Recommendations to Refine Grupo Faro’s Monitoring and Evaluation Tools for the “Comunidades de Aprendizaje” Program

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1. Executive Summary

This report provides recommendations on how to strengthen and synthesize the monitoring and evaluation tools developed for Grupo Faro’s main education program. Grupo Faro is a think-tank based in Quito, Ecuador who, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education has been implementing learning communities in over 10 schools in the country since 2017. Grupo Faro serves as an advisor to each school, identifying and resolving any ongoing implementation challenges. At the same time, they also evaluate the program by gathering and acting upon relevant quantitative and qualitative information through surveys, interviews and focus groups.

The education system in Ecuador has undergone transformative changes over the past two decades, including a renewed emphasis on rigorous evaluation to design and implement education practices. Notable accomplishments include students’ improved academic performance in national and international tests and universal access to education in the country. However, there are still persistent issues experienced in how students learn, the way teachers are trained, and how engaged and influential family members are in the school-system’s decision-making process. Additionally, there are concerning inequities among students from low-income backgrounds, rural locations and self-identified ethnic/linguistic minorities.

Learning communities are a multi-faceted, dynamic education model developed by the University of Barcelona Community of Research on Excellence for All (CREA). European’s Commission Project Include-ed studied the model’s impact and effect on school systems from 2006-2011. The studies present strong evidence that suggests learning communities can have a positive impact in all school communities, but particularly those most vulnerable. As a result, many countries including many in South America, have replicated and adapted the model.

Learning communities’ principal goal is to improve how students learn. Equally important goals are to increase the students’ analytical and critical thinking skills, levels of engagement and sense of belonging and inclusion. Learning communities aim to improve how every individual in the school community interacts with one another. In order to achieve this, the intervention consists of a variety of methods called “Actuaciones Educativas de Exito” or successful educational practices (SEAs). There are six SEAs that are most salient in Ecuador’s context: family education, dialogic literary gatherings, mixed commissions, conflict prevention and resolution, interactive groups and dialogic pedagogical trainings. In other contexts, learning communities have been leveraged to alleviate many of the challenges Ecuador’s education system exhibits.

In 2019, the Ministry of Education assumes the role of replicating learning communities to new schools. Grupo Faro will provide support and advice to the Ministry of Education staff on how to implement correctly and successfully, while continuing to support schools initially selected into the pilot program.

Given that the implementation will rest on another stakeholder, and considering that maintaining model fidelity is an inherent challenge encountered when reproducing across contexts, Grupo Faro wanted to revisit, refine and strengthen their current monitoring and evaluation system. After in-depth discussions with the client, we identified the research question
to be: “What should Grupo Faro do to refine their monitoring and evaluation tools in their “learning communities” program”. To answer this question, I developed a logic model, analyzed current tools and conducted site visits in Quito and Manta. Chapter 6 expands on the methods used further.

This report discusses Ecuador’s education system in Chapter 1, and examines the research and development of learning communities in Europe and Latin America in Chapter 4. Chapter 7 explains Grupo Faro’s current monitoring and evaluation system, which includes: Attitudes’ and Perception Survey 2017 & 2019, and focus groups differentiated by stakeholder (teachers, students, school leaders, and parents). Grupo Faro also collected relevant quantitative data such as students’ academic performance and attendance. All tools coalesce on four main broad dimensions: changes in teaching and learning, in community participation, in leadership, and in conflict prevention and resolution. Chapter 9 summarizes site visit observations conducted in December for each SEA, and synthesizes interviews. This insights and discussion section draws from primary observations, and previous qualitative data collected by Grupo Faro.

Recommendations

After a careful review of existing literature, Grupo Faro’s existent tools and site visit observations, I offer three broad recommendations for the client to strengthen and refine their tools. restructuring existing tools, collecting comprehensive quantitative data and conducting a long-term impact study.

The restructuring of existing tools to be clearly differentiated between summative evaluations, that is, data that can be used to determine the impact of program, and formative evaluations, that is, data that can be used to improve the program. Given that learning communities will be replicated by the Ministry of Education in new schools, it is proposed for the client to focus on the latter. Within this primary recommendation, there are three layers to this solution. First, linking the “Attitudes’ and Perception Survey” explicitly to the focus groups, and prioritizing questions that ask about each stakeholders’ complete experience of SEAs. Second, collecting data that informs level of training, resources and support by relevant authorities and leadership and identifies gaps, if any. Third, leveraging Instituto Natura’s rubrics to assess model fidelity and to evaluate SEAs implementation status. The use of Instituto Natura’s resources, a Brazilian think tank that specializes in researching and evaluating learning communities will continue to provide valuable insights on SEA’s progress.

The second recommendation involves collecting comprehensive quantitative data that capture relevant information on the school population’s socio-economic status, number of behavioral incidents, mental health incidence can contextualize each school better. Finally, there is a unique opportunity to evaluate learning communities’ impact between schools that have implemented it and schools that have not; thus offering significant insight into the effect learning communities have on a variety of different outcomes and can be instrumental for Ecuador’s national education policy agenda.
2. Policy Question

Grupo Faro has developed a variety of tools to assess, analyze and continuously improve their main education program, learning communities. While these tools shed light on a variety of indicators, and provides information on some outcomes, the client would like to revisit these tools and strengthen them. Given that learning communities will be replicated in additional schools throughout Ecuador, doing so seemed relevant and timely. Thus, the client and I identified the question to be:

“What should Grupo Faro do to refine their monitoring and evaluation tools in their “learning communities” program.”

3. Snapshot of the Status of Education in Ecuador

Educational institutions in Ecuador exhibit persistent inequality in quality and access to education. Over the two decades, Ecuador’s education system and policies have rapidly evolved to ensure all students have access to a high-quality education regardless of socio-economic status or geographic location. Public education is free for grades K-12, and in many cases, the government provides books and other resources to low-income and rural schools.

There have been sustained efforts to embed rigorous evaluation practices within the national Ecuadorean education agenda. Indeed, in 2012, Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa, (INEVAL), was created, a non-partisan institution that evaluates education indicators in grades K-12 and conducts independent research. These efforts have translated into some notable improvements. According to TERCE 2010, an international test administered by UNESCO, Ecuador scored median across the region, an improvement from 2006 when it scored second to last place. Additionally, according to INEVAL 2018, 96 out of 100 students were attending school to their corresponding grade.

Consistent with these improvements, and building upon these efforts, the Ministry of Education released its 10-year plan in 2018. This plan is focused on improving the quality of education in all grades, particularly in strengthening intercultural, bilingual and inclusive practices. The plan also emphasized increasing resources to strengthen the quality of teacher instruction to better prepare students for the employment and higher education pipelines.

Nonetheless, there are still persistent issues in the how students learn, the way teachers are trained, and how engaged and influential family members are in the school-system’s decision-making process. School leadership (i.e. directors) and Ministry of Education officials usually hold significant power in making decisions. The infrastructure available for students, and community members to influence policy is still quite weak.

Additionally, troubling inequities persist. Large percentages of children who come from low-income families, live in rural areas, and are part of ethnic/linguistic minorities continue to lag behind their peers. Approximately, 95% of the population nation-wide can read and write. However, for the rural population it decreases to 88% compared to almost 98% for those who live in urban areas. Similarly, indigenous’ subgroups report the lowest percentage of being able
to read and write at 84%, followed by afroecuadorian at 93%, white at 95% and mestizo at 96%. These disparities are evidenced in higher institutions’ enrollment and access to employment opportunities.

In 2014, Ecuador participated for the first time in the PISA-D test which was designed as a pilot program to encourage interested and motivated low and middle income countries to participate in OECD’s PISA. The overall aim of PISA-D was to collect data to develop robust and comprehensive collection instruments that capture countries’ unique experiences. Ecuadorian students who took PISA-D test scored well below the OECD average, positioning the country in the middle when compared to other Latin American countries. It is important to note that the sample also included students who were not enrolled in the education system.

Significant barriers impede rapid structural change in the education sector. There is high turnover of staff at the Ministry of Education, which disrupts the continuity of initiatives and oversight. In an attempt to drive results and embed evidence-based practices, teachers report an increased level of reporting and responsibilities which have contributed to growing tensions between them and Ministry of Education staff.

4. Learning Communities in Europe and Latin America

“Comunidades de Aprendizaje” or learning communities are an educational intervention that was pioneered in Europe in 1995, primarily Spain, in order to reduce absenteeism in low-income schools. Learning communities’ overarching goal is to improve how students learn and shift the way the entire school community interacts with one another in a more positive and productive way. In order to achieve this, learning communities consist of a variety of methods called “Actuaciones Educativas de Exito” or successful educational actions (SEA) in order to reach the complete social transformation of the school. Learning communities must also achieve seven fundamental principles: solidarity, egalitarian dialogue, transformation, cultural intelligence, sensory creation, overcoming differences and instrumental dimension.

The Community of Research on Excellence for All (CREA), a think tank from the University of Barcelona, has spearheaded the growth of SEAs. From 2006-2011, the initiatives were studied by the European’s Commission Project Include-ed. Includ-ed systematically analyzed educational strategies and best practices that aimed to overcome inequities and promote social cohesion. Armed with these strategies, CREA developed the learning communities model.

In order to determine learning communities’ impact, Include-ed then studied 22 case studies, including six longitudinal studies that evaluated centers over the course of 4 years. In 2010, they presented to the European Parliament that learning communities did indeed contribute towards promoting inclusion by centering and recognizing the talents of all students. Researchers also found that learning communities increased the sense of commitment from students, teachers, and family members and supported the growth and quality of educational

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1 The OECD conducts the PISA test through which it tests 15-year-old students from all over the world in reading, mathematics and science. The tests are designed to examine how well students master the subjects and can translate them into real-life situations as adults.
centers. It also created favorable conditions to reduce absenteeism and helped those who were at risk of abandoning. Specifically, Included-ed found strong evidence that learning communities significantly improved educational outcomes for immigrants and minority communities in Spain.  

Included-emphasized the use of *communicative methodology* to perform their evaluation, which ensures that those who are part of the study are given meaningful roles in the research project.  

Studies leveraged a mixed-methods approach by incorporating pre and post intervention surveys, in-depth interviews and the observation of classrooms. Other studies evaluated learning communities by comparing pre and post students’ academic performance, such as grades, enrollment rates and absenteeism. Within these studies, researchers did distinguish between measuring the frequency of participation and measuring the type, level and intensity of participation between various stakeholders such as family members and the school. For instance, the difference between recording increased attendance in meetings compared to assessing the level of influence in the decision-making process of the school. 

Since the inception of learning communities, there have been at least 50 studies conducted in English and 30 in Spanish that measure the effectiveness of the program by evaluating level of communication, belonging, inclusion and cohesion as well as the application of instructional practices.

### 5. Grupo Faro and Learning Communities in Ecuador

Grupo Faro is a think-tank based in Quito, Ecuador. The organization’s mission is to support an Ecuadorian state that is more efficient, equitable, non-discriminatory and democratic. To date, Grupo Faro has over 30 initiatives that seek to improve environmental, fiscal, education and public administration policies in a more transparent and accountable way.

In 2017, Grupo Faro introduced learning communities as a strategy to reduce the existing inequities in the education system. As such, they are the gatekeepers of its correct implementation, and conduct the monitoring and evaluation of the same. However, given funding constraints, Grupo Faro has been unable to employ staff in every school to monitor every time each SEA is carried out. Instead, they have focused on training key representatives within each school as well as Ministry of Education staff to implement learning communities and provide feedback. On a regional level, Instituto Natura, a think-tank based in Brazil has implemented learning communities in every country in Latin America. Instituto Natura has also conducted comprehensive research on learning communities and compiled best practices.

Learning communities in this context consist of a multi-stakeholder system comprised of students, teachers, school leaders, family members and Ministry of Education staff. All learning communities share in common that they place meaningful and constructive dialogue at their core in order to improve students’ academic performance, analytical skills, and overall improve the school’s social cohesion and school climate.

The model’s implementation blueprint allows for some flexibility as countries and individual schools implement it according to their specific needs and changing circumstances. For instance, in some cases, creating dedicated space for teachers to discuss their teaching
methodology is a priority. In other cases, dialogue among students, volunteers and teachers to promote higher analytical and comprehension skills is highlighted. In every case, learning communities are expected to work closely with the school community to foster greater participation in the decision-making process. Progress along these dimensions might vary significantly, school to school. In the long-term, learning communities are meant to *socially transform* the school, in all of the dimensions previously mentioned.

The Ministry of Education along with Grupo Faro initially selected 12 schools as part of the pilot programming in 2017. Shortly afterwards, Juan Montalvo, a school located in Manta, asked to be part of the pilot, bringing the total to 13. These institutions were located across two regions in the country, the coast and the Andean region. Both regions of the country have different school year timelines. For instance, educational institutions in the coast start their school year in April and end in January, while classes conducted in the Andean region begin in September and end in June. Schools that were selected for the pilot program vary in terms of urban, rural locations, elementary, middle and high school. Additionally, some schools identify as bilingual centers, and others as intercultural centers. Finally, schools that were part of the pilot program, committed to instating one SEA per week.

The *successful educational actions* implemented in Ecuador include:

- **Interactive Groups**: This intervention strengthens group work, cooperation and attention among students. It invites volunteers and teachers to the classroom to moderate and participate in small group activities for the students. The structure promotes dialogue that is characterized by acknowledging and respecting differences, and promoting emotional intelligence to resolve conflicts.
- **Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLG)**: Students are asked to read classic works of literature, and reflect on the readings by connecting to their own unique lived experience. It strives to improve vocabulary skills, and comprehension skills. Usually in lieu of social studies or language arts class.
- **Family Education**: It provides the platform for alumni, community members and family members to get involved in the school, and as such respond to the interests and needs of the community. It aims to increase the level of connectivity and engagement with the school. Existing educational practices are usually leveraged for this intervention, such as involving family members in dialogic literary gatherings.
- **Dialogical Pedagogical Training**: Teachers and staff are asked to read academic education articles or evidence-based education policy books. Consists of dedicated space for teachers and staff to meet on a monthly basis to discuss and reflect on key themes found in the readings. This intervention encourages teachers to connect to their unique teaching style and discuss any particular challenges incurred with their students with the group. This type of dedicated space and time for teachers did not exist before.
- **Mixed Commissions**: Opportunities for students, teachers, school leadership representatives and family members to discuss any emerging issues experienced in the school system. It is a platform to share ideas, learn from one another and find ways to solve these challenges together. While these spaces did exist before, learning communities aim to revive them and ensure communities’ voices are fully represented in the decision-making space.
• **Dialogical Model of Conflict Prevention and Resolution:** This intervention is a strategy to improve the co-existence of differences through egalitarian dialogue. The main mechanism to resolve conflicts should be arriving at consensus and discussing conflicts in a productive way. All SEAs feed into this intervention. Some institutions are overtly implementing it, while others have embedded it within other interventions.

In 2019, the agreement between the Ministry of Education and Grupo Faro shifting, altering their roles and responsibilities. Grupo Faro will no longer be solely responsible for the introduction and monitoring of learning communities in new communities. Instead, they will introduce the learning communities implementation process to designated staff from the Ministry of Education who will then replicate the model in more schools. Grupo Faro will still maintain their role as primary advisor to the 13 schools initially selected into the pilot program.

6. **Methods**

Learning communities have been replicated in a variety of countries, including many in South America over the past 5 years. However, implementing this model in other contexts represents some inherent challenges, including maintaining model fidelity.

Implementation fidelity has been studied extensively in the evaluation field. Given the multifaceted nature of fidelity, combined with the absence of a unified approach to fidelity across and within research disciplines, there are a variety of ways to understand fidelity as well as ways of assessing it. However, a frequently referenced comprehensive definition of fidelity distinguishes among the following:

- Adherence (Did the implementers do what was expected)
- Exposure (Did participants receive as much as expected)
- Quality of delivery (Did implementers perform activities in the manner expected?)
- Participant responsiveness (Did participants follow through as expected?)
- Program differentiation (Did the treatment condition differ from control condition as expected?)

While there are many studies that measure the effectiveness of learning communities, studies that focus on assessing the implementation fidelity of learning communities are rare, if any. This report assesses the implementation fidelity of learning communities in Ecuador to identify areas for improvement. These activities are important to do before the program is introduced in new schools and communities through the Ministry of Education.

In order to answer this question, I created a logic model, analyzed Grupo Faro’s current evaluation tools and conducted site visits in Quito and Manta. The logic model’s goal is to link core components to short, medium and long-term outcomes and explain the value of the program clearly to all audiences. It includes new indicators or the re-phrasing of existing ones, and contextualizes the desired outcome of “school’s social transformation”.

I assessed the extent to which the current evaluation tools capture changes in students’ behavioral and academic performance outcomes; teacher’s pedagogy and community participation. In some areas, I offered ways to strengthen each tool. Finally, I visited six schools
in Quito and 2 in Manta that have implemented SEAs since 2017. Similarly, I conducted 14 interviews, 2 with senior Ministry of Education officials, 2 with Grupo Faro education staff, 8 with teachers implementing learning communities in Quito and 2 with teachers implementing learning communities in Manta.

7. Grupo Faro’s Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of Learning Communities

At the beginning of the implementation process, Grupo Faro utilized site visits and built-in check-in points to assess progress. The technical team visited the schools involved and talked to the school directors, teachers, volunteers, and students to gain a deeper understanding of the status quo. Throughout the first year, this system allowed the technical team to identify strengths and areas of improvement. While Grupo Faro followed a structured plan of visits, institutions were able to ask for additional visits and/or guidance at any point during the process. Currently, a staff member from Grupo Faro visits schools on a monthly basis in the coast, and another staff member visits schools every two weeks in the Andean region. Staff observe the SEAs and offer personalized feedback.

Grupo Faro asked school leadership and teachers to self-evaluate through rubrics elaborated by Instituto Natura in an effort to monitor progress, identify barriers encountered and offer opportunities for reflection. Additionally, some schools require teachers to incorporate the SEAs in their weekly and monthly classroom plan submission and to share this with Grupo Faro as well.

Grupo Faro developed comprehensive tools to monitor learning communities in the Ecuador. In 2017, through their Attitude and Perceptions Survey, they collected baseline data for selected pilot schools. This survey was disseminated again in 2019. Surveys were differentiated by each stakeholder: teachers, students, school leaders and family members. Throughout this report, I’ll refer to “family members” as a stakeholder, however, it is important to note that the learning communities model assumes that this stakeholder includes family, volunteers and community members. In terms of grade levels, students grades 3rd through 12th were part of focus groups and took the surveys. Data was coded in STATA and descriptive statistics were used to analyze and compare changes by year.

In 2018, Grupo Faro asked schools to share quantitative data such as students’ attendance, grades in math, science and language arts, and average score on the Ser Bachiller. Ser Bachiller is a standardized, national entrance exam for higher education that measures students’ aptitudes and knowledge in four main core areas: math, science, language arts and social studies. The score is over 10 points (0-6.99 not approving; 7-7.99 elemental; 8-9.49 satisfactory; and 9.50-10 excellent).

Nation-wide, in 2018, rural schools located in the coast, scored on average 7.43, while urban schools scored slightly higher at 7.51. Schools in the pilot program located in the coast averaged 9, compared to schools located in the Andean region who scored an average 7.63. Nation-wide, INEVAL reported that 83% of those evaluated in 2018 scored over 7 points, placing pilot schools slightly higher than the middle nation-wide range.
In 2018, Grupo Faro also conducted focus groups, interviews with relevant stakeholders and an in-depth dialogic literary gathering evaluation (DLG). Data collected through the focus group has been coded and analyzed through Atlasti. Finally, Grupo Faro assessed the impact of dialogic literary gatherings by measuring students’ reading and comprehension skills. A school located in the Andean region was selected to participate in which the frequency of dialogic literary gatherings increased from twice a week to 4 times per week. After a month of “treatment”, students were asked to complete the standardized test to identify any changes.

All tools detailed above coalesce on four broad dimensions: changes in teaching and learning; in leadership; community participation and in conflict prevention and resolution. Within each dimension, Grupo Faro identified broad categories that apply to all stakeholders. These are identified in light blue in Graph 1. Perception of school climate, identified in yellow, is the only category that is reserved solely for students and family members. While the individual questions that feed into each category varies by stakeholder, each broad category and dimension is meant to provide commonality across stakeholders to analyze changes by component and on a system-level.

**Graph 1 Information Analysis Structure**

![Graph 1 Information Analysis Structure]

*Source: Adapted from Grupo Faro’s “Estructura del analisis de informacion”*
8. Analysis of Current Tools and Literature Review

Michael Scriven introduced the original distinction between formative and summative evaluations.\textsuperscript{xxii} Scriven’s distinction emphasizes the difference between evaluating program effectiveness and identifying implementation issues. Formative evaluations help researchers improve the program, and focuses on an analysis of program implementation.\textsuperscript{xxiii} Conversely, summative, focuses on whether the program worked the way researchers planned, and if it achieved its intended objectives.\textsuperscript{xxiv} While this distinction has been debated by others in the evaluation field, there seems to be consensus in that formative evaluations are meant to provide feedback and summative evaluations are meant to provide information regarding the effectiveness and worth of the program.\textsuperscript{xxv} Table 1 provides a succinct summary of the difference between both.

Table 1: Formative and Summative Evaluation Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formative Evaluation- Improve</th>
<th>Summative Evaluation- Prove</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides information that helps you improve your program. Generates periodic reports. Information can be shared quickly.</td>
<td>Generates information that can be used to demonstrate the results of your program to funders and the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focuses most on program activities, outputs and short-term outcomes for the purpose of monitoring progress and making mid-course corrections when needed.</td>
<td>Focuses on the program’s intermediate-term outcomes and impact. Although data may be collected throughout the program, the purpose is to determine the value and worth of a program based on results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful in bringing suggestions for improvement to the attention of the staff.</td>
<td>Helpful in describing the quality and effectiveness of your program by documenting its impact on participants and the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Bond, Boyd and Montgomery (1997) "Taking Stock: A Practical Guide to Evaluating your own Programs, Chapel Hill"

In order to fully assess, analyze and strengthen the current tools Grupo Faro has employed, I have centered this evaluation on 4 main questions.

Does the logic of the program reflect evidence-based theories of change that are relevant for this situation?

Grupo Faro has not developed a robust theory of change and logic model. Weiss emphasizes that assessing the implementation is a necessary condition to being able to evaluate the extent to which a program has achieved its intended outcomes.\textsuperscript{xxvi} Implementation evaluations can also examine the ways that existing organizational structures, processes, and cultures either facilitate or impede program implementation. Regardless of the type of evaluation question, the evaluation must be aligned to the theory of action. Theory of action is a statement designed to connect program goals and objectives to the intended outcomes of the program.\textsuperscript{xxvii}
It is important to include a logic model given that there could be multiple interpretations of the same program. Having divergent interpretations among program designers, implementers and researchers can be misleading, especially if this is not clear until after the implementation. Logic models are a systematic and visual way to present and share understanding of relationships among the resources to operate the program, activities, and changes/results hoped to achieve.xxviii

The learning communities educational model assumes that the SEAs will have a positive impact on the ways students learn, increasing their analytical and critical thinking skills, as well as their levels of engagement and sense of belonging and inclusion. Additionally, these feelings of inclusion and belonging will transcend across school leadership, teachers, family members and other community members. Finally, the model encourages shared decision-making across all stakeholders in the education community, increasing community and family participation.

Graph 2 visualizes this logic model. Each stakeholder: students, family members, school directors and teachers are involved in each SEA. Indicators are organized and color-coded in the short-term, medium-term and long-term. Short-term indicators are characterized by values like frequency, percentage rate, participation. Medium-term indicators capture changes in behavior, attitudes, and perceptions. Long-term indicators build upon medium-term indicators. Evidence that learning communities are achieving social transformation in the context that they are embedded in, could be seen through the interaction, and dynamics of all of these components working simultaneously in the long-term. Quantitative indicators offer contextualizing data that also feeds into the four broad dimensions. Finally, focus groups by stakeholder play an important role by gaining insight into the experience of the SEAs and the perceived change as a result of the SEAs.
Was the program implemented as intended?
Group Faro’s monitoring and evaluation process seeks to accomplish the following: xxix

- Identify the perceptions of the different education stakeholders in the 13 education centers before and during the implementation of learning communities.
- Create spaces for dialogue and self-evaluation for the entire education community regarding pedagogical practices, school climate, educational leadership and community participation through the synthesis of information.
- Monitor and evaluate the SEAs in order to replicate in other contexts.

The current tools provide detailed and ample information on how students are learning, instructors are teaching, family members interacting with the educational system and how stakeholders perceive each other. However, these tools do not tell us if the learning communities have been implemented as intended.

Was the program responsible for outcomes that actually occurred? Effectiveness or combination of environmental factors other than the program.

This question is best answered through a summative evaluation and a clear control group. For instance, the Attitudes’ and Perception Survey sheds light on perceptions of bullying and
aggression by stakeholder. In 2017, 87% of students reported that there were never any fights between students and teachers. In 2019, students reporting no fights increased to 93%. It is encouraging to identify that students involved in the pilot schools are reporting lower levels of aggression from 2017. However, the tools do not give us enough information that would lead us to believe that the program is responsible for these outcomes.

Did the program achieve its intended objectives?
Grupo Faro has collected data on the number of SEAs implemented, as well as the frequency of training opportunities offered to institutions. At the first level of implementation, Grupo Faro has been able to achieve the intended objective of rolling out learning communities, and engaging stakeholders (teachers, family members, students and school leadership) in implementing the program and attending training sessions. They have also been successful in creating spaces for dialogue and self-reflection. Indeed, in their final report to the Ministry of Education, Grupo Faro attests that they have reached their goal of implementing at least one component of learning communities, i.e educational interventions in the 13 pilot schools selected.

9. Site Visits and Interview Insights Discussion
During the site visits in December, I was able to observe dialogic literary gatherings, interactive groups and dialogic pedagogical trainings in eight schools. Generally, most schools implement SEAs on a weekly basis. Each SEA observed exhibited strong positive signs, such as students feeling empowered to discuss readings and connect to their lived experience and teachers identifying how innovative and powerful SEAs can be. Some teachers acknowledged that they find it valuable when the administration encourages or requires them to incorporate SEAs in their weekly and monthly planning activities. Conversely, many teachers shared in their interviews feeling overwhelmed with having yet another reporting mechanism for learning communities. Others didn’t see the difference between how they had been teaching previously and what learning communities fosters. Yet others, were not completely sold on the benefits of the same and opted to make it their lowest priority. In two schools at least 3-4 teachers did not lead the dialogic literary gatherings and interactive groups during the designated hours. This section discusses strengths, and areas for improvement for each SEA observed.

Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLG)
The dialogic literary gatherings provided the space and platform for students to share ideas, participate fully and lose any associated fears with expressing themselves. There are various layers to achieving the full and successful implementation of DLG:

- Students are participating, focus is on reading the paragraph.
- Students provide an opinion on liking or not the paragraph, and why.
- Students analyze the book by connecting the passage to a contemporary event or their own lived experience.
- Another student intervenes, builds upon an idea, and dialogue is formed.
- If someone disagrees, they can respectfully agree to disagree.

Ideally, students should be comfortable with elevating and refining their critical and analytical skills and connecting to their own lived experience. This was particularly salient in the
high school group, but not observed with the younger students. The number of students per class (sometimes over 40) created an additional challenge for this intervention.

The successful implementation of DLG’s are highly dependent on teachers’ motivation, school leadership’s commitment, the book selected and the use of moderators. Some teachers understood the facilitation of dialogic literary gatherings slightly differently. Encouraging the participation of all students while providing prompts and resources for students to connect to their own lived experiences seemed really challenging. Grupo Faro usually provides feedback to teachers right after they facilitate an educational intervention. While important to not let too much time pass, providing feedback right after, usually in the classroom while the students are waiting, does create some challenging dynamics.

Grupo Faro’s staff shared that building strong relationships with school leadership and administration is a key priority for them. Particularly since school leadership’s high level of buy-in, commitment and enthusiasm for SEAs, seem to have led to overall strong positive results throughout the institution. Similarly, they have also noticed that teachers who are invested in the SEAs and believe in its impact, are really excited to continue to implement it, regardless of the challenges and difficulties encountered.

While the implementation guidelines allow for some flexibility during the process, it does contains specific steps for each SEA and offers a clear roadmap on the correct implementation of the same. The implementation guidelines for dialogic literary gathering, for instance, require that the book be a classical work of literature. To this end, Grupo Faro donated classical works of literature to schools. However, few are using them, instead using the books that the education system in the country provides.

During my site visits, one of the elementary school classrooms was reading a book provided by the government. This one in particular was about immigration. The main character moves in with her grandparents because her mother went to Spain in search of better economic opportunities for their family. Some students were able to speak about their own experiences with immigration and it sparked a lively discussion. However, there were also moments in other classrooms, where the books used were not ripe with opportunities to fully discuss and connect to lived experiences, therefore obscuring the potential of the intervention.

Moderators are a key component of the success for dialogic literary gatherings. The younger students assuming this role, adhere to a very strict moderating role by limiting themselves to taking note of students who want to participate and calling on them, without offering their comments or reflection. The high school students did push the limits of this rule, by empowering themselves and their peers in offering comments, asking follow-up questions and overall encouraging discussion. To this end, the role of the teacher, in encouraging students to move beyond the reading of the passage is critical. This was especially highlighted in the elementary and middle school classrooms.

Interactive groups

Through my own interviews, and previous Grupo Faro led focus groups, teachers strongly encourage this intervention and identify it as an innovative practice that encourages
students to connect on a deeper level with adults. They also report how empathy between parents and instructors has increased, as parents become much more aware of the difficulties and challenges present in managing classrooms. Teachers report that parents’ levels of motivation, connectivity and community have also increased as a result.

During my visit, I was able to observe one interactive group. However, the role and set up of interactive groups came up constantly during the school leadership and teacher interviews. In general, interactive groups show potential, while facing significant challenges. Some barriers often identified and mentioned included working parents’ time constraints and availability to participate. Similarly, teachers discussed that recruiting parents is difficult, including making sure multiple members of students’ families are able to participate at various times. Finally, they shared that the parents of students with behavioral issues seem to be the ones least able to participate, even though their presence might signify notable improvements in the students’ behavior and overall classroom dynamics.

Family members need to be supported better when participating in and facilitating interactive groups. In the interactive group I observed, the family members were unclear on what to do, and limited themselves to stand next to the groups of students. While there is some benefit of having the presence of family members in the classroom, this exponentially increases when they have clear guidelines on how to support the classroom activities.

Additionally, some family members have not gone through a formalized education. A few school staff shared that some family members might be really intimidated by the idea of helping students academically. While the intervention is designed for all members to feel valued and contribute regardless of socio-economic status, education level, etc; it is still important for teachers and leaders to reiterate and emphasize to volunteers, community members and family members that their participation is valuable and impactful.

**Dialogic Pedagogical Training**

Through the December interviews, teachers identified that embedding this intervention into their weekly routines, and developing outside reading habits was a positive change. At the same time, they did acknowledge that finding the time to do this in addition to their other responsibilities was really challenging. However, they still found it helpful and beneficial in the long-run.

According to previous Grupo Faro led interviews and focus groups, dialogic pedagogical trainings fostered community among teachers who didn’t think they had anything in common before. In a couple of dialogical pedagogical trainings that I observed, teachers discussed how conflict prevention and resolution strategies were unclear and confusing. Furthermore, they were frustrated at the sometimes conflicting advice from leadership (school administrators, Ministry of Education staff) and parents on how to support students who are undergoing difficult family and life situations. Indeed, most of the schools are located in predominantly low-income areas that exhibit high levels of violence. Finally, consistent with previous interviews, and throughout site visits, teachers reflected that the amount of work, reporting and accountability measures are too overwhelming and distracting from the core of the work that they would like to be doing.
Mixed Commissions

In Manta, I observed a mixed commission that was made up of mostly teachers, the school director, some family members, and one student. There seemed to be great rapport between all individuals leading me to believe that they have been meeting for some time and really respect and appreciate one another. During this particular meeting, they were discussing the prevalence of drugs in school, concerning students’ behavior and their upcoming move to another location. When the earthquake hit the country in 2016, this school moved to a temporary location until the city rebuilt and it was safe to move back. In 2019, the Ministry of Education approved their new permanent location. The most salient item on the agenda on this particular day, was to discuss non-negotiables with relevant Ministry of Education authorities in terms of the logistics involved in the move as well as the new building’s details. Some of these items included increased security for the school and covered basketball courts. Grupo Faro’s staff member was integral in helping the commission organize their ideas and articulate their next steps strategy.

While mixed commissions show substantial potential and promise, there are structural barriers in place that hinder their success. For instance, even if school leadership is highly receptive to the mixed commissions’ recommendations, policies on a district and region level might slow or even stop their progress.

Interviews with Senior Ministry of Education Officials

I interviewed two senior officials in the coast, one representing the district and another representing the zone level. One of the officials emphasized that improving academic performance is his main overarching goal and identified that SEAs are tools to help schools achieve this goal. He also shared that his team is also interested in finding innovative ways to improve teachers’ motivation. His policy advisor also recognized that SEAs are most successful when they are fully embedded, and harmonized within the academic planning that teachers submit to their supervisors. The rubrics are necessary in order to comply with Ministry of Education requirements. Overall, Ministry of Education officials in the coast were highly supportive, excited and engaged with implementing learning communities. Both officials cited the impact of the learning communities in other contexts and how extensively it’s been studied in Europe.

10. Expansion of Learning Communities

Given that the program will expand through the Ministry of Education, it is important to clearly identify the moments that present the most challenges to ensure the correct implementation of the program consistently across schools and communities. Grupo Faro has identified the following challenges already:

- Local higher education institutions can play a pivotal role, but there is a weak relationship with administration across regions.
- Many public schools have dual school schedules with different teachers in each block. Therefore, it is necessary to facilitate space for all teachers (morning and afternoon) to participate in the dialogic pedagogical training sessions. There also seems to be a lack of participation for teachers in specific disciplines such as math and science.
• Teachers report not having a strong reading routine (outside of required school activities), therefore, the dialogic pedagogical trainings can be especially burdensome.

Taking these barriers into account, along with the data collected during this research project, these are the considerations must be at the forefront as learning communities expand to new schools:

- School leadership’s presence will positively impact the implementation of SEAs. Therefore, their support, and commitment is critical.
- Feedback after SEAs must be a built-in formalized process, preferably the same day of observations, but not right after class in front of students.
- Dialogic pedagogical trainings can be a powerful vehicle for teachers to discuss the challenges encountered when implementing interactive groups and dialogic literary gatherings.
- The short, medium and long-term goals are interconnected and important to distinguish. There are various layers of implementation within each SEA.
- Trainings that focus on providing information and tools on how to organize effectively and advocate in the education system can be instrumental in elevating mixed commissions’ influence and power.
- Training that focuses on harmonizing and streamlining the requirements from the Ministry of Education with the SEAs can be helpful in reducing the administrative burden for teachers and school leaders. Teachers and leadership constantly mentioned how learning communities show potential, but represent a lot of extra work.
- Local higher education institutions play an important role in recruiting and supporting a pipeline of volunteers to support with community engagement, program implementation, data collection and analysis.

11. Recommendations
As the literature suggests, there is a difference between evaluation instruments that aim to measure how a program has been implemented, and those that measure the effectiveness and impact of the program. It is recommended for Grupo Faro to focus on strengthening their formative evaluation, data used to improve the program. In order to do so, current tools can be restructured, and additional quantitative data collected. The final recommendation includes a summative evaluation by developing a long-term impact study.

1. Restructure existing tools
Grupo Faro can articulate tools that capture the progress and experience of “learning communities” rather than focusing on changes in behavior and attitudes over time that might be attributed to the program. Grupo Faro should focus on the formative evaluation, especially as it moves to the next stage in replicating the program through the Ministry of Education. Formative
evaluations should be periodic and reported/shared quickly to improve efforts. In order to do this, I recommend the following three strategies:

First, the existing tools can be strengthened by linking the Attitudes’ and Perception Survey to focus group questions that ask about the experience of SEAs from the moment they are implemented in the school. Some suggested questions include:

- **All stakeholders:**
  - Tell me about your first experience with the SEAs. Has your opinion changed since then?
- **For students:**
  - What specific part of the SEAs do you like the most?
  - What do you observe around you when SEAs are being implemented?
  - Can you tell me a story about a SEA implemented in class? What stands out to you about it?
- **For teachers and directors:**
  - When identifying challenges and barriers in implementing the SEAs, what strategies do you use to mitigate them?
  - Walk me through a typical day implementing a SEA.
  - How do you incorporate learning communities’ strategies into your daily teaching routine?
  - How have you incorporated family members’ needs and wants into your decisions?
- **For family members/volunteers/community members:**
  - Can you explain SEAs to me?
  - Tell me a story about a SEA you were involved in.
  - Has your child talked to you about the SEAs at home? What do they say?
  - When you disagree with a decision made in the school system, what avenues are available for you to advocate for change?
  - Have you been involved in these platforms? Tell me about your experience and the change (or lack thereof) you were advocating for.
  - How does the community influence the decision-making process at school?

Second, include questions that gather information about Grupo Faro’s and the Ministry of Education’s level of support, training and resources to carry out SEAs successfully. These
questions will allow evaluators to gain insight on any gaps between trainings, feedback and implementation of SEAs. Possible questions include:

- Did you feel you had the necessary information and resources to carry out SEAs successfully?
- If not, what would you have wished you knew before implementing SEAs?

Third, it is recommended to include questions that assess model fidelity and how SEAs are being implemented. These fall into four broad categories: adherence, exposure, quality of delivery and participant responsiveness. The rubrics provided by Instituto Natura fulfill this role, a complete list can be found in Appendix A. The information that these rubrics provide serves as valuable guides to provide feedback, and identify trends within and across schools. Given that it is difficult to complete these rubrics while observing each SEA, I propose instating this activity every 2 months. Similarly, it might be helpful to prioritize information on understanding the underlying factors that hinder participation, and that are creating or exacerbating confusion. Some rephrased and prioritized questions include:

- **Dialogic pedagogical trainings:**
  - Are teachers reading assigned literature?
  - Are all teachers participating?
  - What barriers hinder their participation?
- **Dialogic literary gatherings:**
  - Are teachers moderating and facilitating DLGs for it be as successful as it can be?
  - Are students in the DLG connecting readings to lived experience?
  - Are all students participating fully? Which students are not and why?
- **All SEAs:**
  - Are teachers implementing SEAs with the recommended methodology? What pieces are missing, why?
  - Are school leaders supporting SEAs?
  - Are family members understanding their role and participating fully during the SEAs?

### 2. Comprehensive quantitative data

While schools find it challenging to disseminate quantitative data to Grupo Faro, it is very important to keep collecting data on grades, absenteeism rates and Ser Bachiller scores. Other quantitative data that Grupo Faro can consider collecting include students’ gender, number of behavioral incidents, mental health incidence, number of students, geographic location, socio-economic status and percentage of linguistic/ethnic minorities. This information allows evaluators to contextualize each school in a more complete way. Similarly, devoting resources to build an automatic tool that calculates percentage rates and change across the various indicators can streamline the process to collect and analyze data. Given that data is currently stored in an excel sheet, the shift can increase easyability and efficiency for schools and staff to plug information and analyze trends quickly. A summary of the quantitative indicators currently collected along with recommendations on how to strengthen them can be found in Appendix B.
3. Long-term impact study

There is an opportunity to conduct a quasi-experimental study with schools that have implemented learning communities compared with those that have not. Schools in Ecuador are organized in zones, districts and provinces. For instance, some schools are located in zone 4 in Manabi and zone 9 in Pichincha. Grupo Faro can leverage this set-up by comparing schools that have not implemented learning communities with those that have, across the 4 main dimensions all tools share in common: learning and teaching, leadership, conflict resolution and community participation. It would be important to control factors such as socio-economic status, parents’ schooling, urban versus rural, teachers’ level of schooling, and school administration level of turnover. This type of study has the potential to shed further information on the impact of learning communities on various types of schools, teachers’ instruction, students’ learning and overall community participation. Additionally, strengthening the formative evaluation components will position Grupo Faro to be able to carry out this type of summative evaluation effectively.
References:

- Informe Final Comunidades de Aprendizaje Abril 2019
- Ministerio de Educación y Grupo Faro Convenio 2017
- Ministerio de Educación y Grupo Faro Convenio 2019
- Formacion en Comunidades de Aprendizaje Modulo 1 introduccion y bases científicas de las Comunidades de Aprendizaje


- Formative evaluation of the exploring life curriculum: Year two implementation fidelity findings. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Association for Research in...

12. Appendix A Instituto Natura’s Rubrics (English translation)

Dialogic Literary Gatherings
- Does the DLG meet regularly? (weekly, every two weeks, monthly)?
- Is the book used a literature classic?
- Is the book adequate for the age group?
- Did everyone have access to the book before the DLG?
- Did the moderator ensure that all students that wanted to participate had an opportunity to do so?
- Did the moderator organize the DLG in a way that was clear?
- Was the moderator impartial during the DLG?
- Did the moderator ensure the DLG became a discussion and running commentary?
- Did students do the readings beforehand?
- Did students relate the reading to their lived experience?
- Did students have the space to talk about what they think?
- Did students respect the ideas expressed by their peers?
- Did at least 40% of students participate with commentaries?

Interactive Groups
Groups
- Were groups defined by the teacher?
- Was there diversity in the group of students (gender, culture, learning)?
Volunteers
- Did volunteers receive recommendations on how to participate in the activity?
- Were there volunteers in every group?
- Did volunteers act effectively in the group, helping with the interaction of the same?
- Did volunteers meet with the teacher to do an evaluation of activities or participation of students?

Activities
- Were the activities worked in the classroom before?
- Were there rotation of activities?
- Did all students perform all activities?
- What was the level of difficulty? Was it a challenging activity but possible to complete?
- Were students able to do all activities 15-20 minutes?

Students
- Were students were grateful for volunteers’ presence?
- Did students interact with volunteers?
- Did students work collaboratively, helping each other?

Teachers
- Did the teacher present volunteers and/or explain their role at the beginning of class?
- During the interactive groups, did the teacher help students who were struggling and resolved any students’ questions?
Family Education

- Are meetings regular?
- Were trainings defined by community advocacy and needs?
- Are trainings prioritized in terms of instrumental learning (i.e computer skills, language arts, reading, writing, math)?
- Are trainings offered during times that favor most parents and adults?
- Did participation reach organizers’ expectations?
- Are participants regular or is there diversity within the same?

## 13. Appendix B: Quantitative Indicators Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quantitative Indicators currently collected</th>
<th>Implementation fidelity indicators and recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational interventions implemented</td>
<td>1,161 SEAs implemented</td>
<td>Data broken down by school and geographic location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measured by self-evaluation rubrics and</td>
<td>498 interactive groups</td>
<td>Data broken down by % of family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class curriculum planning.</td>
<td>596 dialogic literary gatherings (DLG)</td>
<td>represented and diversity of the same (ex: mom,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>644 dialogic pedagogical training</td>
<td>dad, grandparents, siblings, etc; is it the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>82% teachers have participated in dialogic</td>
<td>family member that usually comes?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pedagogical training</td>
<td>How often have teachers participated? Consider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72% of teachers have done interactive groups</td>
<td>creating thresholds such as: once, 1-2 times,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78% of teachers have participated in the</td>
<td>consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>instruction of pedagogy discussion</td>
<td>Expand on how teachers understand interactive groups,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>73% dialogic pedagogical training has their</td>
<td>what percentage implements it as it is intended?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>school director present</td>
<td>Expand on how teachers understand pedagogy discussion,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>what percentage participates/engages fully?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What types of themes are most salient?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>13 initial introduction seminars to school</td>
<td>Include level of commitment, support and buy-in from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>leadership, teachers, volunteers</td>
<td>school leadership (including school director)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 seminars second year to reintroduce</td>
<td>Design pre and post attitudes and level of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learning communities to pilot schools</td>
<td>survey, share results. This can include a validated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>attitude scale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provide follow-up trainings around curriculum planning,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and opportunities to apply knowledge immediately.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
32 seminars that focused on the implementation of learning communities. Workshops included conflict prevention and resolution, and ways to embed learning communities in the Ministry of Education requirements and class curriculum planning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online training modules hosted by Institute Natura</th>
<th>1245 people (teachers, students, family members) with at least 1 module approved</th>
<th>Data broken down by school, zone, and stakeholder. Include data on how level of knowledge has changed as a result of trainings.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4443 people approved all 8 modules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Informe Mineduc, data collected by Grupo Faro 2017-2018 first two columns

https://www.institutonaturaleza.org.br/

Results from Grupo Faro data


Key Concepts and issues in program evaluation and performance management.

Ibid.


Using Logic Models to bring together planning, evaluation and action. Logic Model Development Guide. W.K. Kellogg Foundation. 2004

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Grupo Faro Mineduc Report 2018