



RESEARCH
brief Nr.2

IN WHAT WAYS DOES PARTICIPATORY SCHOOL GOVERNANCE SUPPORT COHESION AT COMMUNITY LEVEL?

Latest information to the existing status of the project
Frugality as Value and Practice

by CFIA
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INTRODUCTION

The essence of a critical pedagogy is to develop an educational project that goes beyond the classroom and pursues a vision of more equal and resilient communities. The Group of Educators of Religious Origin with Critical Pedagogical Approaches (GEROCPA) emerged in the 60s as a critical education movement to promote comprehensive, inclusive and high-quality educational processes from, with and for communities in remote rural places throughout Latin America. Its mission centres on spilling over the education actions beyond the classrooms and in that spirit its schools have developed a pedagogical project that engages local communities in a participatory dialogue, namely with households, neighbours and other local agencies. The integration of the community outside the school has allowed GEROCPA to contribute to the development of the local community taking into account the specificities of the context where schools are located.

The study has found that the actions of GEROCPA schools transcend the educational realm and have a long-term incidence in the communities where the schools are placed. A key component of this vision is their clear participatory governance approach that enhances and builds social capital in the neighborhoods. Participatory governance means that students and their households are engaged in the decision-making, management, coordination and communication of the schools, while other local actors such as neighbours, municipal mayors and other local authorities, enterprises, donors, and various religious and non-governmental groups are regularly involved in the social life of the schools. Naturally, this governance modality entails tensions with successes and failures.

This study of the research project focuses on the local or community level. It addresses the ways in which GEROCPA affects communities where schools are located. It is guided by the question: How does participatory school governance strengthen social cohesion in the local communities? This research brief presents a summary of some of the findings.

WHO IS THIS BRIEF FOR

This research brief is for fellow academics, policymakers, civil servants, international organizations, think-tanks and practitioners interested in educational policy.



GEROCPA SCHOOLS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The research project team selected four schools in each of the six countries that were part of the study (Bolivia, Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, Dominican Republic and Venezuela) and implemented a crossed case-study methodology. The schools per country were chosen with theoretical representativeness criteria in mind after discussions with the six national GEROCPA headquarters. The selection represents a mix of rural and urban locations, old and new schools, managed by secular and religious authorities, and are generally considered successes and failures by the six national GEROCPA offices. Each school was treated as a separate case study in which similar data collection methods were applied. In each location, between 19 and 41 persons responded to various interview techniques or participated in focus groups with students, teachers or parents. The written historical records of the schools and localities were canvassed where these existed. The case studies on schools and local communities hence engaged a total of 600 respondents in 24 locations in six countries. In some locations, the researchers were accommodated in the homes of the parents, teachers, and so on, which enabled substantial additional data gathering via informal conversations and observation. All cases were studied by senior researchers who ensured complete anonymity to the respondents.

HOW DOES PARTICIPATORY SCHOOL GOVERNANCE STRENGTHEN SOCIAL COHESION IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES?

FINDINGS

Promoting participatory governance and generating social cohesion has led various communities to think about a "before" and "after" the arrival of GEROCPA schools. Changes can be identified on a larger or smaller scale but, following the general perception of local actors, they have been significant in the development of communities and transforming them in a positive way beyond the realm of the school. The study has confirmed effects on the education community (inside the schools) and on the neighbourhoods where the schools are located (outside the schools).

GEROCPA SCHOOLS IMPLEMENT PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE PRACTICES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

- There is a strong household involvement in the school governance. Parents' associations have emerged as a "watchful eye" that represents the interest and empowerment of families.
- Most schools have parents' associations who meet voluntarily in order to look for opportunities to improve school infrastructure, teacher training, and children's education.
- On the downside, school authorities sometimes struggle to maintain a balance between a strong level of influence and participation of the parents and the school's independence to fulfil their educational role.

GEROCPA'S PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE GENERATES SOCIAL COHESION OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL

- The values transferred from GEROCPA to the entire community have been positively recognized by actors from the educational community and by other agents in the locality. Values such as discipline, respect, and solidarity are the pillars of the social cohesion promoted by GEROCPA.
- A feeling of school community as a "family" emerged after a while through the establishment of regular decision-making processes and alliances with various key actors at the local level.
- Solidarity is characterized as one of the key values within and outside the schools. Participatory governance is the element that translates solidarity into concrete actions of social mobilization.
- In general, the experience has made the relationship between GEROCPA and the families enriching and mutually supportive, which makes the environment beneficial for the different learning processes.
- GEROCPA has an active role in many of the places where schools are present and these are perceived as accountable agents to support the communities in their demands for basic needs and fundamental rights, for example in relation to the government.

AS A RESULT GEROCPA SCHOOLS AFFECT LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- GEROCPA schools are an influential organization in the neighbourhood and have an indirect impact on families who are not directly involved with the movement.
- There is a transformation that goes beyond the classrooms with comprehensive training to alumni and ex-alumni who reach adulthood, have managed to access higher education and aspire to be agents of change in their communities.
- GEROCPA schools have various effects on the improvement of the quality of life by promoting upgrades at local level, such as infrastructure, public and private services, and training of local social leaders.

ANALYSIS & CONCLUSIONS

FINDINGS

The participatory governance spurred by GEROCPA schools contributes to social cohesion within and outside the schools. The study suggests that the social capital built within the schools supports social cohesion at the local level and socio-economic progress of the communities where the schools are located. The schools serve as a collaborative space in which different forms of organization and associations emerge and this indirectly benefits the neighbourhood by supporting local networks and social cohesion outside the school. As a result of these dynamics, GEROCPA's presence changes the community mostly in a positive way and reaching out to the locality beyond the classrooms. However, the data suggested that there is a "life cycle" in the local effects of the schools' presence, which led to study to an additional line of enquiry.

ANALYSIS & CONCLUSIONS

LIFE CYCLE IN THE PRESENCE OF SCHOOLS WITH CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

GEROCPA schools follow a critical pedagogy approach and many succeed in promoting social cohesion and socio-economic development at the local level. At the same time, their presence in the local communities seems to have a life cycle with different stages from the period where the dialogue with the community starts until the period where schools have matured (See Figure 1). During the arrival stage, GEROCPA reaches the most remote and difficult contexts, even where the state does not reach, and attends the most vulnerable student populations. Local communities are often engaged to support the building and initial running of the schools, which sometimes includes contributing their own labour. During the intermediate stage, GEROCPA schools strengthen the ties with their neighbourhoods and work on the notion of a school community as "building a family". At this stage, social capital is developed within the community and sometimes this extends to organising collective struggles for access to key services and public resources from the government. Generally, it is no longer only the poorest and most vulnerable who attend GEROCPA but a mixed student population, in which the majority of the households are under the poverty line but enjoy somewhat improved socio-economic conditions. Lastly, during the consolidation stage, relations with other local organizations (e.g. municipalities, health services, non-governmental organizations) are established and internal dynamics within the school communities are settled. Local communities' perceptions of GEROCPA schools are mostly positive and nested in trust relationships but the regular management of conflicts becomes part of the schools' normal life. At this stage the student's diversity is more evident and GEROCPA schools serve students and families with a mix of socio-economic conditions.



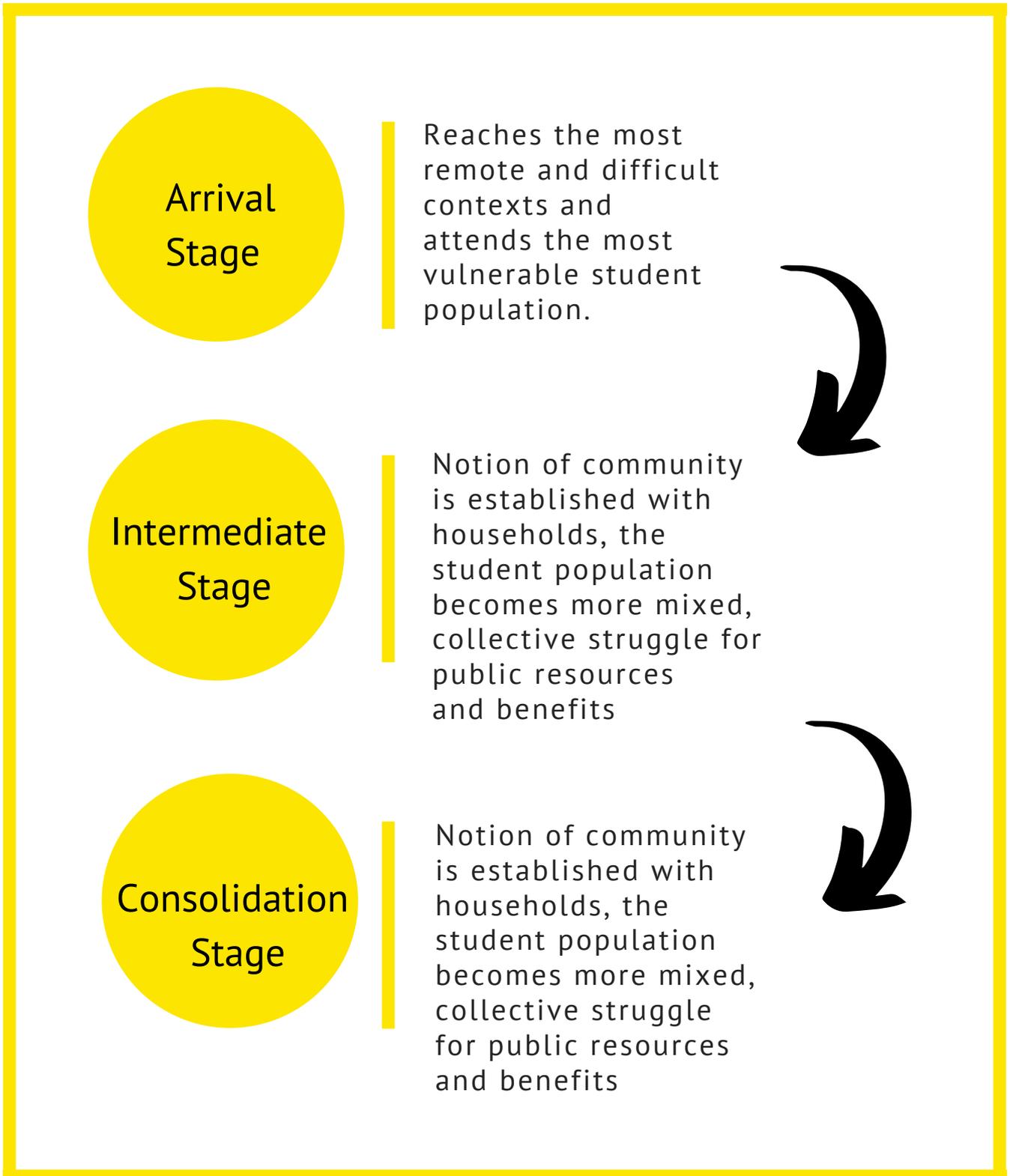


Figure 1. GEROCPA Life Cycle