Rural Education with a Heart

Fe and Alegria's experience with Rural Educational Networks

Here we tell the history of the Fe y Alegria movement's Rural Education Networks (REN) in Peru. We describe how the networks operate and present the recommendations we provided the Ministry of Education for its guidelines for the organisation and operation of networks.

Con el corazón puesto en la educación rural. La experiencia de las Redes Educativas Rurales de Fe y Alegría

Presenta un recuento de la historia de las Redes Educativas Rurales del Movimiento Fe y Alegría del Perú, describe su modelo de trabajo y las recomendaciones que entregaron al Minedu respecto a los lineamientos para la organización y funcionamiento de estas redes.

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The current reality of the rural world challenges the way we think, conceive of, assess and undertake our educational work. This challenge may be due to the disadvantages rural areas historically have faced as compared to urban areas—their remoteness, high levels of poverty and deficit of basic public services, among others—or as a result of their current day situation as an ever more dynamic and changing environment in which rural schools run the risk of becoming removed from the rapid transformations occurring around them.

Among those who work on educational issues, there is a tacit agreement that schools in the rural area require innovative strategies and models. For Fe y Alegria these proposals must accept the distinctive features of the rural world as potential in need of development if they are to be truly effective in this diverse, challenging and ever-changing environment. In addition, these proposals should be linked to crosscutting public policies geared to attending to the educational demands of the rural world which have been postponed for decades.

At Fe y Alegría we are convinced that, in order for these proposals for educational alternatives to be pertinent to the rural world, they should be constructed at the grassroots and based on a dialogue and exchange of experiences among a broad group of actors from government, society and, of course, from the communities themselves. Educational networks have gained significant ground as an effective alternative for the management of rural schools. A variety of studies and reviews of these experiences have highlighted their qualities. (Alcázar, 2011). These acknowledge the significant progress these networks have made and also identified a powerful potential that can be fine-tuned in the future.

Based on our experience promoting rural educational networks over the course of 22 years, we can say that working in a network promotes the construction of positive interaction that meets long-ignored local needs, and that they motivate an organised participation of society that is committed to local democracy and quality rural education

We have witnessed significant progress in many aspects of human development (learning, increased freedom, agency) among the teachers, students and parents.

This article presents some elements that should be taken into account with regard to the Ministry of Education (Minedu) guidelines for the operation and organisation of the rural educational networks that were approved this year. Here, we present a brief history of Fe y Alegría's Rural Educational Networks (REN), a description of our model and, lastly, recommendations for Minedu's proposed guidelines.

THE HISTORY OF REN

Work with REN began in the 1990s, a decade in which Peru underwent significant changes in its economic, social and political situation. In the educational arena, there was interest in reforming the educational system to help it overcome problems in rural schools, such as unequal access to education and low academic achievement. In addition, rural educational services were characterised by high levels of absenteeism, deficient infrastructure, low or inexistent access to basic services in schools, and a troublingly low level of teacher training (quoted in Flores, 2016).

In this context, Fe y Alegría, which had been working already in urban and peri-urban schools around Peru, decided to work in rural areas to attend to the these problems. This is how in 1995 the first REN began in Cuzco with members of the Society of Jesus who worked in the Urcos area.

Table 1.
Fe y Alegria's Active Networks

Network	Location		School Number	Students EBR DER	Teachers EBR DER
FyA 44	Quispicanchi	Cusco	23	2097	118
FyA 47	Loreto	Iquitos	41	1881	120
FyA 48	Malingas	Piura	34	2683	118
FyA 54	Moro	Áncash	23	1277	85
FyA 72	Pucallpa	Ucayali	26	739	39
FyA 79	Acobamba	Huancavelica	18	1058	112
Total			**165**	**9735**	**592**

Fuente: Archivo Fe y Alegría

Today, there are six functioning REN: Fe y Alegría N° 44 (Cusco), Fe y Alegría N° 47 (Loreto), Fe y Alegría N° 48 (Piura), Fe y Alegría N° 54 (Ancash), Fe y Alegría N° 72 (Ucayali) and Fe y Alegría N° 79 (Huancavelica). Each of these started operating at different times, has a unique history, and is located in distinct rural contexts.

Currently Fe y Alegria's REN serve 165 schools with 9735 students and 592 teachers distributed in the six REN across the country, as shown in Table 1.

THE FE Y ALEGRIA REN INITIATIVE

Definition of an educational network

Fe y Alegría defines an educational network as:

> [...] an administrative unit composed of a group of schools that share a natural space where people have social, economic and cultural relationships. These schools have similar characteristics and needs, which gives them a shared vision of local and regional development and of the required abilities needed to be an agent in that process." (Santos, 2009, p. 59)

> It is important to point out that these networks are made up of people and they are the ones who sustain and breathe life into these networks, to the extent that they identify with them, share values, goals and interests and are willing to interact, to learn together, collaborate, exchange information, lead, and resolve conflicts.

For this reason, the network needs strong ties between its members to generate trust, recognition, closeness, identity and a sense of belonging.

Another element that should be noted is that the networks are not declared or created, rather the actors discover, activate, and build them.

Fe y Alegría's REN initiative

Fe y Alegría's REN are a model of alternative educational attention that brings together a group of 20 to 40 public schools through a central work team.

The goal is to provide quality, comprehensive education that is timely and pertinent to children in rural environments. This education is intercultural, bilingual and focuses on gender equality and environmental stewardship. It is provided through the committed involvement of teachers, boards, parents and the community. It is based

on the institutional principles and values within the framework of the objectives of the National, Regional and Local Education Project.

Achieving this goal involves the following lines of action:

- Strengthening the capacities of teachers and institutions in the schools within the REN.

- Supporting teachers' and administrators' educational and institutional management through continual reflection on their practice and the formation of learning communities.

- Supporting knowledge building, reflection and demonstration of good innovations in teaching practices in rural education. Promoting the production of native-language educational materials that are creative and current.

- Strengthening the bond between the school and the community to promote the participation of different educational actors, recognizing their value and incorporating them into the process of teaching and learning from community knowledge.

- Contributing to advocacy, through participatory processes, for the right to a quality rural education.

Fe and Alegria's REN Management Model

The management model provides significant benefits for this type of work, which takes place in a challenging and ever-changing rural environment. The model has three fundamental aspects:
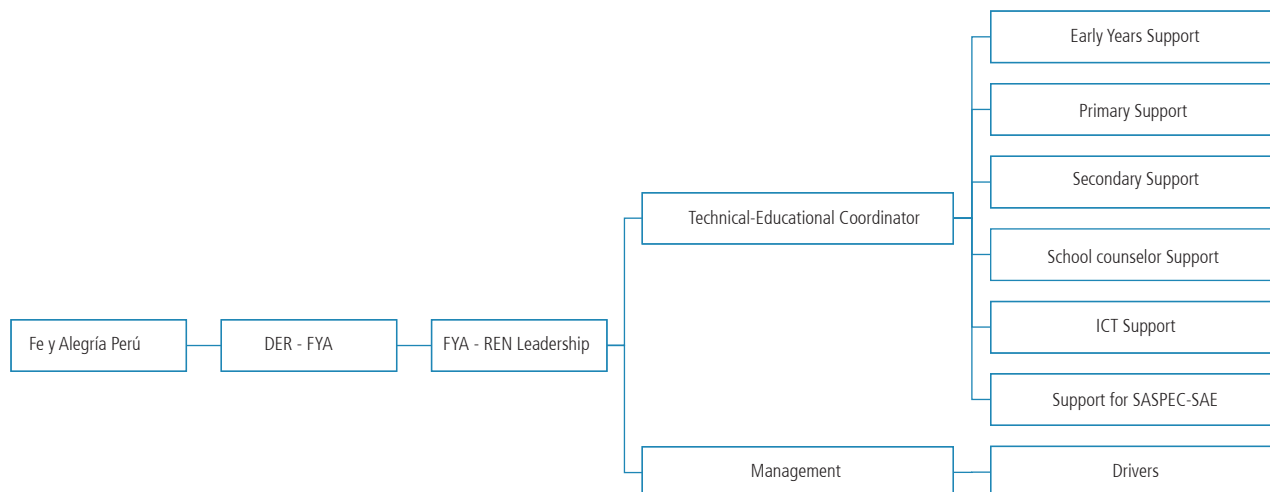
a) Alternative

The management model for the network seeks to break the hegemonic, national model of the urban school. It incorporates the students' and communities' knowledge, given that they are actors who have developed many skills within their rural environment corresponding to the diversity of their towns and their particular needs.

b) Orientational

The management model develops a common educational proposition and gives it direction. Fe y Alegria's REN support a group of rural schools offering them a shared vision with common institutional goals. Each REN has the challenge of formulating a common Institutio-

Diagrama 1.
Estructura de funciones RER FyA

nal Education Project that is in line with the institutional mission of Fe y Alegria and that follows the guidelines of Minedu's education policies.

c) Adaptable

The management model has a certain flexibility and adaptability in the way in which it organises the REN. This is due to the diverse and heterogeneous nature of the rural world, where other criteria may have to be taken into account when forming working groups, committees, assemblies etc. in order to achieve optimal, quality education.

Organisation of the REN

Figure 1 shows the organisational structure of the REN.

Educational Proposition

Teaching-learning processes take into account the needs and interests of the students and their context, incorporating their culture and local production systems into the curriculum, units and class sessions. At the same time, they include the creation of a diverse basic education curriculum with an intercultural, environmental and gender focus.

Part of the work with institutions includes generating a good environment in the school and seeking to increase the hours of academic instruction. In addition, we support teachers and principals so they can incorporate

gender equity into their classroom practices, with a specific focus on the girls in the class.

Another important aspect of the educational proposition for Fe y Alegria's REN is forming learning communities comprised of teachers and principals who are interested in participating with their peers to create spaces for reflection. In these spaces they review and refine the educational initiatives they use in class. (See Figure 2)

At the same time, a priority is to involve parents as key actors in the life of the school and its dynamic.
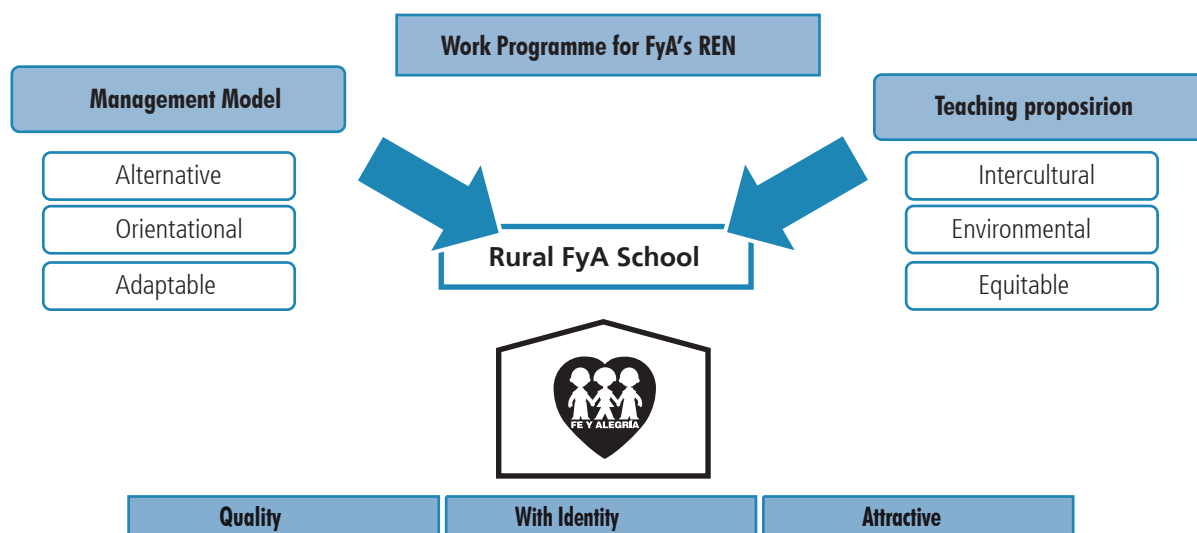
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MINEDU GUIDELINES

Below are Fe y Alegria's recommendations for some aspects of the guidelines that Minedu approved this year.[1] These recommendations incorporate the viewpoints of all of the actors involved in Fe y Alegria's experience. They take into account the reflections of the six REN teams as expressed in their statements and the input of Fe y Alegria's central team.

Criteria for forming networks

The guidelines mention the criteria of geographic proximity and jurisdictional demarcation for the conforma-

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1   Resolution of the Secretary General N° 114-2017- MINEDU. "Guidelines for the Organisation and Operation of Rural Education Networks" approved. El Peruano government gazette, Lima, May 2, 2017.

Figure 2.
Elements of the FyA REN Programme

tion of the networks. However, the Fe y Alegria experience has revealed that the ties between the schools and the social and cultural territorial dynamics do not always coincide with these jurisdictions. This warrants a flexible application of these criteria.

What's more, the heterogeneity of the rural world demands that, to the extent that the regulations permit, we be open to developing diverse proposals that are appropriate for the people in the territories and to the diversity of their situations and to generating a variety of organisational and operative models for the educational networks.

Network management for learning communities

The guidelines suggest that the REN form "learning communities" (by educational levels and types of school) and strengthen the interactions among them. This presumes that there is an administrative structure that allows for the organisation of distant schools and for the management of more resources and information. While the guidelines include both administrative and educational considerations for forming the REN, there is a greater emphasis on the administrative. Looking at our experience at Fe y Alegria, and according to the definitions in this document, we believe that overall the REN should be conceived of as learning communities, as units of reflection and educational exchange, rather than administrative units that provide for better management and control of resources.

" The education team spends 80 to 90 per cent of its time in the schools. We are not an office team. We spend our days working with people and it is through the monitoring and company that we have seen improvements". (Carlos, Fe y Alegría N° 44)

It is important to highlight the centrality of the educational aspect of the REN in the face of the very real risk that the administrative aspects become the fundamental organisational criteria for the REN.

The conception of the REN as "learning communities" implies reflection and educational exchanges more than it does the compilation of different units. As such, it must be geared to promoting sharing and reflection and energizes the participation of teachers and communities with the multidisciplinary, external team that supports the educational processes and the administration of the schools. Our experience shows that for the networks to be real opportunities for sharing lessons learned, in-service training, interaction between players, cohesion and social and cultural integration, they need leaders and a team dedicated specifically and exclusively to this task.

The network management teams should prioritize capacity building among teachers, providing support in the classroom, and fostering a bond between school and community.

The organisation of the REN creates flexible mechanisms that allow for developing and sharing innovative expe-

riences while avoiding the generation of administrative systems that become solely mechanisms of bureaucratic control, superimposing their own agenda on the schools' and communities' processes and agendas. We believe it is important that there is an emphasis on educator and not administrator for the position of network director. The director should be focused on maturing and energizing a participative educational network and on increasing the quality of intercultural teaching projects in the schools.

> Working together allows for achieving improvements in the teaching-learning processes. Another factor that helps teachers and school administrators is closeness and trust. The bond that is built between us is one of solidarity, sharing, kindness and support for the teachers to improve the learning process". (Marleny, Fe y Alegría N° 48)

By having teachers interact in the same space, the organisation of networks creates the possibility of developing educational proposals that are related to the social, historic and geographic setting—the territory—in which they exist. This interaction between school and territory is vital for the relevance of the learning experience that is offered to the students.

> At Fe y Alegria we form a community of teachers who are motivated by the way we see the children as a source of inspiration for our work, we combine our efforts to give them an education of the quality that they need." (Celia, Fe y Alegría N° 54)

Resources and connections among networks

The guidelines propose the establishment of "learning resource centres" in each REN. We believe that the resource centres make valuable contributions to teachers' work and to work with the communities. However, it is important to evaluate whether these should operate within a network school or whether it would be more appropriate for the centres to be housed in separate, centrally-located and fully-equipped headquarters that have bedrooms for teachers should they need them.

We believe it is appropriate to encourage the production of educational materials or creative adaptations of materials received from other teachers within the REN (which is conceived of as a learning community) for these learning resource centres. Given the cultural and territorial characteristics of each area, the creation and creative adaptation of these materials, incorporating a gender,

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intercultural and environmental focus, could produce very novel materials that could enrich national education on the whole.

> One example of this is the treatment of language in which there is an acceptance of the experience of the community and in which workbooks, games and books are created in such a way that the people of the area see their experience, their cultural heritage, their literature, expressed in writing." (Carlos, Fe y Alegría N° 44)

Another element to consider in the construction of educational networks is the importance of communication among schools and connectivity. Having linked technological platforms is essential for facilitating the exchange of research and educational experiences among teachers and networks. It allows the teacher and his or her students to be connected with their community, the country and the world. It also provides significant support to the many teachers who live and work in areas that are far from their own personal and professional support systems.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITIES IN NETWORKS

For Fe y Alegria, the experience of working in REN places the community in the role of a key actor. It fulfils a central role in the network proposition.

The guidelines also acknowledge the significance of the community—and specifically of the wise people of the communities—as educational actors who are particularly relevant in the territories. However, at Fe y Alegria, we believe that this role could be emphasised even more and that the community actors could have an even larger presence in rural education work, in the innovation and contextualization of curricula, and in the development of educational projects that are in dialogue with the reality and expectations of the community.

“ We see the community's commitment to the REN, which is really high. The community is aware of the important role that the school plays and how it can be the basis for the development of the city or village. The relationship is close, the community identifies with Fe y Alegría”. (Marleny, Fe y Alegría N° 48)

There is a very close relationship between Fe y Alegria and the community. Parents participate…families pay close attention, reporting when teachers are absent, for instance.” (Jaico, Fe y Alegría N° 72)

In rural areas, communities' social commitment is essential for strengthening the right to a quality, bilingual education with a focus on gender equity and responsible stewardship of the environment; ensuring timely enrolment; reducing the drop-out rate; guaranteeing access for girls; combating absenteeism; and supporting teachers in their already demanding work, to mention just a few of the benefits. At Fe y Alegría, we consider it appropriate to think of the role of the communities as actors in the educational process and not just recipients of an educational service for their children. We'd like to point out they are the ones who should decide what kind of education they want and what they aspire to for their children through new forms of participation.

“ “We use workshops to work with parents on issues related to intra-family dynamics. We also use workshops to work with students, whether it be on social skills or a particular dynamic at the school (bullying, child abuse…). As a young REN—we have existed for six years— we are seeing results from this work and if we intend to improve, we undertake an evaluation of each activity. We are on a good path and are receiving recognition in the area where we work.” (Eduardo, Fe y Alegría N° 79)

In the Amazon, there is the issue of the scattering and diverse nature of the communities, languages and cultures. But one must take into consideration that designing the organisation and operation of educational networks requires a dialogue with the communities and the indigenous teachers. ILO Convention 169 is explicit on the right of indigenous people to have educational systems appropriate to

their culture. It is an issue that the sector, with its specialists in intercultural bilingual education for the Amazon, can help define and incorporate into the construction of the rural education policy that is currently being developed.

The Rural Teacher

Lastly, it is well known that the role of the teacher is decisive in any public education improvement process. For this reason, along with the REN, there are continued efforts to improve initial and in-service training and labour policies for teachers. In addition to progress in training and pay scale, it is important to seek alternatives to challenge low rates of labour stability and the high rates of mobility in rural areas of Peru. The construction of REN requires a commitment from the teachers, which implies recognizing their work and continuing to improve, where possible, the means of doing so.

❝ One challenge is the turnover and movement of contract teachers. In recent years, this has been subject to exams and rankings, which have made it hard to guarantee continuity for our teachers. At the same time, many teachers who have gone through the first phase of training have moved for their own interests, leading to new beginnings and to renewal." (Carlos, Fe y Alegría N° 44)

CONCLUSIONS

Peru's rural worlds present challenges and immense opportunities for the country. They also provide inspiration for and a wealth for how we think about education in Peru. As we have seen, rural schools needs their own organisation and one that responds to their context with a different teaching and administration model. Organisation in networks constitutes an appropriate alternative for these environments.

It is still necessary to improve low levels of quality from a comprehensive approach, with initiatives on various fronts, and with simultaneous strategies: teacher training, educational proposals, accompaniment, educational materials, labour conditions, etc. Schools also need reasonable margins of autonomy to make their own decisions and respond to their particular situations.

We acknowledge Minedu's efforts in recent years and the interest of diverse sectors of civil society in contributing to the construction of rural education policies. Fe y Alegría reaffirms its commitment to contribute along with others and to be attentive to progress made on the issue. ❶

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