is to say as a place of political socialisation and education for citizenship. Consequently the school does not take responsibility for the wellbeing of its social context unless it is able to deal with the problem of power and rule relationships in its own context. It becomes unable to change long-established cultural guidelines based on a patronising attitude and expressed in attitudes of resignation and passivity (Pérez & Butti, 2005; Oraisón & Pérez, 2006).

However, the participation structures defined by the school regulations could become valid strategies for recognising the other from a symmetrical, more equal, point of view. This can be done, for example, by means of enquiries, asking opinions, writing joint proposals as a way of delegating powers until reaching, at best, shared decisions and management. From this point of view, consideration of the participation issue from a perspective that genuinely favours the building up of citizenship suggests the need for the involvement and recognition of the other on an equality and willingness to set aside one's own knowledge in order to accept that of the other (Habermas, 1999).

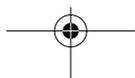
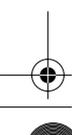
Towards a new kind of school

The current conception of the school is of an historical institution derived from Western European modernity, but we suggest it can be rethought and redefined. Thus we wish to propose a new kind of school, which offers possibilities for adapting to a changing environment and which enables us to be aware of the tension it undergoes; a school that promotes new ways of education that favour the processes of building up citizenship, not only for the students but also for the community in general, over the transmission of knowledge.

In this respect, to look upon the school as sustained by modern ideas and based on neo-liberalism is hereby questioned. This is so because the transformation we propose suggests breaking with the organisational logic marked by bureaucratic rationality and linear delegation of duties; the division between planning and implementation; the prevailing authoritarian culture derived from the long and recurrent military governments endured in our country; and the assumptions about participation understood not as a practice of equals, but as a summons of the other in order to be questioned.

In consequence, our proposal, based on a critical perspective on education, is to extend awareness of the school's role and its opportunities to promote socially transformative processes. The school has to answer appropriately in the educational context the demands of highly vulnerable social scenarios, such as those in post-crisis Argentina, where around half the school population live in poverty and where 70% of poor homes with unsatisfied basic needs below the poverty line have a child under 14 years old.⁸ In our opinion, the great challenge schools have to face is breaking the asymmetric structure blocking the possibilities of genuine participation and denying the formation of autonomous and pragmatic citizens.

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*Community participation and development: a strategy to overcome exclusion*

5 First, ‘participating’ means to belong to a whole that comprises and takes the participant into account. It implies a committed and responsible individual attitude towards a whole in which the participant is included. This is built with everyone’s contribution because it requires that essential decisions have to be taken in the group by means of more or less equally shared power. Participating is a learning process in itself, it requires formation and information and it must always be accompanied by formative processes. The famous educational principle ‘learning by doing’ indicates that we learn to participate by undergoing the experience and in the act of participation.

10 We suggest applying the same principle to turn the school into a community development agency. Taking on the role of a community-development institution means assuming that the school links itself closely with the community and accepts its social responsibilities; the community in which the school is situated forms part of the school’s own referential community, so that it is not only an educational institution but also a meeting venue and social space that also has an affiliation and environment of belonging, based on cooperation, the construction of ‘us’ and the recovery of the welfare notion.

15 In this school-transformation framework we identify two essential aspects: the definition of new teaching-learning contexts and the creation of structures for genuine participation.

20 *Definition of new teaching-learning contexts.* This aims to coordinate the traditional function of the school with the demands of new social settings, helping to change material life conditions and generating, at the same time, consciousness and empowerment. Knowledge transmission acquires another meaning when it is associated with social change. Such knowledge favours the repositioning of participants, not only teachers and students but also parents and the community in general, and it encourages the development of critical competence, which authorises them to take part actively in the social and political processes that involve them and from which they have been historically alienated.

25 A strategy to face new challenges (such as social disaffection, vulnerability and exclusion) is to invite the community to formulate and develop projects aimed at solving a specific problem or at taking care of an occasional social need identified as a priority; for example, the creation of a library or a film library for the school, a place to practise sports, the promotion of ecological activities and caring for the neighbourhood and adult literacy. To meet the specific community request would generate a social initiative and a new learning environment would be organised on site, that is to say, in the neighbourhood or the city—according to the method of problem-based learning which will foster development of specific content of the diverse curricular areas. In this way academic interests can be coordinated with those of the community. Thus ethical-political learning experiences would be favoured, since they allow
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40 the consolidation of competencies of, and dispositions for, dialogue, commitment



and responsibility, which are essential for exercising active citizenship; and contribute to the construction of a positive identity and autonomous subjectivity.

Creation of structures for genuine participation. Generating a genuine participation ethos requires the consolidation of participation and citizenship learning within the school, mainly within the framework of community interactions by institutionalising the opportunities for taking part in deliberative and decision-making processes on common and communitarian matters. This means establishing a new model of organisation and social relationships, based on solidarity and dialogue, which renovates the link between the school and its educational community—parents and students—and which is oriented towards the achievement of consensus.

In order to accomplish this, one of the strategies should be the promotion of public community training and the strengthening of areas of common interest that involve not only social organisations and their participants but also State representatives, as a way of assuring the consolidation of transformation processes and the correction of asymmetries.

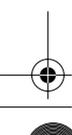
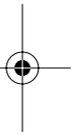
Other Latin American examples of community schools

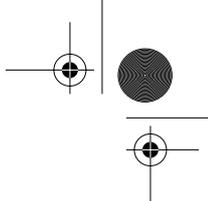
Examples of experiences of schools directly linked to the community can be found—amongst others—in the popular state high schools of Argentina, the open schools of Colombia, the ‘Sin Tierra’ [‘Non-land-owners’] schools of Brazil and youth activity centres of Argentina. They each have something distinctive to offer for school and community development.

The popular state high schools of Argentina came about between 1998 and 2001 as an initiative of a group of teachers and university researchers who were taking part in the process of re-establishing factories that had been closed.⁹ Welcomed and supported by the community, these self-managed schools, without owners or fees, are located in areas with few economic resources and their ‘at risk’ students come from lower social classes. In addition to their normal educational function, these schools aim to develop political literacy, while generating job alternatives in a supportive economic framework. These high schools include a wide range of activities beyond the tasks or the scenarios of a conventional school, with classes taking place in environments outside the normal classroom and with a flexible curriculum. The students are heterogeneous and often teaching and learning is centred on students’ own expressed needs rather than an externally prescribed curriculum. This experience emphasises a new model of organisation and social relationship based on solidarity and dialogue, a model that changes the bonds between the school as institution and the school community of parents and students through the building of consensus for reciprocal actions.

The Proyecto Escuela Abierta¹⁰ [Open School Project] promoted by the local council of Medellín, Colombia, seeks to turn educational centres into places with cultural, recreational and educational activities for all the community. This strategy

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has, as one of its fundamental ideas, the use of public space to become a city-wide reference for free-time social encounters, thereby turning educational institutions into meeting places. The Open School model establishes a permanent dialectical exchange between ordinary and academic knowledge and the community and school environments intermingle in a synergy of uses in collective and public life. In this case, the interaction between the school and the community enhances and multiplies the opportunities for participation, deliberation and decision making about community problems.

The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra¹¹ (MST) [Sin Tierra Movement] was born in Brazil in the 1970s, from the context of social struggles during the Agricultural Reform. According to MST's philosophical and educational principles public schools have been established with the involvement of the community in their organisation and management. The innovative aspect of these schools is the ethical-political principles on which their curriculum is based: education for social transformation; education for and by work and cooperation; education directed towards organising social practices; humanistic and social education; and education as an ongoing human transformation process. We endorse the ethical component of the educative practices of these schools, because they support consolidating dialogue competencies as well the development of responsibility and commitment—all fundamental to the exercise of an active citizenship.

In Argentina, in the Centros de Atención Juvenil¹² (CAJ) [Youth Activity Centres] students can participate in recreational, cultural and scientific activities on Saturdays all year round. The centres have been created in schools, bringing together different neighbourhoods, and they also offer a participatory and recreational space for young people and adults who form a consultative committee to coordinate the workshops proposed by each CAJ. For many young people this is an opportunity to spend their free time creatively and productively, since this is a call for participation, to make demands and take decisions, whilst enjoying the experience with their friends. These workshops are a learning alternative in tune with teenagers' current problems, the educational institutions they attend and the community where they live. They also encourage many young people who have left formal schooling, and others who are at risk of doing so, to become closer to education again. This illustrates our idea of the school as an agent of community development.

By way of conclusion: participation and community development as a form of moral education

There are many different ways to promote moral education in schools, from occasional work on a moral topic or the discussion of a moral dilemma in class, to a moral education curriculum course, to more systematic interventions and institutional projects that work with the variables influencing moral and citizenship learning. Kohlberg's (1985) Just Communities is such a case. Similarly, the project we have described allows the rethinking of the school as a privileged scenario for moral and citizenship experiences.



To think of the school from an ethical and political perspective permits the activation of its ethical and political role. On the one hand, political socialisation studies (Bobbio *et al.*, 2002, pp. 1514–1519) show that it is at school that individuals acquire political notions from experience of struggles that happen there and the ways in which the school relates with political institutions. We can surely say that those who have not attended school or have not completed their schooling are disadvantaged in relation to social and cultural competencies that formal education offers. The greatest inequality might be the lack of public socialisation and the absence of relevant experiences of moral, ethical and political learning. Generally, these inequalities occur in socially vulnerable groups, where families and the primary groups of interaction do not provide meaningful elements from which a whole and complex political identity can be constructed and, because of that, their view of the social world and their construction of categories to interpret reality are fragmentary, inconsistent and easily manipulated. Because of that, to enhance the role that school plays in the development of citizenship is an unavoidable ethical imperative.

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In a similar vein, studies on moral development show that the school offers crucial experience for moral learning. As Kohlberg (1980) wrote:

Given the importance of actual experiences of participation in a political community, why does it rest upon the high school to provide it? Why not leave it to spontaneous experience after high school? The answer is that unless a person leaves high school already at the fourth stage and with corresponding interests and motivations, he or she is unlikely to be in a position to have the capacities and motivation to enter positions of participation and public responsibility later. They will, as our graduating student says, avoid such situations, not seek them. ...Experience of participation causes development; but higher stages of development are also causes or conditions of being in a position of participation. ...Opportunities for participation, then, are given to mature in our society. Representative democracy, like our economic system, tends to give growth experience to those who don't really need it, to those already advanced. (p. 34)

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Although it is true that as a democracy matures and is consolidated it offers more opportunities for participation, both representative democracy and the economic systems of western countries tend to offer formative experiences to those who need them less. Because of this, high schools must help students to assume participative roles, especially those students who, due their disadvantaged social positions, may not have a chance to have them in the future.

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In this sense, our project aimed to make stronger, diversified and enhanced participation opportunities in school, involving the whole school community in institutional pedagogical projects offering systematic experiences of moral learning. To make institutional space for the participation of teachers, students and parents in decision-making processes about issues that affect them directly or indirectly may compensate for social inequalities. Since in the democratic system in Argentina it is still not possible to rely on equal access to opportunities or inclusive processes for decision making, schools should be places that guarantee the same conditions for people to intervene and to contribute to decision making through the effective exercise of ethical-political competencies.

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Summing up, this analysis argues for alternative school models that, in situations of social vulnerability, may provide the tools for social change. Similarly, in terms of growth in moral and political subjectivity, experiences such as we have described may enable the participants to develop more critical and complex life perspectives and to move towards more autonomous and pro-active positioning. The conception of school we are advocating—based on participation, equal opportunities and social responsibility—has such an orientation and aims to compensate for the main obstacles preventing an institution—such as that in our project—to play the key role required of it in the process of building up citizenship. In all these cases, the change processes promoted should be understood not as radical transformations but as slow, step-by-step processes of transition, which accumulate collectively constructed possibilities and capacities for action that derive from school-led innovative experiences.

Moral and citizenship education should go far beyond the introduction of a course or a topic in the school curriculum. It needs to be based on the cultivation of a moral environment that promotes reflection on and critical discussion of social practices as well as the development of the discourse of argument. Having institutional workshops for analyses of social problems, community work and service learning are vital to the development of moral sensitivity and the broadening of a socio-moral perspective.

Kohlberg (1984) identified two fundamental factors for moral learning: cognitive conflicts and role taking. A school open to its community and committed to its social context is the vital link in relation to both these factors and, because it places all the educational agents in touch with diverse cases, realities, dilemmas and points of view about the world, it can be a stimulus for the development of moral sensitivity and moral judgement. School life can be very rich in morally relevant experiences and role-taking opportunities, especially in those institutions where all the staff actively participate in the making of socio-educative projects. Cooperative ways of life can be very significant for the development of an autonomous, critical and committed morality.

Drawing on our project experience we make the following recommendations for schools to:

- define new learning–teaching contexts that allow the coordination of school curriculum experiences with the needs and demands of the community;
- give new and enhanced meaning to education, taking into account social and political issues;
- open up and institutionalise opportunities for deliberation, decision-making and participation in matters of public and community interest; and
- adopt ‘education as the practice of freedom’ (Freire, 2004), that is to say a thoughtful education that entails a more complete understanding of reality, of cause-and-effect relationships, and where the power to transform lies; an education that makes use of dialogue: assuming that knowledge is constructed through the mutually helpful activity of teachers, students and parents, all of whom are



considered valid interlocutors in a collective formation and self-formation process; and a practical education, in the belief that education for citizenship is only possible in a context where practice encourages its true performance.

The results of moral education need to be measured not only in terms of the development of the individual but also as a function of the benefits that it brings for the social group or the institution of individual belonging and identification (Kohlberg, 1985; Reimer, 1989). The effectiveness of moral education can be seen in the building of positive moral climates and just and supportive communities.

Notes on authors

Mercedes Oraisón is Professor, Humanities Program in the Philosophy Department and Researcher at Centro de Estudios Sociales, Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, Argentina. She received a PhD in philosophy and sciences of education from the University of Barcelona, Spain. She is Consultant for the Programa de Educación en Valores para una Ciudadanía Democrática [Education Program in Values for Democratic Citizenship] of the Organización Iberoamericana para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (OEI) [Iberoamerican Organisation for Education, Science and Culture]. Her publications include: Representaciones y prácticas de la ciudadanía. Una lectura histórico-pedagógica del caso Argentino [Citizenship representations and practices. An historical-pedagogical view of the Argentinean case], in: M. Oraisón (Ed.), La construcción de la ciudadanía en el siglo XXI [The construction of citizenship in the XXI century] (Barcelona, OEI-OCTAEDRO), 13–68, 2005; and Oraisón, M. and Perez, A. M. (2006) Escuela y participación: el difícil camino de construcción de ciudadanía [School and participation: the difficult path towards the construction of citizenship], Revista Iberoamericana de Educación, 42, September–December, 15–29.

Ana María Pérez is a researcher at Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) and Professor of Sociology of Education, Humanities Department and Director of Centro de Estudios Sociales, Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, Argentina. Her publications include: Acerca de la exclusión y otras cuestiones próximas [About exclusion and other similar issues], Revista de Estudios Regionales y Mercado de Trabajo, 2, (2006); and Empleo, desempleo e informalidad: la composición del mercado laboral de la región Nordeste Argentina. Una caracterización con los datos de la Encuesta Permanente de Hogares [Employment, unemployment and informality: work market composition in the Argentinean Northeast. A characterisation with data from the Permanent Home Survey], Revista Laboratorio, VIII, 20 (Facultad de Sociología. Universidad Buenos Aires) (2007).

Notes

- 1. During 2006–2007 the Social Studies Centre of the National Northeast University carried out two action-research projects in schools in low income and poorly resourced neighbourhoods. The first project was oriented towards lowering school failure rates and the second

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aimed to develop opportunities for community participation. These projects were designed to influence the building up of citizenship development processes and were financed by the Iniciativas para el fortalecimiento democrático y social [Initiatives for social and democratic strengthening], managed by Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) [The Latinamerican Faculty of Social Sciences], Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) [The Centre for Legal and Social Studies] and San Andrés University, with Ford Foundation funds.

2. The calculation of homes and families living below poverty level (LP) is based on data collected by the Encuesta Permanente de Hogares (EPH) [Permanent Home Survey]. Based on the income available to the home, an estimate is made of the family's capacity to fulfil basic needs (e.g. buying goods and services). There is an even lower poverty level (LI), which estimates if families have enough money to pay for food to provide minimum energy and protein needs. According to the 2001 Instituto Nacional del Estadística y Censo (INDEC) [National Survey and Statistics Institute] (2002) evaluation, in the cities in north east Argentina where our study took place 57% of the population was below the poverty level and 26.8% was at the lower level.
3. In Argentina the cycle of neo-liberalism initiated during the military dictatorship that assumed power in March 1976, was supported by a very traditionalist and authoritarian ideology spread among some sectors of the Church and the army forces, by its repressive power and by the traditional free-market ideology of political groups that expressed the interests of local oligarchies. A democratic turn was established in 1983 with Raul Alfonsín's government, which had to face not only the Latin American external debt crisis and the pressure of economic corporations that were strengthened during the dictatorship, but also the persistence of authoritarian groups and the systematic opposition of labour unions. Hyperinflation during 1988–1990 left a very vulnerable society, one where neo-liberal discourse about the crisis had room to grow. It was intensively embraced by Carlos Menem, who was elected President in 1989. Menem's discourse emphasised the inefficiency of the State, which he blamed for the economic problems and the 'hyperinflation crisis', because he understood that those protections acted as disincentives for investment and undermined workers' motivation to work. His government set as a political priority (and unrealisable) objective the reduction of public expenses: adjustments, such as budget cuts and reassignment to different sectors, were the main axes of state politics. In the name of rationalisation of State expenses, investment and support for basic public services, such as health, security, education, scientific research and public infrastructure were cut (Grassi & Alayón, 2004, pp. 23–24).
4. This person represented the State and thus could legitimate the proposed innovations as well as acting as a mediator with the educational authorities, presenting requests and managing bureaucratic and administrative matters.
5. In schools attended by students from lower social classes, breakfast consisting of a cup of milk with cookies, or muffins and cereal is served. This is resourced by the government through the distribution of powdered milk and other foods.
6. This expression is Argentinian slang for someone who is overbearing and pushy.
7. During the Federal Law reform (República Argentina, 1993) teachers and their salaries became 'the reduction variable' because by law it was mandatory for them to retrain on the public capacitation programs on which quality of education was held to be dependent. So teachers were held to be accountable or 'responsible' for the decay of the educational system, judged by the measures implemented (qualification demands, professionalisation and redeployment).
8. According to two studies carried out by Ecolatina, Consultora de Economía y Empresas [Ecolatina, Economy and Enterprise Consultants], el Instituto de Estudios y Formación de la Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA) [Institute of Studies and Formation of the Central Argentinian Workers] and Prefinex consultants (see <http://www.atlas.org.ar/Articulos/print.asp?Id=12431> (accessed 7 July 2009)).

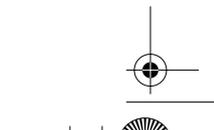
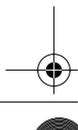


9. In recent years most of the factories shut before and during the 2001 crisis have been reopened successfully by the workers and have become symbolic of anti-hegemonic fights in Argentina.
10. <http://www.edu.gov.co/pdf/bexternocinco.pdf>
11. <http://lpp-uerj.net/olped/documentos/2026.pdf>
12. http://www.letra.org/spip/article.php?id_article=2802

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