



POSITIVE
DEVIANCE
INITIATIVE

Will Ramón Finish Sixth Grade?

Positive Deviance
for Student Retention
in Rural Argentina

by Lucía Durá & Arvind Singhal



An elementary school in Misiones, Argentina photo: PDI

"I am Ramón, a first-grade student in San Pedro's elementary school. This bulletin board in my classroom displays the birthdays of the 24 students in my class. My birthday is on September 11th, and I look forward to the next one."

While all 24 students in Ramón's first grade class await their birthdays, they are unaware of how bleak their future might be. Within two years, by the time they are in third grade, it is likely that 5 out of the 24 will have stopped going to school. By the sixth grade, another 7 out of the remaining 20 will have dropped out.¹ In 2000, a first grader in San Pedro and, more generally, in Argentina's rural province of Misiones would have had a 3 in 4 chance of getting to third grade and a 1 in 2 chance of making it past the sixth grade. Ramón's entering class of 24 would have become a class of 12 students by seventh grade.



Birthday bulletin board in Ramón's classroom

- To help with weeding, a non-complex task which children carry out with relative ease. Weeding, much like tobacco harvesting, requires long hours of squatting in the fields.

In essence, young children in Misiones play a key role in generating family livelihoods. For them, and their parents, school

attendance is a relatively low priority. Survival takes precedence over education. However, not every elementary school in Misiones has high dropout rates. Some schools do better.

What explains this sharp drop in school enrollment rates in Misiones? Why do so many Ramóns drop out of school, missing out on learning basic literacy and numeracy skills? The answers, in part, lie in the traditional roles that young children in Misiones play in subsistence agriculture. For instance, Ramón may drop out of school:

- To help his parents plant cassava branches, a staple food in Northeastern Argentina.
- To help with the tobacco harvest. Children like Ramón are well equipped to pick tobacco leaves as one has to squat low in order to pluck them from the bottom, keeping the upper ones intact.



Children play an important role in subsistence farming

Consider Mr. García's school. Mr. García is a teacher in a school in Misiones which has higher student retention rates. After school hours, Mr. García can often be seen at his students' home sipping a cup of *mate*, a local beverage made of herbs. He may ask parents about the well-being of the family pig that appears to be pregnant and about the tobacco harvest: "How much are they selling it for per kilo?" Mr. García may encourage Manuel and Lydia, the parents of Sylvia whom he knows on a first name basis, to continue sending their child to school. "Education is a great equalizer," he emphasizes. "Sylvia is a good student and has a bright future ahead."

POSITIVE DEVIANCE

is an approach that is uniquely successful in extremely difficult situations, where perhaps other approaches have failed.

POSITIVE DEVIANCE

makes the invisible visible.



Folded arms and defying glares from teachers

The boys and girls in Mr. García's class, as well as their parents, know that Mr. García believes in their potential and will go the extra mile to encourage their continued presence in school, even when they are absent.

In Misiones, teachers like Mr. García are beacons of hope for the Ramóns and Sylvias, who otherwise would not make it past third grade.

DEFIANT WELCOME

"Señor, Argentina no es Vietnam (Sir, Argentina is not Vietnam). Your Positive Deviance approach that may have worked in Vietnam will not work here in Misiones! We, the teachers, haven't been paid in months. The parents of these children who drop-out are worthless and disinterested. And you Señor, you know nothing of our situation or problems," noted a senior female teacher. Other teachers, with crossed arms and defiant looks, nodded in agreement.

"Señora, lo que usted dice es absolutamente la verdad!" (Madam, what you say is absolutely true), replied Jerry Sternin, co-founder of the Positive Deviance Initiative. "It is also true that some of you, sitting in this room at

this very moment, have been able to retain over 85% of your students. So, yes, I know nothing about your situation. But I do know that the solution to your problem already lurks in this room."²

After a long pause, an elder teacher noted, "Yes, Señor, that is correct." She added, "but we are so often blamed for student drop-outs by both the parents and school administrators."

"Is that the case every time?" asked Jerry. "At every school?" There was a long pause. Some teachers leaned in. Some appeared to drop their frowns. Some seemed to be smiling.

"PD is not a magic bullet," Jerry noted with humility, "but by looking at elementary schools in Misiones that are able to retain and graduate more students without access to any special resources, we might get somewhere."

More folded arms began to open and Jerry's suggestions received affirmation.

THE POSITIVE DEVIANCE INQUIRY

allows community members to ask open-ended questions.

By the time the day ended, the tone of the meeting had changed dramatically. Some participants noted they looked forward to continuing the discussion the next day. “Most surprising of all,” noted Jerry, “some teachers asked if they could invite parents of some school-going children.” Earlier in the day, the teachers had blamed the parents as being the cause of the “drop-out problem.” Now they felt that including parents in this workshop might bring them closer to a solution.

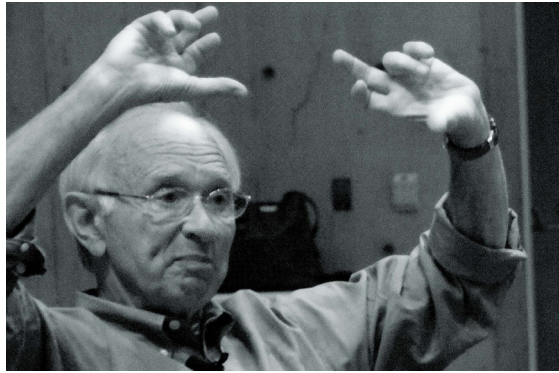
THE 180 DEGREE FLIP

Those who knew Jerry Sternin will tell you about his 180° hand flip, a cue for shifting perspectives: That is, “flip” the problem and focus on the solution.

On the second day of the workshop, 22 parents joined the meeting. Suspicious of the teachers’ invitation, they looked palpably nervous.

“We’re not sure what to expect,” one parent said. “I don’t know what we can contribute,” said another.

As poor subsistence farmers, parents were not used to being asked for their opinion. Yet as happens in many iterations of the PD approach, the less likely suspects, in this case the parents, were full of ideas and contributions.



Jerry Sternin's characteristic 180° flip

The parents were even quicker than the teachers to embrace the 180° flip. They worked intuitively, discussing their own experiences in overcoming hardships to keep their children in school and identifying ways that their neighbors had been able to do the same; thus began the process of self-discovery.

PD RE-FRAMES, PD PARTICIPANTS SELF-DISCOVER

Self-discovery is critical to community ownership of a PD program. It significantly increases the probability of adopting the identified PD strategies. In Alem and San Pedro, two districts in Misiones, self-discovery was introduced to the workshop participants from 10 schools followed by a field-based PD Inquiry.

First, the problem was defined. Workshop participants, comprising parents, teachers, and administrators, agreed on a definition of the problem: “Schools in Alem retain only 56% of students through grade three.”

Next, participants agreed on a desired outcome: “Schools in Alem would achieve retention rates of 75% or higher.”

Third, the group was charged with determining if Positive Deviant schools existed in Alem. To determine if there were schools with retention rates of 75% or higher, small groups were given a calculator and a list of schools with data on the number of students enrolled in grades one to

three from 1999 to 2001.³ They would then identify these schools and rank them accordingly.

After calculating retention rates for all 63 schools in Alem district, eight potential PD schools with retention rates ranging from 78 to 100% were identified. The identity of these schools was then revealed. The group discussed that two of those schools had access to special resources, and that their strategies might not be accessible to ordinary schools. Through another round of review, six were narrowed as being PD schools. These schools had high retention rates but were otherwise identical to other schools in the area.

Fourth, the teacher-parent teams set out to discover uncommon practices by visiting the six PD schools. The first day they carried out in-depth interviews with teachers and administrators, and observed classes in session. Parent participants also interviewed parents from PD schools at their homes. The teams were to make general observations regarding the use of physical facilities, food distribution, and condition and utilization of school materials.

The process of self-discovery is not just about looking at what is going right. For example, several groups reported that

FEA	NUM	IE	UE	GRU	PRO
T	16	102.5	41.21	12.41	101.13
T	20	100.6	41.64	11.41	94.27
T	21	105.9	51.01	6.76	92.63
4	56	105.0	56.41	15.06	104.37
4	66	110.4	53.01	34.00	121.37
4	73	148.5	52.46	20.01	98.87
4	66	105.3	50.01	14.51	100.47
4	41	108.3	46.42	24.80	111.51
6	71	102.4	53.01	34.00	121.37
6	59	103.3	50.01	15.06	104.37
6	59	103.3	50.01	15.06	104.37

PD school selection process

“teachers in the PD schools showed unusual respect for their students,” rather than identifying the specific uncommon behaviors and strategies through which that respect was enacted. It took a second trip to the school for the group to see the usefulness of identifying specific, verifiable practices that led to good outcomes.

Only when Jerry Sternin challenged the logical conclusion of that perception was the group willing to dig deeper.

Jerry asked: “Since all schools treat their students with love and respect, can we assume that this issue has no impact on retention levels and that schools with 56% retention rates treat their students in the same manner as those with a 100% retention rate?”

This PD Inquiry process helped the group arrive at a more nuanced description of common practices.



Practices

Strategies

PD Behaviors

Accessible to All

PD behaviors and strategies are passed through an “accessibility sieve”

In a PD school, for instance, teachers warmly greeted parents whenever they visited the school. In turn, parents felt comfortable approaching the child’s teacher. Teachers also asked parents to RSVP to invitations for meetings, and when parents did not RSVP, teachers went out of their way to contact them.

Only those strategies accessible to all are kept. The rest are deemed TBU “true but useless.”

POSITIVE DEVIANCE is a practice-based approach that yields immediate, actionable results.

Area of Impact	Traditional Practices	PD Practices
School - Family Relations	Parents with little or no formal education are not given opportunities to contribute to the educational process.	All parents contribute to the school. Parents hold skills workshops (i.e. sewing, woodworking). They also help maintain the school building (i.e. mend fences) and arrange student games and/or parades.
Teaching Methodology	The whole class is given the same assignment to work on, regardless of ability or age.	The class is broken up into groups. Assignments are modified to reflect the abilities of the students in the group.
Degree of Community Involvement	There is little communication between the school and community leaders.	Schools identify community leaders (i.e. priests) and discuss problems with them. Community leaders are actively involved in increasing retention.
Nutrition	Children are provided with one meal at school (lunch).	Schools recognize that hungry children have difficulty learning. Schools provide breakfast instead of lunch.

Table 1 A comparison of traditional and PD practices in elementary schools of Misiones, Argentina

The PD Inquiry yielded identification of uncommon practices in the way teachers and parents interacted with students, in the way classes were taught and assessed, in how the community was involved, and how children’s nutrition schedule was constructed (See Table 1).

Upon conclusion of the PD school visits, and identification of uncommon PD practices in schools with high retention rates, an action plan was developed by parents, teachers, and administrators. The final workshop before implementation of the PD intervention closed with a very different tune:

“We have become deviants!” noted a Misiones school headmaster.

Next, the six schools developed an initiative building upon the foundation of identified PD practices and actionable solutions. Some PD behaviors were implemented immediately.

Beginning the following week, teachers and parents identified absentee children and visited their homes to discuss their absence with their parents.

Students and their parents made “commitment posters” at home on which parents detailed the commitment they would make to improve the quality of education of their children. Imagine a school of more than 550 students “papered” with these posters!



Engaged students in an elementary school in Misiones

SMALL RIPPLES, BIG CHANGE!

Small actionable practices, blowing candles, singing happy birthday, and cutting cake, can make a big difference. In the case of Misiones, it helped ensure that the birthdays of Ramón, Paola, Vicente, Sylvia, and others stayed on the wall for years to come.

A parent aptly summarized the Misiones experience with school retention: “Even though I have little schooling, the PD practices are something I can take home. I can also show them to my neighbors so they can better support their children. I feel empowered that I can get closer to the teacher to make it better for my children.”

¹Dabas, E. and Yanco D. (2003). Enfoque de desviación positiva en el ámbito educativo: Misiones, Argentina, 2002-2003. Unpublished report prepared for the World Bank.

²Sternin, J. (2003). Positive Deviance (PD) Student Retention and Educational Enhancement Program. Unpublished report. Buenos Aires, Argentina: World Bank.

³Schools were classified by number, not by name so that selection was based solely on data rather than perception of performance.



Design Team: Arvind Singhal, Lucía Durá, Robert Gutierrez, and Sarah Ontiveros
Department of Communication
The University of Texas at El Paso
Email: asinghal@utep.edu



**POSITIVE
DEVIANCE**
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The Positive Deviance Initiative
Tufts University
150 Harrison Avenue, Room 135
Boston, MA 02111
tel (617) 636-2195
fax (617) 636-3781
www.positivedeviance.org