Introduction

Extending the degree of autonomy of school staff to make decisions regarding how to improve schools is a popular option among governments and international development agencies these days (Marti-Vazquez, 2000; Park, 2000; Wilson, 2001; Leroy, 2002; Cha, 2003; Caldwell, 2005; Ferimeldi, 2005; Di Gropello, 2006).

On the surface the logic of school-based management is impeccable on at least two counts. In terms of improving the efficiency of schools; what could be more logical than to empower those closer to the locus of implementation with the authority to make decisions that have consequences for their practice? Teachers and principals know their students, communities and themselves much better than removed administrators or

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policy makers. They also are arguably in a better position to figure out what changes need to take place in their schools to improve the opportunities of their students to learn.

In spite of these theoretical advantages, and given the power of local context to transform educational innovations, it is fitting to ask how school autonomy fares in a national system where high levels of inequality in educational opportunity result from the combined effect of social and educational inequities. In this article we examine evidence pertaining to the implementation of a national programme of school-based decentralization, the Quality Schools Programme (*Programa de Escuelas de Calidad*).

The main argument of this article is that high levels of inequality in the institutional capacity of different schools and in the financial capacity of different communities minimize the likelihood that this school-based management programme might, in the short term, contribute to closing the gaps in educational opportunity for students from different socio-economic groups who are segregated in different types of schools. The heterogeneity in school and community resources and capacities conditions the way in which teachers and principals respond to the incentives provided by the programme, with the least changes observed in the least-endowed schools.

We posit three key mechanisms that explain why school-based management (SBM) does not close equity gaps in educational opportunity in Mexico: first, selection mechanisms, which make entry into the programme more likely for the schools with greater capacity and resources, principally urban schools; second, organizational mechanisms at the school level, which make school-based management work better for schools that have adequate leadership and coherence of vision among school staff; third, management mechanisms and politics at the system level which undermine local initiative in the most vulnerable schools.

**The Quality Schools Programme in Mexico**

In 2001 the Mexican Federal Government launched a major school-based management programme to improve the quality of public schools, the Quality Schools Programme (QSP). This was one of the flagship programmes of the administration of President Vicente Fox (2000–2006) and it expanded rapidly, from 2,239 schools included in the programme in 2001 to almost 35,000 at present.

Although initially the QSP was conceived as a “certification programme” for public schools in Mexico, the programme was soon explicitly predicated as a strategy to improve school efficiency and effectiveness. The initial rhetoric of the programme emphasized fostering quality, subsequently incorporating the aspiration to close equity gaps. The programme expects to influence pedagogical practices and student learning outcomes.

QSP provides schools that prepare a plan of school improvement with financial resources and technical assistance to implement that plan. Principals enjoy relative freedom in determining whether these plans should fund school maintenance and repairs, construction of new physical infrastructure, acquisition of educational materials or professional development for school staff, although programme norms place a