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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (December 2023), pp. 242-252

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/69903>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/h7ws-7nkh>

REFERENCES:

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Restrepo-Sáenz, Ana María, and Emmanuel Neisa Chateauneuf. 2023. "Preparing Children for an Unpredictable World in the Middle of a Crisis: La Aldea's Approach." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 9 (1): 242-52. <https://doi.org/10.33682/h7ws-7nkh>.

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PREPARING CHILDREN FOR AN UNPREDICTABLE WORLD IN THE MIDDLE OF A CRISIS: LA ALDEA'S APPROACH

ANA MARÍA RESTREPO-SÁENZ AND EMMANUEL NEISA CHATEAUNEUF

ABSTRACT

No one was prepared when COVID-19 hit. While education systems all over the world turned to distance learning, countries like Colombia faced a significant challenge: only 75 percent of Colombian teachers had received training in online teaching, 64 percent of school principals considered the technology available to schools to be insufficient, and only 67 percent of 15-year-old students had internet access (OECD 2019). And what about the families living in at-risk contexts and facing additional economic and health pressures? The time was ripe to scale up La Aldea—a flexible, learner-centered strategy whose content and methods are designed to meet the needs of the child at the end of the proverbial “last mile.” La Aldea is a strategy created by ClickArte, a Colombian organization that specializes in designing and implementing educational projects. Using its print books, radio shows, digital content, songs, and games, La Aldea was disseminated throughout the country via UNICEF Colombia’s education in emergencies strategy. It also provided online training sessions to 4,220 teachers. It ultimately reached 87,667 families and children. This immediate, comprehensive, multimedia, multistakeholder plan was adapted to reach every child in Colombia’s formal and nonformal education settings in migrant and conflict-affected communities. La Aldea’s education strategy is composed of carefully crafted stories whose main characters are animals found in Colombia (such as macaws, tapirs, owls, and anteaters, among others). The stories and activities that make up La Aldea are metaphors of society: children, families, and teachers can self-identify with the situations being portrayed, hence giving schools material to integrate playfully into the teaching curricula, while at the same time nudging children’s cognitive, citizenship, and social-emotional skills—and, of course, COVID-19 awareness.

Received August 14, 2021; revised April 4, 2022; accepted October 26, 2022; electronically published December 2023.

Journal on Education in Emergencies, Vol. 9, No. 1.

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ISSN 2518-6833

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19-related school closures created a unique opportunity to rethink how to enable student learning when children are not attending school, and to do so in a way that also provides critical social-emotional elements associated with resilience, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the world. La Aldea is a multifaceted education strategy composed of stories available in print books, radio shows, digital content, songs, games for parents, children, and teachers, as well as teacher training sessions. Inspired by the use of fables in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the stories that make up La Aldea are metaphors for society as described through the characters and the village (*aldea* in Spanish) they live in. The objective is to demonstrate that current real-life themes can be integrated into the mainstream curriculum by using carefully crafted stories for children in a playful manner.

La Aldea benefitted 87,667 children ages 6 to 14, including Venezuelan migrants, who were attending primary and secondary schools in communities in Colombia that were dealing with conditions of poverty, including poor connectivity. In 2020, 130,000 printed copies of La Aldea books (which contained QR codes to connect to digital content such as songs and videos) were distributed in formal and nonformal education environments in 17 regions of Colombia, making it one of the most widely distributed books in that nation. More than six radio shows that included La Aldea's stories were produced. In addition, 4,500 teachers from 600 public education institutions, along with 130 tutors, were given a 1,000-hour training in the La Aldea strategy.

THE COLOMBIAN CONTEXT

Donor and international aid agencies refer to Colombia as a context with multiple concurring emergencies. Situations related to armed conflict, the environment, and migration are a constant in the country. In terms of armed conflict, the Colombian government signed a peace treaty in 2016 with the FARC-EP guerrilla organization, Latin America's oldest and largest insurgent group. What led to the conflict, and has continued since it ended, is a deep struggle over various economic, political, social, and environmental challenges. After more than 60 years of internal armed conflict, Colombia had more than seven million internally displaced citizens. Moreover, 17.5 percent (DANE 2020) of the country's population now lives in multidimensional poverty, making Colombia one of the economically most unequal countries in Latin America. According to INDEPAZ (2021), after

the signing of the peace treaty, the armed conflict was merely reconfigured: it is estimated that around 93 illegal armed groups continue to threaten the population with kidnappings, killings, bombings, and curfews.

Environmental hazards are also an issue in Colombia. According to the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (2010), 90 percent of the population has been exposed to at least one hazard and 80 percent to two or more. Severe floods, hurricanes on the northern coast, landslides, and droughts are common. This high vulnerability to climate hazards affects the vulnerable populations the most, making them still more vulnerable. Additionally, of the more than 5.2 million Venezuelans who have fled their country due to political and economic instability, the International Rescue Committee (2020) calculates that 1.7 million are living in Colombia, 460,000 of whom are school-age children.

The quality of education available to many children in Colombia is at great risk. Families often lack the resources to buy books or pay for internet access. Others have been displaced from their hometowns due to ongoing conflicts between illegal armed groups and gangs. In some towns, the schools have been repeatedly flooded or were destroyed in a storm. Those who do attend school in their hometown find the classrooms overcrowded and lacking enough seats because so many families have migrated there. For school-age migrant children in Colombia, the situation is even worse.

And then, with so many families and communities already facing multiple emergencies, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Even though the government allocated a higher budget to the education system in 2020 than to any other sector (USAID 2020), the investment was not enough to respond to the needs of the nearly 10 million enrolled students.

EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA

Since 1994, schools in Colombia have adhered to the National Law on Education (Congreso de la República de Colombia 1994), which established basic competency guidelines instead of a national curriculum. The law also included an autonomy principle that allows schools and teachers all over the country to create classes and study plans according to the local need, but still following the general guidelines. Of the 9.6 million students enrolled in preschool and in basic and secondary education, 81.4 percent attend the public system (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2021); of the 44,000 school venues in the country, 80 percent are located in rural areas. In terms of quality of education, Colombia has scored below the mean on

three of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) tests (math, reading, and science). Of the Latin American countries assessed by OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Colombia's overall score rates below Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, and Costa Rica and above Argentina, Panamá, and the Dominican Republic (ICFES 2018).

THE EDUCATION SECTOR DURING COVID-19

On March 15, 2020, after the first COVID-19 case was reported in Colombia, the national government announced a nationwide closing of the schools. They asked schools and local education authorities (known as *secretarías*) to adjust their study plans according to their specific needs, and to offer their students online education options. At that time, only 75 percent of Colombia's teachers had received training in online teaching, 64 percent of school principals considered the technology available to their school to be insufficient, and only 67 percent of 15-year-old students had internet access (OECD 2019). What was to be done? The majority of schools, in the public sector for the most part, remained closed until the first trimester of 2021, which created an education void for the most vulnerable students, who had limited access to the internet and other suitable electronic devices.

The main problems and risks generated by the COVID-19 emergency included the following:

- **School closings:** COVID-19 put children's education in Colombia at risk. Many of them lost contact with their school and were struggling to continue learning. Homes had to become the learning environment and parents had to become teachers, including those who didn't finish their primary education.
- **Home as school:** With no clear pedagogical strategies in place, parents were overwhelmed and underresourced.
- **Survival skills:** Families needed critical information on COVID-19 in order to fight the pandemic at home. The information available needed to be meaningful and usable.
- **Emotional crises:** Confinement and the fear of catching COVID-19 brought the need for skills to cope with emotional issues and their consequences to the forefront. Lack of work, money, food, and other basic needs led to an increase in domestic violence, which made children and women particularly vulnerable.

- **Lack of connectivity:** While some digital strategies were available for distance learning, most children in rural areas did not have connectivity, computers, or high-quality cell phones. This scenario left most of them unconnected to digital education.
- **Inadequate training and pedagogic strategy for distance learning and teaching:** Teachers were responsible for keeping their students connected to learning. They needed to plan distance learning lessons, create printed lessons for their students, and assess students' learning progress—often without any tools.

THE LA ALDEA APPROACH

In contrast to irrelevant, exclusive, prescriptive education systems that systematically fail those in need, the La Aldea strategy offers an agile, child-centric “fable universe” in which children, teachers, and parents are able to interact with printed books, videos, songs, and radio shows that present fables containing metaphors of society. By offering carefully crafted stories and activities using this multiplatform content—print, radio, and digital—current real-life themes can be integrated into the mainstream curriculum. These contents also can be used as interactive materials for out-of-school children and youth in any given context. This helps children develop the 21st-century skills that will help them thrive in an unpredictable world.

The content of La Aldea is a direct reflection of today's world. The main characters, Colombian animals such as macaws, tapirs, owls, and anteaters, face all sorts of social, political, economic, and health dilemmas in the stories. For example, in one story, a virus strikes the village and the animals have to deal with biohealth standards and all the dilemmas the real world was facing. Enrique is a migrant chameleon who hosts a radio show to help fellow migrants understand and process their emotions. By reflecting what the world is going through, the La Aldea content is relevant, engaging, and helpful for users in different contexts. All contents are piloted with its target audiences. To make sure the content responds to users' needs and interests, ClickArte is in constant contact with them through WhatsApp and Facebook groups, as well as teacher training webinars.

The world the La Aldea materials present to their users stands out among education offerings, as it is fun and full of colors and challenges. The stories and their characters mirror today's children and create an emotional relationship that not only enables children to learn but also supports their family's involvement.

When learning with La Aldea, children don't feel like they are at school. The idea that there is no single right answer lightens their experience, and instead of the interactions between a teacher or a parent and a student being about knowing or not knowing, it concentrates on experimentation and discovery, which can completely shift the relationship. Play, conversation, and engagement become the student's inner teacher, curiosity arises, and self-confidence appears. Children work with the books and the associated digital content at their own pace, which gives them the freedom they need to really learn. The entire strategy of La Aldea is based on the following elements:

- **Offers a flexible, multifaceted learning platform and instruments:** La Aldea offers fun, engaging content that is easily adaptable to existing curricula and is accessible by print, radio, and digital platforms. Aimed at delivering entertaining, quality educational content that fosters curiosity, critical thinking, social-emotional wellbeing, and resilience, these contents enable teachers and families to cope with an emergency. This kind of content could easily be adapted to school communities around the country.
- **Provides parents support to re-envision their role:** La Aldea encourages parents to engage in meaningful conversations and activities with their children, and supports teachers by giving them extra tools and training in how to lead different types of conversations in the classroom.
- **Focuses on social-emotional learning:** La Aldea provides children, teachers, and parents with the skills they need to decipher, understand, listen, and cope with emotions—within themselves and in others.
- **Builds teacher communities:** Teacher training sessions have created a sense of belonging among La Aldea's learning communities all over the country and have turned peer exchange into a habit.
- **Reaches a critical mass efficiently during an emergency:** Despite the logistical challenge, more than 130,000 La Aldea books were distributed to children and teachers in 17 regions of Colombia. La Aldea provided an anchor for the learning process and became the link between teachers and families. ClickArte also distributed digital resources to families and cultivated partnerships with local radio stations to broadcast audio La Aldea content.

LA ALDEA'S ROLLOUT DURING COVID-19

With all of Colombia's children in need of a fast education response to the COVID-19 school closures, La Aldea had to be flexible enough to scale-up quickly and to support a variety of learning communities—rural, urban, migrant, and indigenous. In less than a year, the strategy was adopted by school communities across the country. This demonstrated that, despite the differences among territories and local contexts, it was possible to use a “one size fits all” teaching strategy. Each region, from La Guajira and Bogotá to Arauca and Nariño, was able to adapt La Aldea to its own realities and needs.

Fifteen days after the Colombian government announced the closing of all the nation's education institutions in March 2020, the La Aldea materials began to be disseminated by UNICEF Colombia as an emergency education strategy. By the end of April, a comprehensive printed, digital, and radio emergency content strategy was offered to students, teachers, and families across the country.

Because lack of connectivity was a main challenge facing learning communities during COVID-19, La Aldea was based primarily on printed books that could reach children in even the most remote areas of the country. In 2020, the two La Aldea books were among those most widely distributed in Colombia: 112,054 books were sent to students nationwide, which provided them with their own learning materials to use at their own pace—even in conditions of low or zero connectivity. These two books, which were translated into the Wayuu indigenous language, were the entry point for 232 activities, 3 songs, 5 yoga and social-emotional management videos, 7 audiobooks, 6 radio shows, and 2 resource repositories in Google Classroom for teachers.

The main features of La Aldea's contents that enabled the strategy to respond to the emergency were:

- **Offers inclusivity and relevance:** La Aldea's stories tackle current and universal issues that can be adapted into different formats and languages. La Aldea is responsive to the needs of communities, which distinguishes it from other initiatives. The 2020 strategy encouraged school communities to generate conversations and think about such topics as viruses, confinement, social-emotional wellbeing, fake news and information regarding the virus, and a variety of other issues important to any child, teacher, or family.

- **Connects teachers, students, and families:** La Aldea offers opportunities for collaboration between teachers, students, and families, thereby engaging the entire school community. As school communities became disconnected from their physical learning environment, it was important to glue the community together around a common strategy. La Aldea, with its relatable situations and characters, provided a universe in which children, teachers, and parents could unite, and it became a platform where they could create and have discussions, despite their physical separation.
- **Focuses on play and creativity:** La Aldea enables children to have fun while learning and ensures that they still meet their learning goals. This was essential during the COVID-19 school closures, as children and their families genuinely needed to set aside time just for learning. That said, La Aldea's approach is that learning must grow out of learners' inner curiosity and willingness to play, rather than because it is an obligation.

To create rapid and sustainable strategies for providing distance education and strengthening social-emotional skills in an emergency context, it was essential to involve caregivers. In 2020, 4,220 teachers and tutors in Colombia received the La Aldea books and digital resources; 2,631 of them also went through 888 hours of training and implementation support. The teacher training spaces, besides offering an opportunity to develop and strengthen professional skills, were valued as favorable environments in which to create communities of emotional wellbeing, as creative laboratories, and as spaces where teachers from different territories who had different areas of knowledge could exchange experiences. The La Aldea universe allowed students, families, teachers, and tutors to find multiple ways to stimulate the learning process.

In 2020, ClickArte worked with 421 rural and urban education institutions from 21 of the country's 96 education *secretarías*, which were from 66 municipalities in 17 of Colombia's 32 regions. Even though a country like Colombia is fragmented racially, socially, and geographically, it is possible for its citizens to share a democratic ideal in which quality education will be provided to everyone. The openness and flexibility of the La Aldea strategy enabled communities to differentiate what aspects they adopted. Some were more inclined to produce theater performances, drawings, songs, and choreography, while others chose to hold debates and produce written essays, among other types of exercises. La Aldea proved adaptable to a variety of contexts in the regions where it was implemented.

A SUCCESS STORY

Building a sustainable network of partners and organizations that could reach children and learning communities in different regions of Colombia was paramount to spreading and scaling up the La Aldea strategy. In 2020, La Aldea built a network of 23 organizations—among them UNICEF Colombia, Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee, World Vision, the Lego Foundation, and the World Bank—to implement this nationwide emergency education strategy. As few organizations had a ready-made strategy, the network kept growing during the emergency, which allowed the consolidation of funding and the coordination of the work of international aid agencies, local nongovernmental organizations and national and local governments. This created momentum and enabled La Aldea to be widely recognized as one of the most impactful emergency responses to the education crisis brought on by COVID-19. This is why, in June 2021, the Interamerican Development Bank selected La Aldea as one of the most impactful strategies for the enhancement of 21st-century skills in Latin America and the Caribbean (HundrEd 2020).¹

One of the main elements making La Aldea a sustainable strategy is that it goes beyond the emergency and brings to the fore three fundamental aspects of education: relevance, quality, and equality. Teachers and school communities in Colombia continued to use the strategy in 2021, as the schools began to reopen. In 2021, more than 50,000 children and 2,000 teachers who belong to 160 school communities were using the new season of La Aldea. This demonstrates the need to connect what happened during the emergency with the return to “normality.”

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The model through which La Aldea was implemented in 2020 depended on teachers' willingness to be part of the strategy. One important lesson from that year was the need to generate better communication with the local government, school principals, and UNICEF Colombia's local agents. If all these stakeholders were to buy into the strategy, teachers then would be more motivated to be part of the training sessions.

1 La Aldea was chosen from more than 380 projects in 16 countries in Latin America.

Given the timing and the urgency of the implementation of La Aldea, there was no time to give feedback to the teacher trainers on how the La Aldea content was being implemented in classrooms around the country. An observation methodology was integrated into the 2021 implementation work plan to ensure a better quality implementation. A measure of the strategy's impact on teachers, students, and families has not yet been performed.

Families' increased involvement in the education system is the greatest asset resulting from COVID-19. To preserve education quality and access, families must be involved and consider the education content their children are working on to be a valuable aspect of their daily lives.

Creating multiplatform curricula to reach students living at the last mile ensures that children from vulnerable backgrounds will have access to better education services, even if they are unable to enroll in the formal education system.

Education curricula should always enable children, parents, and teachers to navigate the uncertainties brought on by an emergency or any other personal or social situation they are facing. This is a lesson brought to us by COVID-19 that should be maintained in regular times.

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