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PLIE: Improving the Capacity of School Leaders in Argentina

Once people in schools see the road ahead, it is hard for them to turn back.

—Isolda Calsina, Minister of Education, Jujuy Province, Argentina (2017)

Looking at the Road Ahead

Sitting in the brand new headquarters of the Varkey Foundation in Argentina (“VFA”) in late November 2017, Agustin Porres, VFA’s Country Director, marveled at the scale and the pace of the work VFA had accomplished in a mere eighteen months. With barely any organization in the country in early 2016, VFA built a team of 70 people distributed among a small central team in Buenos Aires and four regional centers in the provinces of Jujuy, Salta, Mendoza and Corrientes. In partnership with the National Ministry of Education and the four provinces, VFA trained over 2,000 school leaders in the past year. Provincial cohorts of 100 to 150 participants arrived in two-person school teams made up of a principal and member of the school’s staff. Each cohort completed a six-week immersive cycle of learning that brought the latest research on leadership and driving change to the participants. Each school team also developed an innovation project for their school. These projects presented an incredible opportunity for VFA but one that also came with anxiety for the young organization. For the work of VFA to be about impact – an ambition Porres and his team shared with the Varkey Foundation international leadership, with national and provincial leaders and the participants themselves – the outcome of those projects mattered tremendously. The outcome of the innovation projects would either validate or leave open to question the assumptions about leading, learning and driving change that underpinned the hopes of so many.

Porres looked back and pondered the road ahead. Had VFA and its partners calibrated sufficiently what it would take to transform the participants’ leadership practices and the capacities they needed to drive change in their schools? Now that they understood how school leaders and teachers in Argentina experienced the challenge of driving change on the ground, what would it take to support that work of innovation once the school teams returned home to their own schools? Who would now provide that support? What changes would be required in the structures, processes and people making up the systems supporting those schools? What would the road ahead look like?

Professor Andrés A. Alonso and Senior Project Manager Matthew A. Tallon of the PELP project prepared this case in conjunction with the Certificate of Advanced Education Leadership (CAEL) professional education program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. PELP cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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The Genesis of the Partnership

The partnership emerged in 2016 from a spirit of innovation percolating within the federal Ministry of Education, from a strong belief among some provincial ministers that improving the capacity for leadership among school principals was essential to their goal of institutional improvement, and from Varkey Foundation leaders' entrepreneurial drive and mission, both abroad and in Argentina. Back then, the National Minister of Education Esteban Bullrich had felt that "education has to have a global view... it cannot just be about local solutions." While the Argentinian system had once been a model for others in Latin America, it had grown stale and failed to actualize its aims as it shifted its policy directives over time. The system "had fallen asleep, while others had moved ahead fast." When he visited classrooms, Bullrich saw learning that reflected a past age: "The education system is like an old car that you keep on upgrading. But we've left that old car behind and jumped into a spaceship that we're building from scratch." Looking for examples of innovation abroad, he admired the Varkey Foundation's global reach and its focus on the importance of the teacher.¹ How could he bring lessons learned abroad about leadership to Argentina?

The country lacked an institutional framework of accepted competencies for leadership, as well as systems for the development and ongoing support for leaders linked by those competencies. (See **Exhibit 1.**) The National Ministry team understood these gaps, which dovetailed with its work on the national plan to train teachers and other educators.² Mercedes Miguel, Secretary of Innovation and Education Quality at the National Ministry, saw principals and school leaders as key actors who could enable or constrain the working of the planned reforms. "We've had laws and resolutions that are still in the books but no one pays attention to... or others misinterpret... Many things are a pretext for what's not working but it is the human capital of leaders and teachers, people who often limit themselves through an absence of confidence and faith, that get in the way of innovation." The Ministry team saw burdens to that human capital in a long-standing culture of bureaucratic compliance with both the federal government and the provinces. Building the capacity of educators--not only principals but also supervisors and teachers--emerged as a keystone of the new reforms. An important goal was to redirect school leaders' focus and capacity to support teaching and learning in classrooms, away from managerial or administrative tasks. "Redefining the task of leadership for principals and supervisors with a view to pedagogy and leading learning," Miguel explained, "was a new discourse in the country." The size of the education system—24 provinces, 54,000 schools, with varying levels of resources and capacity—added enormous operational and political complexity to the difficulty of operationalizing this new vision. The federal and provincial ministries would need new partners to help create the new approaches and institutions it envisioned, and the work with those partners would need to move fast to catalyze the push for innovation across a diverse country, as well as to take advantage of the political moment.

In the spring of 2016, the president of Argentina, Ing. Mauricio Macri, attended the World Economic Forum's Annual Summit at Davos, Switzerland, for the first time, and met Varkey Foundation leaders Sunny Varkey, the foundation's founder, and Vikas Pota, its CEO, to learn and discuss new approaches to education. The president invited representatives of the foundation to travel to Buenos Aires and meet with leaders of the National Ministry of Education, including Esteban Bullrich. Early on, the prospective partners agreed that the focus of the partnership would be on the development of principals, especially incumbent principals. What that meant was unclear. Since under the existing federal governance model for education the National Ministry set direction and policy while the provinces shaped execution, any agreement would require assent by partner provinces, as well as local help in facilitating and supporting the work that the Varkey Foundation would do on the ground. The National Ministry would fund the tuition costs of the program for four provinces over the next three years. The provinces, however, controlled time, people and building, and needed to carry the hidden

operational costs—transportation, facilities, the participants’ time and the coverage gaps left in the sending schools. That, plus the expected ripple effects of the program on the rest of the provincial systems, required that the National Ministry team look for provincial partners who clearly saw the purpose, embraced the goals, and agreed with the perceived need gaps in the system that the partnership meant to address.

Two events shaped the eventual footprint and development of the partnership. First, Esteban Bullrich reached out to Isolda Calsina, recently appointed Minister of Education in the province of Jujuy, who had earlier appealed to him for support in bringing innovative practices to one of the poorest and most isolated provinces in the country, to be the first provincial partner. The early contributions of Calsina and her team clarified the eventual characteristics of the partnership’s work across all four partner provinces. Second, to lead in what was an uncharted way to operationalize its mission, the foundation hired Agustin Porres to lead VFA. Porres had local experience in both the education and policy circles, having worked for Esteban Bullrich in the Ministry of Education in Buenos Aires City and for the national government in the social security administration. Porres, who had just spent two years studying policy at Georgetown University, immediately brought a sense of agency, contacts, local understanding, and a global perspective about education reform. He had initially reached out to the Varkey Foundation about a global fellowship in education, but the foundation, already deep in conversation with leaders in Argentina, saw him as necessary for its new venture in the nascent partnership. The negotiations with Calsina, coupled with the hiring of Porres, set the footprint for both the operationalizing of PLIE—the Program on Leadership and Innovation in Education—in Argentina and sharpened the certainty of its mission.

The Footprint and the Logic for the Footprint

The early conversation between the Varkey Foundation leadership and the Jujuy provincial leadership team helped define how the larger national aspirations were supposed to interact with the local needs and the operational realities of the provinces engaged in PLIE. Mercedes Miguel understood that real transformation required that the “best way of transforming the reality of education was in the hands of system actors.” The program needed to target incumbent leaders who were early in their careers in order to equip them with the tools they would need to be effective leaders. It required “intensive immersion” – taking principals away from the normal daily routine. But there was also a larger, transformational purpose. Using the football (American soccer) analogies that peppered conversation in Argentina, Miguel felt that there was a need “to step on the ball, raise our heads, look at the other players, and ask, what is happening and what are we going to do about it?” PLIE hoped to provide an opportunity to not only develop school leaders but also influence the larger local contexts of their education systems.

Isolda Calsina thought similarly. A lawyer and advocate, new to education but with vast experience and understanding of complex political and operational systems, she saw incoherence, enormous fragmentation and isolation in the local system of schools. Most provincial schools functioned in half-day sessions, meaning that principals struggled to find instructional time to serve the needs of their students, especially in higher grades where schools experienced an exit of students and a glut of teachers. Teachers, who were paid poorly, used the half-day structure to work in different schools and programs, leading to the coinage of the phrase “taxi teacher” as part of the lexicon of the trade. With so little available time and strong unions protecting the teachers’ working conditions and the boundaries of authority for their poorly paid members, principals struggled to find space to develop the capacity of their teams, let alone develop a sense of their institutional mission. The preparation of principals did not equip them for the enormity of their challenge, and the selection process had no

relationship to prior evidence of effectiveness; seniority ruled. In the past, principals had qualified for appointments through academic competitions (“*concursos*”). But the skills tested in the *concursos* were pencil and paper exercises—not demonstrations of capacity in action, nor evaluations to guide the choices. In both Jujuy and Salta, the second partner province, there had been decade long gaps between *concursos*. Analia Berruezo, Minister of Education in Salta province, who unlike Calsina had been a former principal and provincial supervisor, saw the deficiencies in principal preparation and selection as grave obstacles to improvement. The lack of preparation for the tasks of leading schools, the irrelevance of capacity for the appointment of principals, and the absence of supports for principals were her central rationales for bringing PLIE to Salta. Principals entered the profession unready, and then they learned in isolation. The work of principal supervisors centered on ensuring compliance with existing regulations and access to operational tools, not the development of capacity to lead learning or improve academic outcomes. Both Isolda Calsina and Analia Berruezo lamented principals’ isolation from each other: principals working in different levels of schooling seldom met or communicated with each other. Rural, suburban and urban or “center” schools functioned in different worlds. Principals blamed the challenges in their schools on societal ills, the students’ poor preparation in previous schools or political favoritism that affected access to resources and programs.

Early on in the development of the program, Calsina asked for the program to bring together educators in the different levels and geographic areas of the Jujuy provincial system, an idea that later became part of the footprint of the program in the other three provinces. There was early agreement on the academic components. Varkey first engaged an international expert to design the content: six modules drawing from the research on leadership and on leading for innovation; four would focus on specific domains of competence and two would cut across the content domains. Agustin Porres, the provincial team and the National Ministry then whittled down the initial proposal from a ten-week program to six weeks, as a concession to the operational needs of schools. A practice of deferring to the provinces on which schools and leaders would participate took hold. Calsina and later Berruezo both shifted the intention to focus on younger incumbent principals in the initial proposal and opened the selection to people at different stages of their careers.

Porres, under pressure to launch PLIE right away, sought partners at this stage to revisit the original design and content of the program in partnership with the province. What made the most sense? How could they make the experience relevant to the educators’ contexts? What was most consistent with the theory of action about change that the content itself preached? EDUCERE, an organization that supported leadership development across the country, for example, became a key partner in reshaping the curriculum and in the “Argentinization” of PLIE. Early hires then began to influence the shape and delivery of the program. Graciela Calzada, a highly respected former teacher and principal in Jujuy, became the first local center coordinator, bringing connections and knowledge of local actors who could function as facilitators and tutors. Fernando Giménez Zapiola, then a practicing principal in a highly regarded private dual language school in Buenos Aires, came aboard as a consultant and facilitator on the technology and innovation strand in Jujuy, and became influential in rethinking the pedagogical delivery of the content both there and in the other provinces. EDUCERE and these early collaborators expanded the training program’s syllabus to include Latin American authors, activities, examples, and expanded references to the Argentine context. Magdalena Zorraquin, the second employee hired by Varkey in Argentina, later described the revised syllabus as having done away with a perception of bias in the original conception toward “business” approaches.

The early process of collaboration saw one significant shift from the original conversations and proposal: The composition of the participants shifted from just principals (and potentially supervisors) to school teams. Every school sent a team of two: a principal and a key member of his or her staff. The shift to partners obeyed a first principle of driving change: change has to take place among diverse

perspectives. It has an essential social nature. There is a need to move away from the heroic solo leader of the organization toward the collaborative workings of the team. For the culture of their organizations to change, principals needed to rethink their practice from command and control to collaboration and team building. It was imperative, then, for teachers to participate in the program.

That early process gave clear shape to the pedagogical approach of the program to a workshop model, with an emphasis on case study analysis, problem solving as a group, and collaboration or meaningful “encounter” among the participants. Participants worked in groups that bridged hierarchy, grade levels, geography, types of programs and schools. The morning sessions were about content and engagement. The afternoons focused upon individual teams working on specific problems of practice. Those problems of practice informed the innovation projects. Early insight about the importance of the innovation project obeyed a second principle of driving change. As Porres and Giménez Zapiola later noted, the work has to be real, it has to be about impact, and it has to provide a tangible course of action to rally participants to further problem solve once they return to their schools. (See **Exhibit 2**.)

In October of 2016, Porres launched the first cohort in Jujuy Province. National elections were on the horizon. It was important to launch the program ahead of any political changes and any politicization of its potential early struggles. The new elections saw an end to Esteban Bullrich’s tenure as the national Minister of Education. President Macri’s support for the partnership gave cover to the new minister, Alejandro Finocchiaro, who also saw great promise in the nascent partnership. Mercedes Miguel remained in her role in the National Ministry leading the national project for education reform. But for Agustin Porres, for Varkey Foundation leaders, and for provincial leaders like Isolda Calsina and Analia Berruezo, the future of PLIE depended upon its success and credibility among its participants and on its impact on the participating schools.

The Guiding Team and the PLIE Participants

The key to improve or to revise the program is the team – we need to incorporate others and to listen to those who are doing the work.

—Agustin Porres, Country Director of VFA (2017)

VFA followed the launch of PLIE in Jujuy in late 2016 with successive launches in three other provinces—Salta, Corrientes and Mendoza—in 2017. Each launch entailed building a local, provincial team that could deliver on the footprint of PLIE, while at the same time remain flexible enough to respond to the differences among the provinces, to differences among each successive cohort in each province, and to the individual needs of the PLIE participants. The footprint remained the same in each province: Every cohort participated in a six-week, immersive curriculum, tied together by six content strands, that was consistent across all provinces. PLIE participants came in teams of two except in the case of very small rural schools. The participants met in mixed groups (different schools, levels, locations) in the morning to study the content as problem-solvers, led by local facilitators and tutors. The physical organization of each center pushed for engagement and the loss of hierarchy: the centers were located in schools, some operating with children learning in nearby classrooms. The participants sat alongside round tables, and the facilitator was seldom at the head of the room. In the afternoon, participants met as individual school teams to work on a culminating innovation project, with access to other teams working in the same rooms. Each province, however, implemented subtle changes that challenged the coherence of the program. The selection process of the participants varied. The participation of supervisors varied as well. The context, and with the differences in context the responses to aspects of the program, varied as well. The expansion of PLIE—the increase in scale from one to four provinces—therefore brought organizational challenges of coherence and differentiation.

The original guiding team in Jujuy had been Agustín Porres as the sole VFA employee, working closely with provincial partners and external consultants, with Varkey Foundation staff from abroad providing guidance and ongoing feedback—a relationship of close thought-partnering and support with foundation leaders abroad that continued as VFA matured. Magdalena Zorraquin then came aboard the Varkey staff to provide operational and logistical support, and she remained with the organization as a connector of all things PLIE-related. Fernando Giménez Zapiola shifted his role from a facilitator for the first cohort in Jujuy to that of VFA's lead academic officer, working closely with local coordinators and facilitators to ensure coherence across the local centers. Carolina Giménez joined the young organization later when a need became apparent for the guiding team to understand better the challenges PLIE participants faced in implementing the innovation projects once they returned to their sites. Throughout the first year and the multiple provincial launches, the young guiding team organization worked virtually and also met in informal spaces or in the provinces “where the work happened,” as every member of the guiding team stated in separate interviews. The guiding leadership team remained composed of a handful of people, even as the organization moved into permanent space in Buenos Aires in November of 2017.

Magdalena Zorraquin remembered the experience of the guiding team in those early months as both exhilarating and uncertain. “We did not have a structure to meet every need ... the structures were emerging as we understood the needs ... We would do something and then we would look back and say, if we had talked to these people, if we had known more about what was happening in the individual schools, with computers, with teachers, with supervisors....” Zorraquin remarked on the impressive cohesion of the guiding team during the early months, even amidst uncertainty: “We were all doing parts of everything, and it was too much and we were taking stabs at things ... but we all understood why and had an enormous sense of purpose.” She was now wary, looking ahead, about the guiding team's ability to maintain that cohesion: team members now had separate tasks. It would be difficult to keep that sense of the whole that the guiding team had had at the start.

The young team traveled incessantly, first to meet with provincial partners, then to set up the logistical infrastructure of the local centers, and finally to hire the local facilitation teams. The guiding team members then continued to travel to ensure that the local teams understood the VFA's vision and had the necessary support to enact it. Ultimately, the guiding team continued its constant touching of the provincial teams as a demonstration of the logic of action in the program. What mattered, they continually came back to, was to know fully the needs of the local teams and the PLIE participants, to maintain and check an open mind as to what needed to change, and to look ahead to impact in the local schools and in the larger context of schools.

Each launch and each individual cohort thus provided an opportunity for reflection and renewal. The initial revision of the curriculum and pedagogical approach that had preceded the first 2016 launch in Jujuy led to a second revision in January/February of 2017, when the importance of the innovation project—and the type of methodology and materials and activities needed to support different participants in developing the project—emerged fully. After the expansion to the three other provinces, the guiding team, now supported by four local provincial teams that included facilitators deeply embedded in the experiences of the participants, revised a third time. The guiding team now understood what was happening on the ground in each province, how that experience interacted with the classroom experience in PLIE, what translated across provinces or played only in specific places, and how assumptions played in the larger context of the provincial systems. “If we, who want to bring forward a program of leadership and innovation do not innovate, if we don't think creatively ... we would err,” Agustín Porres held.

For Porres, the key to the program was supporting the purpose and skills among the facilitators, who “generated the encounter” among now over 2,000 school actors, often divided by experience, resources, incentives and their own purpose. Looking back at the first year of PLIE, he felt that the most remarkable achievement had been the development of local teams of facilitators who functioned with purpose and coherence. The first order of business had been to find strong local leaders who would know other strong local leaders, like Graciela Calzada in Jujuy, and Raquel Flores, who coordinated PLIE in Salta. They had to ensure that their teams possessed the necessary diversity of experience and skill to respond to the experiences and needs of the PLIE participants. For Porres, the constant “touching” points and intentional listening to the local teams had served not only to understand their needs more fully and to ensure consistent systems across all provincial teams, but also to model the logic of action for VFA. There had to be great space for understanding, problem solving, reflection and feedback within and across the teams and between the guiding team and the local teams. The local teams had to create that space for the PLIE participants in schools in turn. Consistent process ensured constant reflection and conversation. There was inter-visitation across classrooms and across teams. There were also daily team meetings where all members spoke and problem solved about the challenges of individual lessons. During workshops, the facilitators and supporting tutors broke down and calibrated how individual approaches had worked and looked for patterns across the participants. At some point and at a modest scale, the local teams introduced visits to local schools to allow PLIE participants to see each other’s schools and those of former participants. The original attention in the program to the development of general leadership skills had shifted by the end of the first year to a more differentiated notion of understanding the needs of individual participants and equipping them with tools to have greater impact. Part of that new focus on impact had also shifted the purpose of the program to having impact with other actors of the larger education ecosystem – not necessarily just those participating in PLIE – who influenced the workings of schools, such as supervisors, policy makers and ministry staff.

Agustin Porres and Fernando Giménez Zapiola, as well as local team leaders, emphasized the richness and sense of purpose – the wealth in human capital – they found in each cohort of the program across all four provinces. They also emphasized the importance of developing trust among the PLIE participants – trust in themselves and their local school teams, trust among the PLIE participants, trust in PLIE – when so much of the PLIE participants’ narrative about their schools and the larger education system was about the absence of trust. For Magdalena Zorraquin, for example, part of the reasons there had been an early receptiveness to PLIE among the participants was its early commitment to supporting the execution of the innovation projects in the schools. VFA, however, had lacked the infrastructure to deliver on that promise early. Porres and local team members like Diego Tolaba, a tutor at Jujuy, agreed on a pattern of behavior that manifested itself in every cohort. In the first days of each cohort, one saw and felt mistrust and distance among the PLIE participants, unaccustomed to the practice of analyzing and exposing publicly their problems of practice and the underlying root causes of those problems in their individual schools. PLIE participants agreed. When asked to describe what they had initially welcomed about the program, they universally praised the content of the lessons, the opportunity to work with other principals and school actors, the hands-on and practical nature of the learning, and the unique chance to focus on a specific project with others. They also mentioned the tremendous difficulty they had being transparent and open about their fears and struggles at the start. “What was easiest was to learn; what was hardest was to share,” one former participant shared. The arc of learning in the program pushed the participants to overcome this reluctance and to think about how they needed to address issues of trust at play in the participants’ own sites and communities. Local PLIE team leaders and facilitators tried to instill the type of trust dynamic that would allow the participants to take chances at PLIE. They hoped that the PLIE participants would then take more

chances with others in their home sites, instilling that same dynamic of trust. “Without trust,” Graciela Calzada asserted, “there was no reform or change that would stick.”

The program’s emphasis on building a vision with others, on collaboration and on team building resonated among former and present participants, who invariably focused part of their reflection on the needs and challenges of working with their home teams. Patricia Tapia, a veteran school principal in Jujuy province and former PLIE participant, reflected on how before PLIE she and her team had thought about the administrative team as “the team.” The experience of PLIE had pushed her to think of “team” as the collective members of her staff – making the work harder, she thought, but leading to something valuable in both how the administrative team now thought of its tasks and how teachers responded to challenges in the schools. PLIE participants from the teaching ranks saw the same possibilities in principal leadership. Sandra Mariscal, a teacher and project coordinator and former participant in the program in Salta province, continued to see the role of the school principal as the axis of change in the institution. She felt strongly, however, that for change to occur in a school the role needed to be about support, about channeling, about ensuring that others saw the need for change and had access to tools to make change happen. The new type of leader had to have confidence and the trust of his or her team. The new principal needed to be able to sustain others in “leading, conducting, following, modifying change.” That meant that the new leader could not lead or work alone.

Participants continually spoke about a newfound sense of not being alone, of moving to a sense of “we” and “us” – reflected in the shifts in pronoun to “*nosotros*” as they spoke of other principals and about their own school communities. “We are part of an entire school,” explained Gloria Urzagasti, another former PLIE participant who led an elementary school in Jujuy. “We have to transform ourselves, because we are part of the team... We have to accompany, to guide, to orient, which is what the program offered me. It opened my head a little, if you want to know [laughing].” Even for teacher PLIE participants, working on the innovation project led to a new view of how to work with fellow teachers as well: “From the start of the project we started thinking about socializing others, about making others see all the richness we received,” reflected Laura Valderrama, a first-grade teacher also from Jujuy province.

Participants marveled at the opportunity to work alongside other principals and teachers from other levels and locations. They found commonalities where before they had seen barriers and differences. At the same time, PLIE participant responses and surveys showed that they feared the road ahead. The local teams surveyed PLIE participants daily. The participants overwhelmingly praised the content and delivery of the lessons. At the same time, responses to specific questions about efficacy showed participants’ concerns with their ability to implement those lessons effectively when they returned to their schools. They feared the micro-politics of schools and not possessing the necessary operational and leadership tools to drive change. Alicia Osoreo, a teacher from Salta province, articulated some of the concerns: “I want to have the tools and knowledge needed so that I can justify a decision and a direction... I want to learn how to do that... here, there are no compromises, no compromises in the content, in the time, in the sharing.” She was willing to risk trying out the new lessons. “But the doubt is... whether we would truly be able to put in practice... without knowing what the system is going to allow us to do....”

For some participants, it was important that the “Varkey way” continued past the six weeks of PLIE and followed them back to their home sites. The work was collective work, but was it not predictable that “we would each go our own way afterward?” The demand for continued support and community, for “*seguimiento*,” revealed something missing in the larger structure of the system, while it validated the lessons of connection that the program itself had taught. Once you see the road ahead, Isolda Calsina had stated, it would be hard to go back. Once you felt others beside you, the PLIE participants

suggested, it was hard to let go and return to “yo” from “nosotros.” PLIE participants now had a certainty about the commonalities of their problems and of the potential for success in working with others and learning from others. At the same time, there was a palpable sense of newfound responsibility in many of their responses: “If we keep waiting for others to tell us to change, but we don’t change, and then nothing will change, you understand? Someone has to start the change, and change in reality always starts from below... it starts with my student, then my teacher... it has to start from way below.” That sense of newfound responsibility coexisted with a persistent sense that the larger systems would get in the way – a sense resulting from what they described as a decades’ long top-down demand process for change that told them: “you have to change and you have to do this and then figure out how to make it work!” For some respondents, the call for Varkey to “seguir” past the six weeks signified a call for shared responsibility in the change process: “I will tell you something needs to change, but I’m also going to help you.”

Improvement, Learning and the Challenge of Systems: The Grain of Change

I am astonished daily about the power of trust.

—Fernando Giménez Zapiola, Chief Academic Officer of VFA (2017)

Looking back to the first eighteen months of PLIE, Agustin Porres and the VFA team could celebrate a story of considerable accomplishment. Chief among those accomplishments was the central leadership team itself. It was remarkably nimble, cohesive in its mission to support the local centers and the school leaders who participated in PLIE, and owned a consistent language across all participating members regarding its dedication to impact in classrooms and schools. The central team had worked collaboratively with the local provincial teams to create a flexible footprint that was at once coherent across all provincial local centers and local teams, and yet also responsive to the needs of that local context. While the specific conversations differed across cohorts, centers and provinces, the content, organization and pace of the training, the core pedagogical choices, and the processes of engagement were remarkably similar across the local centers. The operational achievement was enviable: 2,000 school leaders had participated in the first year of a three-year engagement, promising coherence and scale in a short time. (See **Exhibits 3 and 4.**)

Participants and observers, as well as the provincial partners, found a face validity in PLIE in the satisfaction and testimony of the participants. (See **Exhibit 5.**) Participants found value in the content of the curriculum, in the connections they forged among their colleagues, and, with some wariness, in the promise of support as they returned to their schools to launch their innovation projects. As the participants looked ahead, they asked for more of the same, this time in the context of “real time” and the messy processes of implementation. The specification of the “more” depended on the participant and the nature of his or her context. For Gloria Urzagasti, a principal in Jujuy province, the “more” was more “seguimiento” and more tools, especially in the area of socio-emotional learning, for teachers, parents and students. For Laura Valderrama, a teacher in Jujuy, it was the creation of networks to “share more, to see more, and not share from the outside, but about what we already have inside our education community...because our community is rich when we begin to see people in their full capacity... which we often fail to do when we are running, because we have other obligations or lack time.” To a former participant, Principal Patricia Tapia, it was also growing “from building on others...” to realizing that she “was part of more schools that are having a positive impact on society.” Principal Tapia had found great value from working on her school’s innovation project with others outside her own school and context. Her project had focused on increasing inclusive learning in her classrooms. She had derived confidence and new ideas from other principals and teachers, especially

about managing the difficult process of convincing teachers and supporting them as they adapted to a new way of grouping students. She had approached the project with the newfound perspective and new resources gained from others: “this change is a process, we are changing, it’s not something utopian, but we can do it—it demands a lot of work, and sometimes we teachers are afraid of change.”

In Principal Tapia’s case, the innovation project for her school tackled difficult cultural assumptions about children and their learning and entailed significant risk. Both Porres and provincial team leaders like Calzada and Flores worried about whether many of the innovation projects fell short of that type of risk taking and ambition, focusing instead on easier technical fixes rather than on the deeper problems in the schools’ abilities to support all students’ learning. For the VFA teams, both the central one and those in the four provinces, the promise of PLIE required that all school teams embrace that type of risk taking and ambition. Having schools embrace great risks and court the possibility of failure, however, probably required change in the supports, incentives and accountability for the participants and their schools. The increasing depth of the teams’ understanding of the schools’ circumstances and problems of practice—the type of knowledge that the processes of engagement in PLIE had made possible—was changing the definition of the problem for VFA leaders across all roles as they thought about the meaning of impact.

The definition of the problem had morphed over time. At the start, VFA leaders and their partners had thought of the goal as primarily improving the knowledge base of the PLIE participants. The initial focus and questions had been about curriculum and pedagogy: what were the essential skills and capacities principals needed in order to bring about improvement and innovation in their schools in the Argentinian context? The entry problem had naturally also signified a set of political and logistical questions about how to operationalize what became PLIE in four different local contexts—most importantly the building of the correct teams to do just that. By November 2017, however, informed by its work across the four provinces and many diverse cohorts, the guiding team now felt confident about its ability to work with school leaders and draw on their gifts and sense of purpose not only to improve their knowledge, but also to improve their individual and collective agency. VFA was now recognizing its own responsibility for supporting those school leaders as those participating leaders took the risks that VFA had encouraged. VFA increasingly questioned and reconsidered its relationship to the leadership and supervisory structures in the provinces, and wondered how to influence, from its limited perch, coherence among the interdependent administrative, political and cultural systems that bounded the work of the school leaders.

To Agustin Porres, the challenge of improving PLIE now revolved around two axes: one was to go deeper into the “schools and the implementation of the projects and see what was happening. See how the projects stumbled, how they succeeded, in ways that would enrich the program.” This deeper focus and more granular lens needed to be available not just to VFA, but to the participants themselves as instrumental for their learning. The local centers had started to bring back former participants to share their experiences with present participants. The work increasingly entailed the building of lasting and deeper connections among school leaders creating a “great web.” The second axis was to “work with other system actors... which was still a problem of practice: how to work with supervisors, how to work with the ministries to enrich the task of the principals from other spheres?” That strategy would require VFA to redefine what it meant as a partner to influence and support the core hierarchical structures of the partner systems, and especially how supervisors defined their task. This system-focused approach at the provincial levels would require “a togetherness in support of school principals, especially in relation to the implementation of the innovation projects...” Porres thought. “We are just one actor in a stage that is very large, but we have the luxury of being able to work with others, and help make others stronger, to support the development of others.”

Fernando Giménez Zapiola echoed Porres's growing analysis of the importance of "the system." Originally, he had thought that the solution lied in "following" the project, watching and supporting problem solving in implementation, sharing with new participants. But he had learned that it was very difficult to support changes in practice independent of transactions between schools and the structures and processes surrounding them:

What have we learned? We have learned that we need a dialogue with the system.... We need to read and collaborate well with the real and the practical... We are convinced that changes come from below... that teachers need to open their classroom doors, and schools need to open too and tell stories about all the good they do so that new forms of learning emerge... but without a doubt, if those above do not see that as a good thing, and if they don't start opening too... then any change is going to hit a ceiling... What keeps us awake now is how to collaborate with the system to bring together the two ideas of understanding the music in the schools and providing the support from above.

Both Giménez Zapiola and Porres kept coming back in their assessment of the problem and its potential solution to the notion of the "encounter". That notion had helped structure the footprint of PLIE – it had been there in Isolda Calsina's demand that PLIE help bring together leaders from different levels and localities, and in the way facilitators grouped participants in the classroom – the mantra of "five people, from different schools, without hierarchy, sitting around a round table." The notion of "encounter" now increasingly applied in Porres's and Giménez Zapiola's thinking to leaders across all levels of the system. "Our encounter," Porres emphasized, "especially given the normal churn of political leadership in education systems in Argentina, had to generate trust... if there is no trust, whether it is from those who are designing a reform or those who are implementing that reform, if some are alienated or mistrustful then there is no successful reform or change."

For Porres, trust and coherence worked together. The "encounter" of PLIE, where school leaders in diverse roles, from diverse types of schools, worked together on developing their capacity and skills, while also generating innovation projects for their schools in collaboration, had to align with the larger systems that influenced the success or failure of those projects for improvement. A six-week encounter, disconnected from the rest of the system, would not be enough to bring about sustainable impact in schools unless the encounter expanded across time and across people and levels of the system. "We want long-term impact not because we are unique, but because our opportunity is unique, when we can bring so many people together. It is an enormous privilege and a responsibility. We can be a channel... to generate capacity and alignment and trust."

Now looking ahead, Agustin Porres asked, "What can we do so that our work lasts and so that it reaches more school leaders and teachers? Do we need a new program? Do we need a new strategy? We need to keep asking. The original premise is the same: how to support and build capacity in schools. The challenge is how to go about it now, given what we've learned."

Exhibit 1 Notes on Context (UNESCO, 2014)

- A decentralization process in Argentina in 1992 transferred the services and the personnel from the central government (national) to the jurisdictions, and shifted governance of the school systems to local legislations under an overall national legislation frame. Each province thus has its provincial education law, school regulations and provincial teaching status. Regulations in the different provinces define the role of the principal with varying specificity about functions and detail about enactment of those functions.
- In Argentina, the selection processes in the provinces have not undergone significant variations in the recent past. There is a general requirement that candidates have teaching experience and a teaching degree, be in good standing and have management experience or education. The actual selection process combines merit (the teaching title, its seniority, qualification or teaching concept, publications or studies related to education and residence in the jurisdiction) with an examination and an oral colloquium. In some provinces, there is an additional requirement of a practical test that might include observation or a diagnosis of a problem of practice. The jury in the selection process varies among provinces, but can include supervisors, union representatives and representatives from the school community.
- Initial training can be mandatory or voluntary depending on the province, and the institutions offering this support include the provincial ministries and universities. Continuing education is voluntary, and offered through different institutions ranging from agencies centralized as the National Institute for Teacher Education (INFOD), others who depend on the provincial Ministries of Education, national universities and private institutions, including some private universities, NGOs, foundations and companies. Only some Argentinean provinces have institutes dedicated to the specialized training of principals. Most institutions and programs providing training to principals specialize in teacher training.
- In Argentina the elaboration and socialization of performance standards (or “action frameworks”) for principals are in development.

Source: Varkey Foundation Argentina (VFA).

Exhibit 2 The Program Footprint



PROGRAMME MODULES

The PLIE curriculum is designed to be practical, challenging and intellectually engaging. The six modules are outlined as following:

🏆 Educational Leadership for Organizational Development and School Reform

This module explores how teams are built and empowered in schools. In particular, the development of models of distributed leadership. The second part of the module addresses the issues of leadership through the challenges of the 21st Century.

🏆 Leading Quality Assurance for Performance and Improve Performance in the Teaching and Learning Process

This module works specifically on the processes of teaching and learning that lead the teachers. Different topics are addressed such as the contributions of neuroscience, the impact of emotions in the learning process, the heterogeneity in the learning process and the education for inclusion.

🧠 Managing Technology Integration

Through this module, participants will understand how to plan, manage and sustain the IT implementations in their schools to optimize their management processes. It also addresses the risks that students face from technological inclusion.

🎓 Leading Teacher Professional Development

In this module, the participants are challenged to discover their own leadership skills, their strengths and any areas for development. It also examines how to analyze and design new strategies for teacher training for the institution itself.

🗨️ Leading and Developing Community Relations

In this module, the different relationships of the members of the educational community are analyzed in order to improve the school environment. Relationships within the school, with families and the community at large are developed.

📖 Leading and Managing Learning, Creativity and Curriculum Innovation

In this module, the different levels of consolidation of the curriculum are analyzed. Participants will learn about innovative curricular practices such as Teaching for Understanding, while being able to analyze different approaches to implement in their institutions.



EVALUATION

Each module has its own assessment tool, which aims to integrate theory explored with challenges that the participants face in their individual schools. Each participant will create an individual portfolio, which is evaluated and receive feedback from the facilitators of the program.

SCHOOL INNOVATION PROJECT (SIP)

Over the course of the programme, participants are asked to evaluate their own schools and to design an improvement plan. Specific sessions will be allocated in order to help them achieve this and for the accomplishment and socialization of the project. They must deliver a final project for evaluation.

Source: Varkey Foundation Argentina (VFA).

Exhibit 3 Participation by Province

Province	Participants	Schools
Corrientes	524	225
Jujuy	706	323
Mendoza	474	278
Salta	436	208
TOTAL	2,140	1,034

Source: Varkey Foundation Argentina (VFA).

Exhibit 4 Participation by Province and Cohort

Province	Cohort	Participants	Schools
Corrientes	1 Cohort - Corrientes 2017	100	48
	2 Cohort - Corrientes 2017	126	58
	3 Cohort - Corrientes 2017	136	65
	4 Cohort - Corrientes 2017	162	79
Subtotal		524	225
Jujuy	1 Cohort - Jujuy 2016	90	55
	1 Cohort - Jujuy 2017	138	69
	2 Cohort - Jujuy 2017	139	69
	3 Cohort - Jujuy 2017	95	49
	4 Cohort - Jujuy 2017	82	41
	5 Cohort - Jujuy 2017	77	39
	6 Cohort - Jujuy 2017	85	45
Subtotal		706	323
Mendoza	1 Cohort - Mendoza 2017	76	42
	2 Cohort - Mendoza 2017	59	38
	3 Cohort - Mendoza 2017	79	57
	4 Cohort - Mendoza 2017	104	76
	5 Cohort - Mendoza 2017	90	66
	6 Cohort - Mendoza 2017	66	41
Subtotal		474	278
Salta	1 Cohort - Salta 2017	106	52
	2 Cohort - Salta 2017	134	71
	3 Cohort - Salta 2017	121	62
	4 Cohort - Salta 2017	75	41
Subtotal		436	208
TOTAL		2,140	1,034

Source: Varkey Foundation Argentina (VFA).

Exhibit 5 Participation by Province and Role

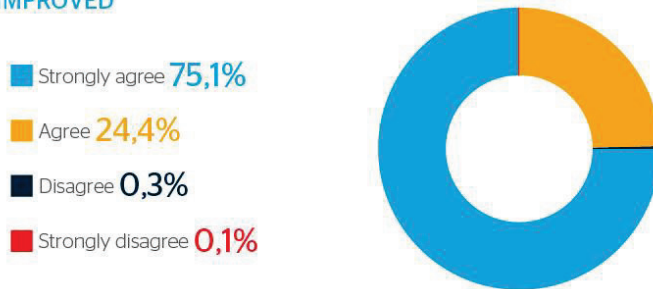
Province	Participant's Role	Participants
Corrientes	Managerial Position (principal or vice-principal)	250
	School Staff	274
Subtotal		524
Jujuy	Managerial Position (principal or vice-principal)	367
	School Staff	339
Subtotal		706
Mendoza	Managerial Position (principal or vice-principal)	286
	School Staff	188
Subtotal		474

Source: Varkey Foundation Argentina (VFA).

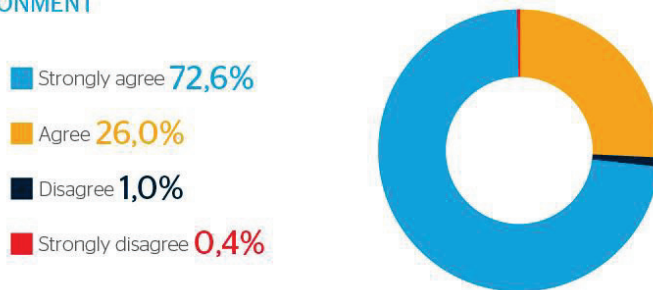
Exhibit 6 Participant Satisfaction Surveys³

NATIONAL

YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING ON EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION HAVE IMPROVED



YOU FEEL HAPPY AND TRUSTED TO APPLY THE LEARNINGS OF THE PROGRAM IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT



HOW LIKELY WOULD IT BE TO RECOMMEND THE PROGRAM TO A COLLEAGUE?

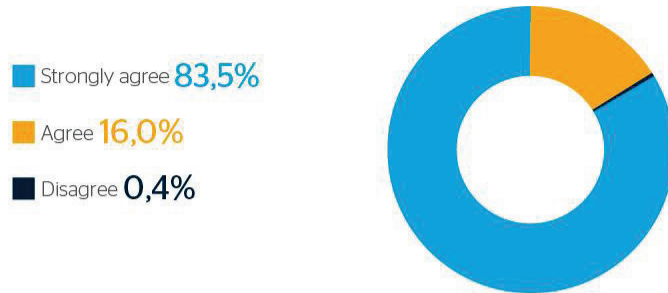
1 = Very unlikely and 5 = Very likely



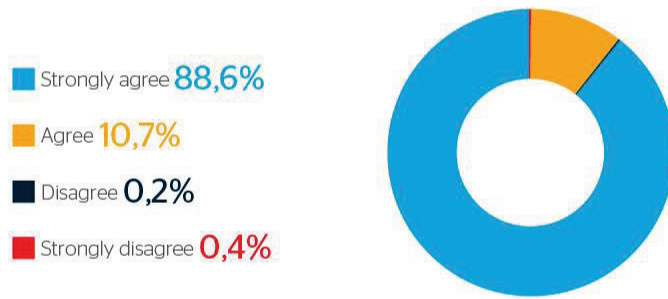
Exhibit 6 (continued)

JUJUY

THE LEARNING OBJECTIVES WERE CLEAR AND APPROPRIATE



THE FACILITATORS HAD ADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE



THE CONTENT TREATED WAS RELEVANT AND ADEQUATE FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

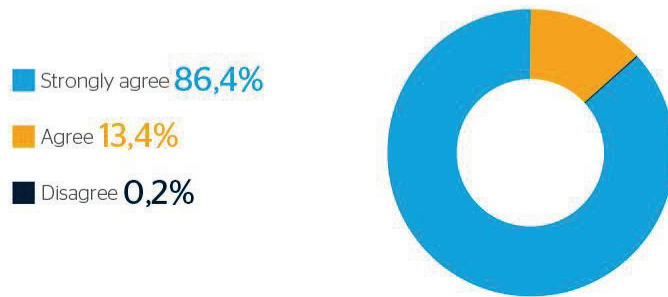
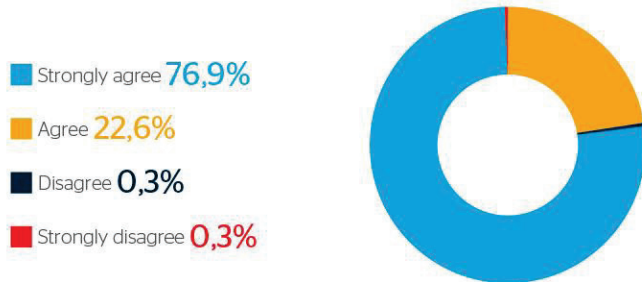


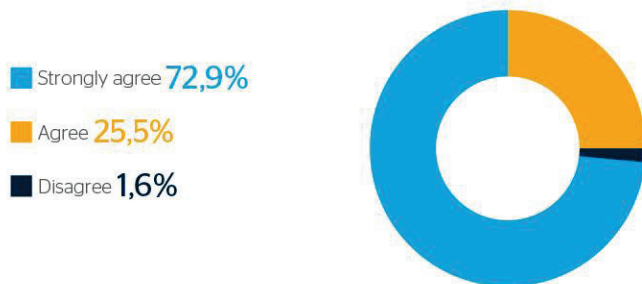
Exhibit 6 (continued)

CORRIENTES

THE LEARNING OBJECTIVES WERE CLEAR AND APPROPRIATE



THE FACILITATORS HAD ADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE



THE CONTENT TREATED WAS RELEVANT AND ADEQUATE FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

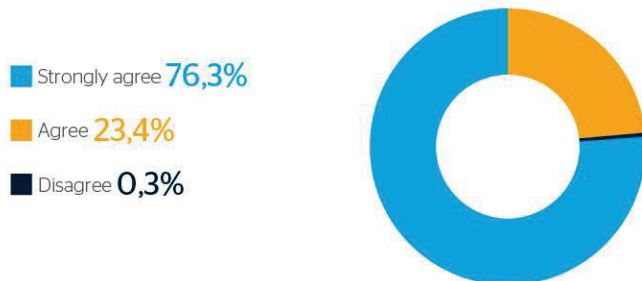
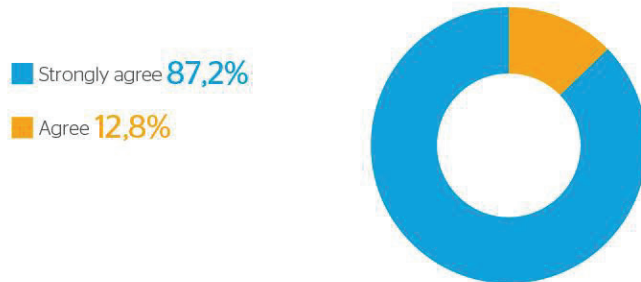


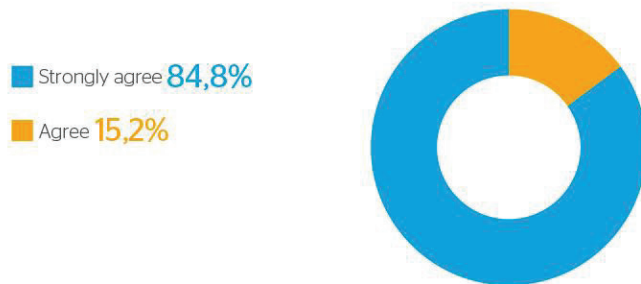
Exhibit 6 (continued)

MENDOZA

THE LEARNING OBJECTIVES WERE CLEAR AND APPROPRIATE



THE FACILITATORS HAD ADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE



THE CONTENT TREATED WAS RELEVANT AND ADEQUATE FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

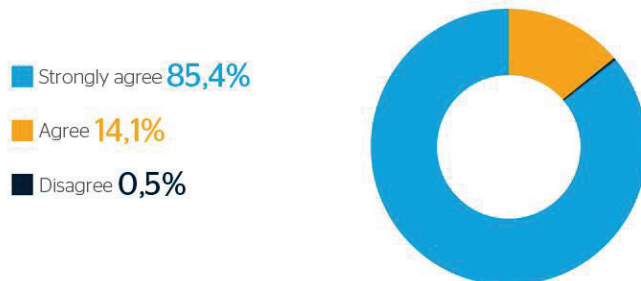
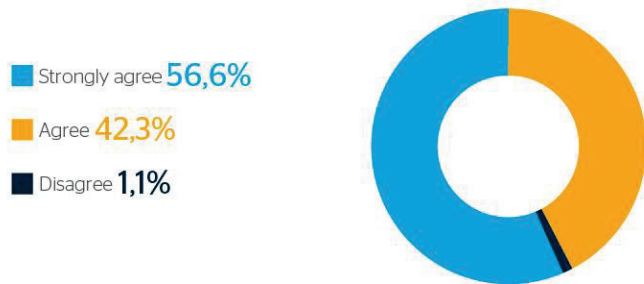


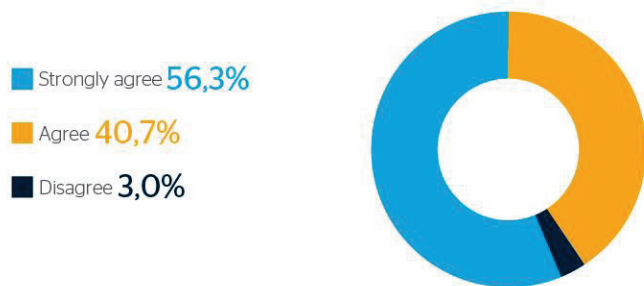
Exhibit 6 (continued)

SALTA

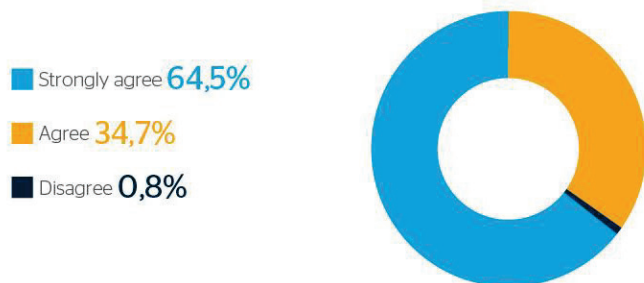
THE LEARNING OBJECTIVES WERE CLEAR AND APPROPRIATE



THE FACILITATORS HAD ADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE



THE CONTENT TREATED WAS RELEVANT AND ADEQUATE FOR THE PARTICIPANTS



Source: Varkey Foundation Argentina (VFA).

Endnotes

¹ The Varkey Foundation is a not-for-profit organization established to improve the standards of education for underprivileged children throughout the world. Its mission has been that “every child should have a good teacher.” It has operationalized that vision through building teacher capacity, advocacy campaigns to promote excellence in teaching practice at the highest levels of policy-making and by providing grants to partner organizations that offer innovative solutions in support of that mission.

² https://cedoc.infed.edu.ar/upload/Plan_Nacional_de_Formacion_Docente1.pdf

³ Anonymous survey data from 1,567 participant respondents.