

Positive Deviance and Student Retention in Argentina

In the Misiones Province of Argentina, school retention is a major issue. Almost half of the students drop out before the end of the third grade. In order to address this problem the Ministry of Education and the World Bank decided to pilot a Positive Deviance project in two districts; Alem and San Pedro.



Students in Misiones

Although economic difficulties left many teachers, parents, and schools feeling that the retention problem was insurmountable, the Positive Deviance approach has allowed them to see viable solutions which *already exist* within their district.

Using PD inquiries, low performing schools discovered that there are schools which have been able to achieve better results, *without access to any special resources*. By identifying the *specific strategies* that enable these 'Positive Deviant' schools to successfully address common problems, the less successful schools discovered that their problems are not intractable. Rather, these low performing schools have found that through the PD process they could identify strategies that can be used to improve their retention rates *today*.

The first four steps of the PD process are illustrated through the Argentina pilot project. They are: 1. Define, 2. Determine, 3. Discover, 4. Design.

The Positive Deviance Process

1. **Define** the problem, what an acceptable outcome would look like and the normative behaviors surrounding the problem.
2. **Determine** if there are any members of the community who already exhibit the desired outcome (Positive Deviants).
3. **Discover** the specific behaviors/ practices that allow the PDs to perform better than their neighbors.
4. **Design** an intervention that allows others in the community to *practice* the successful PD behaviors/ strategies.

Step 1: Define the problem with members of the Community

This step includes defining:

The Problem: In the Alem and San Pedro districts of Misiones only 56% of students complete the third grade.

Successful Outcome: The stakeholders decided that their goal would be to retain over 75% of students through the third grade.

Current Normative Behaviors: The identification of issues that relate to school drop out and the establishment of common practices is a prerequisite to the later identification of the PD practices which *differ* from the norm. In order to identify issues that relate to school drop out a conceptual framework was developed. Each issue that was identified was broken down into sub issues, and participants were asked to report how they handle them (common practices).



A Positive Deviant (PD) is a person who finds a better solution to a common problem than their neighbors, without access to any special resources.

Step 2. Determine, if there are any members of the community who already exhibit the desired goal. ('Positive Deviants')

Groups (composed of parents, teachers, and school administrators) were provided with a list of schools (identified by an arbitrary identification number), a calculator, and data on the number of students enrolled in Grade 1 in 1999, Grade 2 in 2000, and remaining in Grade 3 in 2001. Participants calculated the retention rates for all 63 schools in the region. Eight schools with reten-

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tion rates from 78% to 100% were identified as potential PD schools. Program Coordinators then contacted these schools to ask if they were willing to participate in the Positive Deviant Inquiry (PDI).

It is important to note that giving the schools arbitrary identification numbers allowed the potential PD schools to be identified based solely on data, rather than on the participants' perceptions of the schools. In addition, it is important that the participants discovered the PD schools. Although it would have been quicker for one individual to calculate these rates, this would have deprived participants of the experience of identifying and choosing the schools for themselves.

Step 3: Discover the uncommon practices or behaviors that enable the Positive Deviants to perform better. (The Positive Deviance Inquiry –PDI)

Over a two-day period, “PDI teams” (comprised of parents, teachers and administrators) visited 5 of the PD schools. During these visits they compared the common practices that they had identified in their conceptual frameworks with the practices that they observed in the PD schools. The team observed classes, the general facility, materials, and other aspects of school life that were thought to impact upon school retention. At a minimum, the team also interviewed teachers, the head mistress, and several parents (in their homes).



At the end of each day the team returned to the training site to debrief each other and document their findings. After the first day of observation the PDI teams provided each other with feedback on their findings. This critique ensured that the findings focused on actual behaviors or strategies, rather than on attitudes or beliefs. It also highlighted the issues that remained undocumented so that they could be explored the following day.

After the second day of observation, all of the participants met and the teams reported their findings. Participants were struck by the simplicity of the uncommon but successful strategies that the high retention schools were using. They were excited by the fact that these strategies which they had 'discovered' were clearly accessible to them.

Step 4. Design with community members an intervention enabling others in the community to practice the new strategies.

After analyzing the numerous uncommon, but demonstrably successful strategies discovered at the PD schools, the teams spent a day creating an action plan that would enable them to adopt these strategies in their schools. These detailed plans included objectives for the proposed changes, the PD strategy on which they were based, and implementation details ("who?", "what?", "when?", and "how?".)



Once the action plan was completed the school teams shared them with other participants. Rather than wait until the beginning of the next school year that was three months away, the schools chose to initiate their new strategies on the following Monday!

Illustrative of the action plans was the decision by teachers from two of the schools teams to adopt a PD strategy to improve school-parent relations. They decided that teachers from the schools would visit students' homes to explain why parent participation is critical to their children's education. Parents would be invited to visit the school, and periodically meet with their children's teachers.

6 Weeks Later...

Six weeks after the original workshop, the schools met again to report on their progress. (In order to promote active learning at the workshop the schools were paired up and presented their partner's "progress to date" to the whole group.) Three of the five schools had been totally revitalized. They reported that they had experienced unprecedented change over the previous six weeks, and noted that the communication between parents and teachers had markedly improved as they adopted some of the PD strategies. (See Page 5 for Comparison of Common Practices and Practices found in PD schools.)

These strategies included greeting the parents when they came to the school, visiting their students' homes, and signing a "compromiso" or learning contract with the parents that outlined the different roles and responsibilities of the parents and teachers in the learning process. In addition, the teachers in one school used communications with the family as the basis for a reading/

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composition project. The teachers began by sending their photos and a note to the homes of their students and requesting that the parents do the same. The teachers reported that parents were flattered and surprised by these unexpected visits, and the importance attached to their participation in their children's education. The five school teams left the workshop committed to meeting again the next school year to share further progress.

COMPARISON OF COMMON PRACTICES AND PRACTICES FOUND IN POSITIVE DEVIANT SCHOOLS

Common Practices	PD Practices/ Strategies
Family- School relationship	
Many Parents do not feel comfortable going to the school or talking to their child's teacher.	Teachers warmly greet parents whenever they visit the school. Parents feel comfortable approaching their child's teacher.
There is little interaction between parents and teachers.	Teachers visit the homes of every student. During this visit they sign a contract (agreement) with the parents.
Two annual school meetings <i>with a fixed agenda</i> are held; but many parents do not attend.	In order to increase interest in general meetings, teachers inform parents of the proposed topics and <i>request suggestions for other topics</i> .
Parents receive notes to inform them of upcoming meetings. Parents are not asked to RSVP and there is no follow-up to encourage parents to attend.	Parents are asked to respond to invitations for meetings. When parents do not RSVP, the teacher reminds parents of the upcoming meeting.
Parents who are illiterate or have little formal education are not given opportunities to contribute to the educational process.	All parents contribute to the school. Parents hold workshops to teach students specific skills (i.e. sewing, woodworking). They also help maintain the school building (i.e. mend fences) and arrange student games/ parades.
The curriculum does not integrate families into classroom activities.	Projects are undertaken to strengthen the school-family relationship. Children are asked to bring a picture of their family to school. Students interview their parents for reports on specific topics (i.e. a value that is important to their family).

Common Practices	PD Practices/ Strategies
It is unusual for teachers to meet with the parents of a child who is doing poorly.	Teachers visit the homes of students who are doing poorly.
Teacher-Director relationship	
No specific times are set aside for staff meetings.	There is a specific time set aside for staff meetings. A one- hour staff meeting is held every fifteen days.
There is a clear hierarchy within the school system: teachers fulfill certain duties and directors others. Specific protocols dictate interactions between teachers and school directors.	Formal protocols do not dictate most of the interactions between teachers and school directors. Relationships are more informal and collaborative.
Teacher-Teacher relationship	
There is little communication or collaboration between teachers; especially those who teach different subjects.	Teachers work as a team. Teachers from different subjects share materials on the topics that are being explored by students.
Community Mobilization	
There is little communication between the school and community leaders.	Schools identify community leaders (i.e. priest) and discuss problems with them. Community leaders help to develop programs to decrease school dropout.
School Attendance	
There is little communication between the school and families: families may be unaware that their child is not attending school.	Teachers meet with their students' family and older siblings to discuss problems with school attendance or performance.
Repetition	
Whether students are promoted to the next grade or held back is determined by the school calendar rather than the ability of the student.	The needs of students are respected: those who are having difficulty are kept in their grade for an extra 2-3 months rather than promoting them to the next grade or having them repeat the whole year.
There is no testing done to determine the needs or skills of students.	Schools administer tests to determine the academic strengths of students as well as areas that need development.
Students who repeat a grade are exposed to the same curriculum.	Teachers modify the curriculum and assignments to meet the needs of students.
Individualized Attention	

Common Practices	PD Practices/ Strategies
The whole class is given the same assignment to work on: regardless of ability. Older students are assigned the same work as their younger classmates.	The class is broken up into groups. Assignments are modified to reflect the abilities of the students in the group.
Classroom environment	
Teachers display indifference towards the students and their emotional and social needs.	Classrooms are child-centered. Teachers display affection for their students in many ways; i.e. personalized greetings and celebrate student birthdays.
Teaching Methodology	
The class schedule is highly regimented.	Recess is not held at a set time: it is held when the children begin to have difficulty concentrating.
A rigid curriculum is adhered to.	Activities are designed to reflect the individual needs and interests of students. The class is broken in to groups. Assignments are given that address the needs of those in the group. Special workshops are held on topics that students express an interested in (i.e. carpentry).
Emphasis is placed on the final product (i.e. correct answer); rather than the process. There is an intense focus on avoiding errors. Students are immediately corrected when they make mistakes.	Teachers use student errors as ‘fodder’ for learning; they realize that errors can be used in a way that contributes to learning.
Class work consists primarily of written assignments.	Class work includes oral and written assignments.
Evaluation	
Parents are not aware of how their children are evaluated.	Parents are informed of the areas that their child will be evaluated on prior to evaluations.
Teachers receive little feedback on teaching methods from school administrators.	Regular evaluations of teaching methods are done and findings are followed up on.
Other	
Children are provided with one meal at school (lunch).	Schools recognize that hungry children have difficulty learning. The school provides breakfast instead of lunch.
Libraries are not used. Books are locked up.	Classes use the library often.