



**Directorate for Education
Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), OECD**

Innovative Learning Environments (ILE)

INVENTORY CASE STUDY

Itinerant Pedagogical Advisors Netzahualcoyotl

School

Mexico (CONAFE)

The Itinerant Pedagogical Advisors is a strategy that focuses on schools with very low performance in highly marginalized small rural communities. Pedagogical advisors are university graduates in Pedagogy or Education who alternate between two community schools throughout the school year, providing advice to the community instructors (young people without professional teacher education who teach for a limited period of time in small marginalized rural communities), offering individual assistance to students with low performance, and promoting parent participation in education. The advisors employ diagnostic instruments to identify the needs of students, monitor and coach the community instructors, and give recommendations to be followed up by the next instructor.

This Innovative Learning Environment case study has been prepared specifically for the OECD/ILE project. Research has been undertaken by Paula Sierra Vélez and Isidro Sánchez Ulloa under the supervision of Lucero Nava Bolaños, Dolores Ramírez Vargas, José Carlos Rocha and Carmen Gladys Barrios Veloso from the National Council of Promotion of Education (CONAFE), México, following the research guidelines of the ILE project.

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(Los Coyotes, Hidalgo)

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Abstract:

This case study illustrates the experience of the Itinerant Pedagogical Advisors' program (API) in a Mexican rural elementary communitarian school operated by the National Council for Educational Foment. API's objective is to conduct pedagogic interventions that improve the learning process of children that are at lag, to advise teaching-learning facilitators in order to improve their practice, and to strengthen parental involvement in their children's education through the work of an Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor that alternates his work among two communitarian schools throughout the school year.

The quantitative evidence of national standardized test's results and API's diagnostic evaluation results, as well as the qualitative evidence based on the perception of students, advisors, instructors and parents, led to the conclusion that the program has been successful in achieving its objectives.

Background

The National Council for Educational Foment (Conafe) is a decentralized Mexican Federal Government agency devoted to providing alternatives of access, permanency and learning improvement in early childhood and basic education for infant and teenagers that live in rural poverty stricken communities in marginalized conditions.

The Council's Communitarian Education's constructivist model implemented in basic education services throughout the country (benefiting approximately 335.000 students), uses a multi-grade approach¹, where a communitarian instructor plays the role of a teaching-learning facilitator employing strategies that favor interaction among students, knowledge and their social and physical environment.

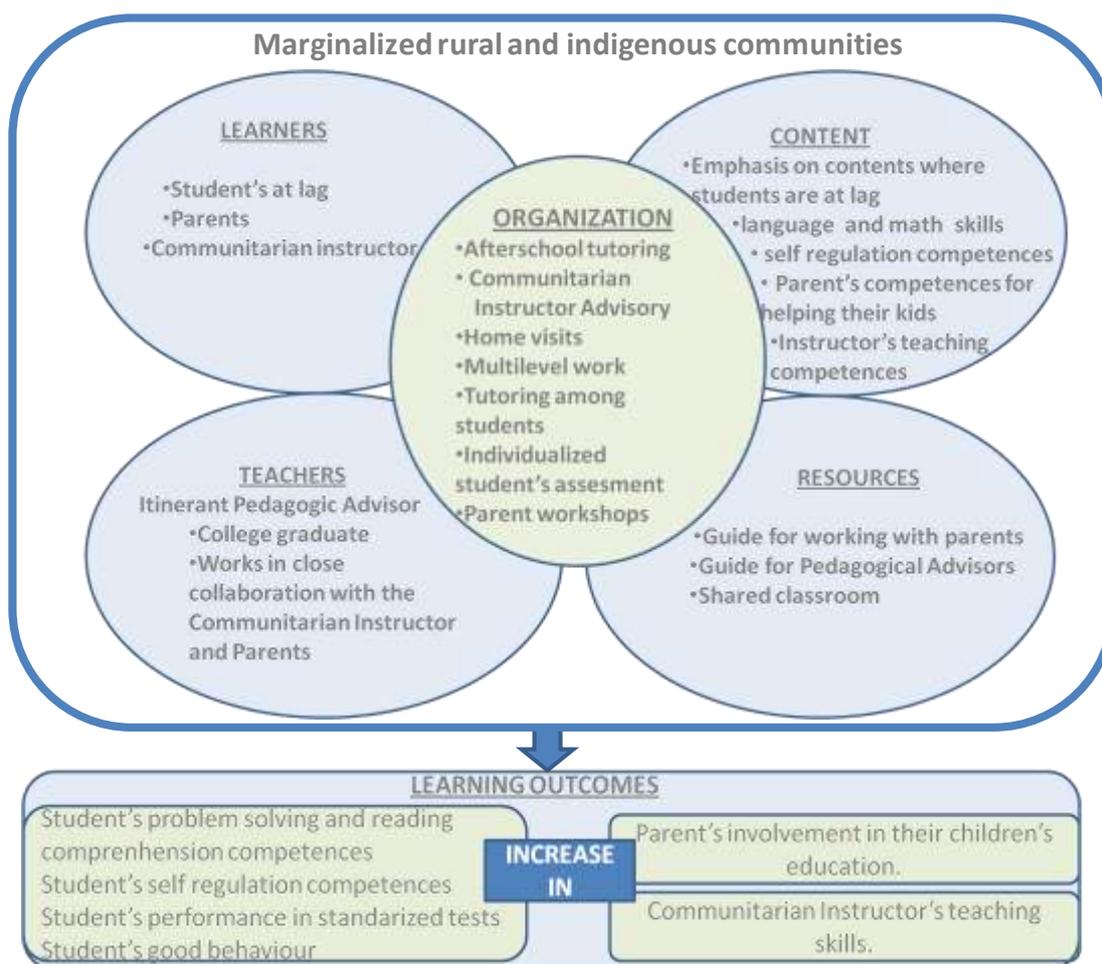
Communitarian instructors are young men and women, usually native of rural communities, that have graduated from secondary or high school and, after a seven week initial training, provide a social service during one or two school years in exchange for an economic scholarship to continue with their formal education. They have not received previous educational training and are thus no experts when it comes to teaching, however, they are expected to improve teaching-learning processes in communities that continue to achieve very low scores in standardized national tests and face adverse social, geographic, economic and political contexts.

¹ Conafe's elementary education comprises three levels. Level I: is the equivalent of first and second grade in the regular education system, level two: third and fourth grade. Level three: fifth and sixth grade.

Conafe, aware of the above, of the difficulties that instructors face in the classroom, due partly to their lack of experience, and the ways in which this may affect the education that's being offered to the children that are at a greater disadvantage in the country; making use of its inherent nature that allows it to research and implement alternatives to help improve education with equity and quality with independence from the regular education system (hence, less bureaucracy which translates in more celerity in its actions), has implemented a project named Itinerant Pedagogical Advisory (referred to as API due to its Spanish initials) to improve the learning process of students in primary and secondary communitarian education services.

API was inspired by the Finnish system of education where, in every school, each student's individual development is closely followed by his or her teachers, and learning difficulties are tackled as soon as they are detected through individual or group advisory. The consistent remarkable superior results of the Finnish students in Pisa evaluation drew the attention of Conafe's directives who, three years ago, decided to, at least, adapt the idea of pedagogical advisory to Mexico and, particularly, to the institution's reality: the characteristics of its students, its instructors, the socio-cultural environment of its target communities and its financial capability.

The project's objective is to conduct pedagogic interventions, at the basic education level, that improve the learning process of children that are at a disadvantage in school performance, to advise and guide communitarian instructors, employing strategies that trigger an improvement in the educational processes that take place inside the classroom, and to strengthen parental involvement and participation in their children's education. These pedagogic interventions are led by *Pedagogical Advisors* who are required to have a college degree in education and that, unlike the instructors, get paid for their services.



To finance API, Conafe made a financial adjustment that allowed it to have a monetary reserve that could be destined to different new projects aimed at improving the teaching-learning process of its beneficiaries. Due to budget restrictions, API can only operate in a limited number of Conafe's education services and each pedagogical advisor works in two schools that are located in the same region, alternating between them every two weeks during the school year.

The number of communitarian schools where API is implemented is decided taking into account financial constraints and the exact schools are chosen using the following priority criteria:

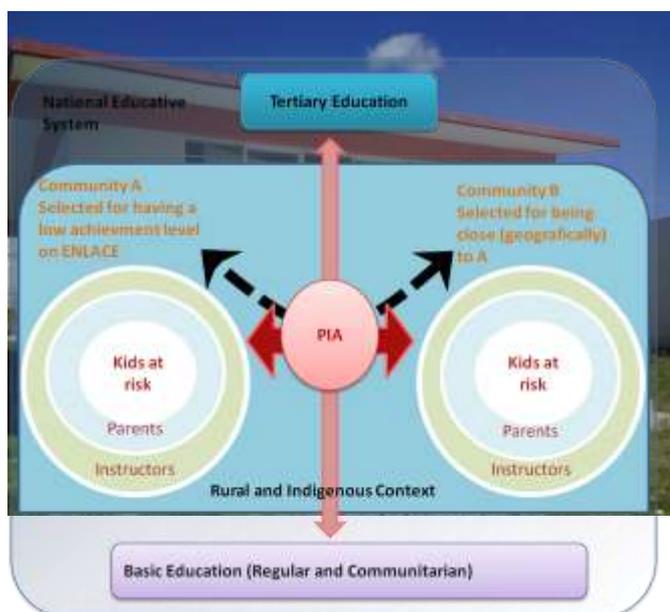
- **Location:** they have to be located in the municipalities that are considered a priority by the state or federal government due to their high levels of marginalization.
- **National standardized tests' performance:** priority is given to schools whose students achieved a high percentage of insufficiency in ENLACE evaluation.
- **Student- instructor ratio:** priority is given to schools with only one instructor and more than six students.

The project initiated its pilot phase during the school year 2008-2009 in 204 communitarian schools in the state of Guerrero, the following school year it was implemented in 444 communitarian schools in 11 states and, during 2010-2011, in 1385 communitarian schools in 14 states.

Although API is being implemented only in Conafe's schools, the program aims at impacting the basic education system as a whole by increasing the field experience of college graduates that will be entering the regular education system as private or public school teachers.

For this particular case study we chose to document API in Netzahualcoyotl, a communitarian school located in Hidalgo. The variables that we took into account for selecting it among schools from the API's attention universe where:

1. Representativeness: in terms of number of students and improvement in national standardized tests' results since API was implemented.
2. Program's antiquity in the community: since the research was done at the beginning of the school year, we needed to conduct it in a school that had benefitted from the program the previous year (2009-2010).
3. Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor's Experience: we wanted to interview someone who was familiar with the program and, at the start of the school year, that was only possible with a second year advisor.
4. Location: for convenience purposes we chose a school that was relatively close to Mexico City and would allow us to visit as often as needed.
5. Education level: 80% of the students benefited by API are at the elementary education level; accordingly, we chose an elementary school.



I. Context

Netzahualcoyotl is the only school in los Coyotes, a rural community located in the Mexican state of Hidalgo, home to approximately forty families. Its seventeen students live no further than a ten minute walk from it. The community stands next to a paved road that connects it to the rest of the state. There's no sewage nor drinking water pipes but the school, and some of the houses, have plastic hoses that bring relatively clean, yet undrinkable, water to be used in basic house chores. Electricity is scarce, not enough to plug in a refrigerator, withal all of the houses have light bulbs.

The official name of the community is los Coyotes, however, the inhabitants have divided it in two distinct areas separated by a small indent in the land. Some say the division is due to religious beliefs that caused a quarrel between families; in the area referred to as San Ignacio there is a small chapel where worshipers venerate that saint while, in the area referred to as Los Coyotes, a church is currently being build to venerate Saint Felipe. There's not a strong sense of community and social problems such as addictions to *pulque* (alcoholic beverage) and violent behaviors have been on the rise in recent years.

Most of the men work in the fields, growing barley, beans and corn or taking care of a reduced number of goats and lambs; in recent years some of them have started working in the service industry in the nearby town of Tepeapulco or in the state's capital, where they live during the weekdays. It is usually the women's responsibility to take care of children, home and cultivate the family's small vegetable garden that is typically made out of just enough corn and bean plants for the family's intake and an occasional lettuce or carrot.

The literacy level among adults is low; most of them did not study past elementary school. Now days, some children attend preschool, all of them elementary school and, the majority, go to the closest secondary school located in the town of Cides, approximately eight kilometers away, nevertheless, hardly any attend high school and college education is not even considered an option.

In the community's school, a communitarian education service run by Conafe, preschool and elementary students share the same physical space and one instructor in what is referred to as an *aula compartida* (shared classroom).

Carmen², an 18 year old high school graduate, is the instructor this year. She arrived to the community two months ago and will be living in a student's family home during the school year. Even though she attended Conafe's training course, she doesn't have any previous teaching experience or theoretical education background and is a little overwhelmed by the work ahead of her, especially since many of the kids in her school haven't learned what they are expected to according to their age and grade; there are, for instance, a couple of nine year old kids that do not know how to read or write and are in the fourth grade.

She is glad to have the support of an itinerant pedagogical advisor that will guide her. This is the second year the school benefits from the API project, it qualified to participate in it due to the high insufficiency rate its students were repeatedly achieving in national tests, the community's high level of marginalization and the high student-teacher ratio, as well as to the high instructor desertion rate that was being caused by the aggressive behavior of the students, towards each other and towards the instructors.

² Real names have been changed.

Last week was Roberto's first week in the community as a pedagogical advisor, he had visited it earlier to apply a diagnostic evaluation to the kids and reach logistic agreements with the community. Last year he was an advisor in a different community and an advisor named Rosa worked in los Coyotes.

Ramiro graduated from university two years ago, he studied pedagogical intervention. He is familiar with Conafe's communitarian education because, seven years ago, he was a communitarian instructor and, later, a training tutor for other instructors. He is also used to live in a rural community because his home is located in an underprivileged rural community similar to los Coyotes that he now visits only on the weekend.

While he is in los Coyotes, he sleeps in a classroom that is no longer being used as such even though the families of the students have offered to give him shelter in their houses. He likes his privacy so he plans on sleeping there until the weather gets too cold to bear, then he'll probably move into one of the family homes. The parents of the students have also offered to feed him: everyday he eats in a different house. He is thankful for the support the community has shown since the first day he arrived; he believes it is due to the fact that they've already experienced the project and think of it as beneficial as a result of the good performance of his predecessor.

Both last year and this one, before starting his work as an itinerant pedagogical advisor, he attended a one week training course in Pachuca, the state's capital, where he and other pedagogical advisors learned about the project's objectives, their functions and the resources available to fulfill them. Afterwards he conducted a diagnostic evaluation in the communities he was assigned to and returned to Pachuca to receive guidance in the process of planning the activities for the school term.

All the itinerant pedagogical advisors of Hidalgo will meet again in January; for a week, they'll discuss, along with other regional and state educational and operative Conafe figures, the progress of their yearly plan of action and the obstacles encountered. The last meeting they'll all attend will take place in June, at the end of the school year, when they'll evaluate their work and analyze the impact of their actions.

Apart from these three meetings, at least once, Ramiro, meets with the regional coordinator, other pedagogical advisors from his region, training tutors and communitarian instructors, for a tutoring session where they discuss aspects of their work in the communities and exchange opinions. When Ramiro finds himself stuck with an educational strategy, is at a loss for things to do to get through a child, a parent or the instructor or needs any other kind of academic (sometimes also personal) advise, he calls or sends a text message to his peers; they have created a network through which they exchange experiences and meet occasionally on the weekends to support each other's work.



II. Structured patterns and characteristics of the learning environment

During the two weeks a month that Ramiro spends in los Coyotes, he carries out different tasks to improve the student's learning process. He dedicates most of his time to assist Carmen during class by supporting individual students or guiding a group

of them in specific activities.

Once the school day is over, he tutors some of the children he has identified (either through the diagnostic evaluation he applied during his first visit to the community, or during class) as needing extra help to learn a particular lesson, subject or to develop certain competencies.

Then, along with the instructor, he engages in preparing the lesson plan for the following day by getting materials ready and reviewing the pertinence of the planned activities in accordance to the student's particular needs. Last, but not least, he conducts monthly workshops with adults to incorporate parents and caretakers in their children's learning processes and school activities.

The above is Ramiro's way of reaching his main goal as an Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor which, in his own words, is to: *reduce educational lag in the communities (...)and raise children's results in ENLACE. Provide the instructor with a series of didactic tools and skills, so that she is able to prepare and develop her activities with the least possible trouble. With parents, it is to try to make them understand the duties they have towards school, that they have to get involved and that they need to play a part in their children's education instead of being external agents.*

The activities that he conducts in class benefit from the physical layout of the class room that reflects the fact that Netzahualcoyotl is a Conafe's communitarian education service since children are organized in working spaces according to their level and all spaces are positioned so that students face each other. Three or four rectangular bright orange plastic tables are placed adjacent to each other and are surrounded by bright orange plastic chairs.

Located closer to the large chalkboard, there's a tiny table with chairs smaller than the rest of them where the two boys that are in preschool sit. The rest of the room is divided into three working spaces: two boys and two girls sit in one of them: the level I work space; next to them there's another area where three girls and three boys that are in level II sit and, closer to the entrance door, is where level III's three girls and two boys conduct their daily school activities.

There is not a table for the instructor, nor one for the Pedagogical Advisor, because they're both in continuous movement around the class room. Carmen goes from level to level guiding activities and solving doubts; meanwhile Ramiro individually helps students from different levels in specific activities or, at times, focuses on all the students from one particular level to allow Carmen to concentrate in the other ones. Consequently, and in order to constantly support the learners during their activities, all the facilitators' work during class takes place with the children in *their* spaces.

The walls around the class room are nicely decorated with what the kids, the advisor and the instructor refer to as *rincones*, or learning corners: wall or shelf spaces destined to a specific topic. In this manner, there is the music corner, a shelf where different musical instruments made by the students are on display, the math corner, an area of a wall where eye catching signs depict the numbers accompanied by drawings of bright stars; the reading corner, the color corner, arts and crafts corner and so on. They are all attractive to watch and hence become useful resources for the students that use them any time they need to solve a problem or build and design material for their learning activities which is why, when Ramiro first arrived in the community, he concentrated on making new drawings and arranging the corners properly in collaboration with the instructor and the students.



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There's also a bookshelf in one of the class room's corners that neatly gathers a variety of books that all students constantly use in activities as sources of information and examples of literary genres.

Outside the classroom, there's a small vegetable garden, where children study the process of growing vegetables, learn to take care of their environment and work cooperatively by sharing the products of their effort. There's also a basket ball/soccer court that is frequently used by the pedagogical advisor to stimulate learning processes by playing outdoor games where the kids practice what they have learned in a fun and physically active manner.





Even though Ramiro focuses on the children that are at lag with regard to the rest of their peers, he does not limit his advisory work to them. During the school hours, he becomes part of the class aiding Carmen to guide activities, working closely with a particular level or a student that at a certain point may present difficulties with a particular activity.

The subjects that Ramiro reinforces the most are Math and Language because they are the ones that are evaluated by ENLACE and by the project's diagnostic evaluation, nevertheless he also ventures into other areas of knowledge depending on the student's needs. Being a part of school activities all day long allows him to take advantage of his participation in class to observe children:

*More than anything during class I can observe children's performance and the attention they pay to class. I can see the difficulties they present so that I can advise them. I make some recommendations to help them improve when they make mistakes or when I feel they could do better. Even when they are having a good performance I try to motivate them, to help them to continue working hard. Feedback, in that way is shared with them, it's different, because I show them their work and I help them find ways to improve and to recognize when they have done well.*³

His interventions emerge from the activities the instructor has planned to work with learners according to the curriculum, therefore, he must be attentive to identify the moments in which he can provide help to a student or to the instructor, in order to improve the learning environment. Thus the importance of observation, not only of children performance, but also of the role of the instructor in providing the right elements to promote learning: *I believe it is precisely because you are an outsider that you can see what the instructor is not able to see, what she can't notice*⁴.

The following activity illustrates the kind of intervention the advisor has with students from one level in any given day:

The class is working to create a community newspaper that they will send to another school in the region. Each level has the assignment to write one of the newspaper's sections. Ramiro has chosen to work with level II students, since he has noticed that they find writing difficult. Meanwhile, Carmen guides the activities of levels I and III.

³ Ramiro, current Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor

⁴ Rosa, previous Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor

Ramiro asks the students if they know what a newspaper is and what is its purpose; children answer that it is to find out what has happened lately. He shows them a newspaper and asks them to look at its pages in pairs and comment about the pictures, what is written down and the different sizes and styles of letters. He remarks that newspapers are used to let people know what goes on in different places. He then asks them if they can tell him about some of the things that have happened in Los Coyotes lately. Children talk about what has impressed them the most, almost the only thing they talk about are the car accidents that have occurred in the road that can be seen from their classroom's window. Ramiro tells them to be as specific as they can about the details: when did it happen? Where? What happened afterwards?

They talk about it for a while and then he tells them that it would be great if they could inform the children from another school about what they have been discussing. He asks each of them to write something they would like those kids to know about the latest events that have taken place in los Coyotes.

A group of students begins writing their news article right away but the other kids start playing with paper planes. At first, Ramiro doesn't say anything and answers the doubts that arise among the children in the first group (date, place, story line etc). Once he sees that they are fully engaged in writing, he calls the rest of the kids and draws their attention to the newspaper again, he asks them about what they can find in it, if there is a date, why are some letters darker, where can they find the name of the author of the article... Then he asks them what they would like to write about, and each one of them comes up with an idea, he asks them what title would they give to the article and then tells them to write it down on their notebooks. As soon as they do it, he encourages them to write, first asking them what they remember about the event and then telling them to write it down. By this time the students in the first group have already finished, and start helping their classmates.

The second group needs more help to pay attention to what they are doing. Ramiro is helping a boy sitting next to him, but after some minutes of working, the boy starts to feel restless and says to Luis: "*hold on*", he stands up and walks around the classroom for a minute or so, sits down again and keeps on working. Once they all finish, Ramiro tells them to read someone else's article and help each other make corrections. Then he asks them to write it down in a new piece of paper (the day before, they had cut papers in irregular shapes and decorated them) to paste each news article in the class' newspaper.

It is relevant here to point out the self regulating strategy that the boy used in order to be able to follow through with the activity. He knew that he was feeling distracted and tired, and he didn't abandon the activity, instead he just took a rest.

This example of Ramiro guiding a learning activity illustrates the involvement he expects to inculcate on children by creating a connection between an academic activity and their previous knowledge. This seems to be a characteristic element of the activities planned by the advisors.

When inquired about their favorite activities with the pedagogical advisor, children explain that they like outdoor activities the most; they relate them with playing but are aware that they are usually linked to mathematical problems. Both Ramiro and Rosa, the previous adviser, have engaged the students in many different outdoor games that students remember. Below, is an example of one of them, this plan for an activity to aid developing motor function as well as to exercising the learning of basic mathematical operations was taken from one of Rosa's reports to the regional coordinator:

At the center of the court I place some magnetic numbers.

- a) The class is divided in two groups that gathered at opposite ends of the court.
- b) I shout an operation: for example 9×3 .
- c) All the children from one team must crawl to the center, find the numbers and signs they will need to solve the operation and find out the result.
- d) They must crawl back to their side of the court and place the numbers in the right order on the poles of the basket ball's basket.
- e) The team that ends up with the most operations in the right order and the correct result wins.

This activity can be done many times during the year, changing the instructions to move (jumping, running, backwards...) being careful that children do not hurt themselves⁵.

The *Guía para el Asesor Pedagógico Itinerante* (Guide for the Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor) (Conafe, 2009), contains general concepts that the advisor will need to comprehend to accomplish his work. It explains the kind of intervention he or she should carry on and suggests strategies and activities that focus in three main areas: language, math and neurologic maturation. It includes theories and ideas about pedagogic intervention in Conafe's communitarian schools and strategies to encourage the development of language and mathematical skills on learners, however, sometimes they aren't enough and they have to use the internet, library, their peer advisor's suggestions and, most of all, their imagination to innovate. The pedagogical advisors have to be creative; they have to come up with activities that are adequate for each particular group or student.

This also applies to the advisor's other functions such as his work with the instructor. Ramiro has to come up with strategies to help Carmen improve the way in which she facilitates the student's learning process:

My aim with the instructor, more than anything, is to provide her with strategies that can lead children to a meaningful learning, not learning for the sole purpose of learning, nor memorizing or repeating, but a learning that will be helpful throughout their lives⁶.

⁵ Source: Rosa's notebook.

⁶ Ramiro, current Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor.

They work as a team, together they decide which learners Ramiro can help and in what ways and they carefully plan the strategy they will follow so that their activities are coordinated and they do not interrupt each other. Every day, after class, they plan the next day lessons jointly and solve any doubt or difficulty the instructor may have; if she feels unprepared to teach something, Ramiro can advise her so that she finds the easiest way to comprehend and explain to the students what they need to learn. He is clear that he is not going to teach for her, that's not his job, however he is there to support her so that she can find the way of making the best out of her knowledge and abilities in order to use them to the student's advantage.

Also afterschool is when home visits take place. Part of the support the advisor provides consists in going to the students' homes. These visits enable him to see firsthand the conditions in which they live, meet members of their family and understand their family context. They also allow him to see the physical space where they do their homework, if it's appropriate for them to concentrate, if they feel comfortable in it and if his family encourages them to study. During his visit, he helps students do their homework and guides their parents so that they learn how to help them in the process.

Since parents rotate among them to feed both the advisor and the instructor, he also gets a chance to visit all students' houses in a more informal manner and uses the opportunity to discuss family involvement in education. In addition, he interacts with parents during informal conversations when they drop or pick up their children from school and during parent's workshops.

So far this school year, he's only had one workshop with parents but he plans to conduct them at least once a month. Only women attended his first workshop and only women attended the many workshops the previous advisor carried out twice a month. These meetings are based on the *Guía Familia y Escuela. A Generar un Futuro Mejor*⁷ (Conafe, 2010) which describes proposals of activities to use during meetings with parents, reminders regarding the particularities of working with adults and the aims of the intervention. The purpose of these workshops is to increase parental participation in the students' academic activities by involving their family in their educational process, to contribute to improve family and school environments and thus favor the students' school achievement. They are also intended to stimulate the development of parents' initiatives and creativity to foster peaceful family relationships, problem resolution and active participation in school activities.

Ramiro has reached parents through encouraging them to think about their life as a part of the community, he provides them with the opportunity to talk about any situation they feel needs a solution, whether regards school or the community as a whole; he then encourages them to reach a consensus to find the best way to solve the issues at stake. The idea is to allow everyone to say what is on their minds, avoiding confrontation, and sharing experiences, rescuing ideas from everybody, searching for the most suitable way to face problems.

⁷ To generate a better future. Guide for working with parents

With parents I want to impact in the upbringing practices, the community organization, their involvement in school, but not in a superficial way; I want to help them acknowledge that they must have a comprehensive role in the education of their children, stay alert to what they are learning, as well as what are they not learning and to how they can help them learn. To be updated on how the instructor is working, how she is assessing, how they can help in their homework, and so on⁸.

Evaluation plays a key role in API's project in order to assess the impact of the actions the advisor implements. The first evaluation Ramiro applied, took place during his first visit to the community. He used a diagnostic written evaluation to help him identify students at lag, those who may need extra help with certain topics, and to assess the general learning situation of the school. This standardized evaluation is applied to all schools that participate in the API project and it is based on the most difficult math and language questions from ENLACE.

At the end of the school year a similar evaluation will take place, it will include the same type of questions and will also focus on language and math skills; this will help Ramiro estimate what the children have learned and inform their parents and his coordinator about the progress they made during the school year.

In addition to the bimonthly standardized tests that Conafe sends, in accordance to the national education system's curriculum and grading requirements, there are other forms of evaluation that Ramiro implements throughout the school year to find out about the progress students have made and the obstacles they may encounter:

Children are assessed through written or oral exams, through solving problems, written projects or activities which help me find out if children are actually learning (...) Sometimes the evaluation will depend on the child I'm working with, because, on daily basis, if I worked with one kid in particular, I could only assess his learning. Nonetheless at the end of the 15 days I design an evaluation for all of them to assess the overall progress⁹.

In order to design this evaluation Ramiro takes into consideration the best way to assess according to the children's aptitudes and, with the help of the API's Guide, he includes what he considers to be the most suitable indicators according to the contents the instructor has been working with the children. Depending on the level of the children (I, II or III) the complexity of the evaluation, and their abilities, this evaluation may be oral, written or derived from other activities conducted during class.

I use the evaluations to monitor their learning, what they have achieved, to find out if it is best to review some of the contents again, to know if kids need more attention or different strategies to understand something, maybe the strategies used did not allow children to really assimilate learning. Then I will know if children actually learned or if we need to work some more.¹⁰

⁸ Ramiro, current Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ Idem.

III Nature and quality of learning

Ramiro's main goal is to improve the learning process of students, one of the objectives of his work in Los Coyotes is to coordinate all agents around learning, therefore every hour of the day and every physical space in the community is seen as an opportunity for the children to learn.

Language and math are the core subjects of his advisory, but they are not the limits of his action. It is the advisor's responsibility to assemble all the work that takes place in the classroom and use it as a base to help children learn what they must be learning according to their age and the grade they are in.

His intervention is based, from the beginning, in the diagnostic evaluation, which allows him to identify each child's particular needs and, accordingly, plan the course of action he will follow to make learning accessible to all the students. Nevertheless, Ramiro realizes that the diagnostic evaluation is not the only way to find out about the student's knowledge which is why he attributes a great deal of importance to home visits and to be a participant observer during classes. From getting to be familiar with the children by spending time with them in class, in their houses and in the playground, he gets to know their interests, their strengths and their disadvantages, which are the starting points for the activities he collaboratively plans with the instructor throughout the year.

When the activities developed take into account the interests of students, like the writing of the newspaper article that was previously described, or making learning fun by playing games outside while reviewing the contents of the class, children wish to participate, they start asking questions in order to find out more and they realize it is not difficult to learn when they are doing something they like. When students enjoy a learning activity, they want to repeat it over and over; this is where the significance of Ramiro's advisory to Carmen lays: he is supplying her with activities and that will make the children want to learn more and increasing her skills to come up with innovative ways of making learning fun.

By getting to know the families and listening to the parents and children, community members start to trust Ramiro and each other. Some of the kids have already started to share his interests with him, what they like to do, what they like to play, etc. This is an important part of living in the community, among its members, because it allows him to spend more time with the kids, sharing what they do in their free time, exploring their interests, their motivations and getting to know their personal life, which explains many of the emotional ties that emerge between him the students and the way in which he refers to them: *"I have a very close interaction with kids, I try to identify their needs, their weakness and help them overcome them. Besides, I believe it's a very good relationship, beautiful, because they offer me their trust. They trust me with their needs and they expect my support"*¹¹. He uses his individual knowledge of the kids to come up with activities but also to address some of the

¹¹ Idem.

family issues that may be affecting the children's academic performance during the workshops with parents.

Working in a multilevel environment, is usually an advantage for the advisor because collaboration amongst students is continuously taking place. However, in this particular school, Ramiro is focusing on boosting productive cooperation between classmates, because kids were under the impression that helping another student meant doing all the work for them instead of guiding them; he is working on making them comprehend that helping a classmate means explaining to them, providing them with hints that allow them to figure out their own conclusions. Ramiro is attempting to do this by guiding the tutoring and reinforcing that students from the upper levels coach students from the lower ones.



When a student seems afraid to ask when he or she doesn't understand something, Ramiro tends to become aware of it, inconspicuously, walks towards the child's place and, using a soft tone of voice, explains the activity to him or her as many times as necessary until he is sure that the child has understood; sometimes he offers examples or involves other children in the explanation.

When the students were working on the newspaper, Ramiro wasn't rushing them; on the contrary, he let every child to do their work at their own rhythm. When he saw that some kids' attention deviated from the activity, he asked them about their personal experience drawing on it to help them identify what they could add to the newspaper, in that way, he made them realize that it was within their power to carry on the activity and that they were also able write an article. When their attention deviated again, he became aware that they needed extra help to get through the activity so he guided them and involved the classmates that had already finished in helping out their friends. This helped to avoid the frustration in children that may be caused by seeing that their classmates could finish the activity and they couldn't; instead Ramiro helped everybody accomplish the goal of the activity: to write an article and create the school newspaper.

The same activity presented different difficulties to each kid and, according to their needs, Ramiro offered suitable help and helped realize they were able to do the work by guiding them and recognizing the efforts and progresses they made. His intention in doing this is also expressed by him during an interview:

We try to integrate activities that have different complexity levels; even when it is the same content, we vary the difficulty level and depending on what children know, their abilities, their capacities we guide the activity to what they can solve, to what they can understand. This way we are conscious of their differences, because if we plan the same activity for the three levels with no variations it won't have the same impact since we would put some kids at a disadvantage (...) According to the activities planned by the instructor, we think of the strategies and the children that will be tutored. I always start the activities from the most simple to the most complex and everyone helps everyone¹².

It is evident that Ramiro is mindful of the fact that to accomplish meaningful learning in children it is necessary to start from their previous learning, but the richness of working with different levels also means that he has to acknowledge the differences between children and use them as a helpful tool.

When Ramiro is discussing math divisions with level III students, first he asks them who knows what a division is and when is necessary to use it and then he encourages them to come up with concrete examples. They start talking about sharing things; when someone wants to share many things among many people, one way to do it is by giving the same amount of things to everyone. Then, with the material from the math



corner they practice sharing different amounts of rings among different amounts of people: 80 rings among 5 persons, 45 rings among 9 persons etc. He lets all of them provide an example and then everyone takes the number of rings and practices the divisions.

“To start a lesson I always ask first what they know about the topic, I ask some questions and see how much they know about it. From there, I can tell what and when I would need to emphasize and to whom I won't need to explain the basics (...) sometimes, however, there is a big difference between what some kids and others know, even though they are from the same level. Sometimes it varies a lot, this is when we try to foster tutorship this way they can support each other and those who know more, those with more experience help the ones that are learning. Sometimes instead of supporting the learners, the tutors do all the work, then I must pay attention, so that tutorship is really an advisory exercise among them, not solving each other's problems¹³.

¹² Ramiro, current Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor.

¹³ Idem.

Another advantage of staying in the community is that Ramiro gets to learn about the traditions, the history, the economic activities and the relationship between the people who live there; all of these are important elements to make learning interesting for children and to inject meaning into the activities they conduct in school, founding a strong relation to what they see happening daily in their community. This is something Ramiro stresses when working with the instructor, he emphasizes that daily events of the community are also a great opportunity for planning learning activities for children, usually this is done for subjects as history or environmental sciences, but Ramiro tries to include them in the activities related with language and math, the subjects in which students have experienced more difficulties:

For example (using) a math activity, problem or Spanish texts that are linked to the community's history; something of their own, to make it meaningful, maybe a legend, it is better (to refer to) one from their community than to a strange one that is distant from what they know. To be able to involve learning into their context, for example the math problems can be related to the products of the community, bring it closer to them to relate it with their life¹⁴.

For Ramiro, the assessment is not focused on grades or in seeing which student is better than other, assessment is a tool that guides the advice he can give to children, to the instructor and to the parents. He evaluates every time he is in the community during the fifteen days a month; this can mean assessing the learning progress of an individual student or finding out the common learning difficulties the group as a whole is running into, either way, his evaluations include the contents he has reviewed with the students during his advisory and can take many forms (e.g. oral, written, observation, project building). He believes the advantage of this way of evaluating is that it makes children feel confident since it takes into consideration their individual abilities and constraints.

Every day during class, Ramiro is constantly assessing through observation what are the results of the activities that he and Carmen planned and what are the changes they need to implement to better promote children's learning; in this way he also assesses his own work and Carmen's work, which undoubtedly reflects on students' performance.

IV Impact and effectiveness

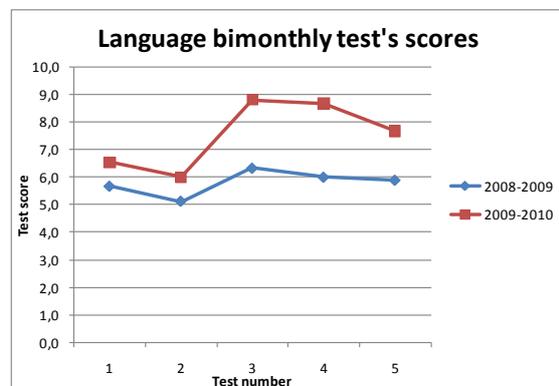
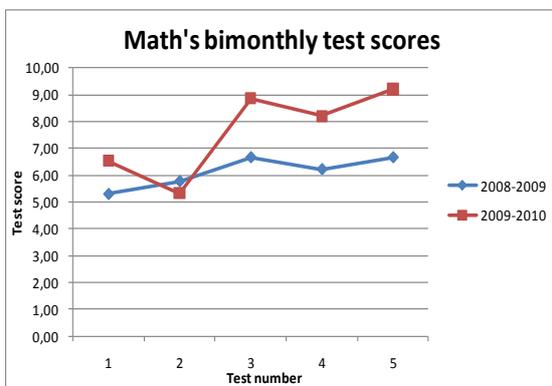
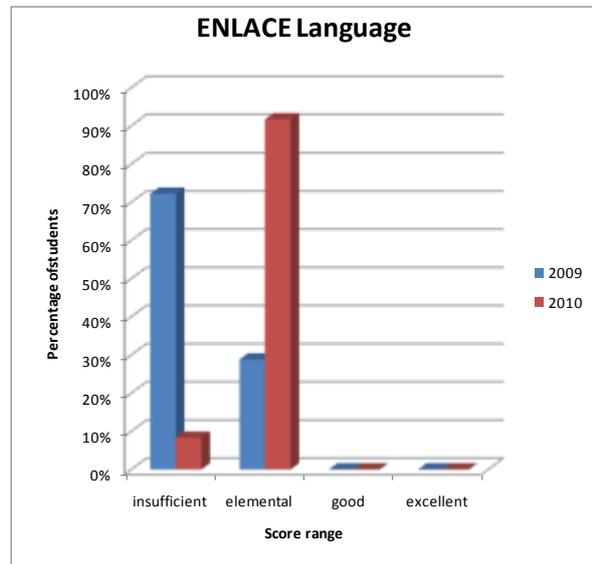
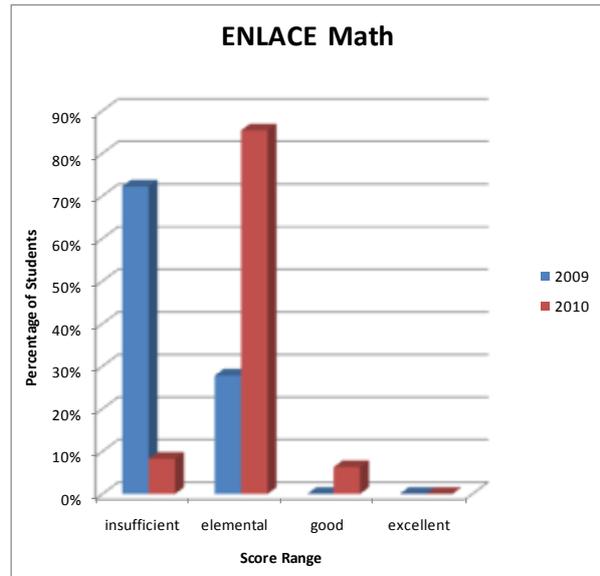
As we mentioned earlier, APIs project was implemented in Netzahualcoytl School for the first time a little over a year ago. It is thus, a short time to evaluate long term impact on children's learning processes. Nevertheless, based on mostly qualitative evidence, we can deduce that the project has had a positive impact on the students' educational achievement, study habits, the strengthening of parental involvement in their children's education and on the community as a whole.

¹⁴ Ramiro, current Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor

The percentage of Netzahualcoyotl students that achieved insufficient results in 2009¹⁵ national ENLACE evaluation dramatically dropped in 2009-2010 (59,3% in 2009 vs 8,3% in 2010). The student's overall performance, in average, increased by 14.7% versus that of 2009. The student's math results increased by 30.2% and their language ones by 9.2%

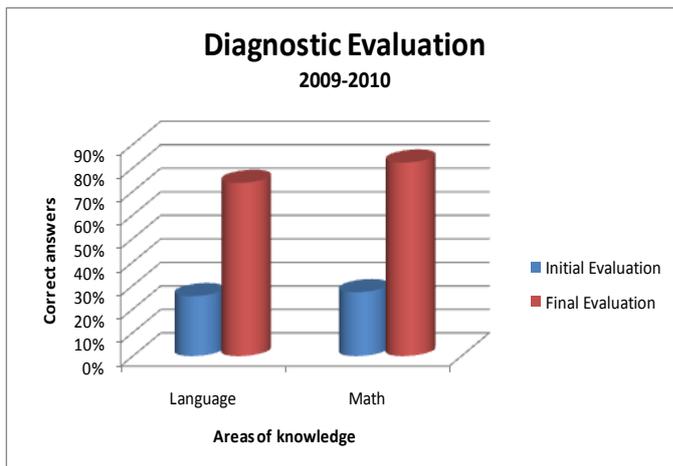
If we compare the student's final average achievement in Conafe's bi-monthly standardized tests from the year before API got to the community (2008-2009) with the ones from last school year (2009-2010), we can see an improvement that is extensive to the majority of the individual students. In average, their math results improved by 32,16 % (1.8 points), their language ones by 32,6% (1,5 points), the social science ones by 10.6% (0.6 points) and the environmental sciences by 27% (1.7 points).

The graphics below illustrate the comparison between the average scores students achieved in each one of Conafe's bi-monthly standardized tests during the school year 2008-2009 and the ones achieved in 2009-2010, in Language and Math.



¹⁵ The evaluation takes place in the fourth quarter of the school year, therefore ENLACE 2009 reflects the school year 2008-2009 and ENLACE 2010 reflects the school year 2009-2010

Regarding API program's diagnostic evaluations, the first time it was applied to students in los Coyotes, when the previous pedagogical advisor first arrived to the community, all of them scored in the bottom half on each theme indicator, for both math and language, reason why she decided not to focus only on a few kids but on the group as a whole, since she considered they were all at a tremendous educational lag. As can be seen in the graph below, there was a noticeable difference in the final diagnostic evaluation's results where, in average, the students showed an improvement in their abilities to solve the problems that were presented to them.



The results of this evaluation are a meaningful piece of information for parents and children, because it is a way to let them know the progress they have made along the school year, promoting their trust and self-esteem and recognizing what they were able to learn with the support and guidance of the advisor, who is responsible of explaining the meaning of their results.

Mothers described the changes that took place in their children, referring to what they learned but mainly to their change in attitude. Some of them attribute the improvement their children have shown in their school performance to their improved self esteem, to them believing that they can do what they set their minds to: *"(API) helped my daughter because she was one of those people that always said she could not learn. Even I learned a bit more and now we have both learned new things"*¹⁶. Knowing that they are able to learn, that, even though some kids learn faster than others, they can all follow a process that allows them to investigate and solve problems has made a difference in the way they approach school work.

A recurrent comment made by the students was that they appreciated the way in which the advisor explained things because it made learning easier, they especially liked that he would tell them when they are wrong but also when they are right: *"we like the way he explains because if we answer the questions wrong he explains them well and if we answer them well he tells us we are doing well"*¹⁷; this has had a positive effect and helped battle their insecurities.

¹⁶ Student's mother

¹⁷ Student

Other parents stressed their children behavior's improvement; this was also pointed out by the regional coordinator and the previous advisor: *"some of the kids were very aggressive, they would lock themselves and not work, others would fight, others would leave the class room whenever they felt like it and others would hit each other. There was a boy who even tried to break the glass windows to escape from school. We worked hard on those things and they changed"*¹⁸. In fact, as mentioned earlier, one of the extra reasons los Coyotes was chosen to implement API was that students were becoming very aggressive towards the instructors and towards each other, in previous years an eleven year old boy threatened the instructor with a knife and others sent her intimidating notes; these behaviors had caused the instructor desertion rate to increase, however, last school year, the instructor remained in the community throughout her term. Now days, when you walk into the class room is hard to imagine that some of those same boys and girls could have reach those levels of aggression, they seem peaceful and respectful towards the instructor, the advisor and their peers.

The change in attitude has helped strengthen teamwork spirit in the students. The emphasis that both the instructor and the advisor have placed on collaborative work has paid off and now even the parents can see that *"children have improved, they used to not like to share with each other, now they have improved their education and they have learned how to coexist"*¹⁹. One of the student's mothers told us that Rosa helped his son to learn how to concentrate, even when working with others: *"I see that he has changed; now he tries harder. Before, teachers told me that he tried to work but he got distracted by his class mates, now he still gets distracted but a lot less"*²⁰. Even though collaborative work is one of the pillars of Conafe's communitarian education, in this school, it used to be particularly hard for the instructor to have class control when students worked together.

API's impact can also be observed in parental involvement in their children's education. On one hand, the workshops in school and the house visits have helped engage them in their kids' activities by making them aware that they need to support them in order to propitiate positive changes in their behavior and their learning process, and on the other, they became conscious of their need, as a community, to improve the relationship among them, also for their kids' sake. According to the previous advisor, when they first started attending the workshops, the mothers argued and could not reach agreements, however, after a while: *"they started to get organized to plant the vegetable garden and even agreed on an annual plan of action. They were able to get organized"*²¹.

¹⁸ Rosa, previous Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor

¹⁹ Student's mother

²⁰ Student's mother

²¹ Rosa, previous Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor

Mothers are proud of their children's improvement in the standardized national tests, but they are also proud of themselves because they know they too have changed and contributed to this achievement. One of the mothers who doesn't know how to read or write properly, situation that she used as an excuse for not getting involved in her kids education in the past, commented the following: *"I feel the meetings helped me a lot because, as they say, sometimes we care more about our home chores than our own kids, and now I dedicate more time to him"*²². While the youngest mother said that she could clearly see the improvement in her son's learning and that she knew her involvement had something to do with it: *"last year my son ended up reading some letters and writing. His letters were very ugly, but now they are pretty because I help him out at home"*²³.

Conclusion

The improvement Netzahualcoyotl's students showed on the standardized tests evidences that the API project positively impacted their learning. Their problem solving competences and their reading comprehension, the two most problematic aspects when API started to work with them, have further developed. Students and their families would like the project to continue in their school, however, if children's learning results continue to improve this academic year the way they have been doing, their school will no longer be considered as an priority next year and the project will move on to a different community with critical educational lag.

A systemic operative evaluation and monitoring of the program is being conducted throughout the academic year in all the states where API currently operates. Thanks to this, weaknesses have been identified and have resulted in changes that have led to a better and more pertinent implementation of the program.

API's didactic materials are currently undergoing a series of improvements that aim at strengthening the Advisors work. Amongst them, the reinforcement of orientations regarding the pedagogic model of communitarian education, which encompasses key principles to improve the learning teaching process such as auto regulation and autonomy of the students, collaborative work, diagnosis and formative evaluation. New and improved didactic tools are also being added to the Advisor's guide to help them guide their work with the students.

²² Student's mother

²³ Student's mother

Starting this academic year (2010-2011) and for the following three years, the API program will be evaluated through an experimental design evaluation which will measure its pertinence and impact. This will provide Conafe's directives with the necessary evidence to make an informed decision regarding the expansion of the program. They are confident that API will show great results and, if the evaluation proves them right, would like to eventually expand it nationwide, to all the communitarian education services where students are achieving more than 30% insufficiency rate in ENLACE evaluation; in fact they also see the program as something that could benefit students around the country and could, in the future, be implemented at a national level in other modalities of public education.

Glossary

Aula Compartida (shared classroom): one of Conafe's operative solutions for those places that don't count with the minimum of five students per education level (elementary or preschool) required to establish a Conafe's educational service. Preschool and primary students share the same physical space and one community instructor.

Basic Education: compulsory education. In Mexico it comprises preschool, elementary and lower secondary education.

College Education: university level education.

Communitarian education: education model that comprises an array of programs, modalities and education projects that are flexible, pertinent and intercultural operated by Conafe in rural and indigenous communities, migrant workers agricultural camps and circus around the country.

Communitarian Instructors: young men and women (16 to 29 years old) that impart basic education in Conafe's communitarian schools and, in exchange, receive a monetary scholarship to continue their education.

Communitarian school: basic education service attended by Conafe in the most marginalized rural and indigenous areas of Mexico.

Conafe (National Council for Educational Foment): decentralized Mexican Federal Government agency devoted to providing alternatives of access, permanency and learning improvement in early childhood and basic education for infant and teenagers that live in rural poverty stricken communities in marginalized conditions.

Conafe's Education Service: communitarian school attended by Conafe in the most marginalized rural and indigenous areas of Mexico.

Diagnostic Evaluation: written evaluation applied to all schools that participate in the API project. It is based on the most difficult questions from standardized national evaluation ENLACE, in both language and math.

Elementary Education: in México, this level comprises 6 grades, it is compulsory by law and its students' ages range, in average, from 6 to 12 years old.

ENLACE (National Assessment of Academic Achievement in School Centers): is a standardized national evaluation that, at the elementary education level, is applied to children from third to sixth grade. It is based on the official Language and Math curriculum and also evaluates a third subject that varies each year (Environmental Science in 2008, Civic and Ethic in 2009 and History in 2010). Its purpose is to create a unified national indicator that provides comparable information about students' knowledge and skills in those areas of knowledge.

High School Education: education level that follows secondary education. It is not compulsory in Mexico.

Itinerant Pedagogical Advisor (API): college graduates in charge of implementing the API program in Conafe's communitarian elementary and secondary education's services. They get a stipend for their services.

Levels (in communitarian elementary education): Conafe's elementary education comprises three levels. Level I: is the equivalent of first and second grade in the regular education system, level two: third and fourth grade. Level three: fifth and sixth grade.

Preeschool education: is the first level of basic education. It is compulsory in Mexico since 2002, it comprises 3 grades and its students are usually between 3 and 6 years old.

Pulque: traditional fermented alcoholic beverage made from the agave plant.

Regional Coordinator: employee of Conafe's Delegations in the states responsible for the coordination of the pedagogical, technical and operative activities in a specific region.

Rincones (or learning corners): particular class room's wall or shelf spaces that are destined to a specific topic.

Secondary Education: in México, this level comprises 3 grades, it is compulsory by law and its students' ages range, in average, from 12 to 15 years old

Training Tutor: young man or woman that has been selected amongst previous Communitarian Instructors, to orient and support current communitarian instructors.

API'S UNIVERSE*

NUMBER OF PARTICIPATING STATES	14
PEDAGOGICAL ADVISORS	666
MUNICIPALITIES ATTENDED	1332
COMMUNITARIAN SCHOOLS ATTENDED	1385
STUDENTS BENEFITTED ELEMENTARY EDUCATION	15562
STUDENTS BENEFITTED SECONDARY EDUCATION	3347

*Statistics: December 2010

API'S GUIDE

The following are translations of two segments of the API's Guide. The first one is in one of its first pages and the second one is taken from the section referred to as the "tool box" that contains strategies and activities.

I. THE PEDAGOGICAL ITINERANT ADVISOR

Before you start your work as API, we recommend that you:

- Read this guide completely to have a general overview of what your work will include and on how to organize yourself to achieve greater efficiency.
- After Conafe's delegation staff has introduced you to the communities and to the communitarian instructors you will be advising, try to gradually establish direct contact with the residents so that they recognize you; this will make establishing a trusting relationship and fluid communication easier.
- Program periodic informational meetings to ensure that everyone involved is informed about your activities in each of the communities you attend. In this way, you will show a sense of organization that will allow them to appreciate your responsibility and professionalism.
- The materials you use should always be ready on time and in sufficient quantities for the number of people you will be working with. If you use a chart, or copies of documents, ensure that they have the best possible presentation.
- To foster a climate of mutual respect, we suggest that you are very punctual when your activities involve other people.
- Regardless of the language spoken in the community, using a clear, simple and precise vocabulary is a gesture that will be appreciated.
- The advice you will offer students, communitarian instructors and parents should be oriented to very specific points of the teaching-learning process, at times it may seem too limited, however it is just this precision what makes it possible to effectively address problems related to educational lag. Remember that, as stated in the introductory section: small opportunities are the beginning of great enterprises.

1.1. ¿Who is him or her? ¿What does he or she do?

Plan an advantage by listening.

Sun Tzu

The Itinerant Pedagogic Advisor is, in the first place, a person that graduated from a teacher training institution, with a university degree, capable of teaching in a program or level of basic education, preferably elementary or secondary education. In some cases, he or she has experience in community work, although it is not a prerequisite. What is essential is to have a vocation of service and the openness

needed to identify and address the specific needs of the people who she or he will be advising.

In very general terms, this is your description.

However, the task that you will develop as API is not what is traditionally done in the classroom. It is very specialized work, both in its execution as in the spaces in which it operates, both physically and time wise.

As an advisor you will attend to:

- The students in each one of the groups of the schools that have been assigned to you.
- An average of eight students who present the highest academic lag, individually.
- The communitarian instructor, in order to improve his or her performance both in the classroom and in his or her relationship with parents.
- Student's parents / caretakers, to promote their collaboration with the aim of increasing their children's academic achievement.

This advisory is characterized by two **main specificities**.

The first one, already mentioned in the introduction, is that your main tool is the **pedagogic intervention**, a concept we will come back to later on. Let it be enough, at this time, to clarify that your job is not to teach students the content of academic programs: the communitarian instructors got that covered.

In order to do your work as an advisor it is essential to have a global vision about the teaching-learning environment in which students will develop, so that little by little you can identify the problems responsible for academic lag in each particular case and act accordingly, intertwining parent's and instructor's efforts to propitiate the best possible long term results: your intervention in the present is based on your ability to think ahead.

The second one is the itinerant character of such intervention (...)

3. TOOL BOX

(...)

3.1.1. Strategies/ activities Level I

Reading Comprehension

First, what comes first:

- Offer students different types of books and other publications: magazines, newspapers, leaflets, posters, brochures, catalogs and other objects with letters.
- Talk about what they see: its size and shape, if it has many or few pages and how they are, whether or not it has a cover and how is it, if it has pictures and what do they suggest. At this point, try to foster that the descriptions are as detailed as possible.
- It is very likely that, at first, students find talking about the materials difficult because they do not know them or their parts, they don't know you, they are shy, etc. Do not force them, you can describe the materials yourself and compare them with others while showing students what you are referring to.
- Tell them what your favorite story is about and why you like it, who told it to you the first time, how old were you, and all the details you wish to include to make your narrative more enjoyable. It does not matter if what you tell them is not entirely true, what is important is to capture their interest.
- Ask them what their favorite story is. Ask them to tell it to you and to tell you all the details concerning the first time they listened to it. Ask them about who they would like to tell the story to and why.
- Go back to the printed materials and discuss what happens when a person reads a tale or a story. Invite them to imagine the author writing his work and to make assumptions about why he or she decided to write it.
- Pick some illustrated story books with very little text. Let the students identify which pages contain words and which ones don't.
- Play a game to see what letters or whole words students recognize, find other words that start with the same letter or make sentences with the words they recognized. As they speak, write everything they say on the board and ask them to go back to the books to find those letters or words. This exercise is more rewarding if you do it with more than one student, because you would have more elements, letters and words to work with.
- Use all possible combinations.

- Once they have made themselves familiar with a text's letters and words, ask them to tell you their ideas regarding the story plot: What is it about?, What do they see in the pictures? Does it have characters? How are they like? How is the place where it happens? What is there? and so forth.
- Read the story slowly, paying close attention to the tone and volume of your voice. Ask them to tell you which of the letters or words they had found in the book they recognized while you were reading out loud and write them down on the board. Talk about the story: what did they think of it? Did they like it? Why? Who would they like to tell that story to?
- Ask them to choose another story and read its first pages; then, ask them what they think will happen next and why. Suggest them to guide themselves using the illustrations and by the letters or words they recognize in the text.
- Read the story and compare what it says with what had been previously imagined. Find the relationship between the text and the illustrations and discuss the characters, the places where the story unfolds, if they would like it to have a different ending. Ask them to tell you if know a similar story, what did they think about the story, what is the most important part of it and if there is something people can learn from it.
- Go back to comparing the books with other printed matter, define what is the difference amongst them and what can each one be used for, what is its purpose: to inform (newspaper), sell (catalog), express an opinion (editorial page of a book or journal), show something (brochure), tell a story (book or story), to distinguish one product from another (label), promote a show (poster), teach how to make something (recipe), and so on.
- Talk about how useful it is to know what they say: what can be the point of knowing what the material says? How can it be useful to them? To their family? To the community?
- Think about the difference between use and enjoyment, not all things are useful for something immediate and concrete. There are things, such as tales and novels that may not have an evident utilitarian purpose but serve to develop key competences for our life: our imagination, ability to learn, memory, ability to understand...They are like cities where we can discover worlds that are different from ours.
- Repeat these activities as often as you consider it pertinent in order to gradually draw students to reading, always keeping in mind their own interests. Seize every opportunity to observe their vocabulary and help them to expand it, to improve their fluency and accuracy, to correctly build their statements and modulate the tone and volume of their voice, using proper intonation for what they want to express, and so on.
- Encourage them to identify each time more letters and words and write them on the board. Once they begin to familiarize themselves with the lines, ask them to bring their own notebook to record their first letters and words.
- If they make a mistake, ask them to try again saying what is the letter or word in question and show them how to spell it correctly.

- Ask them to choose the stories or books that interest them the most and to read them little by little. If they cannot decide which ones, suggest them the ones you consider appropriate for their level of advancement.
- Keep an accurate record of their progress and discuss it with them.
- Congratulate them when they do something well and encourage them to express their doubts.