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The Bases of Federalism and Decentralization in Education

Las bases del federalismo y la descentralización en educación

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Abstract

This essay uses the Weberian-type ideal to define the conceptual bases of federalism and the decentralization of education. Classic federalism, fictitious federalism (corporativism), the origins and the indigenous version of the new federalism are discussed. We conclude that Mexican constitutional federalism is baroque and ambiguous. Based on theory and the experiences of various countries, bureaucratic centralism and its main characteristics are defined. As a contrast, a typology of educational decentralization is developed. Taken into account are its political, judicial and administrative definitions; a distinction is made between delegation and decentralization. It is argued that with the signing of the Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education, the Mexican government sought to increase its legitimacy without losing control of education.

Keywords: federalism, decentralization, power.

Resumen

En este ensayo se utiliza el tipo ideal weberiano para definir las bases conceptuales del federalismo y la descentralización de la educación. Se discuten el federalismo clásico, el federalismo ficción (corporativismo), así como los orígenes y la versión autóctona del nuevo federalismo. Se concluye que el federalismo constitucional mexicano es barroco y ambiguo. Con base en teoría y experiencias de varios países, se define el centralismo burocrático y sus características principales. Para contrastarlo, se desarrolla una tipología de la descentralización educativa. Se toman en cuenta sus definiciones política, jurídica y administrativa; se distingue entre delegación, desconcentración y descentralización. Se arguye que con la firma del Acuerdo de Modernización de la Educación Básica, el gobierno mexicano perseguía incrementar su legitimidad sin perder el control de la educación.

Palabras clave: Federalismo, descentralización, poder.

Introduction

After the Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education 1992 (hereinafter, the Agreement), it became fashionable to talk about the federalization of education. The intent of the government was clear: to symbolize a long-term pact that would mean something more than an administrative decentralization (Mancera and Vega, 2000). In addition, the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) opposed the policy of decentralization from the moment President Miguel de la Madrid announced it in his inauguration speech. Through interviews with ministers of education, labor leaders, mid-level managers, representatives of the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) and researchers in 10 states, we obtained evidence to put in doubt—even to contradict—that the Agreement and its consequences are federalist or even a far-reaching decentralization policy.

To justify that thesis, it was necessary to take apart the different concepts of federalism and decentralization. What is presented here is the first systematic version of those notions which, in summarized form, were part of a book in preparation.

1. Federalism

It might be said that there are almost as many federalisms as authors addressing the issue. According to Levi, federalism is understood in two ways: the first as a constitutional organization technique, and the second as an ideology comparable to other *isms*, such as socialism and liberalism. In the second sense, federalism essentially means freedom, and at the same time, order and government. Underlying both concepts is the idea of the voluntary association of several entities (states, provinces, cantons) to form a national government or to organize a State which is in charge of common functions: issuing currency; national defense; representing the State in foreign countries; arbitrating conflicts between two or more states, and other, more general conflicts, but without the associated bodies'

loss of autonomy, or the local government's being considered subordinate to the national (Levi, 1981).

In the two meanings of federalism, the central government tends to occupy increasing political and economic spaces, and to restrict the autonomy of the entities that make it up, especially on fiscal issues and the provision of some public services involving the federal government. The parts of the federation are composed of a territory, population, and economic and social institutions, as well as a distinctive culture. In some regions there are even associations that are characterized by different nationalities in their country, e.g. Canada (Anglo-Saxon and Quebeckers), Belgium (Flemish and Walloon) or the vanished Yugoslavia. For some writers, the post-Franco Spain and its autonomous regions form a multinational federation (Requejo, 1999).

To arrange the discussion of federalism as a technique of political organization, the concepts that define it, the sources of its legitimacy, the regulation of power and the institutions that shape it, it is advisable to turn to the ideal Weberian type. We can consider three basic types, without presuming that all concepts are reduced to them: classical federalism, fictional federalism and the new federalism. All have a constitutional basis, political practices and social consent.

1.1. Classical federalism

This type of federalism represents the union of several political entities that are associated by common interests. These delegate certain activities to a central government; in other words, it is a delegation from the periphery to the center. In its constitutional arrangement, the sovereignty of the parties is maintained; it is the source of a legal system that supports the rights and responsibilities of the units as well as the relationships between them and the central government. There is a diffusion of power distributed at various orders of government (not levels, because there is no defined hierarchy) and jurisdictions delimited in the political, legal and judicial aspects (Landay, 2000).

The political institutions of the parties are similar, but function autonomously. The constitution and laws of the units of the federation keep a certain uniformity, but there are wide margins of independence for legislating local issues. The judicial power is distributed according to the same constitutional design, and moderates disputes between the parties and the powers that be. The relations between the regions are symmetrical and asymmetrical. In the first case, the symmetry is expressed in the formal equality of each of the parties, similar rights, equal representation in national parliaments by region and in proportion to the number of inhabitants. The asymmetry (and hence the association) is in the aspects of territory, population, economy and culture.

The legitimacy of the classic federal system comes from its origin—because it is a voluntary exercise association—and of exercise because the division of powers is respected. Membership of the federation guarantees some protection of the

parties; hence it is argued that the federation is a political expediency (Tarlton, 1999). Social legitimacy is given by the sense of belonging and national pride, by the clear acceptance of being part of the federation and by the equal rights of citizens.¹ Similarly, the federation gains legitimacy when there is a socially-sanctioned system of accountability, and citizens have information about the actions of the orders of government.

Even in classical federalism there are debates about the legitimacy of power. For some authors, such as Levi (1981), federalism is associated with the idea of popular sovereignty rather than with democracy; whereas for others, federalism, democracy and political liberalism share a historical association. Consequently, the legitimate power emanates from elections and other forms of direct democracy.

This type of federalism cannot be found in its pure form anywhere in the world, although in a historic moment Switzerland and Australia, for example, approached the ideal type. Liberty and order are sometimes conflicting values; the actual political relations show more interest in power, conquest and preservation, than in respect for the constitutional provision. Governments and bureaucracies which administer it aspire more to order at the expense of individual freedom and of the sovereignty of the units of the federation. In these circumstances, federalism is a notion of positive law, but is absent in political practice.

1.2. Fictional Federalism

The most important perimeters of classical federalism flourished in liberal democratic societies; but the advance of capitalism, the creation of monopolies and the organization and influence of the working class weakened the conventional institutions of democracy and the federal arrangements. After World War II and the consolidation of what was called the “welfare state”, the interests or groups, social classes and regions began to be represented more by their leaders and less by the mass of voters. The national state became the most dynamic agent of development, and gradually subordinated the subnational political entities. This model of political organization was called corporativism.

According to Schmitter, corporativism is opposed to democratic pluralism, even if it does not have an authoritarian nature. It is, in his words, “[...] a system of intermediation of interests, where a limited number of non-competing groups are licensed [or are created] by the state, which gives them a monopoly in their respective categories in exchange for control their leadership and their demands”^{*} (Schmitter, 1974, pp. 93-94). The national state replaced the parts, obtained a hegemonic power in both the modulation of the economy and in practical politics. As Weber had foreseen, the control of the state apparatus by a professional bureaucracy became an end in itself, with the consequent reduction of civil society

* Translator’s note: Some texts cited in this paper were freely translated by the work’s author, from their original English version into Spanish. As the original English versions were unavailable to this translator, she found it necessary to employ the technique of back-translation, for which she offers her most humble apologies.

and its institutions. Bureaucratic centralism became the rule; the sovereignty of states, provinces, departments or cantons became a rhetorical device that also was used little, so as not to generate regional illusions.

However, as it happened in Mexico, the constitutional arrangements did not really change. Because there was economic growth, expansion of employment, social protection for the labor movement, and guarantees of profits for entrepreneurs, the legitimacy of the corporate regime was not questioned. The exercise of power was centralized, national institutions outdid the regional ones; local demands were ignored, and the political system was functionally monopolistic capitalism. The horizontal relationships between the federation's entities lost momentum; judiciary power stopped being the arbiter because corporativism demanded a "strong executive." The relationships between the parts of the federation were symmetrical not only in the letter of the law, but in political coherence; the political organization seemed more like that of a unitarian state than like a federal one. Order overpowered liberty.

Even left-wing critics categorized the institutions of corporativism as promoters of "internal colonialism", where the federal executive, the chief of state, dominated (in the sense of bureaucratic subordination) the other branches and regions. From the point of view of social power, corporations (political parties, unions, schools, public institutions) were the main elements of social cohesion, and its representatives held supremacy over the territorial authority. In this political system, federalism was not erased from the Constitution, but it was pushed into second place; bureaucratic centralism undermined the principles of accountability to society; officials and elected representatives were responsible to the central government, and especially to the federal executive.

Federalism became a symbol, sometimes uncomfortable—not a political reality. Nevertheless, the rise of the welfare state came to an end, economic crises and lack of fiscal resources to distribute eroded its legitimacy. Centralism began to be questioned (O'Connor, 1974). The neoliberal ideology, sometimes combined with a libertarian discourse, planted the idea of an economic, political and social alternative. As for the political organization, neoliberal forces formed the new federalism.

1.3. The New Federalism: Origins

According to Conlan, Richard Nixon started the conservative or neo-liberal reforms in the United States. His purpose was clear: reduce the role and actions of the national government; and return to the states, powers that Democratic administrations had robbed them of. President Nixon (quoted by Conlan, 1998, p. 11) in 1971 stated: "The more distant the government is from the people, the stronger the government and the weaker the people".² The policy of devolution and decentralization of programs and tax credits that began in that government was called new federalism. The slogan had three parts: philosophical, administrative and partisan.

The philosophical current had two sources, one historical and the other ideological. It took up again the texts of Hamilton and Jefferson on local democracy and the participation of the citizen in all matters that concern them. The discourses of community control were largely accepted, even by traditional liberal and radical groups. The sources of legitimacy were remote, the idea of local sovereignty over taxes, spending and accountability was planted in the history of the United States, as well as the value of the individual and the participation of civil organizations in politics. The ideological foundation was of a different nature: the market economy had to be strengthened, there had to be eliminated the regulations that took away agility and privatized non-strategic public services. In sum, neoliberal ideology.

However, the core was administrative reform. It involved streamlining intergovernmental relations, reducing the federal bureaucracy, transferring the power to collect taxes to the states and counties. The attack on the central bureaucracy had effects that legitimized the politics of the new federalism; horizontal relations between states were more prompt, and the idea that the government was more effective was strongly reproduced. There was also a fever of privatization; many public services were decentralized, the fiscal arrangement favored the local governments and the transfer system was more transparent.

With all that, and the fact that the Constitution remained unchanged, there was a revision of the idea of the historic federalism of the U.S. The notion of state sovereignty did not disappear, but the idea of collaboration began to outweigh it. Such words as interdependence, cooperation, transfer and horizontal relationships filled political speeches. The political institutions of federalism, particularly the Senate, still dominated by the Democratic Party, were revitalized, and new secondary legislation emerged to justify the changes.

The partisan current was intended to restore credibility to the Republican Party, and to dismantle the institutions created by the Democrats in the days of New Deal. For this, the new federalism had to provide greater governmental efficiency, get closer to communities and help bring prosperity to the cities and citizens.

The new federalism met many of its goals, decentralized programs, reduced the regulatory role of the central government, and reduced the federal bureaucracy; the legal reforms legitimized action, and neoliberalism was consolidated as the official ideology of the U.S. government. Only partially achieved were some other goals, such as the idea of privatizing public education, as proposed by the neo-liberal ideologues, but some states made progress in furthering the voucher system.³

The new federalism was a triumphant ideology and was repeated in other latitudes, as was classical federalism in its time. Its rhetoric and symbols penetrated strongly into Mexico, although the original authors were not cited.

1.4. Policy or public administration

For many, the classic idea of federalism is no longer applicable to contemporary society, globalization and post-capitalism; sovereignty cannot be thought of or acted upon as it was imagined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As they see it, the new federalism offers new prospects for freedom and order, but it is the collaboration between governments, and not sovereignty, which predominates in intergovernmental relations. Classical federalism was always understood as a category of politics; the new federalism is a concept of public administration.

Federalism, as a doctrine and system of legal organization, is based on the voluntary association of the parties and the delegation of portions of sovereignty from the periphery to the center. The Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education, of May 1992, was not a federalist pact, but the transfer of responsibilities and resources from central government to the states; it represented, as described by those who analyze it from the states, a decentralization; tenuous, as well.

2. Decentralization

The concept of decentralization contemplates ambiguities and even contradictions. Neither in the literature nor in the analysis of concrete situations does the term mean the same thing. An ideal typology perhaps helps to comprehend the phenomenon better, and serves to explain the Mexican model.⁴

The variety of meanings and practical purposes of decentralization has caused those occupied with the question to develop typologies for differentiating and confronting goals and facts, models and trends. All the classifications have a certain rationality and usefulness; nearly all are constructed to give an answer to research questions. The first great division among the concepts of decentralizations is in relation to their goals: political, legal and administrative. It is worthwhile to remember that the ideal type is only an analytical device. A concrete model can pursue political ends, legitimized through legislation, and can generate effects in the administration.⁵

2.1. Legitimacy and power redistribution

The purposes of political decentralization are directed mainly toward the redistribution of power, to provide greater degrees of autonomy to subnational entities and the propensity to legitimize the State (Falleti, 2001; Lauglo, 1996). Political decentralization has typically been conceived as a response to the central state's legitimacy crisis which, in order to maintain power, offers concessions and transfers of resources and power to regional governments. It also provides mechanisms and regional political institutions—in coordination with the national ones—to manage the conflict, by strengthening local authorities (Lundgren, 1996; Weiler, 1996). However, there are differences in delegated power—from the center to the periphery—to legitimacy and power conquered from the regions.

Delegated power has no roots; therefore, the local institutions are weak and the center maintains political control. Conquered power generates institutions rooted in community life.

The Argentinian and Mexican cases could be categorized as examples of decentralization from the center to regain an eroded legitimacy, conceding little, transferring responsibilities and seeking to decentralize the conflict. The institutional and educational reforms in Argentina and Mexico look like twins. Both started in the nineties; in the two countries they represent a project of the central government that maintains the political and regulatory leadership; and in both, the local governments did not have appropriate mechanisms for controlling education. In Argentina, spending was decentralized, in Mexico, no (Cocorda, 2000; Roten, 2000). The case of Argentina included the dispersion of the unions (Murillo, 1999). Delegated power is precarious; it can even be fictitious.

In contrast, regionally-motivated decentralization reforms, such as those in the Philippines, Spain or Sudan, had their political base in powerful separatist movements—even with threats of secession—which demanded and obtained higher degrees of autonomy. The central authorities gave real power to convince the moderate secessionist groups to remain in the national context (Bray, 1999).

In the Philippines and Spain, the regional movements—although with internal political divisions—tore concessions from the central power to legitimate linguistic plurality and cultural nationalism (Basque and Catalan in Spain, for example). For Hanson, the Spanish case can also be an example of “successful” institutional strength, the rule of law and the establishment of clear rules for the administration of education—a harmony between the *de jure* prescription and the *de facto* action (Hanson, 2000).

Political decentralization and redistribution of power do not necessarily imply the collapse of education systems. The central organizations are generally responsible for national regulation in order to maintain reasonably similar grades and examinations, which would permit national mobility, mutual recognition of degrees and certificates, personnel changes and a portion of the curriculum (*the core curriculum*) with national standards. However, there are differences in the degree of legitimacy that can be achieved, even between federal states, if the unit of the educational system is promoted from subnational governments (greater legitimacy) or imposed from the center (precarious legitimacy). The *Länder*—the German federal states responsible for education policy—represent a case of regulatory centralization from the periphery, through the Permanent Assembly of State Ministers of Education and a historically-decentralized operation (Weiler, 1996). This does not keep the *Länder* from enjoying, within themselves, the perfect health of bureaucratic centralism, especially among the states of the former German Democratic Republic. Again, Argentina and Mexico are paradigmatic in maintaining, even after the transfer, strong central regulatory controls (Rhoten, 2000; Gomez Alvarez, 2000; Rodríguez Rodríguez, 1999).

Decentralization of power is defended from various angles. Strongly-rooted populist currents with charismatic leadership and their own traditions and folklore, demand a radically decentralized system at the level of communities, and under local control. According to their proponents there is sought the persistence of the popular culture, the native language (as in the movements of reconstitution of Gaelic in Ireland, Finnish in Finland and Euskera in the Basque Country), and a rejection of the elitist culture with foreign influences. "Populism does not show great respect for formal schooling, which it comes to value simply as a cultural ornament. When schooling opens a window into a larger world, it must do so without alienating the students in respect to their origins" (Lauglo, 1996, p.180). The administration of the schools should fall to local institutions, into small units, where parents and the community would feel that the school belongs to them. Social participation is the cornerstone that defends the populist trend.

Federal democratic currents were also interested in local cultures, but even more in the creation of political institutions. Their sponsors promoted educational decentralization in order to strengthen local authorities, establish standards of political coexistence and define the structure and content of their educational system. The concepts of autonomy and sovereignty were faces of that perspective; the votes of citizens and other forms of social participation gave the legitimacy that bureaucratic centralism lacks. Switzerland presents an extreme form of this type of political decentralization, sown in history, with its 26 cantons, each with its own educational system and standards. "The Canton authorities have the power to decide the system's structure, curriculum, language and even the time to be spent on every subject in every grade. The national government hardly plays a role in the making of decisions" (Bray, 1999, p. 212).

The connections of the education systems of each province are given by federal agreements between the areas, with equal rights, just as in Germany, Switzerland and (although not a federation in the strict sense) in the United Kingdom (p. 211). The national character of education resides in the establishment of standards, certification requirements and a minimum of common contents. The operation rests on regional bureaucracies, and the participation of parents and other social segments is institutionalized. Federalist Democrats argue that when local institutions exercise the power, educational services are more effective, authority is near the needs, and therefore can solve problems that arise.

The neoliberals strongly defend educational decentralization. Their arguments highlight tax matters, transfer of resources, accountability and dissemination of power. These currents are most concerned with instituting rules that put the accent on the quality of education, technical effectiveness and efficiency in spending. Its advocates believe that decentralizing decision-making will make the voice of the "consumers-voters"—as some authors designate the citizens—heard more in regard to the quality of service received. The rationale for the effectiveness technique includes two theses. First, since production and prices vary between locations, there is an obvious efficiency in allowing local authorities to decide on the budgets for education. Second, in situations where the capacity of

the central ministries is weak with regard to monitoring and supervising the regional systems, decentralizing this function to the consumers-voters will make schools more accountable and improve their performance (Burki, Perry and Dillinger, 1999).

The economist and technocratic emphasis is evident among the sympathizers of this current, but does not rule out political views; these center on a buzzword: evaluation. "Decentralization does not mean reducing the importance of federal authorities or of compromising national unity. Decentralization means (for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]) that the center should work differently. Besides its traditional functions in a market economy, the central government must ensure a balance between the different territories, not only by means of the application of active policies [...], but also through the introduction of information at a national level, as well as evaluation systems in all the projects" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, n.d., p. 106).

Evaluation becomes the axis by which the parts are linked, are decentralized. Typically, it pertains to the central governments; that power should remain in the center. It is striking how for multilateral organizations, evaluation, of technocratic origins, becomes an argument to safeguard the unity of nations (Kogan, 1996).

The neoliberal right's alternative emphasizes freedom of choice: individual sovereignty, market mechanisms and privatization of public goods (Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998, Chubb and Moe, 1990). For some authors, privatization is the final level of educational decentralization. This does not have to do with transferring public schools to the private sector (an alternative which is not excluded, of course), but of the use of public funds to pay private companies for providing services, including maintenance, cleanup, security and food preparation. This in the name of efficiency in spending.

Although it seems obvious, when there is an effective political decentralization and a sharing of power, the central government gains degrees of legitimacy, especially if it takes over projects which through fiscal policy reduce disparities between the rich and the poor.

2.2. Legitimacy and formal profiles

Judicial decentralization is concerned with establishing a legal framework, and certainty with the powers transferred from a higher government order to one of lower hierarchy. There can be found in the law the profiles on the express purposes, the institutional implications and the *expected* modes of operation. The law also prefigures the size of the bureaucratic organization to be established in the decentralized portion. If political decentralization acquires its meaning from the distribution of power, the forms it acquires judicially will demarcate the areas of the exercise of authority. "Looking after the legal criteria—says Ortega—decentralization is revealed as a basic principle of the state's organization, referred

to its territorial association, the sphere of validity of its regulations. It means the coexistence of a plurality of entities with territorially-defined legal powers, subject to the higher standard or constitution governing the state” (Ortega, 1988, p. 6).

Typically, the legal forms of decentralization include: a) geography (competencies within a territory), which regulates intergovernmental relations between different levels of government, and b) function, which regulates the levels of autonomy.

The demarcation of the authority of the orders of government varies depending on the nature of the constitutional system, if they are federal states or unitary states. In federal states there are varying degrees of autonomy to legislate within the subnational territory, subject only to constitutional principles. Which shows that to regulate any specific activity (education, for instance) there can be as many laws and regulations as federal entities. In unitary states there are no regional laws; the national standard accommodates the authority of the parties. Intergovernmental relations of the orders of government navigate between the legal principles of autonomy and unity. In a federal system legal and regulatory autonomy is enhanced; in unitary systems the uniformity of the standard predominates. In the first there are or may be dynamic horizontal relationships between paired organs; in the second, vertical coherence prevails.

In Latin America, for example, the decentralization of education in Argentina, which is a federal state, gave wide margins of authority to the provinces to legislate within their territories. This included setting priorities, defining the nature of labor relations, allocating spending—which led to disparities in teachers’ income—and either motivated or did not motivate the participation of parents and civil organizations in education (Cocorda, 2000, Murillo, 1999).

In contrast, the education system’s reform in a unitary state, such as Chile, was the transfer, in the early eighties, of the national government’s educational administration to the municipalities. The World Bank celebrated this reform as successful for being close to the market mechanism and for fortifying the private sector (Prawda, 1993; Winkler and Rounds, 1996). However, the imposition of the standard was arbitrary. The dictatorial government of Augusto Pinochet appointed the 327 mayors of the municipalities, exercised political control over them, broke up the teachers’ unions, and lacked margins of autonomy. With the restoration of democracy, the autonomy of municipalities was broadened, and teachers’ political organization was restored (Schiefelbein and Schiefelbein, 2000).

Decentralization by function implies the transfer of authority and competencies of government institutions created to provide a service. Decentralization by function, typically includes the collaboration between the central organization and the decentralized institutions in a set of shared competencies, common or connected.

The definition of the legal form of what is decentralized, grants degrees of formal legitimacy, especially if there is a democratic debate and a plural participation, and if the priorities of subnational entities are taken into account. The certainty,

however, can be precarious if the creation of local institutions is supported on nothing but the legal basis, and if its administrative responsibilities, i.e. the exercise of authority, are not outlined.

2.3. Legitimacy and shared management

If the decentralization policy puts the emphasis on control and issues of power, and the legal form sets the institutional operating modes, then the administrative decentralization provides the location of what is decentralized. Rondinelli, Nellis and Cheema (1984) produced one of the first types of educational decentralization, based on experiences in Third World countries. After that came others supported by the theory of organizations and the collecting of cases. Definitions were connected, political and administrative purposes were confused, and motivations coincided in spite of the social, historical and economic differences in countries that tried educational decentralization projects.

Administrative decentralization has to do primarily with the institutional arrangements for the bureaucracy to do its job and provide the services; it is supposed to improve efficacy in providing the service to users (*the clients*, in neoliberal jargon). Efficacy, in much of the literature, includes improving the quality of education and improving the efficiency of the educational systems (Weiler, 1996; Winkler, 1993). Although in legal terms decentralization and deconcentration can mean different matters—as in Mexico—much of the international literature agrees that *deconcentration* is a form acquired by decentralization; *delegation* is the other form.

For Hanson (1997) and Winkler (1993), as well as Rondinelli, Nellis and Cheema (1984), deconcentration is a form of decentralization that generally transfers the tasks and the work, but not the authority, to other units within the same institution. This represents a limited form of decentralization, since its power and authority to make decisions depend on the central bureaucracy. Deconcentration is done to increase the bureaucratic rationale and administrative efficiency, and to bring the provision of educational services as close as possible to local demands. Deconcentration does not alter or change the power relationships, but it can modify the routines of bureaucracy (Hanson, 2000; Winkler, 1998; Rondinelli, Nellis and Cheema, 1984).

Delegation, according to these same authors, transfers the authority to make decisions from higher hierarchical units to lower ones. However, the authority may be withdrawn at any time. Delegation entails a reorganization of bureaucratic bodies which can alter the previously-established lines of command. A senior official of the central apparatus may transfer certain degrees of authority to her delegate so that in her name and as her representative he may carry out functions that local organs of the national institution formerly performed.

Deconcentration usually results in two functions that strengthen the administration from the center out; one goes from the bottom up, and the other from the center to

the periphery. The collection of data is the job of local bureaucracies which minimally process it, put it into previously-designed formats—called microplanning—and sent to the center for its organization, process, presentation and use. The central role relates to national planning, especially of expenditure and the control that should be exercised from the center. All bureaucracies tend to centralize information as a source of power.

In summary, administrative decentralization is more responsive to the needs of the center, to the manner of implementing national policies in the field of localities and their desire to rationalize expenditures in accordance with certain purposes. Even in the case of delegation, the transfer of authority is limited. In order to achieve efficiency in providing the service, collaboration between levels of government and institutional actors is considered necessary. Certainly, as has been the case in several countries, if some purposes of efficiency are achieved, if the public perceives that the changes have a positive impact on education or the improvement of schools, these types of decentralization broaden the legitimacy of the system, increase the credibility level in politics and—what is essential in these models—maintain and even strengthen the control from the center. The reasons for deconcentration and delegation evoke the tenets of Machiavelli and Weber: the propensity to concentrate power.

2.4. Decentralization and political conflict

Politically, legally and administratively, decentralization of education means a change of course that affects vested interests and historical patterns. In no case of educational decentralization has conflict been absent. Resistance to this change makes the processes slow, erratic, and sometimes contradictory. The political struggle between groups and bureaucratic factions are frequent, and hamper the scope of decentralization projects. In Mexico, there was strong hostility—and this continues in large measure—between modernist and technocratic bureaucracy, and the SNTE groups that had “colonized” the SEP for decades.

The political and administrative aspects of decentralization are dynamic; they are modified by changes in the groups in power, and the correlation of forces is altered. The legal form provides the decentralization reforms with a certain stability and certainty. The regulations induce uniform routines.

With all that, and even though in international experience, educational decentralization has not fully lived up to its promises of greater efficiency, democratic participation and distribution of power, many governments, multilateral agencies, civil organizations and political parties continue promoting it. Certainly it represents an alternative to bureaucratic centralism—at least it is no worse—and maintains its potential to grant legitimacy to governments that try it, although some are reluctant to lose degrees of control.

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1 In Canada, the asymmetry of Quebec causes Francophone citizens to have more formal rights than other citizens; their national pride lies in the province, not in the country (Taylor, 1999).

2 The sources I use as support for this section are Conlan (1998) and Stockman (1986).

3 Proposed by economist Milton Friedman, the voucher system is still under debate in the United States. It consists in giving children's parents "bonuses" to be used for tuition at private or public schools, as they choose. Perhaps the best exponents of privatist ideology in education are John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe (1990).

4 In the United States and Australia the debates on centralization versus decentralization are of different magnitudes. It does not have to do with reforming a centralized system, but with transferring the city government's authority to the school. It has to do with topics such as the community's control of the school, administration based on the school (*school based management*), and the participation of the parents in the schools' decisions. The concept most used is that of devolution, which means giving power to the parents and the teachers to direct the school, as in the 19th Century. This type of decentralization is not useful for the discussion of national educational systems (Tyack and Cuban, 2001, 151-155).

5 This is the case in Mexico. First a political pact was signed; afterward, the General Law of Education emerged and had consequences in the institutions and in the administration of the service.