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Civic education as social process: A case study of students' protests in Córdoba, Argentina, 2010

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Abstract

This article's aim is to provide, through a case study, new insights into current research on the civic education policies that encompassed the transition from authoritarian to democratic political regimes that took place as of the final years of the 20th century in Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America. Many of these studies parted from the assumption that citizenship could be promoted by imparting a universal set of rights and attitudes, which would not interact with pre-existent and varied conceptions of citizenship. By studying the midlevel students' protests that took place in the city of Córdoba in Argentina in 2010, we show that even in societies that have undergone long dictatorial periods, there are pre-existent civic traditions that influence the implementation and effects of these policies. This leads to new recommendations on the importance of considering these traditions when designing and assessing civic education policies.

Keywords

Argentina, citizenship, democracy, midlevel education, protests

Introduction

Towards the end of the 20th century, several countries in Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe entered a process of political transition from dictatorial or single-party regimes to new emerging democracies. Encompassing this process, several international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (e.g. United Nations, World Bank or United States Agency for International Development (USAID)) sponsored civic education policies that had the central aim of promoting citizenship and strengthening the institutional systems in these countries in transition (Finkel, 2000, 2003; Osler and Starkey, 2006; Torney Purta et al., 2001). In several cases, national governments and NGOs instrumented policies that, although with their own nuances, followed the recommendations of these international organizations. In turn, these policies were accompanied by studies that sought to assess their effects.

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In general terms, these civic education policies consisted in a set of educational activities destined to promote the rights, values, beliefs and commitments that would turn students into active members of their national communities (Levine, 2013). Following Sunström and Fernández (2013: 114), we can identify two main types of civic education policy. A first type consists in deliberate forms of instruction guided by teachers or tutors who teach citizenship rights and values through a specific curriculum and set of activities. A second type of policies promote the exercise of the citizen role at school through forms or styles of school management that allow students to take part in democratic processes of decision-making on their own learning situation.

Most of the studies on the effects of these policies examined civic education programs of the first type, which tended to include the assumption that societies in transition to democracy had no previous civic traditions.[1] Therefore, they were frequently based on the premise that citizenship could be promoted by imparting a set of rights and attitudes defined by policy makers and researchers with no prior consideration of local conceptions of citizenship. Consequently, it was also assumed that these civic education policies would have an independent and homogeneous effect in the target population as they would not interact with pre-existent conceptions of citizenship.

The main purpose of this article is to provide new insights to the previous approach through a case study on the effects of promoting citizenship through civic education policies of the second type. In contrast to the aforementioned studies on policies of the first type, this approach reveals how pre-existent civic traditions influence those effects, and how these effects may vary across different social sectors according to diverging civic traditions that are present in them. To show this, we specifically examine the midlevel students' protests that took place in the city of Córdoba, Argentina, between September and December 2010. Protests consisted mainly of street demonstrations and 'school occupations', where students took control of their schools excluding all forms of adult authority (i.e. teachers, parents and principals) from school premises for several weeks. Protests originated in demands to improve school infrastructure and in opposition to a new provincial law of education (Ley Provincial de Educación, LEP) that modified student participation rights. The LEP was promoted by the executive power of the province of Córdoba and was been debated in the provincial parliament when the protests took place.

The reforms that led to the protests in Córdoba were part of a process of recurrent reformulation of civic education policies that began with the democratic restoration Argentina experienced as of 1983.These civic education policies were initially promoted throughout Latin America by international agencies such as the World Bank, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Inter-American Development Bank.[2] However, in Argentina, successive national governments instrumented these reforms according to their particular conceptions of citizenship and students' participation rights. In turn, national legislation suffered further variations according to how each provincial government instrumented national-level initiatives and to how each educational community (teachers, students and parents) understood these proposals. Thus, the policies that began by the initiative of international agencies underwent recurrent reformulations according to the diverging conceptions of citizenship and students' participation rights present among the different actors in the educational system. These discrepancies led to ongoing conflicts on how to instrument these reforms, which include the events occurred in Córdoba.

Thefore, in order to account for the procesual character of these events, our study focuses intially in the historical context in which the reform occurred, then it looks at the parliamentary debates in which the new LEP was discussed and it finally centers on the school ocupations through an ethnographic study of two schools belonging to different social sectors. This analysis reveals how the motives and forms of protest were part of pre-existing conceptions and attitudes related to citizens' participation rights. It also shows that these traditions varied, not only between different

sectors of the provincial parliament but also among students in schools of different social sectors and also among groups of students, teachers and parents of the same school.

Although the results of a case study cannot be easily extrapolated to other contexts, we believe that the analysis of the events occurred in Córdoba has heuristic value. Summarily, the case suggests that (a) civic education policies should be designed and assessed paying attention to how pre-existent civic traditions may shape the understanding of citizenship in a given social context; (b) it should also be considered how these understandings vary across different social groups and sectors and (c) how these variations may influence the effects of such policies. Even though we are comparing different types of civic education policies, we believe these insights may still be valuable since these civic traditions may have an effect on both types described by Sunström and Fernández (2013: 114).

In the following section, we review studies that have assessed the effects of civic education policies implemented in the democratic regimes that emerged as of the late 20th century. We will show that many of these studies were not based on an examination of pre-existent civic traditions. Instead, policy makers and researchers designed and assessed these policies parting from their own conceptions of citizenship, implicitly treating them as if they were universal. After this section, we situate the protests that took place in Córdoba in the context of previous civic education policies and the history of political movements among Argentinian midlevel students. This shows that civic traditions may be present after long dictatorial periods and influence the effects of civic education policies. Next, we present the results of the ethnographic case study, which further reveals how these conceptions had the capacity to influence the effects of civic education policies, producing differing outcomes in schools from diverse social sectors. In the concluding section, we look at how the insights provided by the case study allow for further recommendations concerning the design and assessment of civic education policies.

Civic education and its effects

Most studies implemented in countries in transition to democracy in the late 20th century analysed the effects of civic education policies based on a specific curriculum and activities guided by tutors or instructors. These studies reached contrasting conclusions. Some concluded that this type of civic education policies had a small or no effect in promoting awareness of citizen rights and attitudes (Brahm, 2006; Keating and Benton, 2013; Merelman, 1971; Patrick, 1972). The main explanation of these negative results was that the internalization of the rights and attitudes that compose citizenship is the product of structural conditions (e.g. industrialization and economic development) and long-term exposure to democratic principles, which could not be substituted by short-term educational policies (Coleman, 1965; Cook, 1985; Dalton, 1994; Inglehart, 1990). Despite these arguments, other investigations concluded that civic education policies strengthened the awareness of civic rights and the internalization of civic attitudes promoting citizenship, especially in countries in transition to democracy (Cox et al., 2006; Reimers and Reimers, 2005; Sherrod et al., 2010; Torney Purta, 2002; Yudelmann and Conger, 1997).

However, further research also showed that these results were strongly conditioned by concomitant cultural and socio-economic factors. For example, Finkel's studies (Finkel, 2000, 2003; Finkel and Smith, 2011) on a variety of programmes in South Africa, Kenya, Dominican Republic and Poland suggest that civic education policies have a positive effect on the recognition of civic rights and attitudes, such as strengthening participation, tolerance for diversity of opinion and the predisposition to the peaceful resolution of differences. Notwithstanding, when controlled by the educational level of participants, their previous participation in political or civil organizations and their initial knowledge of the political system, these effects became more moderate or even lost

statistical significance. Therefore, instead of influencing those unfamiliar with citizen's rights and attitudes, civic education policies seemed to enhance political awareness and the development of civic attitudes among those who had previous political experience or knowledge of the political system (Finkel, 2000: 3, 2003: 148; see also Smith et al., 2002).

These latter results coincide with Schulz et al.'s (2011: 70) study on the effects of civic education in Latin America. These authors show that students with higher socio-economic status have a significantly superior knowledge of civil rights and a stronger internalization of democratic attitudes, such as aversion to political corruption and authoritarianism, than those with lower positions in the social ladder (see also Schulz and Gonzalez, 2011). Similarly, Bratton and Alderfer (1999: 817) find that civic education has practically no effect on the population without access to mass media and low levels of scholastic education, while it strengthens political awareness among those with access to those means. In the same vein, the work by Sanborn and Thyn (2013) suggests that high educational levels increase civic awareness and stabilize democracy, while low educational levels provide shaky grounds for democracy and citizenship.

Therefore, studies that have controlled the effects of civic education policies by cultural and socio-economic factors suggest that these may have the paradoxical effect of enlarging social differences. They enhance awareness of civil rights and democratic attitudes among those who already have more education and a previous access to participation and knowledge of the political system. Conversely, they may have only a minimal or null effect among those who do not enjoy these initial advantages.

The problem with this type of approach is that these results may be biased by the conceptions of citizenship that inform, at the same time, these civic education policies and the studies that assess their effects. The main problematic assumption is that in countries that have undergone long dictatorial periods, there are no pre-existent conceptions of citizenship. In some cases, like Morduchowicz et al.'s (1996) study on Argentina, the idea that, given the country's authoritarian traditions, 'there is a general absence of democratic values' is explicitly stated (p. 465). In other cases, although there are no explicit statements of this sort, civic education policies and the studies that assess their effects are not preceded by an examination of the political values and attitudes of the social group targeted by these policies. Therefore, the conception of citizenship that these policies seek to transfer and the variables used to measure their effects originate in the values and attitudes of those who design the policy or evaluate its effects that, therefore, implicitly treat their own conceptions as universal.

For example, Morduchowicz et al.'s (1996) previously mentioned study measures the effects of a programme aimed at promoting awareness of political issues among students through the regular reading of local newspapers. The study tries to assess the effects of the programme by looking at the level of political information that those who participated in the programme had in comparison with those who did not. It thus asked students whether they knew in what state there had recently been parliamentary elections or which were the latest privatized public services. In addition, it also measured the students' tolerance to diversity by estimating their willingness to admit religious difference, to accept opposing political opinions or the degree of aversion they showed towards gender-based violence. The study reveals that those who participated in the programme had more political information and greater tolerance to political and religious dissidence than those who did not (p. 472–473).

However, it remains unclear why these variables were chosen and what would have happened if other citizen values or attitudes had been considered instead of those that were part of the programme. For example, what would have happened if instead of asking about the elections, questions had been asked about conflicts in labour unions? Or, what would have happened if instead of measuring attitudes towards tolerance of religious diversity or gender-based violence, the questions had referred to equal access to education?

Similar problems appear in many other studies and policies that do not consider local conceptions of citizenship. For example, Finkel's aforementioned studies reveal that results of civic education programmes in promoting political participation or tolerance for diversity of opinion differ among people from different cultural and socio-economic status. In order to measure the effects of these programmes, the studies rely on variables such as participation in election campaigns, knowledge of political representatives, functions of political institutions and tolerance to open political expression (Finkel, 2000; 17, 2003: 139; for similar approaches, see, among others, Bratton and Alderfer, 1999: 811 or Schulz et al., 2011: 40). As in the former case, what remains unclear in this study is why and how these variables were chosen and whether the results would remain the same if other alternatives had been considered. For example, would differences between social sectors persist if instead of making emphasis in the functioning of the political system by asking about political institutions or representatives, the stress would be in social rights, like universal access to health care or retirement pensions?

In sum, the problem that seems to lurk in this type of policies and studies is that by not taking into account the set values and attitudes that define citizenship in the social group object of these policies, their content and the design of the variables that measure their effects remain as an arbitrary election made by policy makers or researchers. The main difficulty is that they may be based on conceptions that are alien to the societies in which these policies and studies take place or that they may represent conceptions that are prevalent in one social group or sector but are foreign to others. The case study presented in the next section suggests that even in societies that have undergone long dictatorial periods, there may be civic traditions that should be considered when designing and assessing civic education policies. Knowing these conceptions is relevant since they may affect the way in which the rights and attitudes that compose citizenship are understood, influencing the effects of civic education policies in different social groups or sectors.

The protests in context

Historical studies show that the different models of student involvement in school management that were at stake during the events occurred in Córdoba in 2010 and the motives and forms of protest assumed by students responded to contrasting civic traditions that had been in dispute for several decades in Argentinian history. Existing research shows that all along the 20th century, there were students' protests in demand for greater levels of participation in their schools and also in defence of their rights to create free and independent associations (Bonavena et al., 2007; Larrondo, 2013). Furthermore, the changing legislation on students' rights of association and participation in school management that took place during those years exposes an ongoing dispute between contrasting civic traditions that were, to some extent, re-enacted during the conflicts in Córdoba in 2010.

For example, Manzano (2011) reveals that already in the 1930s, there were street demonstrations and school occupations against the 'De la Torre Act', which banned the right to form student unions that were accepted until then. This same study shows that street demonstrations and school occupations took place again in the 1950s, when students protested against policies that favoured the intervention of the Catholic Church in the educational system. In addition, new protests occurred between 1973 and 1975 when students demanded more participation and educational reforms at the university and secondary level. This political agitation among university and midlevel students lasted until unions were banned, and the students' movement virtually annihilated during the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 (Califa, 2007).

Since the democratic restoration in 1983, civic education policies in Argentina were influenced by the agenda of international organizations, which sponsored reforms in school management as a

way to democratize school and promote citizenship. Although Argentina had historically had curricular civic instruction courses, even during dictatorships, several studies show that policies aimed to reform such courses were not very consistent and did not have profound effects (Astiz and Mendez, 2006; see also Quaynor, 2011: 38; Suarez, 2008). In addition, with only a few exceptions (see Morduchowicz et al., 1996), specific civic education programmes outside the normal curricula were sparse in Argentina. Instead, the more prominent civic education policies consisted of efforts to democratize school and promote citizen attitudes and awareness of civil rights by increasing students' participation in collegiate forms of school management, namely, student unions and school councils (Gorostiaga, 2007). However, as shown next, within this general trend, there were substantial variations and nuances according to the political and social context in which these initiatives developed.

Since democracy was restored, any attempt to ban student participation lost legitimacy and, from that moment on, civic education policies varied according to the grades and modalities of participation granted to students (Larrondo, 2013; Litichever 2012; Núñez, 2013, 2015). Thus, the first civic education policies implemented by the democratic government that ensued the 1976–1983 dictatorship re-established students' participation rights by lifting the proscription of student unions. However, the provisions of the time banned the participation of political parties at midlevel school as it was considered that students should not be exposed to party competition at such an early age. However, this prohibition was rejected by sectors of the students' movement, including a group identified with the ruling party, who saw this as an arbitrary restriction (Enrique, 2010a).

In this period, there were also initiatives to promote school councils as a way to democratize school management and favour democratic citizenship by encouraging participation and awareness of civic rights among school communities. Although these initiatives made some progress, especially in the state of Buenos Aires, they were discontinued due to internal conflicts and the generalized political crisis experienced by the national government at the end of the 1980s (see Cigliuti, 1993 and Tiramonti, 1993 for further discussion).

After this first stage, there were two crucial instances, at the beginning of the 1990s and in the early 21st century, when there were new initiatives to reform the education system in general, with special provisions concerning school councils and student unions. In 1993, the enactment of the Federal Law of Education included the right of midlevel students to form associations and student unions. However, beyond this formal compromise, there were no active policies stimulating student participation until the second half of that decade. In addition, the new Federal Law did not include school councils as a more democratic form of school management. Despite this, a few years after the Federal Law of Education was passed, the Federal Council of Education (an organ of the National Ministry of Education) passed two resolutions (41/95 and 62/97) promoting school councils. This, in turn, gave way to new initiatives to instrument school councils in several provinces during the late 1990s and early years of the 21st century. As in the 1980s, the attempts to instrument these forms of school management also faced difficulties (Dussel, 2005; Litichever, 2012; Mayer, 2013; Sús, 2005). However, as shown later, after a reassessment, the initiative continued despite these difficulties (Gvirtz and Larrondo, 2012).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a new phase began that included the enactment of a new Law of National Education in 2006, which replaced the former Federal Law of Education. The new Law marked the beginning of a set of educational policies that actively promoted student participation and that accompanied the rise of the student movement that was characteristic of those years, both regionally and nationally (Filmus and Kaplan, 2012).[3] As mentioned, after assessing the difficulties experienced by school councils in the late 1990s and early years of the 21st century, the Federal Council of Education sanctioned a new resolution (93/09), with the purpose of giving new impetus to the instrumentation of school councils and student unions. This resolution promoted

student participation by declaring school councils mandatory and setting a legal framework for their creation and functioning.

More than an isolated official initiative, these new set of laws and resolutions were the expression of profound political and cultural changes among midlevel students. In addition to the new educational policies, the early years of the 21st century were characterized by an increase in the participation of midlevel and university-level students (Kroff and Nunez, 2009; López Sánchez, 2005; Vommaro and Larrondo, 2012). Most of the time, participation was channelled through 'unconventional' means, such as the combination of contentious action with forms of direct democracy like spontaneous assemblies. This promoted student empowerment and their capacity to actively intervene in educational policies and school government.

However, these new forms of participation were not always well received by all stakeholders in the education system. Some studies reveal that these new political practices were at odds with alternative conceptions of citizenship, particularly of adults, who did not agree with the contentious forms of political action and the degree of participation that students acquired in midlevel school (D'Aloisio and Bertarelli, 2012: 5; Paulin, 2004). Hence, the initiatives of students to increase their participation in school management that was partly encouraged by official policies many times faced the opposition of several actors in the educational community who did not agree that the growing role students played at school was a pertinent mean of civic education.

Protests in Córdoba

The events that took place in Córdoba should then be read as part of this ongoing dispute between differing models of student participation rights that influenced civic education policies all along the 20th century in Argentina. In addition, they should also be considered as a re-enactment of the traditional forms of protest with which university and midlevel students had participated in these conflicts. While these disputes and students' forms of protest took place even before the restoration of democracy, after the 1976–1983 dictatorship, they regained momentum, entering into a particularly active phase at the beginning of the 21st century when the conflicts in Córdoba took place.

While situated within this general context, the protests in Cordoba responded to two specific claims that were differentially embodied in the student movement. As had happened in Buenos Aires a few months earlier (Enrique, 2010b), protests partly originated in demands to improve school infrastructure, especially in marginal urban areas were schools lacked basic services – for example, they had no heating, sanitary facilities were extremely poor and the ceilings rained down (Arce Castello et al., 2014; Beltrán and Falconi, 2011; D'Aloisio and Bertarelli, 2012). In addition, they also emerged in opposition to the new provincial law of education (the LEP) that was being discussed in the provincial parliament during the protests.

The new LEP was promoted by the executive power of the state of Córdoba that in 2009 created a Provincial Educational Commission in charge of producing the new legislation. This new law should adequate the provincial educational system to the National Law of Education sanctioned in 2006 and set the administrative, pedagogical and organizational principles that would guide educational policies within the province for the following years (for a more thorough discussion, see Aizicson, 2011). According to Córdoba's Governor, the general purpose of the LEP was:

> […] to grant the citizens of Córdoba justice and equity in their access to quality education and to provide the educational contents and formats that would prepare them for the ongoing changes that were taking place in the labour market.[4]

Students' protests were motivated because even if initially the new LEP was meant to adequate the provincial legislation to the National Law of Education, it actually introduced limitations to some of the student participation rights granted by the federal legislation (which were also present in the previous provincial educational law sanctioned in 1991). Among other things, the new LEP eliminated school councils, which were present in both the previous provincial legislation and the resolutions passed by the Federal Council of Education in 2009. In addition, the LEP also established strong regulations to student unions. Unlike the federal legislation and the former provincial law, in the new LEP student unions could only exist insofar as they were approved by the authorities of each school, which greatly restricted the autonomy of students to decide the creation and operation of their associations.

Finally, another controversial issue was that in the perspective of some students' groups that participated in the protest (and some of their parents and teachers), the new LEP had been drafted without sufficient participation of the educational community. While the provincial government enabled consultation workshops in schools to discuss an initial draft of the LEP, there were groups of teachers, students and parents who demanded a greater role in deciding the content of the LEP.

In response to these protests, the provincial government enabled a new round of consultation workshops at schools and 'public hearings' in which teachers, parents and students could express their views to members of the provincial parliament. In addition, members of the ruling party argued that beyond these consultations, government bodies (namely, the Provincial Educational Commission) had already treated the draft LEP, which was about to be approved through a parliamentary debate. Hence, in view of the party in power, all these instances granted the democratic origin of the new LEP.

The analysis of parliamentary debates illustrates the models of participation in conflict. A good example of the position of those who opposed the LEP can be seen in the arguments held by Roberto Birri in his parliamentary presentation of 10 November 2010. There he argued that the LEP should be rejected because of the insufficient participation of the educational community:

> […] the greatest weakness of this project is the absence or insufficiency – and I am convinced that it is an absence – of a previous debate, that would provide the LEP with the degree of social legitimacy that a project of this scope should have. What has been the consequence of this lack of debate? That it has left, I could not quantify, but probably tens of thousands of Cordoba`s citizens unhappy, particularly those who are the more relevant members of the educational community: students.

In response to Birri's imprecations, the ruling party's legislator Rivero maintained that the LEP was legitimate because it had been the result of an elaborate participatory process:

> I want to remember that the LEP arises from a representative process; it is a process that begun with the creation of a Provincial Council of Education which produced a preliminary draft [of the LEP]. But, I am going to make a defence of the participatory emphasis that we made after this draft was presented to our parliament […]. I want to stress the importance of the work that each of us has done in our offices: we have received many interested parties, in addition to the emails and folders containing different opinions from different actors of our society. All of these elements were taken into account with enough time, allowing to be seriously considered by each legislator and our internal Commission of Education[5] before we reached the final version of the project we are now considering.

Although it is impossible to go into more detail here (see Míguez, 2015), this brief description already suggests that one of the main reasons beyond the conflicts that took place in Córdoba was the clash between two conceptions of citizen participation rights. These were present, at the same time, in the different models of school management proposed in the differing educational policies

and among the positions held by the ruling and opposition parties in parliament. In the case of educational policies, both the previous provincial law and the federal legislation that were in place during the protests favoured greater and more autonomous forms of student participation. Inversely, the new LEP promoted restrictions on this model, eliminating school councils and limiting the autonomy of students in the creation and administration of student unions. In the case of parliamentary debates, members of the ruling party considered that the consultation workshops in schools, the public hearings and, finally, the debate in the provincial parliament were sufficient to guarantee the democratic origin of the LEP. Instead, members of the opposing party considered that students, parents and teachers should have had a greater say in defining the content of the LEP.

It is important to point out that these different conceptions of citizen participation rights did not only divide members of parliament. These differences were also present within the educational community itself. As shown in the next section, the same diverging conceptions of how students, teachers and parents should exercise their participation rights at school and decide over the content of the new LEP also divided the educational communities within occupied schools.

Occupied schools

School occupations began by the end of September 2010 and increased during the first 2 weeks of October. Students, in some cases accompanied by their parents, occupied about 20 midlevel schools (16 public and 4 private), two primary schools, two adult education centres, six tertiary educational institutions and three departments at the National University of Córdoba. Protests ended in December of that year with the approval of the new LEP.

Although there is no space for a thorough account here, even a superficial analysis of the protests' denouement yields a mixed balance. While the protests did not lead to a substantive modification of the new LEP, they did motivate important initiatives at the federal level. The year after these demonstrations in Cordoba took place, the National Secretary of Youth launched a programme to promote student unions nationwide. That same year, the National Parliament enacted a 'Law of Student Unions', which established the requirement that these were promoted in all schools. In addition, our ethnographic fieldwork after the protests were over shows that they had a lasting impact within school communities (see Míguez and Hernández, 2016) for further discussion).

Our study took place between September and December 2010 in two midlevel schools belonging to different social sectors. In order to select these schools, we considered middle- and higher middle-class schools where more than 70% of parents reached tertiary education. In turn, we considered schools from low-class sector where more than 70% of parents had achieved only primary education. According to previous studies (Susmel, 2012), those who reach tertiary education are usually located among the 25% of the population with the highest income level, while those with only primary education are among the 25% of the population with lower income level. Thus, one of the schools where we conducted fieldwork had students who mostly belonged to the highest income quartile, while the other had students that mostly belonged to the lower income quartile.

The study in these two schools was conducted using non-participant observation. Non-participant observation is a data collection technique in which the researcher enters a social system to observe events, activities and interactions while staying separate from the activities being observed (Ostrower, 1998). In this technique, the main goal is to gain an understanding of a social phenomenon in its natural context, paying particular attention to the actors' own understanding of their actions and the contexts where they take place. Observations must be systematically registered in fieldwork diaries and should gradually focus on the research topic (Liu and Maitlis, 2010).[6]

Following these premises, we visited schools between two and three times a week while the protests were taking place. Our main purpose was to observe the different ways in which students,

parents and teachers were involved in the occupations and the different attitudes they had towards the protest. We paid particular attention not only at the possible contrasts within a same school community, but also at possible differences between communities belonging to different social sectors.

During fieldwork, we attended to the initial assemblies where students declared the occupation of their schools and continued to visit the schools until the occupations were over. We also regularly entered the school premises and interacted with students, teachers and parents in our role as researchers, not playing an active role in assemblies or in the activities involved in the occupation. In this role, we observed, mainly, how students interacted inside school during the occupation, but we also regarded how students who were not involved in the occupation reacted to it and related to students who were occupying the school. We also paid attention to the role played by teachers and school authorities, and the different attitudes that faculty had towards the occupation and the students who had either participated in the occupation or were not involved in it.

As a complement to our observations, we conducted 25 'in-depth unstructured interviews' (Taylor and Bogdan, 1992: 100–132) with students, principals and teachers. The main aim of the interviews was to gain additional insights into the actors' point of view on the occupations and how they understood citizen participation rights in relation to them. With this same purpose, we also conducted complementary non-participant observations in the inter-union students' assemblies that took place during the protests.

Given the wealth of material gathered in fieldwork, we limit the presentation of the ethnographic material mainly to the different conceptions of students' participation rights present among teachers, students and parents in each school. Due to space limitations, we proceed somewhat schematically exposing the various conceptions of participation that structured social relations between social actors in each school.

A middle-class school

The middle-class school where we conducted fieldwork was located in the downtown area of the city of Córdoba. In contrast to the low-class school that we describe later, this school had a reasonable infrastructure, offering students and faculty comfortable premises to work and study.

Several members in this school were actively involved in political organizations. The school traditionally had a student union, composed of a limited but active group of students. In addition, there were students actively involved in political parties beyond those who were members of the student union. Furthermore, there were also active party members among faculty, and teachers who participated in dissident groups in their labour union.

When the conflicts over the new LEP began, a group of students who were active members of a political party that opposed the provincial government and the new LEP promoted the occupation of the school. These students were supported by faculty members who were affiliated with political parties that also opposed the new LEP. These groups promoted a 'students' assembly' where a majority of students declared the occupation of the school. However, behind this apparent consensus, there were important differences.

On the one hand, the students who initially promoted the occupation were members of a party that opposed the LEP, but they were not part and had strong differences with the elected authorities of the student union. In turn, all members of the student union opposed the LEP. However, many of them considered that before occupying the school, a consensus should be built among the majority of students to avoid the risk of having only a small number of students actively involved in the protest. Another group considered that it was convenient to occupy the school to join actively the rest of the student movement. In addition to these groups, most students without political

commitment supported the occupation during the assembly, although subsequent events suggest that this consensus was only momentary.

After the occupation was declared, members of the student union unified their positions and all participated actively. However, there were persistent differences among the rest of the students' body. Some students strongly supported the occupation, saying it was the only way to be heard against the refusal of the Provincial Government to allow greater levels of participation of the educational community in deciding the content of the LEP. For example, during an interview we conducted when the occupations were coming to an end, a student who had stayed within the school premises during the whole occupation declared,

> Now I am more convinced of what we did. At a distance, I can see that if we had not occupied our schools, repercussions would have not been the same. We would not have called the attention of the media, our protest would not have been publicly known, street demonstrations would not have attracted the same amount of people they did, and the government would have not been so pressured to respond to our demands.

However, other students doubted that the occupation of the school and disruption of classes constituted a fair measure. In their perspective, while this form of participation was effective as a means of protest, it involved a violation of the rights to continue the normal activities of the rest of their classmates and the school community in general. One of the students, who had partially supported the occupation, openly shared this type of doubts with us during an interview:

> Yes, we had to fight. I think that if we had not been heard, I would have been totally in favour of the occupations. Now, from there, that this was legal, that we had the right to occupy the school, that this is what we actually had to do; I don't know, it depends of too many things. We interfered with students at the primary level, we affected ourselves; we were prepared to lose classes, but were the rest of the students prepared to lose classes as well? We are fighting for our education, but at the same time we are interrupting our own education. Does it really make sense?

A third, albeit tacit, position among students was manifested in the fact that the consensus for the occupation of the school achieved in the assembly was short-lived. Initially, most students were enthusiastic with the occupation. However, participation gradually decreased. During our recurrent visits to the school, we could observe that while hundreds of students participated in the assembly and agreed to occupy the school, the number of students remaining in the school had decreased to a few dozen when the occupation ended.

This labile consensus had a second manifestation in the elections for the students' union authorities shortly after the occupation came to an end. During December, immediately after the occupation ended, we were able to observe that the group of students which had promoted and participated in the occupation lost the elections to a group that had not been involved in them. Therefore, a third position among students was expressed in a rather silent but growing discontent with the occupations.

In addition to students, there were also important differences among faculty. As noted, a group of teachers, some of them belonging to the labour union and political parties that opposed the provincial government and the new LEP, supported the occupation. Conversely, other sectors perceived the occupation as a curtailment of democratic freedoms. Notably, differences in faculty affected even the school administration, dividing the positions between the principal and vice-principal. While the principal took a favourable attitude towards the occupation, the vice-principal argued against it, becoming a sort of spokesman for the faculty who opposed the occupations. The following interview extracts clearly illustrate these differences:

> It was fine, students learned how to organize, they learned grassroots democracy, direct democracy; students learned a lot. Those students who participated [in the protests] could hardly deny this. I think that as a fundamental lesson of how to exercise citizenship, it was very important. (Principal)

> The saddest thing for me was to see the school closed, and that classes were not taking place for many days. To see the school was occupied, with no classes, and that part of the students had lost their rights [to take classes], or that the rights of some took pre-eminence over the rights of others. (Vice-principal)

In addition, these differences between faculty members were also revealed in how different teachers acted during the occupation. Those who were in favour of the occupations assumed the situation naturally, approaching students to discuss with them about the 'meaning' of the protest and giving them advice on how to avoid the legal responsibilities involved in taking control of the school premises. These teachers perceived this type of dialogue as allowing them to capitalize this instance as a key factor in the civic education of students, where they learned through experience how to exercise and claim their rights.

In turn, those teachers who opposed the occupation experienced it as a humiliation, especially the limitation to circulate freely through the school premises. They felt that the role reversal that occurred during the occupation, where students acquired the power to set the institutional rules, constituted an unacceptable distortion of normal student–teachers relationships that threatened their professional identity. These teachers, far from establishing a dialogue with students, refrained from any interaction with them.

An event where these tensions became openly apparent took place in front of the barricade that students had built in the school's front door in order to control who entered the premises. Students selectively allowed some teachers and administrative staff to enter the school, although they asked them to present their National Identification Document to formally establish their identities. In this context, some teachers opted to refrain from any contact with students, while others had a more open attitude towards them. One of the teachers vividly described to us what was going on:

> See, some people don't even want to approach students at the barricade. I have even seen some colleagues cry at the front door, when students asked them for their Documents. They told kids: 'but if you already know me, I have been your teacher all this year'. They didn't want to talk to the kids; they didn't want to have anything to do with them. […] Instead, I don't have a problem with what they are doing. I think it is a good opportunity to talk with them, and to explain them their rights as citizens and how they have to actively defend them. I see this as an opportunity to change my relationship with students. I have even been able to become friends with some of them.

Among parents, differences were similar to those that divided faculty members. The group of parents who supported the occupation perceived it as an educational instance where their children learned through experience how to exercise their role as citizens. In opposition, other parents rejected this point of view by pointing out that occupations were authoritarian since they implied a curtailment of the democratic freedoms of those who did not adhere to the protests. This dispute was evidenced in the exchange of emails between parents who published a document supporting school occupations and the responses elicited from other parents who opposed the protests.

The document published online on 10 October 2010 had four main points. The first point was an unconditional support to the actions taken by their own children at school and to the student movement in general. Parents interpreted these actions as a defence of a secular model of public school that granted quality education for all social sectors. The second point defended the students' autonomy to decide their forms of protest, arguing in favour of school occupations as a legitimate method to express dissent. The following points consisted, first, in a repudiation of the statements

against the student movement made by the governor of the province of Córdoba and, second, in an exaltation of the 'participatory' attitude of students, understanding that 'participation is one of the pillars of democracy'.

This demonstration of support for the occupation of the school produced the reaction of those parents who felt that these forms of protests restricted the rights of 'some at the hands of others'. The following transcript of an email sent by one of the parents who disagreed with the occupations illustrates the feelings of indignation these parents experienced in relation to the occupations:

> Is this the education we are giving to our children: to use arrogance, to subjugate others, to impose their ideas on others by the use of force? What happens to the rights of those who seek to attend classes? Weren't those who occupied the school taught that their rights end where the rights of others begin?

Reviewing the positions that divided this middle-class school community shows that the different conceptions of student participation rights that produced different positions concerning the new LEP were not only present in the provincial parliament. Actors in school communities also reacted to the new LEP, according to their conceptions of the systems of rights and obligations that assist students and their rights of protest at school. However, as we pay attention to population coming from low-income sectors, we find that there are even more nuances concerning conceptions of student participation rights.

A school in low-class sectors

The low class sector's school where we conducted our fieldwork was located at the poor outskirts in the south of the city of Córdoba and had an extremely deteriorated infrastructure. In this school, there was no active student union or students with membership in political parties with a defined position against the provincial government or the new LEP. Therefore, the school occupation was not motivated by the contents of the LEP or demands to be more involved in its drafting. Instead, the occupation was promoted by students, without previous political experience, who demanded improvements in their school infrastructure. Due to the lack of previous experience, they consulted members of students' inter-union associations on how to proceed in order to occupy their school. However, after initial consultations, these students did not join these associations or became involved in political organizations. One of the students who promoted the occupation and participated in the consultations with other students' unions clearly expressed these motivations:

> The occupation begun because the school had a very lousy infrastructure, the school was very warned down. We talked to kids in other schools, and other schools did it for politics, because they opposed the [provincial] government and the LEP, but we did it for the school, because it was really a wreck. The playground's floor was broken, the toilets were broken, and that is why we occupied the school.

The group that promoted the occupation was relatively small and faced opposition from others who did not consent to the measure. In order to solve the conflict between the two groups, school authorities organized a debate in which those who opposed the occupation and those who promoted it met separately in order to elaborate their arguments in favour of or against the protest. Then, both groups publicly exposed their reasons. The final decision was to occupy the school, although those who did not agree to the measure left the premises.

Unlike what happened in the middle-class school, the different positions among students did not originate in divergent conceptions of students' participation rights. As it is suggested by the following extract from an interview to the school's principal, those who opposed the decision were students of senior years, with good grades, who were close to graduation and feared it could be

threatened by the incidents. Conversely, those who supported the occupation were not so much concerned with their graduation. Therefore, positions were divided, for practical reasons, between those who thought they were about to have an exceptional achievement according to the standards in their social group and those with lower expectations of educational mobility:[7]

> Those who opposed the occupation were mainly those in the senior years, because they said they were going to lose classes, and since they were already finishing school, they didn't want to run the risk of having to compensate for those classes during vacations or next year. They wanted to graduate with a good grade point average and all that. (Principal)

Notably, in contrast to what happened in the middle-class school, in this case, there was a strong consensus among faculty in favour of the occupations. In particular, the school's principal assumed a complacent attitude as she also appreciated the possibility of achieving infrastructure improvements. Hence, when students addressed her asking what could happen to them if they occupied the school, she replied stating that they were at liberty to make the decision to take control of the school and that this would have no disciplinary consequences:

> They [students] said: 'we are going to occupy the school, but what can happen to us?' I replied: 'Nothing is going to happen to you'. But they were scared that one might take disciplinary measures, as a suspension or discharge them from school. 'No' I said, nobody is going to suspend or discharge you from school. I gave them the School's keys, and made them sign a minute stating that they were occupying the school. […] We wanted to have the school fixed, because we have to work and live here, we want to work in a relatively comfortable place, humble, but with basic facilities. (Principal)

Although the principal received pressures from higher ranked authorities to restore normal activity at school, she did not interfere with the occupation. Furthermore, the attitude taken by the principal was also reflected in the support that many teachers gave to students during the occupation. They assisted students providing them with resources (food, covers, etc.) and giving them emotional support. Teachers who supported the occupation saw it as an experience that favoured the civic education of students. However, unlike what happened in the middle-class school, these teachers observed that instead of an increasing awareness of their civil rights, the claim for improvements in school infrastructure implied the recognition of other types of rights. Particularly, it implied an increasing awareness that the precarious living conditions they had always experienced in their own homes and the lack of proper school infrastructure were not the 'normal' state in which they were to live and learn. Instead, they constituted a violation of their rights to dignified living and learning conditions.

These perceptions can be recognized in how one of the students explained to us the motives of the protest and how a teacher reflected on these motives:

> We had no heating, if we turned on the electric heater the electric system blew off, we couldn't use the school's computers. Why can't we have what kids in other schools have? That is why we occupied the school, to have the same rights that other kids have. (Student)

> It is important that they became aware of these things, that they recognize what they are lacking, not only in their school, but also in their homes [computers, heating, etc.]. So, kids, also see these things. Before, they didn't know how to ask for these things, or that they should have them, or that they were entitled to them, because they don't have them in their own home, and their parents don't see these as important. But now they kind of start to see that they are entitled to them, and that they are important. (Teacher)

Finally, parents, almost unilaterally, were against the occupations. This rejection was not based on the opposition to the 'form' of protest as a clash between rights. Instead, many parents perceived

that the attitude assumed by teachers and school authorities implied an abandonment of their role, neglecting the proper education of their children. This created a hostile attitude towards teachers, with parents demanding authorities, even violently, to restore normal activities at school. A teacher who had participated during the occupation explained this during an interview:

> The biggest concern among parents referred to our authority: 'How come a bunch of adolescents can take control of the school'? As if we had no authority over them. In some cases parents even became violent, trying to force us to return to the school or throw the kids out of the school. But we saw things in another way. To leave them occupy the school looked to us as educative; it was a relevant educative experience for students.

Exploring how the occupation developed in a lower class school reveals further differences in how members of the educational community conceive citizen participation rights. Different to the middle-class school, students in this social sector were not so much concerned with participation as a right in itself or with becoming involved in deciding the content of the new LEP. In this case, participation was conceived as an instrumental mean to achieve a practical end: dignified learning conditions. Possibly, if we measured the civic awareness of these students by asking about their involvement in political parties or their knowledge of the political system or information about party candidates, the outcome would be a low level of political information or knowledge of their civic rights. However, variables concerned with concrete social conditions (such as proper housing, health care or educational facilities) would probably reveal a greater awareness of the lack of access to basic rights and a stronger disposition towards forms of participation that would enable access to those rights.

Conclusion

In this case study, we have shown how civic traditions may be present in societies that have undergone long dictatorial periods and how these might, at the same time, shape civic education policies and the effects these have on society. Furthermore, we have found contrasts that suggest that these civic traditions can vary between different social groups and sectors, making the effects of civic education policies heterogeneous within a same society. Given that results of a particular case study are not suitable grounds for empirical generalization, we cannot sustain that what was found here occurred in the same way in all the countries that began their transition to democracy during the final decades of the 20th century. However, we do think that the findings in our case study may have heuristic value. Namely, they suggest the need to consider the conceptions of citizenship present in populations that are object of civic education policies and the studies that assess their effects instead of directly basing them in conceptions held by policy makers or researchers.

In the case analysed here, diverging conceptions of participation were already present on the various models of school unions and school councils present in the different civic education policies at stake during the conflicts. As shown in our brief reconstruction of the protest's context, federal-level policies and previous provincial legislation promoted a model of student union and school council that favoured a strong involvement of the school community in school management and autonomous forms of student participation. In opposition, the new LEP introduced a more restrictive model, holding students to adult guardianship and imposing greater limitations to the intervention of the school community in school management.

In turn, there were also different conceptions of citizen participation rights within the school communities that were the object of these policies and which also responded to past traditions. In the middle-class school, we found that those teachers, students and parents who supported the occupations favoured models with greater latitude for student participation and even accepted their contentious forms of protest as a legitimate mode of intervention. For them, these forms of

participation were paramount in the civic education of students as they learned through them how to exercise and claim their rights as citizens. Inversely, those who opposed the protests supported more restrictive forms of participation and saw these forms of protest as authoritarian. For this second group, these contentious forms of protest implied a violation of the citizen rights of those who did not agree to the measures. Thus, instead of looking at the occupations as an instance in the civic education of students, they saw in them the reproduction of anti-democratic attitudes.

In addition to these cleavages, more differences became evident by observing the nuances between schools in different social sectors. In middle-class schools, where protests were motivated by opposition to the LEP, students' demands concerned mainly civic rights. Therefore, 'participation' as the right to be involved in decisions that directly affected them and their prerogatives to be part of the school management and to create autonomous forms of organization were central issues. Conversely, in schools of lower socio-economic status, these civic rights were not a relevant issue, and instead, access to dignified learning conditions was a more central concern. In this latter case, participation was not conceived as having an intrinsic value, but as a mean to achieve practical ends.

These differences indicate that material conditions influence how citizenship and participation are conceived. Those who do not experience material deprivation perceive their membership into their national community as defined by the degree of participation and protagonism they have in the political system. Instead, those who experience deprivation perceive that their membership into their national community is conditioned by their access to basic living conditions, while participation in the political system is not a paramount issue. Possibly, this is why civic education policies that stress civic rights (e.g. tolerance to religious diversity or to open political expression) or studies that rely on variables such as participation in election campaigns or knowledge of political representatives usually conclude that sectors with lower socio-economic status are less permeable to civic education policies. Our case study implies, however, that these differences could not hold true or could even be reversed if policies and studies would focus on the social and economic rights that are more frequently demanded by lower class sectors.

The results of our case study, therefore, suggest that it may be misleading for civic education policies and the studies that assess their effects to start from the premise that citizenship is defined by an universal set of rights and attitudes, that may be taught through 'instruction' to students without any prior knowledge or conception of them. We have found that different actors within a same educational community and even within a same school may understand citizenship differently. Therefore, the same civic education policy may have diverse effects within a same educational community or even in the same school. Given this potential situation, civic education policies should start by considering these pre-existent civic traditions and how those policies would interact with them. In this way, civic education policies should be conceived as an open social locus where different civic traditions enter in dialogue or even in conflict. The outcome will probably be a partial synthesis of the different conceptions at play. Therefore, the attempts to assess these outcomes should take into account that the effects will not be independent of these traditions and may even be different according to how they vary across different social groups and sectors.

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Notes

1. We understand civic traditions as historically constructed feelings, attitudes and conceptions of citizen rights that promote membership into a national community (Jelin, 2003).
2. Among other things, these policies promoted collegiate forms of school management like school councils in order to democratize and make more efficient the administration of school resources. Ideally, school councils should administer the school budget and be able to hire the school's personnel as teachers and principals. However, as in the case of Argentina, each national government instrumented these reforms according to their particular conceptions of citizenship and students' participation rights (see López (2007) for further discussion).
3. For a more thorough discussion, see Beltrán and Falconi (2011: 28).
4. Opening discourse in the parliamentary cessions where the Ley Provincial de Educación (LEP) was presented.
5. The provincial parliament had a specific 'Educational Commission' that treated the draft LEP before it was discussed in ordinary parliamentary sessions.
6. Due to space reasons, we do not dwell here in more details; for further description and discussion, see Flick (2009: 222–226).
7. According to official data, only 18% of the population in the lower income levels finish their secondary education in Argentina. The average rate is about 50% for the whole population, but more than 80% among the higher income levels.

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