Human rights activism in Mexico City – A case study on young people’s strategies for enacting citizenship

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies used by young people in Mexico City to exercise civic participation in the form of human rights activism. Mexican society is currently marked by an increased amount of human rights violations, together with high levels of corruption, violence and severe flaws within the democratic system. To claim and stand up for human rights in this context is not only difficult but also dangerous, which is a pattern that recurs in many contexts throughout the globe. The young activists who were interviewed share the experience of having attended the same human rights education, where human rights are taught through critical pedagogy. They manifest a perspective where human rights have to be enacted in all spheres of society, including interpersonal relationships. Human rights ideals also seem to represent something similar to an ideology that, when understood correctly, entails a transformative potential. The experience of undertaking human rights education formed new networks and bonds in civil society, as well as personal reflections on their own position in their surrounding. Although recognizing the importance of relating to the parliamentary structure and public institutions, the activists seem sceptical towards achieving human rights progress through that arena due to the large political and financial corruption. Instead, the result of this study highlights other strategies for exercising civic participation and defending human rights in Mexico, such as the creation and participation in autonomous, democratic structures within the civil society and social movements, as well as actions executed within informal relationships and spheres.

Keywords: Human Rights Education, Social Movements, Civic Participation, Mexico, Critical Pedagogy, Democracy
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

According to Amnesty International, the global trend suggests that defending human rights is becoming increasingly dangerous and difficult (2017, 2018c). Torture, murders, and unlawful disappearances as well as smear campaigns, criminalization, and surveillance of protesters and civil society organizations are examples of threats facing people standing up for human rights in a considerable amount of countries around the world. Even while risking severe repression, in the worst cases even death, people are continuing to express discontent and challenging those in power and responsible for violations (ibid.). Mexico is one country that has been infamous for the extensive violence and recurring human rights violations, not at least towards journalists and other human rights defenders. In 2006, the former Mexican president Felipe Calderón started the so-called “war on drugs,” thereby strengthening the role of the military and national security forces in combating the existence of drug cartels and narco-related violence (Amnesty International, 2018b; Faust, Harbers, Razu, & Thunert, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018). This has resulted counterproductive in the sense that it has only increased the amount of violence in a country that, in addition to being home for considerable quantities of organized crime, is also marked by significant inequality regarding social mobilization, distribution of means, and public safety (ibid.). The military and the public security forces have been accused for years of several human rights violations including enforced disappearances, unlawful killings, and torture (e.g. Amnesty International, 2018; Faust, Harbers, Razu, & Thunert, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018). Impunity and corruption are widespread issues in Mexico resulting in that most disappearances and abuses remain unsolved (ibid.). The corruption and influence executed by organized crime on elections and public officials are also described as threats to the legitimacy of the political system (Faust et al., 2017; Torres et al., 2013). There is a considerable discrepancy between what is dictated in juridical and policy documents and the real possibility to claim legal justice and social rights (ibid.) which leaves the accountability of rights dependent on power and financial assets. Simultaneously as the amount of human rights violations is increasing, Mexico’s political system is characterized with corruption, mistrust from the citizens and a ruling power that is more concerned with pleasing power groups within both the illegal and legal economical sector, than with tackling the many social problems that the population faces (Laurell, 2015; Torres-Ruiz, 2016). With a Gini-coefficient of 0.459 Mexico performs worst among the OECD-countries ("Inequality - OECD," n.d.). The general civic engagement – the political and social participation in society – is low, especially among the youth population (aged 15-29 according to the National Statistics Institute’s definition of youth) (INEGI, 2017; Vaquero Ochoa, Galván, & Morales Camarena, 2014). The latest National Inquiry of Political Culture and Citizen Practice (my translation) was realized in 2012 and showed that eight out of ten citizens view politics as something complicated or very complicated (SEGOB, 2012). The same percentage does also agree with the statement that the vote is their only tool to let the government know if it is doing well or badly (ibid.).

Thus, a great proportion of the Mexican population does not engage themselves neither within the
political system, nor in what could be described as civil society organisations or other sorts of social movements. This is a problematic fact considering the inherent paradox that national states are supposed to protect their citizens from human rights violations that may be executed by the state in itself, by action or by omission (e.g. Nash, 2011). Because of this paradox, it is evident that participation from other actors in addition to the state is needed for the actual realization of rights. The state of Mexico has until now not been unable stop the human rights violations but has in fact contributed to their existence. Although the main pattern is to not participate civicly to any great extent, there are young people that do take action in the Mexican society regarding the promotion and defence of human rights exists. This places them within the global group of activists dedicated to defending their own and others’ rights against violations, in defiance of the exposure to personal danger and corruption and impunity that makes the struggle for social change difficult. The human rights education (HRE) at the civil society organisation Centro de Derechos Humanos Fr. Francisco de Vitoria, based in Mexico City, is one such example that gathers young people. Research that focus on specific movements or self-organized groups such as indigenous communities, defending their rights against violations in Mexico, have been performed. Initiatives in the human rights area that are not linked to a specific struggle or a sudden protest movement is on the other hand a scarcely researched subject. This creates an incentive for focusing on young people that participates in society through human rights activism. Nash (2014), amongst others, also stresses that social movements studies should become more concerned with understanding how different movements use human rights to construct their grievances. Other scholars have likewise emphasized the importance of investigating how the discourse of human rights is constructed since that has implications on the work and advocacy that is being done in its name, which is discussed in the next chapter.

1.2 Problem statement

Globally, human rights defenders and organisations are facing threats towards their personal safety as well as repressive measures obstructing their struggle. In Mexico, the state not only failing to protect the population against human rights violations but is also actively involved in some of the violations. The Mexican legal system is marked by corruption and inefficiency, resulting in it being difficult for victims to claim justice by themselves. This calls for a strong civil society or popular response to the violations, holding the state responsible for violations and supporting marginalized groups and victims in their claim for justice. The fact that the population in general, and the young population in particular, does not show a high civic participation is alarming in a country with a large amount of social problems and unjust structures. Even so, there are young people engaging in human rights and civil society. If this sort of engagement is to be seen as an important contribution to the human rights struggle and positive for social development, it is of interest to examine how resistance and strategies for participation is carried out by activists within countries marked by corruption, mistrust in the governance and violent repression. How human rights is discussed, taught and shaped within movements is also a concern that may have implications on how the human rights defence is being carried out in practice. There is a knowledge gap regarding young people seeking to commit
themselves to the defence of human rights in Mexico. It is relevant to not only study their commitment but also how they construct their claims within the framework of human rights and develop strategies for resistance in countries marked by violence and poor democracy level.

1.3 Relevance for Social Work and the Social Work academic discipline

“The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development” is an initiative from the three main international organisations and associations concerning social work. They state that as global bodies, one vital concern is to achieve a global consensus regarding certain ideals and perspectives guiding social work and social workers. One of the major aspects that is mentioned is the protection and advocacy for human rights all around the world (“Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development,” 2014). The Mexican welfare system is characterized by low social, public spending and few universal benefits (Garcés Ferrer, Ródenas Rigla, & Vidal Figueroa, 2016). Since the end of the previous century the trend has been a development towards an increased privatization regarding public systems (ibid.). The context for the Mexican social work is consequently different from that of for example Sweden and the Nordic welfare state regime, which inter alia is marked by a high number of social workers publicly employed (Meeuwisse, Sunesson, & Swärd, 2006). Considering the Mexican context as to corruption, welfare system and the fact the state is responsible for many human rights violations, human rights advocacy is most probable foremost carried out by others than public officials employed by the authorities. Human rights advocacy is consequently one major concern for social workers worldwide and while researching this issue in the Mexican context is it relevant to focus on activists and other parts of civil society and social movements.

1.4 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to increase the knowledge regarding how young adults participate in human rights education and human rights activism within a society marked by a poor level of democracy and extensive corruption and violence. This will be done by examining the characterization of their commitment and their strategies for participating in the Mexican political context, how they view and discuss human rights and how this activity be understood as an act of civic participation. To accomplish this, three research questions are used for guidance:

- What characterize the commitment of young people between 20-30 years old in Mexico City to educate themselves regarding the defence of human rights and how do they reason about that experience?
- In this group of interest, how is human rights discussed and constructed?
- Which strategies can be used for enacting civic participation and human rights defence in societies marked by poor levels of democracy, and extensive corruption and violence?

2. Previous Research

In this chapter, previous research as well as definitions of principal terms and concepts are presented. Considering that the reader of this study may be unfamiliar with the Mexican context, which is knowledge that is valuable for understanding the analytical backdrop, country-specific research is given an elevated role in this presentation.

2.1 Social Movements and Civic Participation

The concept of civic participation can be interpreted in different ways depending on which aspect is being emphasized. A broad definition could be that it implicates actions where citizens are involved in matters related to the political and social development of society, ranging from voting or political party involvement to being part of social movements with an aim to achieve social change (Adler & Goggin, 2005; American Psychological Association, n.d.; Ballard, 2014; E. Banyan, n.d.). Other activities such as volunteering, community work or joining more “non-political” civil society organisations or associations can also be placed within the concept of civic participation (ibid.). Another way of phrasing it is to say that the conception of civic participation tries to capture different aspects of what it means to be active in the society, or in other words to exercise citizenship. Social movement is also a term that is used in a diverse way depending on the context and the theoretical point of view. Mario Diani’s, (p. 2,1992) description of the characteristics of social movements is the guiding definition in this essay: “It consists in a process whereby several different actors, be they individuals, informal groups and/or organisations, come to elaborate, through either joint action and/or communication, a shared definition of themselves as being part of the same side in a social conflict.”

Since the Mexican Revolution in the beginning of the 20th century, Mexican history has been marked by the existence of several social movements claiming social justice and change (Cortez Ruiz, 2010; Torres-Ruiz, 2016). Many of these movements that emerged during the last three decades have reacted towards the neo-liberal global order, fighting for the recognition and rights of minority groups and proposing other alternatives for the social structure of society (ibid.), similar to the characterization of social movements all over Latin America (Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, & Becker, 2014). The sometime self-declared social democratic party PRI governed the Mexican state during the most of the past century. They, like other Latin American countries following the example of Pinochet and Milton Friedman, contributed to a neo-liberal evolvement with a social policy that to great extent commodified what was previously part of the public welfare (Laurell, 2015). This, and other financial reforms and public policies such as free-trade agreements like NAFTA\(^2\), have resulted in a neo-liberal rule where the actual difference between the political parties are vague, since they all seem to promote similar politics and share the same electoralist\(^3\) characterization (Torres-Ruiz, 2016). Although it is apparent that there has been a considerable organisation of social movements, the vast

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2North American Free Trade Agreement, signed in year 1993
3Electoralism refers to regimes that upholds the democratic institutions related to free elections but do not respect or generate sufficient actions to provide other aspects of a functioning democracy, such as for example the rule of law.
majority of the population does not join collective forces or uses other acts of civic engagement to achieve social change (ibid.). Regarding youth civic engagement, Reimers (2010) states that research on North American youth participation shows a low involvement in public political institutions and parties but a greater engagement in grassroot organisations, whether in the case of Mexico the level of youth participation seems to be low in both cases. Mexican youth are also more likely to participate in such civic actions that involve volunteering, donating money or helping others within their community, rather than joining civil society organisations or political parties (Scharnagl Villarroel et al., 2016; Tapia Uribe, 2017).

The low civic engagement could be explained by the corruption affecting both electoral and legal system in Mexico, as well as a low trust in the political institutions together with insufficient political knowledge and disillusion against the possibility to achieve change (Reimers, 2010). The fact that political participation in Mexico historically has been low with the majority of the population not participating more than voting, is also a possible explanation to the poor civic culture in general (ibid.). Other scholars also emphasize the neo-liberal rule within Mexico, that in combination with a poor representative democratic system favours corporate interests and a centralization of power, resulting among other things in the repression of organisations or movements that challenges the current order of society (Laurell, 2015; Stahler-Sholk et al., 2014; Torres-Ruiz, 2016). In a paper published in 2014 Sandra Gutiérrez conclude that the increased violence in Mexico has had a negative effect on the political participation of voting in electoral processes. This is a pattern that is especially apparent on municipality level whilst the federal elections are not equally affected. Interestingly enough, she also concludes that direct victims of violence and crime are more likely to take other actions for participating politically, instead of voting. In a comparative study on civil society and peace building within thirteen countries, Thania Paffenholz (2009) comes to a similar conclusion. The spill-over of violence to other parts of everyday life can increase the engagement in human rights movements and other parts of civil society, although extensive violence also can suppress such organisations if making it to dangerous and difficult to continue their work (ibid.).

By looking at a number of protesters from different movements in Europe and North America centred around ideals of global justice and labour rights, Della Porta (2012) address the issue of low trust in democratic institutions amongst people that participates actively in social movements. The financial crisis in 2008 and the austerity policies that followed created a discontent and political mistrust that was manifested in ways that reflected the lack of trust in traditional, representative democracy constructed on liberal conceptions. Within these movements, Della Porta assess that the general low level of trust towards the democratic institutions does not imply that the protesters holds the opinion that their own actions are meaningless or that all democratic practices are insignificant. Instead, they posses what Della Porta calls a critical trust, they have a high trust in their own efficacy and seeks to evolve and apply new ways of participatory democratic strategies. In contrast to the electoral system and political parties that according to the protesters have a close and corrupt relation to the financial market, which became specially evident looking at the policies leading up to the financial crisis as well as the interventions designed to face the crisis. These social movements challenge the concept of the representative democracy since they do not see
themselves as represented in government. Instead, they seek new deliberative democratic strategies, such as proposing that issues are to be discussed and solved by those affected and in public spheres, instead of addressed from above with great consideration to market interests (ibid.).

### 2.2 Human Rights Discourse, Critical Pedagogy and Social Work

In an article from 2016, Jim Ife and Sandra Magdalena Tascón describe human rights as a “two-edged sword” that can limit or reinforce progressive critical social work, depending on how you view and use human rights. The debate on whether one should view human rights a progressive tool for achieving social change or a discourse that co-opts rights claims within a liberal, juridical and western framework is diverse and extensive, making it hard to fully capture within this limited space. I will here outlay some of the critical voices that acknowledge the possible limitations related to the human rights discourse without, for that matter, dismiss the conception of using human rights to create social change.

Common critiques regarding the dominating human rights discourse is that it is constructed within a liberal hegemony, failing to recognize other (more conflict-based) aspects related to social structures, as well as means for social change outside the law (e.g.: Coysh, 2014; Douzinas, 2013; Ife & Tascon, 2016; Odysseos, 2015). Along with that perspective follows the postcolonial critique that human rights is a conception based on occidental, patriarchal views that are “pushed upon” developing countries/the global south (Osler, 2015; Spivak, 2004; Zembylas, 2017). Coysh (2014) points out the fact that the view on human rights as a universal concept primarily connected to the international conventions are just one interpretation and that we therefore need to understand how the ruling discourse is shaped. Focusing on the education of human rights, Coysh furthermore argue for a critical and more radical perspective where human rights are seen as struggles and can be made relevant by placing them within local context and linked to personal experiences, rather than an uncritical focus on the conventions and articles (ibid.). Zembylas proposes a similar approach and states the need of a “de-colonization” of human rights education by adapting a critical perspective on the dominant world of ideas that permeates human rights. Both advocates for a use of critical pedagogy (also called popular education), a tradition that draws back to the Brazilian professor Paulo Freire who elaborated his ideas in the book “Pedagogy of the oppressed” published in 1968. The main characteristics of critical pedagogy is to view education not as a non-politic, neutral act but instead as an instrument that can and should be used to emancipate oppressed groups (Freire, 2000). This is done by increasing the critical consciousnesses among the students/participants regarding oppression and dominating social structures that surround them. Another central aspect is the critical viewpoint towards how knowledge generally is produced. One should seek to reject a top-down approach on certain given and hegemonic truths and instead encourage personal experiences and use a horizontal learning structure. Within this tradition there is also a clear stroke of opposition against neo-liberal and hierarchical society structures and instead critical pedagogy advocates for justice from below (ibid.). This school of thought have been influential on social work and social movements within Latin America (e.g.: Jones & Torres, 2010; Magendzo, 2005).

Canlas, Argenal, and Bajaj (2015) do also agree on the usefulness regarding critical pedagogy within
human rights teaching. They argue that the language of human rights can be used by marginalized and oppressed groups to create a common point of departure in their struggle, thereby having an important role in how groups can describe and formulate claims to improve their situation and address inequalities and violations. By contextualizing human rights language locally it becomes relevant within the smaller community, as well as it simultaneously can be used as a bridge for groups that are fighting similar – but different – struggles across borders all over the world. This is possible when teaching with a critical perspective that relates human rights to social structures and struggles, both locally and globally (ibid.).

Regarding the possibility to use a human rights framework within critical social work, Ife and Tascón stresses the need for a construction of the rights that starts from the “human” and what they need for a decent life, rather than being a universalistic set of international conventions and declarations. By doing so one recognize that human dignity is complex and to some extent culturally specific and it generates possibilities for social workers to in conjunction with communities explore which rights and issues that are most pressing in their life and context (ibid.).

The shift from discussing rights on accord of national citizenship to human rights which applies to all humans has been discussed and observed by a number of scholars. Globalization and international migration are phenomena undermining the logic of social rights as well as civic ones connected to national citizenship, this since national states are also home for many non-citizens (Benhabib, 2007). Thereby making it not only logical but also just to increase the importance of human rights on behalf of citizenship rights (ibid.). Human rights have enjoyed an elevated legal recognition through the incorporation in national legislation in many countries (Nash, 2009). Although a general argument for applying human rights law in national settings is to reduce the difference of the social and civil status of citizens and non-citizens, there are doubts regarding whether this has really been the case (ibid.). Expanding rights to non-citizens has not been done to any great extent and there is a tendency that human rights legislation neglects social rights and issues of social structures while instead focusing on different sorts of political and civil rights (Basok, Ilcan, & Noonan, 2006; Nash, 2009). In Mexico the international human rights conventions are not only ratified but human rights are also incorporated within the national constitution, in addition to being mentioned in international treaties and other national legislation (Ortega García, 2014). Given the state of the Mexican legal system that is described in the introduction, there is doubt that these rights are claimable even when regulated in legislation, as to other sorts of social rights.
3. Theoretical perspectives

In this chapter will the theoretical perspectives used to understand the collected material be described.

3.1 New social movement theory

New Social Movement Theory (NSMT) is a sociological theoretical perspective within the field of social movement studies. It mainly developed during the late 1980’s to understand and analyse what was considered as the emergence from the 1960’s and forth of new social movements that differed from traditional movements foremost shaped around class based conflicts (Buechler, 1995; Giddens & Sutton, 2013). Social movements from a strict Marxist perspective had mainly been explained as centred around economic production and the distribution of means. An analytical perspective that failed to address and discuss movements that were constructing their claims not in terms of class relations but rather other sorts of values or oppressions (ibid.). Buechler (1995, 2013) asserts that it is better to speak about a range of different theories within the concept of NSMT. Although different theorists (some prominent names within this school of thought is Jurgen Habermas, Alain Touraine, Alberto Melucci and Manuel Castells) put emphasis on certain aspects of these new movements and uses different terms to label similar concepts, several common traits can be distinguished. One fundamental assumption is that changes in the societal structure and setting creates a breeding ground for the origin of new forms of collective action that is not only centred around economic production and class conflicts. New social movements arise within the post-industrial or advanced capitalistic society which is marked by an increased bureaucratization, new media dominance and new forms of social control, some scholars do also place the theory within the postmodern tradition (Buechler, 1995; Johnston, Laranja, & Gusfield, 1994; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). A commodified culture and a rational instrumentality that governs how the state and the capitalistic market view and interfere in personal relations and other aspects of people’s private sphere creates a different kind of response from social movements. This in contrast to the earlier, more “classic” demand of a redistribution of political power and resources. Instead, the normative, cultural hegemony is the main target. Many of these new movements gathers around the creation of identities and lifestyles that challenge this normativity (ibid.). The aspect of focusing on culture have made NSM to be criticized for being “apolitical” but if the cultural hegemony is to be seen as an expression of power, the creation of alternative cultural expressions and structures for organizing social relationships is a form of resistance, according to the perspective of NSMT (Buechler, 2013).

The members of NSMs are diverse as to class background and they construct their claims within political struggles related to identities such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other cultural expressions (Buechler, 2013; Giddens & Sutton, 2013b; Johnston et al., 1994). The NSMs could also be concentrated on a specific struggle such as climate change, nuclear power, gentrification or related to human rights or other civil rights issues. NSM are shaped both by groups of people experiencing oppression and injustice related to their identity and/or social status but there are also movements that are more concerned with fighting for specific values or causes, such as middle class movements opposing environmental pollution (ibid.).
character of the relation between the individual and the collective is another common trait of NSMs (Johnston et al., 1994). Whereas the working class movement performed it’s actions mainly collectively, participants within NSM does in greater extension also fight their struggles or enact their identity (which in itself is to be seen as resisting or challenging the prevailing power structure) in the private sphere, as individuals. Queer movements and women’s movements are examples of this phenomena where the private and the public are hard to distinguish from one another (ibid.). Other characterizations of NSMs are that they tend to have a decentralized organisational form, in some NSMs does this manifests itself in the creation of free spaces and a resistance that is more linked to everyday life and local initiatives than to macro or state level actions (Buechler, 2013; Giddens & Sutton, 2013). This strive for autonomy and the creation of alternative organisational and participatory forms can be seen in the light of the credibility crisis surrounding the (western) democratic systems and its traditional structure of participation, for example does many NSMs distance themselves from big traditional political parties (Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

One critical objection towards NSMT is whether the aspects that are said to be “new” in fact are new (Pichardo, 1997). The presence of the middle class within these movements are one such thing that could be nuanced by looking historically at similar struggles in the past, likewise the emphasises on claims constructed in relation to identities. Critique have also been aimed at NSMT for neglecting social class and economic production as bases for social movements. One example regarding the Latin American context is Henry Veltmeyer (1997) who states that NSMT have been applied in far to great extent on Latin American social movements in general and with reference to the Zapatista uprising in specific. He argues for that this approach ignores the class aspect of the anti-neoliberal peasant movements and that NSMT therefore is not a helpful analytical tool for examining these objects. This is certainly an important objection. Since no pattern could be distinguished of class as a common or crucial factor characterizing the commitment of the participants in this study, hopefully this objection should not imply too much of an issue for using NSMT within this study. As with the development of many other sociological theories is the evolvement of NSMT principally made on the backdrop of of a western context. The term post-industrial society is in some way misleading when discussing Mexico since there are many parts of the country with “traditional”, rural communities, far from being post-industrial. Nonetheless can Mexico definitely be said to be a country characterised by the existence of an advanced capitalism. This, combined with the fact that substantial different traits characterizing NSMs appeared during the data collection and analysis, supports the usefulness of NSMT as an analytical tool for understanding the empirical data.

3.2 Activist Citizen
The theory of the “Activist Citizen” is developed by Engin Isin (2009) who stated the need for a new citizenship vocabulary that captures contemporary struggles and claims carried out by individuals and movements in a globalized society. He sets out from the traditional concept of the “active citizen”, criticizing it for merely describing a conduct of citizenship actions that already follows a predetermined notion of what citizenship implicates. Isin objects to the idea that citizenship is a set of rights and responsibilities being
given to an individual as a result of a membership in a certain state. Instead he proposes an alternative way of studying citizenship through the acts and struggles that challenges the given structure of society, a concept he calls activist citizenship. By looking at societies all over the world we can see that people are resisting and challenging social structures in a number of ways that involves rights claims that go beyond the law or the instituted conception of citizenship. Activist citizenship is not a fixed identity connected to the membership in a state, but the opposite: citizenship is performed when seeking to break status quo while claiming social justice. The term “acts” is important within Isin’s theoretical framework, where the acts of the active citizen follows already shaped institutions as voting, joining a political party or enlisting in the army, the acts of the activist citizen generates a change by breaking established conceptions and categories. It is by claiming rights (for oneself or in solidarity with others) through acts on different scales and sites that the subject (actor) becomes an “activist citizen”, thereby expanding and pushing limits regarding who has the right to claim what, where. Undocumented migrants in France illustrates this new conception of the activist citizen when claiming their right to recognition and to stay in the country and thereby challenging the construction regarding who has the right to claim rights within the nation of France. They assume the right to claim rights within the political context, thereby enacting citizenship. The theory of the activist citizen is a helpful analytic tool when studying how young people in Mexico participates to seek social change through other sorts of engagement that goes beyond participating.
4. Methodology and Material

This chapter will focus on the methodology used in the study and how the research was carried out in practice. The trustworthiness is discussed in the final section but other aspects of methodological considerations and discussions are placed under the headline that best correspond with the subject.

4.1 Methodological approach

This study is carried out with a qualitative, inductive and exploratory approach. The data collection is made through semi-structured interviews and an analysis based on grounded theory. Even if the categories may sometimes intersect, some characteristics of a qualitative study compared to a quantitative one is its interpretive nature and that it is most commonly (although not always) used together with an inductive approach, hence not driven by already existing theory (Bryman, 2012). The approach is inductive in the sense that I do not test the liability of a hypothesis or a theory but rather derive theoretical conclusions from the collected material. Neuman (2014) describes that an exploratory focus is suitable when researching something that is not that well investigated, this to be able to generate more specific research questions in the future. Consequently, the questions within an exploratory study are mostly concerned with understanding “what” a phenomena or a social activity is (ibid.). Hence, the purpose is to better grasp a social phenomena that is scarcely explored, rather than answering questions derived from previous knowledge and theoretical framework. This description corresponds well the aim of this study.

Grounded theory is a method where the researcher derive theory from collected data and it has an interpretive nature not only while analysing data but there is a constant interaction between the gathering of data and the analysis (Bryman, 2012). One key element is that insights and reflections that come from observations or interviews should be allowed to guide the continued data collection. Grounded theory can both be used as an analytical tool and serve as a more comprehensive research method (ibid), in this study is it mainly used in the process of interpretation and analysing the data. One of the advantages of using grounded theory as the main analytical framework in this study is that it is suitable to combine with an exploratory approach, since the researcher can start out with a very open question that during the data collection can be more and more focused as a result of what the gathered data reflects (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2014). In this study, the original focus was directed towards factors regarding civic participation and activism within social movements. While performing the interviews and the data analysis, a greater interest emerged regarding how the respondents spoke about the concept of human rights in relation to their activism and views on themselves and the society. This resulted in an increased focus on those elements of the study and an adjustment of the research questions in order to also cover that area. One objection regarding the application and full usage of grounded theory in this study is due to the practical circumstances surrounding the fact that the field study was realized abroad and during a very limited time frame. Ideally, the data collection should have been revised and extended with additional interviews when new themes emerged, which was not possible. Because of this, it is reasonable to say that grounded theory foremost is
used as an analytical tool since the continued data collection was not altered on the basis of the analytical findings.

4.2 Research Design
The design of this research is a case study. According to Neuman (2014) one of the advantages of using a case study framework is that it allows us to link patterns and characterizations on a micro level with macro level structures and surroundings. In other words, by examining a case, which could be anything from a geographical area to organisations or individuals, we can generate knowledge that can be used to understand and provoke more research on a certain area. In this study the case is the human rights education of La Escuelita and more specifically the young people undertaking it. The topic of human rights activism and civic participation could also be approached in other ways, such as creating a sample of human rights activists participating in different movements or organisations. To create a more in-depth understanding on how the specific human rights education and meeting place of La Escuelita can be seen in relation to civic participation, the choice was made to apply a case study approach. Additional techniques for collecting data could have improved the study and contributed to answer the research questions. Observations and text analysis are examples of such potential additions. Both participatory observations and a revising of internal planificiations was made, but the final decision was to not include these in the presented result. Regarding the observations was one important factor for not including these that they were made early on in the process, when the purpose and the research questions of this study were not elaborated. This fact made the observations more of a background research than a systematic collection of data. This theme is further discussed under the headline “Ethical considerations”. To expand the sample and thereby the collected material was an online survey made and sent to all students participating in the current generation of La Escuelita. This with the hope to gain more perspectives in addition to the interviews. Due to an insufficient number of replies, this method of data collection was insufficient, which is why it is not included in the study.

4.3 Centro Vitoria and La Escuelita
I have chosen to focus my research to a sample of young people who all share the experience of undertaking the same human rights defender’s formation, executed by the civil society organisation Centro de Derechos Humanos Fr. Francisco de Vitoria (from now called “La Vitoria”), based in Mexico City. This after being invited to the organisation and then taking an interest in their activities in general and La Escuelita in particular. La Vitoria has been working for the promotion and defence of human rights in Mexico and Central America since 1984. They describe themselves as having a critical and comprehensive posture against human rights, working with both political advocacy, research projects and publications on the current situation on human rights in Mexico, juridical response to violations and other types of campaigning and
collective struggles within networks of the civil society. Accompanying and supporting people and movements that are fighting against human rights violations is one of La Vitoria’s missions. One of their projects relating to that mission is the “School for Youth Human Rights Defenders” (called “La Escuelita”), an eight month long formation that La Vitoria provides for young people between 18 and 29 years old. Using critical pedagogy and a critical position viewing human rights as being constructed from below, La Escuelita has provided a space for hundreds of young people – engaged or not already engaged within social movements – to meet and learn more about human rights and how to defend them, since the creation of the project 16 years ago. One of the purposes of La Escuelita’s existence is to provide a space for the strengthening of networks between the participants as well as with other actors within social movements and civil society. A guiding perspective is that the human rights struggle has to be performed collectivity, not at least considering the repressive situation for human rights defenders in contemporary Mexico. The classes are being held every Saturday, undertaking the formation is consequently not something you do as a full-time commitment. One so called “generation” of La Escuelita consists of 40-50 participants and there are more people applying to the formation then there is space, which is why there is an application process before entering. Among the participants the vast majority are female and university students or do already possess a university degree. Many of them also have a background within “collectives” (“Colectivos” in Spanish) or other kinds of civil society organisations or voluntary work.

La Vitoria’s own description on how they define human rights (which is also presented during one of the sessions in La Escuelita that I attended) is in my translation: “A collection of life conditions that are essential for strengthening human kind in a comprehensive way. The human rights legal and ethical recognition are results of struggle and social conquests realized by groups and communities that in the past, as well as today, struggles to reach freedom, equality and human dignity”⁴. In addition to this, they emphasize the importance of understanding processes of social oppression. Besides revising publications, planifications and internal notes from the sessions in La Escuelita I have also taken part of two full day sessions, in order to more fully grasp their pedagogy and how they use the human rights framework. In short, the education within La Escuelita is not focused on learning the declarations, other actors within the civil society are often present during the sessions by representing and educating regarding specific topics. The participants own experiences and opinions are encouraged, not only in regard to the different topics but feelings and thoughts connected to the sessions themselves and the learning experience. During the two sessions I attended this was evident since a great amount of the time was spent on group discussions with active participation from the group, in addition to more fact-based presentations. To the extent that is possible to distinguish from participating in two sessions, critical pedagogy seemed to be present in the way of teaching as well as the theory in itself is discussed and explained. Some sessions during the formation focus on how to plan projects or the procedure of formulating reports on human rights violations, whilst other sessions are less practical

⁴Original text in spanish: “Conjunto de condiciones de vida indispensables para potenciar de manera integral al ser humano, cuyo reconocimiento jurídico y ético es resultado de procesos de lucha y de conquistas sociales que los pueblos y grupos, histórica y continuamente llevan a cabo a fin de lograr la libertad, igualdad, equidad y dignidad humana”
and invites to reflections on power dynamics and theoretical perspectives on how human rights and other social structures are being shaped. A feminist and anti-capitalistic perspective is also present within the education and the organisation. The human rights education that is performed within La Escuelita is accordingly similar to the opinions from scholars that are described in the previous chapter regarding a transformative take on human rights and its education. One of the main reasons for choosing the students from La Escuelita as my sample is that they are not part of a specific movement or self-organized group but joint by the fact that they want to know more about human rights and how to practice their defence.

4.4 Sample of respondents and literature

A purposive sample technique is helpful when the goal is not to create a random sample that allows one to generalize the findings to the whole population, but rather to create a strategic sample that reflects the research questions (Bryman, 2012). The choice of case in this study is a purposive one while the final choice of respondents was partly selected through a snowball sampling. Bryman categorizes snowball sampling as one of different purposive sample techniques. Snowball sampling is created from a small group of respondents relevant to the research that links the researcher to additional respondents with similar aspects. Three of the respondents was gathered through other respondents, which in their turn where the result of visits and contacts with La Vitoria and the sessions of La Escuelita. Due to time limits and other practical circumstances, the choice of respondents had to be made partly on the basis of who was able to participate in the study. The intention was to find respondents that did not all belonged to the same generation of the formation, to further broaden the perspective. Another intention was to create a diverse group of people regarding prior involvement in human rights defence and social movement before undertaking the formation.

Seven respondents aged 23-30 years old were interviewed, all of them had some kind of academic background in social science. Regarding engagement in social movements or activism they had shifting backgrounds. At the time for the interviews, all of them had been involved in projects or social work with communities affected by human rights violations, four of them during specific periods while three of them had what could be considered as a more consistent activism. Two of them had been collaborating more closely with La Escuelita after finishing the formation, these two respondents also had a more in-depth academic and practical knowledge regarding critical pedagogy. The sample can be criticized for being too small, which is a reasonable objection towards the trustworthiness of the study, the conclusions must therefore be seen in this light and weighed against the size of the population.

The literature review was conducted by using a number of different data bases, such as Sage Journals, Oxford Journals, Taylor and Francis, Springer Journals, Academic complete and Google Scholar. Regarding research in Spanish from Latin America, the data base SciELO was the primarily data base. A number of different searches was made with a combination of terms such as: social movements, civic participation, youth participation, Latin America, human rights education, human rights discourse, social work, Mexico, critical pedagogy, and activism.
4.5 Data collection and analysis

Seven semi-structured interviews were carried out, taped and later on transcribed. All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, the quotes that are presented are translated to English. Compared to a quantitative, structured interview the qualitative, semi-structured interview creates the possibility to concentrate on the respondents’ perspective and adjust the questions depending on what is brought up (Bryman, 2012). In this sense, it differs from a more structured interview with the aim to get reliable data on a predetermined set of questions. A semi-structured interview guide with several themes was used, how these themes were discussed and in which order differed depending on the interview. Due to the exploratory approach, the aim was to be flexible and capture what the respondents viewed as important and relevant in relation to their engagement.

While coding in grounded theory, the categories are not fixed but instead reshaped during the process (Bryman, 2012). The procedure of identifying patterns and interesting concepts and turning them into codes is part of the analytic process since you thereby interpret the material (ibid.). Thus, the presentation of the result later on is not to be viewed as an objective demonstration on the material but rather as the first step of the data analysis. Once the transcriptions were done, the material was approached by making notes on preliminary categories that were used as codes for structuring the material. At first, there where a number of different codes which were later on both renamed and merged concurrently while becoming more and more familiar with the data. As the transcriptions were in Spanish and the result was to be published in English the exercise of translating quotes and other key terms was also an important element of interpreting the material. The process of translating contributed to a deeper understanding of what the respondents communicated. All of the material was coded into categories such as “views on personal safety” or “Personal process related to human rights education”, although the final results did not include all of the categories, such as the previous example of safety issues which was one of the areas not presented. The sample was made on basis of which parts of the material that corresponded to my research questions, but new patterns and concepts did also emerge during the analysis. The analytical frame work of NSMT was introduced after the first step in coding the material while looking for theoretical perspectives that could explain this sort of participation and social movement. The theory of activist citizenship was initially incorporated in the research but later on removed. At the time of the coding and analysis of the collected data, this theory was not part of the analytical framework but instead reintroduced later on in the process after new considerations.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Gillan & Pickerill outlay in an article from 2012 a discussion of how to reason about research ethics while approaching social movements. They distinguish some elements of studying social movements (or other similar social phenomena) as being far to complex to only use what they label as a “check book approach” on ethics. For example, they oppose to the conception that a consent form is sufficient for securing consent. Instead, the researcher have to be attentive throughout the whole research process regarding possible power dynamics and sensitive issues related to social structures and identities that can be of importance while
studying social movements. The respondents in this study were all university students who many of them had
own experiences of social research and they were not part of a particularly vulnerable group. This
contributed to making the interview situation less unbalanced in terms of power. Even so, they were not
asked any direct questions regarding potentially sensitive experiences if they did not approach those subjects
by themselves. This due to the fact that they had not got any prior information on that the interview would
focus on such issues. The importance of identifying participants’ risk for potential repercussions when
studying social movements is also underlined by Gillan and Pickerill. Since this study is not focused on a
specific and controversial social conflict with distinct opponents and actors, the risk of facing repressions for
speaking about the human rights situation in general in Mexico is very marginal.

The Swedish Research Council (2017) describes several guiding principles for an ethical research, among
others to not cause any harm, be truthful about the research and openly account for methods and potential
conflicting interests. As described above, the intention was to avoid causing any harm to the participants
within this study. The same can be said regarding the truthfulness about the research and the methodological
realization, neither are there any conflicting interest to report. Providing anonymity is also stressed by the
council (ibid.). All respondents are given made up names to protect their anonymity. Regarding those who
expressed no wish to be anonymous, other details in their stories which could potentially identify them was
not changed, while in other cases minor details were modified. Confidentiality concerns the obligation to not
pass on further information given in confidence and to guarantee that this information is kept safely (ibid.).
The transcribes and records have been kept safely during the process and do also go under made up names,
which is mentioned by Bryman (2012) as important to securing data safely. Another theme mentioned by
Bryman is that of an informed consent, which means that there should be no uncertainty as to what the
purpose of the research is and how the data will be used. Information that the participation is voluntary and
possible to withdraw at any point were given to all of the respondents. When visiting and taking part of the
two sessions in La Escuelita, everyone present at the time were given information about the purpose of the
study. Individual consent was however not gained why the observations from those two occasions are not
presented as part of the result but instead serve as a background and context for the “real” data collection.

4.7 Trustworthiness
One way of creating relevant equivalences for the terms liability and reliability within qualitative studies is
to instead consider the trustworthiness of the study (Bryman, 2012). To ensure that trustworthiness is
accomplished there are four criteria that needs to be considered. The credibility of the study means that the
result presented represents a credible image of the data. One way of assuring this is to show a transparent and
detailed description of how the research was performed (ibid.), the intention have been to do so as
pedagogically as possible. Respondent validation is another way of assuring credibility, to make sure that the
result aligns with the respondents own statements (ibid.). Only one respondent wanted to approve of her
quotes, which none of the rest did which would have helped the credibility. To improve the credibility,
clarifications was asked when needed during the interviews. During the translations, several different
dictionaries and sample sentences were used to assure that the translation was accurate within the specific context. External help with overseeing the translations was also given. *Transferability* within qualitative research can be difficult to achieve due to the character of rather seeking in-depth knowledge on one phenomena than creating a wide enough sample. Thick descriptions of the research can however increase the transferability by providing sufficient details for the reader to estimate whether the findings can be transferred to a certain area or not (ibid.). A detailed picture of both the context of La Escuelita but also the extended, Mexican context was made to facilitate the transferability of this study. *Dependability* implies that the findings are consistent and accurate, and that the chosen method have been executed correctly during the whole research process (ibid.). As with the concept of *Confirmability*, which means that the researcher as far as possible is objective and acts in good faith, the idea is that an external researcher would come to more or less the same conclusions if revising the material (ibid.). To assure this, the aim has been to be as consistent as possible regarding the methodological approach and explain the research process carefully to enable the reader to grasp and judge the consistency of the study. The result presentation does in itself constitute a part of an analysis, making it impossible for the reader to exam the parts not presented as to whether the presentation of the result is accurate in relation to the purpose. An external audit of peers revising the material throughout all the stages of the process is a technique for ensuring that these last two criteria are being respected (ibid.). This technique was not performed, mainly due to the fact that it is time consuming not only for the researcher but for potential peers as well, which is unfortunate since it would have elevated the level of dependability and confirmability of this study.
5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Results

The presentation of the result is divided into two main categories corresponding to the two first research questions, whereas the third question is discussed in the analysis and in the final conclusions against the backdrop of the composed data that is presented. This division is made to facilitate the reading and to achieve a pedagogical link between the research questions and the final conclusions, thereby making it as easy as possible to follow the analytical process. The categories do however to some extent intersect and the analysis presented later on aspires to be comprehensive and take the different aspects of the material into account and thereby answer the research questions partly against the composed result presented here and not only one category. The general distinction is that the aspects mainly concerning practical issues related to civic participation and human rights advocacy and activism is presented in the first category whereas issues related to the human rights discourse and definition is placed under the second.

5.1.1 Committent, views and experiences on civic participation in relation to human rights in Mexico and the human rights education of La Escuelita

This category is principally related to the first research question: What characterizes the commitment of young people between 20-30 years in Mexico City to educate themselves regarding the defence of human rights and how do they reason about that experience? The ambition has been to gather the most interesting and distinguished patterns regarding the character of their commitment as to why and where they have chosen to participate in society. Discussions on the experience of taking part of La Escuelita is also presented here, although the part of their experiences that is foremost related to the human rights education is placed under the next category.

Academic and activist experiences

All respondents mentioned how knowledge gained through their university education triggered a desire to learn more about human rights or to engage themselves in social struggles and projects related to the defence of rights and achieving social change. Véronica and Juan – both sociologists with little prior experience of activist and/or social work – described that during their studies they obtained perspectives on social movements and social issues in contemporary Mexico and they wanted to merge this awareness with a greater insight on how to tackle violations and problems with a human rights approach. Juan states while talking about his degree in sociology:

Because of this emerged the need to develop the knowledge that I already had gained from literature and research. During my studies we talked about social movements and struggles or collective groups but I didn’t know how to tackle these issues from a human rights perspective. - Juan

He continues by answering affirmatively on the question whether he wanted a more practically-based knowledge about how to tackle social issues. Alicia is the only respondent that at the time of the interview
was still in La Escuelita, hence part of the current generation. She describes that specific professors teaching at her institution played a big part in inspiring her to become interested in learning more about human rights. Maria, a social pedagogue, also mentions how one of her professors talked about issues regarding political agency and participation which influenced Maria in taking an interest in such issues. Daniel is a social psychologist who wrote his thesis on critical pedagogy after being more familiar with the concept in la Escuelita. After taking the formation he went on assisting in the education of the next generation. He expresses his position at the time before entering la Escuelita accordingly:

My experiences were from the academic sector where we studied concepts based on social psychology and sociology. At the time I was very initiated in understanding and using tools derived from social science, to primarily understand and secondly design interventions, but that was a distant, academic approach. - Daniel

For the respondents who had the most prior experience of activism before entering La Escuelita (Gerardo, Daniel, Andrés and Maria), knowledge gained through their studies led them to start engaging within social movements or civil society organisations. This practical engagement did later on create a need for more knowledge related to human rights, which made them apply to La Escuelita. To exemplify, Andrés who became involved in a small activist group working for the rights of LGBT-migrants, after approaching the subject within an academic project. He decided to enter La Escuelita mainly to increase his knowledge on how to use human rights language in relation to big organisations that handed out funds. He felt that he and his companions lacked knowledge regarding how to communicate with the institutions within the human rights sphere, which they needed to be able to expand their work to a more comprehensive and long-term commitment that went beyond temporary support with food or other supplies.

What we didn’t know was how to dialogue with them, or place us in the same dialogue and concepts. My partner lacked academic experience and I as a sociologist had never worked with human rights. Therefore we didn’t know how to empower our discussion. - Andrés

For a majority of the respondents it was a combination of knowledge derived from studies and practical activism or volunteering that made them apply to La Escuelita. Gerardo, a social work student, had prior experience of community work through assisting different sorts of workshops and activities during his social work studies that made him continue on with similar projects on his own. Although having an academic perspective on social problems he felt that his activism was lacking a “foundation”, which made him interested in learning more about human rights. He puts this change accordingly:

The activism I was doing at the time appeared to not have a foundation. What I now view as human rights was to me before actions that needed to be done. There wasn’t an imperative of human dignity but more what you could call something existential, like looking at the reality and wanting to do something. When entering La Escuelita you realize that all this violence directed towards vulnerable groups is not something only related to the present but a historical issue and you realize that the recognition of rights is fundamental. - Gerardo

5 “Them” refers in this case to UNHCR, International organisation for Migration, UN Women.
Perceiving human rights violations and identifying victims in Mexico of today

Living in a society affected by violence and other violations is something that impact all of the respondents’ decision to engage themselves in human rights education. They discuss how perceiving inequality, deprivation and violence made them to seek human rights education to understand and do something about the current state. Both when discussing the decision to enter La Escuelita but also human rights defence through other sorts of engagements, the inequalities in Mexico are a significant component that made them want to engage more. Veronica expresses:

I chose to learn more because in your everyday life you see a ton of injustices and you have a lot of questions about this and you ask yourself, what do I do to change this? Long ago we went to Pueblo Nuevo to give a workshop to kids living there. The living conditions there are marked by poverty and you ask yourself: why do some people have more and other less? - Veronica

Andrés states that he has put a lot of time, energy and money in his activism and that he probably wouldn’t have done it if not living in Mexico:

I don’t think that it would have been the same if I for example would have lived in USA, Canada or France. I think that the Mexican circumstances regarding the widespread violence and the fact that the governmental politicians is not doing anything activated me. Putting the military on the street is the only thing they have done and it only produced more violence. As in the case of Martín where the criminal groups – being drug dealers or not – faced a total impunity. […] How can you assert human dignity in such a critic setting, without waiting for the government to solve things. - Andrés

Four of the respondents relate their engagement to the stories of their families and several of them points out that their relatives were or are victims of deprivation and other violations. The female respondents did also express in different ways that being a woman implicates gender specific oppression and threats of violence, which for example affects how they move in public places. None of the respondents describe their engagement for human rights as mainly related to a personal struggle where they are the primary victim or subject fighting for better life conditions or against specific violations. While discussing the act of defending human rights they all mention activities that involve elements of advocacy and support to other groups or individuals. The perspective of identifying victims of human rights violations primarily in others than themselves is expressed by Veronica in the quote below. She distinguishes between those who becomes human rights defenders because they have to while others gain that “title” from a course, which she did through the formation in La Escuelita.

Sometimes other people with no level of university education becomes human rights defenders without any title but instead because of necessity, because they are victims, because that their daughter has disappeared, because they killed their daughter as in the case of XX. They become human rights defenders not by taking a course or receiving a certificate but because of the needs in their context. - Veronica

6 Pueblo Nuevo is a municipality within the federal state Durango in Mexico
7 A fictional name for Andrés activist-colleague who was murdered for his work with aiding LGBT-migrants in a transit area, which upset local groups benefiting on the vulnerability of the migrants passing through.
Veronica does later on express vividly her admiration of the extensive human rights activism performed by several of the employees at La Vitoria as well as many of her peers from her time there, showing that she does not view the activism performed within and around La Vitoria and La Escuelita as non important.

Although not being especially exposed for human rights violations, the respondents express in different ways how the general violence and human rights violations in Mexico affect the whole society and therefore almost everyone who lives within it, including themselves. The two quotes below illustrates this perception and does also show how the respondents view discrimination and abusive behaviour in inter-personal relations as human rights violations whether they are to be find in closed communities or public spaces:

A lot of the young people that undertakes the education in La Escuelita do this because we have suffered some sort of discrimination in our life, we have been those people whose rights have been violated. It could be because of gender violence, racial discrimination or sexual orientation and this makes us find shared places where you feel that you can have a certain identity. /…/ I think that suffering from violence shouldn’t be a condition for participating/engaging but the reality is that in Mexico most of us have experienced this in school or in our families. - Gerardo

I consider that in my country it is very hard to never have been a victim of a transgression of your rights. It is something that is practically a part of your everyday life, from the moment that you step on to the metro to your relations with your family, in all those small spaces this problematic issue is present. - Alicia

The conception that human rights permeates all sorts of context of life and thereby can be transgressed accordingly is a general pattern characterizing all the material. To view violence, corruption, impunity and repression as structural issues that affect people even when they are not a direct victim is also a common expression. As when Maria explains that the disappearance of the 43 students in Ayotzinapa was an important moment for her engagement and something that truly affected her without her or anyone close to her being direct victim:

Then I really questioned how they could kill students just for being students /…/ The Ayotzinapa protest was the first time that I went protesting completely convinced, outraged and thinking that I could do something. I felt truly discontent with the government. - Maria

Maria also describes how a semester abroad in Denmark made her realize that there are places in the world where you can feel safe and dress like you want without worrying. She expresses that she had to leave her country to really understand the extent of the violence in Mexico.

Limitations, possibilities and obstacles surrounding different forms of civic participation in Mexico when promoting and defending human rights

The respondents had different levels of prior social engagement before entering La Escuelita, as well as at the time for the interviews. In addition to taking part in La Escuelita and activities linked to La Vitoria they
have all participated in civil society organisations or so called “colectivos”. The literal translation is “group” or “collective” but it is in this context best described as small activist or support groups that have a less hierarchical and rigid organisational structure compared to more institutionalized NGO:s. Activities such as joining demonstrations or engaging in different kinds of online-activism is also mentioned during the interviews. While discussing other ways of working to promote and defending human rights in Mexico, all of the respondents express doubts towards the possibility to achieve a positive change while working within the political party system or other public institutions. Gerardo, however, was the only respondent who clearly stated that there is no purpose at all in entering or trying to impact the political system or governmental institutions at this moment, if the aim is to transform the society:

For me, it is not a viable option. What is understood as the Mexican political system is in practice partisan and those that are in power and able to make decisions do not have a perspective of justice. Therefore, generating bonds that capture people’s demands and create a transformation, I think that has to be related to the local context, in community processes how small they may seem. - Gerardo

The rest are more ambiguous regarding the importance or possibility to influence and working towards political and governmental institutions. They do not dismiss traditional ways of influencing politicians or impacting within the representative political structure, but they express that it is very hard to do so in Mexico. Maria is one of several respondents who speaks about the importance of approaching the political sector but at the same time she describes how difficult it is.

It is hard to survive. I believe that it is a space where it is very easy to lose your autonomy. If you are to enter the Mexican politics you have to have a lot of intellectual, economical and emotional strength because the system eats you. The system is corrupt so you have to be very clear about what you want and where you are going. In this moment I don’t feel strong enough to say: I’m going to enter. This is because the system can swallow me. - Maria

Daniel expresses a similar opinion regarding the possibility to enter the political sector.

It is in my opinion also possible to make an impact within the political parties but in the field of public politics one always has to be backed up by a number of operational proposes that allows a real implementation. If not, the politics only become “dead words”, words that are written in juridical instruments but lacks sufficient material conditions to be fulfilled, it remains in legislation. Here in Mexico there are laws that contemplates equality, inclusion and justice but the problem here is that there are a ton of corruption and that the conditions don’t exist to operate these laws. That is why they just become dead words and don’t serve for anything. - Daniel

Corruption is mentioned by almost all of them as an obstacle one has to be aware of while discussing the possibility to influence or work within the political system and public institutions. Juan argues that it is important that political actors listen to and take the opinions of social movements into account. He reflects on why some people have doubts regarding addressing public politics in Mexico:

I think that there is a big controversy regarding this because many people who are studying human rights don’t
like the political part. This is because here in Mexico the politics are not very well seen, with all the corruption and the bribes. Because of this, human rights and politics don’t get on well, you don’t put one together with the other. Thus, it is very hard to make a balance between human rights and politics - Juan

Scepticism towards whether the state and the ruling power in Mexico is capable of taking into account people’s opinions and generate a positive change as to the human rights situation is another theme in the material, as stated in the previous page in the quote by Gerardo. Veronica explains how young people are upset about the current political situation in Mexico but that they are not listened to while protesting in the streets or through social media:

When you leave this situation for a moment to manifest on the street, in advance we know that they will detain people. This in Mexico is very worrying - Veronica

She continues by saying that she would never go to a demonstration without company since it is too dangerous. The importance of networks for personal safety is also expressed in some of the other interviews. Some of the respondents put emphasis on the fact that the state is responsible to make rights claimable and therefore an important actor that one has to relate to as a human rights defender, especially when reporting violations. Others do also discuss how political parties and institutions affect society as a whole, and consequently the conditions that proceed the realization of human rights, making them important actors not only when a specific violation is already committed. When talking about how civil society can reach progress by putting pressure on public and political institutions Andrés gives the example of how the term femicide⁸ was integrated within the legal system after feminist activists in Mexico pushed for a recognition of gender-based violence. However, he also states that even though this legal recognition opened up for other ways of examining and investigating femicides, it did not eradicate the base of the problem. By linking together the last years’ increase of public security forces with the violence he states:

To strengthen the rule of law by having more police and military forces in the street, the only thing this has led to is more violence. What really improves the situation with gender violence is workshops and campaigns and turning to the civil society to increase the value of human dignity in relation to gender. - Andrés

This represents the perspective that civil society or social movements should try to influence decision makers but that this is not enough. Andrés continues by discussing the risk that struggles from social movements get institutionalized through co-optation by public institutions or political organs. The risk that social struggles or human rights issues loose their transformative nature when adapted by NGO:s is also expressed by others. Some thoughts on this is that the people who are affected by the struggles are left out and that you get caught up in bureaucracy and slow processes. Maria talks about that how her experiences of volunteering in a human rights NGO have made her reflect on how and where she wants to work with human rights issues:

The discussion on human rights can also be institutionalized and then it loses its magnitude of social change, it

⁸ According to the Oxford Dictionaries: “The killing of a woman or girl, in particular by a man and on account of her gender.”
becomes a routine and I said to myself: I don’t want to be in an organisation where the work is in front of a computer /../ I realized that I need to go and visit schools instead of remaining in NGO:s. There are a lot of people who works for human rights NGO:s and that is good, but I need to leave that area. I’m going to work to make the discussion reach more people, whatever the cost is. - Maria

Thus, within this group there is not only a scepticism towards entering public authorities and political parties but also established civil society organisations working with human rights. An over-all description is that they all share the idea that there are several actors that one has to relate to in different ways, even though they may suffer from problems. Irrespective of this, the human rights activism performed within social movements and more autonomous and “non- institutionalized” parts of civil society are crucial to achieve a social change, according to the respondents in this study.

La Escuelita and the creation of bonds and networks

All respondents are positive towards their time in La Escuelita and express that undertaking the formation was of great importance to them, both personally and in respect to their social engagement. Some of them continued to collaborate with others from La Escuelita in different projects. Others underline how new links and contacts are important even when not resulting in an explicit collaboration. Social media as a way of staying in touch and communicating is discussed as a modern advantage regarding this sort of more loose networks. A quote from Daniel shows the opinion that La Escuelita is as a breeding ground for an exchange of experiences and the creation of new groups and networks.

In La Escuelita, or among the people that we get to know through La Escuelita, we can generate new groups and new struggles, this is a very interesting opportunity. You meet new people, new ways of viewing and thinking about the world, you can question yourself and your struggle to be able to enrich what you are doing by learning about new interventions and practices. Because suddenly this doesn’t happen and the strategies of social movements don’t work anymore, then La Escuelita permits you to take part of other strategies and experiences that you can incorporate in the movements and the struggle. - Daniel

Gerardo talks about the “compañerismo”, which is best translated as fellowship or comradeship, that exists among the participants and he compares the generations to families that also translates into being organisations. He continues:

Many have accomplished the establishment of organisations with migration themes in between the different generations. In that way the ideal of justice is being expanded little by little. - Gerardo

The metaphor of comparing the generations to families is one example of the recurring theme that the experience of being in La Escuelita creates a certain bond between the participants. This perspective can also be seen in the following quote by Maria who talks about the networks of solidarity created through La Escuelita that is being shaped since everyone experienced the same process of undertaking the formation:

La Escuelita has this wonderful thing that if you need something, you ask. I know that it can sound very simple but
sometime because of culture we don’t do it, or we ask those that are closest to us. In La Escuelita it is like you ask all of the participants that have been part of the sixteenth generations. It doesn’t limit to just say: you are in my surrounding and therefore do I ask you for help. No, it is that you have experienced the process and therefore I ask for your help. - Maria

5.1.2 Perspectives on the constitution and realization of human rights

This category corresponds to the research question: *In this group of interest, how is the human rights discourse constructed and what possible implications can this understanding of human rights have on the participants and their political and social actions?* This section is divided into three subcategories that reflect patterns related to the human rights construction that could be distinguished in the data.

**Human rights as tools for achieving social change**

Several of the respondents discuss how they have a changed perspective on human rights after participating in La Escuelita and they recognize that the human rights framework can be used in different ways. Some of them, like Andrés, points specifically to the fact that he earlier on saw human rights as a discourse that may be useful while dealing with certain spheres but not relevant on a more local level. Entering La Escuelita and their approach on human rights lead him to revalue the concept:

> Before I saw human rights as something soft and very diplomatic. Like something distant from the reality and more of a discourse [...] I understood in La Escuelita that the idea was not only to perform this kind of practical actions but instead it was how we dialogue and made the Human Rights count, like how you are demanding that peoples dignity are valued and respected not only by helping practically them but you also have to fight for this.  
>  
> - Andrés

He gives an example of this shift by explaining that he went from assisting LGBT-migrants practically to publishing a report on what LGBT-migrants living in different shelters considered to be the most crucial obstacles that needed to be tackled to improve their current situation. While discussing the act of defending human rights several respondents talk about achieving social justice and create other forms of social structure and coexistence. An emphasis on human dignity as a departure for working with human rights recurs. Others do not use the term dignity but describe a similar concept where all humans have essential rights that transgress legal definitions of human rights. This following quote by Daniel reflects the general view of the respondents in regards to how one should use human rights both as a common language while dealing with important actors on national and international level but also as a concept that has to be constructed from bellow:

> I understand human rights as a tool or a way that permits you to lay out a base for your political actions and claims. The human rights then become a common reference, like a collection of basic principles that creates a common language and a channel of communication to use when communicating with official institutions or the state. The human rights in my opinion have to be thought about as this channel that allows justice to be made and makes it possible to realize conditions that social movements consider to be necessary for the realization of their
human dignity. - Daniel

He continues by stating that the use of human rights language makes it possible to be heard since the state has to listen to such claims due to the international treaties that have been signed with the promise to uphold and respect human rights. Many of the respondents express similar opinions on the human rights language as a tool for framing one’s goals within, both in relation to powerful stake holders such as big NGO:s and governmental institutions but also as a joint language that oppressed or marginalized groups can use while fighting collective struggles. At the time when he undertook the formation at La Escuelita, Juan worked at a supermarket owned by a multibillion corporation where the employees experienced low wages and bad working conditions. During the formation in La Escuelita he learned more about labour legislation and human rights connected to that sphere and transferred that knowledge to his own working environment. Juan held a workshop for his colleagues where he explained that it exists legislation that protects them from being exploited and that they should demand that these conditions are being uphold.

They knew about their reality because it is their day to day reality but they didn’t know how to phrase it or how to name what was happening to them. With the workshop I helped them to put a name on this. - Juan

This is one of several examples of how the respondents took their appropriated knowledge to their own local surroundings. Gerardo reasons on how human rights language can be used to frame grass root struggles. He states following while talking about his experiences regarding community work:

I think that in the Mexican context the discourse of human rights is a pretext. Actually, human rights as such don’t interest me but questions regarding the organisation and participation of the society does. Human rights create a language that is more or less for the people. It isn’t the same thing to present a socialistic discussion as it is with human rights, people won’t have the same empathy. - Gerardo

Maria discusses how human rights make you see life in a different way and that they are tools of emancipation that allow you to fight for your rights.

Human rights are not a discourse that you learn, is something that you do. First as you really understand human rights as tools of emancipation can you see life in a different way, or you have more tools to use for fighting for what is yours, for what that should be yours because it belongs to you or because what the state should guarantee is yours - Maria

The opinion that human rights have to be put into practice in order to be understood is representative for the whole sample. The aspect of both viewing human rights as additional tools to enrich your struggle and at the same time as something that makes you “see life in a different way” when you understand them correctly is also a good summary of the multiple meanings of human rights that was expressed in the interviews.

Human rights education as a personal process and human rights enacted through personal relations
The respondents share the conception that human rights are not only the basis for policies and interventions
on national and international level but also ideals that should permeate relations and how you approach others. Another common trait is how the time in La Escuelita and the process of approaching and learning more about human rights and violations is described as a process that very much affected them personally. Veronica says that being in La Escuelita made her ask questions to herself that she never had thought of before, she continues:

It’s a way of questioning how you relate to and view others. At La Escuelita they break with your
preconceptions. It’s a process that I think has helped me a lot in restructure what I thought before, also when it comes to how you define yourself as a person, who should you be? - Veronica

Three of the respondents state clearly how a more profound understanding on how structural oppression operate, what human rights mean and how these rights are being violated was a somewhat painful process since they had to contemplate their own position within the power structure. Maria explains:

Well, the human rights are funded in the human dignity of every person, and you know that the one that is violating the human rights is the state, right? And there are others, like some companies. But in a way, if the rights are based on the human dignity within people then you also have to ask yourself: How have I violated the rights of others? - Maria

She also states that this process of understanding every human being’s inherent dignity entails the insight that you possess rights that probably have been violated by others as well. In other words, to understand that human rights exist triggers an introspective reflection on your own experiences and your position. For Maria, the concept of putting human rights into practice means treating others as subjects, in opposition to viewing them as objects. Daniel reasons about committing to defending human rights and his view on how the feeling of responsibility towards the society is constructed:

I think it is a similar experience as to look in a mirror. When you realize your own vulnerability, then can you also meet the vulnerability of other people and other groups. At the same time as you understand that other people are vulnerable, angry or feel bad do you realize that you also can feel bad or be angry. - Daniel

Personal insights are consequently closely related to generating an awareness of social problems and injustices. Many of the respondents underline the importance of practising and respecting human rights in interpersonal relations and that you have to include this sector while working with human rights issues. Alicia expresses the following reflection when talking about how to defend human rights:

I think that the human rights will become tools when they are visible in our relationships, in the form that we relate to one another. They will stop to be simple ideals, or I shouldn’t say simple because ideals can also inspire. But at least with this perception that they are only the legal framework, something that legally tells you to behave in a certain way but only in a moralistic manner. In my opinion that is lacking in something – Alicia

In addition to be practised in your relations do some of the respondents reason about how it affects their self-image. One story that was mentioned was about a friend in La Escuelita, who through that process felt
confident enough to come out as a LGBT-person and join the struggle against discrimination, even if having doubts and worries about their\textsuperscript{9} parent’s reaction. Veronica does also express this view:

> The perspective of human rights is very important, in addition to the work that I do directed towards mega-projects and displacements I try to involve this knowledge that I have in the context where I am. The theme of human rights has helped me a lot in relating to others and my family, as well as to be able to identify yourself and make others respect you for who you are. - Veronica

**The importance of human rights knowledge and diffusion**

All of the respondents had academic backgrounds at least partly related to areas regarding social issues and theories. Despite that do several of them talk about human rights education as a way to develop a greater knowledge on the structures and conditions related to deprivation, inequality and other crimes or violations. Veronica, who has a degree in sociology, talks about perceiving poverty and violations in society and how that made her want to learn more about human rights:

> Perhaps I won’t be able to change anything but one step is to understand, that I understand why this is happening. - Veronica

Others talks about how their time in La Escuelita made them link certain violations with other historical struggles and that they began to see a structure of violations rather than seeing them as isolated incidents, as Gerardo’s quote on page 23. Several respondents discuss how the diffusion of human rights knowledge would create a positive change in relation to different violations. Not by providing a legal framework or a discourse that allows activists and others to dialogue globally but because of the strength of the diffusion of human rights values. Even Gerardo, who in the quote above claimed that human rights merely are a pretext, states that being initiated with human rights generates a certain responsibility in relation to the surrounding society. While talking about different ways of achieving social change he says:

> Something that has served me a lot is the use of the word, the word has a lot of power and not only in a metaphoric sense. When I see people who are not that initiated in the human rights contexts, they are in other “dynamics”. I think that the reflection you can make in them is very important - Gerardo

Daniel underlines that human rights have to be understood correctly, while he talks about that public officials do not have sufficient knowledge on human rights and only have to pass a simple online test on the subject.

> It is true that here in Mexico human rights are included in the constitution since 2011 but there haven’t been a lot of diffusion regarding this. Because of this the knowledge about human rights is reserved to only certain activist groups, groups that can participate in the public politics and are mentioned a lot in media. In the education politics or public institutions the human rights are mentioned but they are not understood, there isn’t a thorough and exhaustive comprehension on what the human rights really are. - Daniel

Juan talks about the importance of having people with knowledge of human rights in power positions:

\textsuperscript{9} Their = Gender neutral pronoun
If it exists someone within the government with some kind of formation in human rights, then that person is obligated to act. Obviously if you have all this knowledge regarding human rights but is still not using it, then you are failing. This is an obligation - Juan

Spreading human rights knowledge should not only be done to state officials or others with some sort of power or public assignment but also to those that are mostly affected by violations and exploitation and/or belongs to other vulnerable groups. Juan talks about how the diffusion of human rights knowledge to more rural sectors is an important activity that previous participants in La Escuelita have been executing through different workshops. This notion of spreading human rights to deprived groups is expressed by several people, as Maria, who in an earlier quote express that she will make the discussion reach more people, whatever it costs. The importance is partly related to the usefulness of framing claims in a human rights language, but several respondents do also state the importance of human rights education since it creates an awareness of the rights that each and everyone possess.

5.2 Analysis
The results will here be analysed using the two theoretical perspectives presented earlier, as well as against the described backdrop of the Mexican context and with some reference to previous research. To facilitate the reading, the analysis has been divided into three sections.

5.2.1 The characterization of the commitment to undertake Human Rights Education
Wanting to gain further knowledge in human rights can be interpreted as a way of tackling social issues that the respondents have become aware of through their education, or simply by living in the Mexican society and thereby witnessing or experiencing a range of violations. HRE is viewed from the respondents perspective as complementary to other sorts of social theories by providing a kind of more "ction-based" knowledge. This is an interpretation based on the fact that they all, to some extent, already possessed academic knowledge related to sociology or other social sciences which in itself should provide theories that explain societal structure and phenomena. The general image of understanding human rights as a tool for social change also pinpoints human rights knowledge as a point of departure for action, as Andrés who needed to comprehend the human rights language and therefore approached La Escuelita. The HRE did also serve for some of them as fulfilling the need of some sort of overall theory or perspective in addition to practical needs, as Gerardo who felt that he lacked a foundation, or Veronica who wanted to know more about human rights to understand what she perceived as injustices in society. Altogether, this indicates that human rights education in this version seems to be of value or interest for people with a varying experience of practical social/activist work and as a complement to both activist practices and academic knowledge.

The general picture is that the respondents do not place themselves within a group that is facing a specific oppression or in other ways is especially vulnerable compared to others living in Mexico. Thus, neither their general commitment or the decision to undertake human rights education are mainly related to a
personal struggle. They recognize wealth distribution and economical power as important factors for the existence of widespread violations, this is especially evident while addressing the corruption issue. Furthermore, the inequalities in Mexican society is one reason for wanting to participate more actively in human rights issues. However, the ‘arenas’ where violations occur are not only those that most traditionally are related to class-based conflicts, such as work places and/or regarding the power of the production. This suggests that their engagement share common traits with NSMs in that the claims are not principally related to a redistribution of economic means and that they address other forms of oppression that are not necessarily related to economics.

5.2.2 The Human Rights construction and critical pedagogy

As to the experience of undertaking human rights defence formation, many of the respondents discuss how it led them to question already appropriated knowledge and their own position within society. The quote from Veronica on that La Escuelita breaks preconceptions is a good example of this posture. Sharing experiences with other participants as a way of learning is another aspect of this process of gaining new perspectives. This “newness” or break with old perspectives is likely to be associated with the use of popular pedagogy. As presented in previous research, an assumption when applying critical pedagogy to HRE is that the concept of human rights communicated through popular pedagogy achieves a more contextualized understanding of human rights. This contextualization of human rights can be distinguished in the material as to how the respondents discuss human rights in relation to their surroundings. Both in concrete illustrations such as Juan’s story on how he brought the human rights discourse to his workplace, but also the more vaguely defined idea about incorporating human rights in how you relate to your friends and family. One trait of critical pedagogy is the standpoint that education should not be a top-down activity, the respondent’s opinions on how the experiences and reflections of their peers helped them in gaining new knowledge and perspectives could be seen as building on that aspect of critical pedagogy. The emphasis on personal relations as a point of departure for the practice of human rights can also be interpreted as influenced by the teaching of critical pedagogy. While talking about human rights, the concept moves between bearing a legal and “declarational” character that also allows claims to be constructed in a joint language, to a more vaguely defined idea about each and everyone’s rights to be able to define their own rights. Hence something that is rather constructed from below and in line with what researcher suggest that human rights education through critical pedagogy should result in. Daniels quote on how he understands human rights illustrates the fact that these different perspectives and interpretations of human rights can be used simultaneously and that one does not exclude the other, in the eyes of the respondents of this study.

According to NSMT, focus on culture and values are significant traits of new movements, in addition to struggles related to identity. Culture in this sense can be considered as a broad spectrum of values, expressions and other aspects related to one’s ‘lifestyle’ or ideas of how one should live and act in society. Human rights are within this group not only a mean or a tool but a guiding principle and a set of values, which realization is a goal in itself. Everyone does to some extent refer to human rights as a tool or a
practical or legal framework to be used to achieve social change. In addition to this, they also describe human rights as somewhat similar to an ideology and a moral obligation. One interpretation of the material is that the respondents have strong faith in that human rights knowledge, when understood correctly and spread sufficiently, could change society by also transforming those exposed for that knowledge. Being initiated in what constitutes human rights does not only result in a responsibility to fight against violations but it will “automatically” generate a different poster and change how one acts and thinks. This faith in the potential of human rights promotion and diffusion is combined with reflections of how corruption, violence and the poor democratic situation in general shrinks the possibility to make human rights claimable. Evidently there is no contradiction in understanding structural constraints in the society, while at the same time express optimism towards the potential positive outcome of a diffusion of human rights knowledge.

5.2.3 Strategies for enacting citizenship and human rights activism

Human rights are according to the respondents understood as something you do, in addition to being a set of values as well as a concrete knowledge to be used as a tool for reaching social change. According to Engin Isin’s theory of the activist citizen, actions which constitute a real struggle, in contrast to following a predetermined set of civic activities, be considered the basis of the enactment of citizenship, or civic participation. Many social and human rights are restricted by law in Mexico but despite this are they not possible to claim. To demand the realization of these claims should thereby not merely be seen as following a legal path already constructed by others, but can instead be said to expand the rights by actually making these claims become a reality. To defend human rights in Mexico can thereby be considered an action of exercising activist citizenship, even if there could of course be people claiming to defend human rights without in any ways expanding the rights or manifest a real challenge to the prevailing order. The recurring violent repressions against both human rights defenders and student movements are some evidence on how human rights claims from social movements and civil society are controversial and marked by conflict in Mexico.

The ’doing’ of human rights should be enacted on different levels of society including your personal relations, in accordance with the description that violations also occur in multiple different spheres. The vague difference between the private and the public can be understood according to NSMT as a response to how the post-industrial capitalistic state operate its power, which also makes private arenas to sites where struggles are enacted and manifested. The complicated network of political leaders, powerful companies and criminal cartels that in conjunction threaten the freedom of speech in Mexico can indeed be said to “infiltrate” and control various aspects of people’s life. It is hard to merely pinpoint one obvious opponent as the main threat to the realization of human rights in Mexico. This could be interpreted as a reason for constructing a resistance of human rights culture, which hopes to interfere and disturb what could be described as the hegemonic culture of neo-liberalism, machismo, corruption and violence. If assuming that this interpretation is plausible, one could argue that the actions of using a human rights approach in personal relationships and everyday life are acts of civic participation. This by generating a cultural response and
resistance by the manifestation of an alternative way of creating relations. However, exactly how this should be done cannot be distinguished by the collected data, which makes it hard to tell if this is a naive and idealistic theoretical construction or if the respondent’s behaviour and attitude actually have been influenced and changed through human rights knowledge and insights.

One important aspect of enacting activist citizenship is to challenge the prevailing order in society, whereas the active citizen only perform acts that do not expand the boundaries of existing rights and the ways civic actions is performed. Following that assumption, the enactment of human rights values and struggles that are executed in other arenas than the most traditional ones, such as parliaments and similar public spheres, should be considered citizenship actions and strategies for human rights activism in the Mexican context. The creation of and participation within alternative, autonomous movements like La Escuelita and the networks around it should consequently be considered practices of activist citizenship. This because it creates other forms for participation that is outside of the electoral political system. The respondents do express the importance of several actions which could be described as traditional and predetermined, such as influencing the parliamentary politics. A general interpretation is nevertheless that the respondents believe that it is important to overcome the division between the “human rights movements” and more established institutions but do not see themselves as capable or willing to move their engagement to those sectors at the moment. It is also clear that they view it as very important to have alternative ways of participating that allow both autonomy and a transformative take on human rights, or with Maria’s word, a human rights discussion of social change that is not institutionalized. According to NSMT, this can also be seen as a result of the mistrust towards the state machinery, which creates a need for the emergence of other forums and spaces. One possible analysis is that the corruption and deficient legal system could be reasons that explain engagement in other environments than public institutions or private corporations affected by these issues. Research presented earlier (Gutiérrez, n.d.; Paffenholz, 2009) indicating that victims of violence are more likely to take action by other means than through the vote could imply that there is a similar pattern for people who are upset about the violence and other violations happening. Hence, when one is facing human rights violation in Mexico, the most apparent strategy to apply not one principally related to the representative democratic system.
6. Conclusions and Discussion

I will here return to the research questions and summarize the conclusions, discuss potential implications and suggest further research. The sample within the researched case is relatively small and due to the exploratory approach of this study, these findings should be readdressed with more focused questions that can elaborate the analysis. Considering this reservations, the conclusions can be said to illustrate one interpretation of how of young people in Mexico City finds strategies to enact civic participation and human rights activism.

- What characterizes the commitment of young people in Mexico City to educate themselves regarding the defence of human rights and how do they reason about that experience?

The commitment within this group is not primarily related to specific personal struggles and the claims that are constructed transgress social classes in many cases. Perspectives gained through academic training, practical social work and activism were important factors for engaging more in general, and undertaking human rights education in particular. Human rights education appears to appeal to the respondents as a complement to other sorts of social sciences by providing tools for change and more focus on social action, but also as an alternative theoretical perspective on social problems and forms of oppression. This sort of human rights education seem to attract people with shifting experiences of practical social work or activism. Several of the respondents were already participating actively in human rights issues when entering La Escuelita, but one conclusion is that this sort of school also fosters networks between the participants and links to other parts of the human rights movement or civil society in Mexico. The respondents describe that this experience was valuable to them, both personally and in relation to their engagement. One possible objection towards the generalization of this conclusion is that the sample in this study may not be representative, since it is possible that those with more positive experiences are more eager to set aside time to speak about this in an interview setting.

If assuming that it is of value to any society, and the Mexican society in specific, to generate a participation of young people in social movements or other civil society organisations related to the defence of human rights, this sort of initiatives could potentially be of great value to stimulate such engagement. Especially, to reach those that are not forced to civic participation as a response to severe human rights violations against themselves and/or their community. Reimers and Cárdenas (2010) mentioned poor civic culture and knowledge as reasons for not participating in Mexican society. Taking part in initiatives like La Escuelita could address those issues through the creation of new networks, as well as concrete knowledge on how to put human rights into practice by taking action in society. How other groups with less academic pre-knowledge would experience the formation and meeting place of La Escuelita and to what extent the positive outcomes are related to features that the participants brought with them, are questions for further research.

- In this group of interest, how is human rights and human rights knowledge constructed and discussed?
Although expressing reflections on the multiple uses of the human rights framework, the respondents stress that human rights are constructions that need to be contextualized and based on the needs of the specific individual or group rather than legal declarations from above. This is not a surprising conclusion due to the fact that it corresponds with La Vitoria’s description on how human rights is reflected within the teaching of La Escuelita. It also corresponds with previous research concluding that critical pedagogy seems to foster this sort of human rights perspective. The actual causality on this matter cannot be distinguished only by examining this result but it seems probable that these findings represent a similar relation between critical pedagogy and the explained perspective of human rights. The result of this study does consequently add on to the conclusions made by previous researcher that human rights education built upon critical pedagogy promotes a contextualized conception of human rights. Another conclusion is that human rights knowledge within this group represents more than merely being familiar with the legal process surrounding human rights advocacy. It can be described as similar to an ideology, a set of values as a part of a human rights culture that entails a transformative potential in itself, not only as a tool to be used to emancipate groups by providing a legal and linguistic framework. When human rights are understood correctly, it implicates a responsibility to act but also seem to, according to this group, generate a change or a personal transformation within the individual. Hence, create an awareness or desire to act differently and in line with human rights.

As mentioned earlier, the incorporation of human rights in legislation does not automatically lead to that they are respected in practice (Basok et al., 2006; Nash, 2009). In the case of Mexico, this is clear. Consequently, the faith in human rights as the solution to social problems could be questioned, or at least debated. On the other hand it can be argued, in accordance with the research presented on the human rights discourse, that the usefulness of human rights depends on how you understand them. The promotion and diffusion of a more transformative understanding of human rights could consequently lead to other levels of progress than merely adopting and spreading the U.N. declarations. The respondents also discuss how their engagement for human rights does not stop with public protests or addressing the authorities in different ways but should also be enacted in their private relations and other similar arenas in society. Exactly how this enactment of human rights in your private relations and everyday life is executed is not clear. To capture how and if this insights related to human rights can be reflected in one’s behaviour, further research is needed. A general reflection is that while the focus within this study was on the descriptions and stories told by the activists, continued research should be more focused on the actions that are carried out. Possible implications of constructing collective grievances within a human rights language in this national context, instead of for instance applying a more traditional leftist linguistic framework, is another area for further research.

- Which strategies can be used for enacting civic participation and human rights defence in societies marked by poor levels of democracy, corruption and violence?

Several obstacles for exercising civic participation in Mexico through involvement in the parliamentary system and institutions closely related to established power structures can be distinguished, both in previous research and in the result of this study. In contrast to this, to engage in other, autonomous movements and

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organisations can be seen as alternative strategies for participating when the established institutions are regarded with mistrust. It can also be said to be a civic participation of greater importance since it challenges given ways of enacting citizenship in Mexican society, thereby expanding the citizenship constitution. The emphasis on human rights as actions that should be carried out in everyday life, both in private and in public, can be understood as resisting the hegemonic culture of neo-liberalism, corruption, machismo and violence. The enactment and diffusion of values based on a human rights culture can through this interpretation be seen as acts of civic participation, even while being carried out in interpersonal meetings and not necessarily in the public sphere. One conclusion is consequently that strategies for exercising civic participation and defend human rights can both be the creation of autonomous, democratic structures in the civil society as well as actions executed within informal relationships and spheres. This conclusion share similarities with Della Porta’s (2012) research on critical trust. While her sample consists of participators in more temporary, protest movements provoked by the financial crisis can the sample in this study be said to manifest another sort of engagement which is not primarily related to public manifestations within a defined period of time. The political corruption as well as the repression and violence in Mexico also compose a different context than in most western countries. Regardless of these differences, there is a similarity regarding the creation of new arenas for democratic participation when the traditional representative democracy is considered corrupt. A fact that can be said to place this sample within a global movement of activists creating alternative strategies for claiming social justice and enacting democratic practices.

Along with the possible questions for continued research that already are presented in this chapter, one area of importance should be to investigate how alternative strategies for participating in human rights activism could be facilitated and encouraged. Social work professionals could potentially play a significant role in this facilitation. Countries where the democracy level and threats against civil society and human rights defenders are similar to Mexico are by no doubts areas where such interventions should be primarily focused. Nonetheless could the creation of autonomous arenas where critical pedagogy and human rights are reflected also stimulate civic participation for oppressed, marginalized client groups in such different settings as the Swedish one. To reshape and evolve new democratic strategies, thereby expanding the notion of citizenship could prove useful for emancipatory social work directed towards groups that do not consider themselves represented in government and are far away from decision processes.
Reference list


Peacebuilding.


Attachment – Interview guide

- Activist background before entering the human rights defenders education
- Reasons for their own civic engagement – background, specific situations/periods that triggered engagement, experiences of human rights violations
- Views on different ways of promoting and defending human rights (besides civil society/activism)
- Views on how Mexican youth are being heard and to what extent the young generation can influence on the society.
- Views on the act of defending human rights in Mexico and the obstacles that it implies.
- Safety situation in relation to their own engagement/activism.
- Civic engagement after being part of the human rights defenders formation.