

ARGENTINA: USING POSITIVE DEVIANCE (PD) TO INCREASE PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENT RETENTION

In October 2002, Jerry Sternin , a PD consultant, arrived in Posadas, the capital of Misiones in northern Argentina to work on behalf of the World Bank education department. The World Bank was eager to see if the PD approach to behavior and social change could be used to reduce student attrition rates hovering near 50% in primary schools in one of the poorest regions of Argentina.

The Province of Misiones is located in the rainforests of northeast Argentina, bordered by Paraguay to the west and Brazil to the east. Today, the majority of the nearly 1 million residents are descendents of European immigrants, with a minority of the Guarani people.

Preliminary steps: 1. Conversations with different stakeholders

First Jerry met with local education ministry leaders. Jerry was then invited to speak to a group of teachers and headmasters from different schools. He received a cold welcome from the audience since most of them had not been paid for months and had been summoned to the meeting on a Saturday.

The orientation to the PD approach was peppered with story telling of the Viet Nam nutrition program and a discussion on how this could be applied to the situation faced by this audience in Misiones. Jerry emphasized the PD concept by saying:
“I know nothing of your situation. I have no solutions to your problem of high attrition. We are here today because some of you, sitting in this room at this very moment, already have the solution! Some of you have been able to retain over 85% of your students and overcome the significant barriers such as those you have just raised.”

Next, participants explored the fact that some schools present in the room, with the same resources, and same constraints were actually achieving impressive retention rates. The interest of the group piqued as well as the desire to understand what these schools were doing differently with good results. The session ended with the teachers and headmasters embracing the PD concept and proclaiming their interest in using the PD methodology to solve poor student retention in their province.

The next morning they met with a group of 22 parents who had been driven by some of the same teachers who had attended the workshop the day before. From the start the meeting with the parents was much less hostile than the meeting the previous day with the teachers. The parents immediately responded to the Positive Deviance approach. They were asked to turn to their neighbors and discuss positive deviants they had known in their own lives.

All the parents had examples of positive deviants (PDs) in their own lives and many viewed themselves as PDs, in their role as farmers, and parents. At the end of the six hour session, the parents gave a reassuring “*si*” (“yes”) in response to the potential usefulness of PD to address their school issues.

Preliminary steps: 2 Selection of the participating schools.

The next morning the PD consultant met with Misiones's Minister of Education, and with the Teachers Union Representative to discuss next steps. Jerry cautioned that it was important, however, to start small, and to work out the inevitable snags in program design and build on lessons learned before expanding. He suggested beginning with a cohort of five schools.

In order to ensure "ownership" and program sustainability in each school, a sufficient number and appropriate mix of participants would need to be involved in the design and management of the PD program. Each school should have a team consisting of 1-4 teachers, (depending on total number of teachers in the school) an administrator or head master (I.e. an individual at a sufficiently high level to ensure the "political will" necessary for implementation) and 2-3 parents.

The mix of teachers, parents and supervisors would be essential as the PD process would aim to discover and identify uncommon but demonstrably successful practices and strategies utilized by members of all 3 groups which enhanced retention rates.

The Minister chose Alem, one of the poorest of the school districts. He was also asked to select the 10 lowest performing schools in Alem and to choose the 5 which best met both the need and political will criteria. The workshop would take place in August, 2003. The timing would provide schools with a month start-up in the new academic year, prior to taking on the additional responsibilities inherent in their participation in the program. (Timing in PD projects is critical. Several PD failures have occurred as a direct result of an initiative being undertaken at a time where conflicting priorities have resulted in a misfire because of PD being placed on the "back-burner." Once the initial excitement of a PD blast-off has occurred, the two most common trajectories are either full speed ahead or death by "fizzle out").

By the end of meeting the MOE, Teachers Union and World Bank team members had selected the pilot schools, and had agreed to let them choose their team members for the upcoming PD training and workshop. They also agreed to create a list of all the primary schools in the district with their retention rate to enable the program participants to identify PD schools when the workshop began.

The PD workshop in Alem

Six months after the first meeting, Jerry returned to Posadas in Misiones to join the PD team consisting of Elena WB consultant, Pablo Tscerch the Minister, and Gigi, a dynamic teacher and member of the Union who was assigned to help with the training.

The week-long training was launched the next morning in Alem town at a large regional high school. Twenty-eight teachers, parents and school administrators representing five of the lowest performing schools in Alem district showed up the first morning of the training.

To make the PD process seem more relevant and not just an academic concept, Elena asked the participants to break into their school groups and, (as done at the first orientation meeting at the MOE months earlier), discuss PDs they had known in their own lives. The teams were asked to describe the context in which the individual was considered to be a PD, and the special behaviors or practices which the PD used to solve the problem.

A- Defining the problem and desired outcomes

After exposing the participants to the general PD framework, the next task was to utilize the approach to address the specific school retention problem for which the workshop had been convened. The process began by participants defining the problem; “Schools in Alem retain only 56% of students through grade 3.” The next step was to define the desired outcome of a program to address the problem; Initial suggestions ranged from 100% to 70% retention rates. The group decided that the latter figure was much more realistic, and therefore, more attainable than the former.

B- Determine presence of PD schools: Identification and selection

Back in the room after the break, the group was ready to go on to the next step in the PD process, determining if there were some schools which already demonstrated the desired outcome. The participants were provided with a list of all schools in Alem with data on the number of students enrolled in Grade 1 in 1999, in Grade 2 in 2000, and remaining in Grade 3 in 2001. Each group was provided with a calculator and asked to determine if there were any PD Schools, (those with retention rates of 75% or greater) and to identify and rank them accordingly.

All the listed schools were given an arbitrary identification number so that selection of potential PD schools would be based solely on data, rather than the participants’ perception of school performance. It was also important that the discovery and identification of PD schools be done by the participants, rather than by the PD team and the WB team. Although the latter would have been considerably less time consuming, and arguably more accurate, the process would have robbed the participants of the opportunity to identify and choose the schools for themselves.

After calculating retention rates for all 63 Alem schools, the 5 school teams chose 8 potential PD schools with retention rates ranging from 78% to 100%. The identification of these schools was then revealed to narrow them down to 6, based on additional information relevant to workshop objectives. Given limited transportation and time to reach the schools, location was an important selection criterion, as was the inclusion of both urban and rural schools.

C- Exploring common practices

Over the next few days the participants struggled to create a conceptual framework of the factors, issues, and themes which they believed impacted on retention rates. These

included “relations between teachers and parents, teachers and students, pedagogy, grading, and homework assignments.” Next, the participants identified the **common practices** related to all issues identified in the retention conceptual framework. This is a critical step, as it provides the baseline norms, against which the **uncommon**, but successful PD strategies can later be identified.

The first set of relations the group scrutinized were those between teachers and students. All five school groups reported problems in teacher/headmaster-parent relations, the perception was that those problems were the result of “lazy, disinterested, or uneducated parents who typically don’t come to collect their children’s report cards or to confer with their teachers about their children’s performance. These parents don’t actively encourage their children to attend school, and are a major cause of the high level of student attrition.”

Jerry asked a typical PD questions to shift the conversation:

*“Can we assume from your assessment that parents **at all schools** feel equally welcome to visit the schools, attend meetings, and freely discuss their children’s problems with their teachers? Can we also conclude that parents in schools with 90% retention rates are **especially selected** on the basis of being less lazy, better educated, and more interested than their counterparts at schools with 56% retention rates?”*

The creation of the conceptual framework and the identification of related common practices was hard work. For each issue such as “teacher-parent” relations, the participants had to discuss and then agree upon their common practice.

Based on the list of common practices related to the issue of retention, participants created a “**Retention Interview and Observation Guide**” with different content for teachers, administrators and parents groups> The purpose of the tool was to provide a check list of appropriate questions and observations to enable the school teams to discover the uncommon strategies/behaviors utilized by the PD schools to achieve exceptionally high levels of retention. The participants spent the following 2 hours, practicing with the tool through role plays to familiarize themselves with the questions and practice probing.

D- The PD Inquiry

The objective of the PD Inquiry is to discover what the positive deviants (PDs), (with access to no special resources), are doing differently from their “neighbors” to find a better solution to the problem at hand. In this case, to discover the strategies enabling the PD schools in Alem to achieve retention rates of more than 75% when the norm for the department is 56%.

The concept of “discovery”, however, wasn’t immediately accessible to the participants. When asked the purpose of the PD visits, the group response was “to evaluate”, or “to survey” the schools. The notion of discovery or learning from other schools appeared not to be a part of the normal teachers /headmaster repertoire. It was necessary to reinforce

several times the idea that the group needed to be in a student or learning mode and needed to relinquish their role as “expert” in order to be successful in the PD endeavor. To make sure that the PD Inquiries netted the desired outcome, two separate visits by each school team to their PD school were planned. The second visit would allow for a “mop up” opportunity, enabling the team to pick up any important pieces of information, overlooked during the initial visit. After obtaining the selected PD schools consent to participate in the inquiry, it was at long last, time for the first visit to the schools.

The following Monday morning after a 2-day weekend break, they all met at the training room for a last minute briefing before leaving for the PD schools. When they arrived at their PD school, they met briefly with the head master and, using the introductory dialogue prepared and rehearsed during the workshop, a team member introduced the purpose of their visit. The visits lasted from 5-7 hours, depending on the logistics, school schedule, and the depth of preparations made by the PD school. Some of the PD schools, for example, had invited parents to meet with the team and they were ready and waiting when the team arrived. Other teams had to go out and track down parents in the community.

Team members carried out in depth interviews with parents, students, teachers and the headmistress and observed classes in session. They also made observations about the use of physical facilities, food distribution, general cleanliness, and condition and utilization of school materials, etc.

E- Review and select PD behaviors and strategies from the PD inquiry

After the first visit to the PD schools, the teams returned to the workshop site to discuss what they had observed during the visit. The return scene after a PD inquiry is always a high point of any PD-informed project, the point on the marathon route from which you see the finish line, feel the rush of excitement, and sense of accomplishment, and the visit to the PD Alem schools was no exception.

As each new group returned to the workshop site each school group got together and began organizing their findings under the topic headings from their “retention conceptual framework” They pored over the 50-60 identified PD behaviors/strategies to try to uncover over-arching themes. The most powerful overall impression emerging from the visits to the PD schools, was the simplicity of the uncommon, but successful strategies employed by the high retention PD schools. Once “discovered,” these strategies seemed obvious, and more importantly, accessible.

The relations, between teachers and students, and the school and families, featured prominently in all the reports. The PD schools were dramatically different from the non-PD schools in terms of the nature and depth of their relationships with their constituents. All the groups returned with evidence of stunningly different attitudes, reflected in verifiable practices, which impacted on relations with parents in the PD schools. They were surprised and in some cases awed by the differences they discovered in teacher-parent relations at the high retention PD schools. Parents were warmly greeted, “often by

name!” invited to sit in on classes, and treated with respect. Parents at these schools reported that they knew they were welcome, and often participated in school activities.

The most striking difference in teacher-parent relations was the practice of teachers at 5 of the 6 PD schools to visit each of their student’s homes at the beginning of the school year to meet with their parents and student. Another finding was that during the home visits the teachers at those schools entered a “compromiso” with the parents and the students. These “contracts” outlined the various responsibilities of both the teachers, and the students and their parents. Teachers for example, pledged to immediately meet with the parents if their children are having problems, rather than waiting until they are reflected in the report card at the end of the semester, when it is too late to do anything about it.

Parents agreed to notify the school if their child was going to be absent, to attend scheduled school meetings, to check daily on homework assignments, and to “look at” their children’s notebook.

Another PD finding, this one at all 6 of the PD schools, was the integration of parents in the children’s education. PD schools found ways to enable parents to make a meaningful contribution, despite the limits of their own formal educational background. Special parent-directed workshops for students in cooking, carpentry, sewing, etc. enabled even illiterate parents to share their skills and to contribute to their children’s education.

After some animated discussions around teacher-parent relations at the PD schools, the group moved on to pedagogy and curriculum. The “Common Practices Conceptual Framework” suggested that the vast majority of schools have rigid curricula, which take little note of the intellectual, socio-economic or age diversity of students. There is a daily lesson to be taught and it is the students’ responsibility to learn it. Their own life experiences and interests are not considered relevant. Although the required curriculum was covered in the PD schools, the most common point of departure was the inclusion of students’ lives and interests. Students at all the PD schools were encouraged to undertake projects, such as writing stories or plays which reflected their unique interests.

Then came feedback from parent team members on some of the PD behaviors they had discovered during their visit to PD parents semi-literate or illiterate parents whose children were doing exceptionally well academically and have good attendance.

F- Plan of action.. “Starting Monday, we....”

All participants showed up the next morning for the final task of creating an action plan according to parameters as follows:

-The plan should be based on demonstrably successful behaviors/strategies discovered through the PD inquiry (Strategies/ideas held by participants or accessible to them prior to the workshop were not admissible at this time,)

- Plan should include, a) problem to be addressed, b) the objective or desired outcome of proposed change or new program, c) PD behavior/strategy upon which it is based, and d) detailed Implementation ; “who?”, “what?” , “when?” , and “how?”

After 2 hours each school group presented their action plan. The first group to report followed the recommended format and began with the problem to be addressed: “improving school-parent relations.” Based on the PD practice discovered at 4 of the 5 PD schools, they decided that teachers would make visits to students’ homes to explain to parents why their participation was critical to their children’s educational success. They would then invite parents to visit the school, and set up a schedule of 2 meetings per semester between teachers and parents.

The group went on to explain that the “who” were all teachers in grades 1-3, and that the “when” was “next MONDAY.” The “next Monday” time frame turned out to be a common feature of all the action plans. The discovered PD practices, regardless of setting, are by definition, accessible to all community members “today” and as a result are often acted upon with unexpected speed.

The other 5 groups presented their action plans and the theme of improved school-family relations was key to all of them. The “compromise,” (the non-formal contract between school and parents) featured in all of them. The shift in school team receptivity and openness to change over the two-week PD workshop was nothing less than dramatic.

The Initial teacher/headmistress perception that retention problems were the result of dire economic conditions, and low parental interest, was dramatically altered through the workshop visits to PD schools. The action plans reflected that shift, focusing on changes in teachers’ behavior to improve student and parental relationships, as well as the initiation of student-centered learning strategies to enhance retention in their schools.

Just as they were finishing their goodbyes, one of the teachers stood up and offered a touching, totally spontaneous little speech about how important and transformative the experience had been for her.

“I have learned so much during this workshop. Most of all, how much parents have to contribute to the process of education, and how we teachers need to learn how to use this great resource. On behalf of my school team, I pledge that we will take what we have learned these past 2 weeks and put it into action! The next time we meet, we will share with you how this experience has changed our school.”

In Alem, on October 6, 2003, each of the schools that participated in the PD Workshop, makes these commitments:

- a) That each school will make at least one visit to another of the participating schools before the end of the year.**
- b) That all will attend an 8-12 hour meeting with the other schools to exchange**

experiences with the parents and teachers who attended the Workshop, with food and refreshments and/or accommodations supplied.¹ The meeting will be held at the Normal School (Teachers College) and the tentative date will be during the first two weeks of November.

Signed by all teachers present.
