Case Brief: The *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Education Project in Colombia

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Executive Summary

Río, Juego y Aprendo (Laugh, Learn and Play) is an initiative aiming to improve public education, from the early childhood (pregnancy to preschool) years through primary school up to age eight, in rural areas of Colombia. At the heart of the initiative's strategy is integrating a learning-through-play model at each age level. The lead partners in the initiative are aeioTU, the *Fundación Pies Descalzos* (in English, Barefoot Foundation) and the Faculty of Education of the *Universidad de los Andes*, with the National Government as a strategic ally and with the support of the LEGO Foundation. Rural areas in Colombia were selected because they tend to be under high stress – historically, the armed conflict has been concentrated there – and have limited economic resources.

About this Brief: This case brief is part of a series exploring practical lessons from ongoing innovations for early childhood development, made possible by the support of Grand Challenges Canada (funded by the Government of Canada), Porticus, and the Saving Brains Partnership.

Planning for *Río, Juego y Aprendo* began in 2020; a pilot implementation will run through mid-2024 in the department[1] of Caquetá, a predominantly rural department that is a priority area for the National Government's peacebuilding programs. The goals of the project are ambitious – structural change across the public education system in Colombia – so the pilot is intentionally taking a system-wide approach in its target region. *Río, Juego y Aprendo's* activities include: training teachers in the public education system on learning through play; empowering decision-makers at the local and national level through a leadership development program; and advocating for high-quality early childhood education and for embedding the learning-through-play approach at all levels of the education system. So far, the National Government has recognized play as a right of children, based on its recreational and physical benefits. However, *Río, Juego y Aprendo* is advocating for recognizing the value of play in educational contexts and its role in children's learning and development. Through these means, *Río, Juego y Aprendo* seeks to introduce new capabilities into the public system during the pilot phase, capabilities that local civil society partners will continue to support once the pilot is complete.

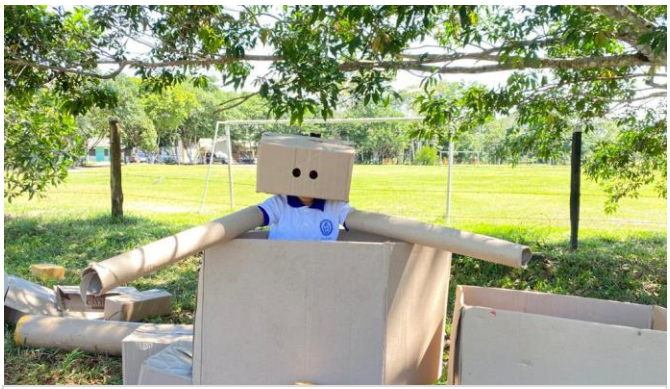


Photo Credit: *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project

Going forward, the effectiveness and sustainability of the project will depend on successfully engaging teachers and leaders in

[1] Colombia's administrative division is composed of 32 "departments" (*departamentos* in Spanish) and a Capital District (*Distrito Capital*), Bogota. In turn, the departments are divided into municipalities.

the official system so that they own the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* model and make it part of their ongoing practice. With this in mind the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team is building inclusive partnerships encompassing the local and national government, NGOs, local leaders, and educators. The project's approach to creating trustful relationships includes systematically listening to stakeholders; providing them with practical tools they find valuable in their work; and creating a monitoring, evaluation and learning system that provides evidence stakeholders can use to improve education outcomes.

This case brief will describe *Río, Juego y Aprendo's* collaborative model as an approach to system change. We will review its origins and development as a partnership, its main streams of work, its approach to multi-stakeholder engagement and local adaptation, and how it is addressing implementation and evaluation challenges. While the long-term goal of the project is to embed learning through play across Colombia, the initial strategy involves focusing on the education systems in a defined region. This makes the project a natural fit for its early childhood partner, aeioTU, which has developed a distinctive scaling strategy based on concerted, regionally focused demonstration initiatives. We will sketch this strategy as part of the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* story.

Origins: Defining the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project

The origins of the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project date to 2019 with a shared commitment between the LEGO Foundation, aeioTU and the National Government of Colombia to improve the quality of education in the country. That year, John Goodwin, CEO of the LEGO Foundation, travelled to Colombia to meet with the country's President and identify how the LEGO Foundation could support early childhood development. In this meeting, the LEGO Foundation committed to improving the quality of education in rural areas of Colombia, as these are generally underserved, and they are also where armed conflict was historically concentrated. The LEGO Foundation and aeioTU, in turn, approached NGO partners (described below) to design a joint program with the National Government that could change the educational conditions of the rural population of the country: the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project. As summarized by the Ministry of Education:



Photo Credit: *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project

> "*Río, Juego y Aprendo*" [is] a project that will contribute to the integral development of more than 12 thousand girls and boys from Caquetá, strengthening the capabilities of educators, leaders and decision-makers to promote learning through play. This project is aimed at boys and girls from gestation to eight years old and will be implemented by civil society organizations along with the National Government, and the support of the LEGO Foundation…. This seeks to positively impact the development and learning processes of girls and boys served under the framework of the

> Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) and the official educational institutions' services, and strengthen their families and communities who have been historically affected by violence [the armed conflict].[2]

Thus, *Río, Juego y Aprendo* from its origins aimed for systems change, specifically in public early childhood and primary school education.

The department of Caquetá was selected for the project's pilot. Caquetá was a natural choice given that: (i) it is predominantly rural; (ii) it was historically affected by armed conflict;[3] (iii) local authorities in Caquetá had strong political will to improve the quality of education in the department; (iv) there was good potential to engage all key actors in the local education system in Caquetá; and (v) educational coverage in early childhood was high enough so that the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* program could have a significant impact.

Caquetá has limited physical and digital accessibility. Its roads are generally unpaved, especially in regions far from Florencia, Caquetá's capital. Additionally, internet access and mobile connectivity are generally available only in urban areas. However, Caquetá's labour force has higher educational levels than in other rural areas of Colombia, as several universities – such as the *Universidad del Amazonas* and the *Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia (UNAD)* – offer education services in the department. This proved an advantage for the project when it recruited local staff.

Strategic Context: aeioTU's Scaling Model

aeioTU is a Colombian social enterprise aimed at helping children in the early years develop to their full potential. Since 2008, aeioTU has been providing high-quality early childhood services in Latin America inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach,[4] with learning through play at the core of its educational practice. aeioTU began by applying this approach at a single early childhood center in Bogotá, Colombia. It then expanded by offering direct services at multiple centers. Outcomes were gratifying, so the organization sought broader impact through a multi-faceted scaling model: (i) direct operations; (ii) consulting and special projects to help others implement learning through play; (iii) digital services through the aeioTU

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[2] *Mineducación: Ministerio de Educación de Colombia* (2021). Retrieved from *"Río, Juego y Aprendo"*: https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/salaprensa/Noticias/408108:Rio-Juego-y-Aprendo-un-proyecto-que-contribuira-al-desarrollo-integral-de-mas-de-12-mil-ninas-y-ninos-de-Caqueta-fortaleciendo-las-capacidades-de-educadores-lideres-y-tomadores-de-decision
Translated from the Spanish by author PG. Original text: *'"Río, Juego y Aprendo" un proyecto que contribuirá al desarrollo integral de más de 12 mil niñas y niños de Caquetá, fortaleciendo las capacidades de educadores, líderes y tomadores de decisión para promover el aprendizaje a través del juego. Este proyecto está dirigido a niños y niñas desde la gestación hasta los ocho años y será implementado por organizaciones de la sociedad civil en conjunto con el Gobierno Nacional, y el apoyo de la Fundación LEGO. … Este busca impactar de manera positiva los procesos de desarrollo y aprendizaje de las niñas y niños atendidos en el marco de los servicios del Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) y de las instituciones educativas oficiales, así como fortalecer a sus familias y comunidades quienes históricamente se han visto afectadas por la violencia.'*

[3] In Colombia, the municipalities most affected by the armed conflict are categorized as PDET (Development Programs with a Territorial Approach) for priority in territorial and rural planning. All 16 municipalities that make up the department of Caquetá are classified as PDET.

[4] To learn more about the Reggio Emilia Approach, see: https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/

online platform *Red aeioTU*; and (iv) advocacy. Through these four components, they have reached more than 450,000 children, 23,000 teachers, and more than 600,000 caregivers in Colombia, Mexico, and Panama. However, until now aeioTU's model was based on a dispersed approach, with different components operating in different places. This enabled expansion, but aeioTU has concluded that a more concentrated approach, one that brings all four components together within a specific region, may be needed to catalyze system level change. In aeioTU's words: "Keeping the aeioTU business as usual approach will allow us to expand our coverage and produce segmented impact … but missing the potential of creating greater impact through … our integrated business model."[5]

Therefore, aeioTU developed a scaling strategy that called for a phase of concentrated work in two localities, in each case mobilizing the organization's full range of capabilities in a coordinated way. This would involve engaging with stakeholders at all levels of the early childhood education system as they relate to those localities. The *Río, Juego y Aprendo* partnership was an ideal context for this strategy. Grand Challenges Canada's Saving Brains program is now supporting aeioTU to carry out its focused transition-to-scale approach both in Caquetá (through *Río, Juego y Aprendo*) and in Cartagena.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) are vital to this scaling strategy, as the implementations in Caquetá and Cartagena are intended both to demonstrate the value of the concentrated model and to harvest lessons to enhance impact. Grand Challenges Canada is supporting aeioTU to develop "communities of practice"[6] in both Caquetá and Cartagena and to put in place a MEL system that will support their longer-term plan to embed the learning-through-play model across the country and reach more than 1.6 million children in the next 10 years.

The *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project, with its partnership model, represents a vital opportunity to carry out this strategy.

Building Partnerships for Improving the Quality of Education in Caquetá

From the start, aeioTU and the National Government knew they needed to recruit additional core partners into the program to fully realize its goal of developing a systemic intervention through the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project. In 2020, they began a partnership with the *Fundación Pies Descalzos* – experts in improving education for children and teenagers – to complement and expand aeioTU's capacities, given aeioTU's focus on early childhood. Robust monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) was also a priority for the pilot, so aeioTU and the National Government also engaged the Faculty of Education of the *Universidad de los Andes* as the project's core MEL partner.

[5] Materials provided by aeioTU.

[6] According to materials provided by Grand Challenges Canada, the intent is to "[c]atalyze communities of practice composed of ECD practitioners, decision makers, and caregivers to share best practices, mobilize local resources, and promote evidence-informed policy to address gaps to scale and sustainability in local municipalities."

National Partners: A Strategic Alliance		
Fundación Pies Descalzos	**aeioTU**	**Faculty of Education of the *Universidad de los Andes***
Since 1997, the *Fundación Pies Descalzos* (Barefoot Foundation) has worked "to improve the education and social development of children in Colombia. We [*Fundación Pies Descalzos]* seek to improve teaching and innovation processes, and overcome all educational infrastructure current challenges in Colombia and Latin America."[7] In the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project, the *Fundación Pies Descalzos* works to enhance teaching practices of elementary school teachers and educational leaders.	Since 2008, aeioTU has worked "to develop the potential of children, so that they become competent, creative citizens and builders of society."[8] In the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project, aeioTU focuses on improving the educational practices of early childhood teachers and on promoting play to enhance children's development.	The *Universidad de los Andes,* founded in 1948, is a top research and teaching institution in Colombia.[9] Currently, the Faculty of Education at the University leads the monitoring, evaluation and learning component of the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project. The Faculty of Education also delivers the project's "SUMA" course, a training program for decision-makers on leadership and educational practices.

With the support of the National Government, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team also built an extensive network at the local level that includes the local government[10] and NGOs.[11] This local network has helped the project's national partners by introducing families and educators to the learning-through-play pedagogical model, by providing valuable advice and feedback, and by boosting social acceptance.

[7] *Fundación Pies Descalzos* (2020). Retrieved from "Who we are": https://fundacionpiesdescalzos.com/en/who-we-are/

[8] aeioTU (2021). "Our purpose." Retrieved from "Us": https://en.aeiotu.com/nosotros

[9] https://uniandes.edu.co/en/university/about-us

[10] Represented by the Departmental Secretariat of Education (*Secretaría De Educación Departamental de Caquetá*), the Secretariat of Government of Caquetá (*Secretaría de Gobierno de Caquetá*), the Secretariat of Education of Florencia (*Secretaría de Educación de Florencia*) and the ICBF's regional office (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar Regional Caquetá*). To facilitate communication among local authorities engaged with the project, the Departmental Secretariat of Education, the Secretariat of Government of Caquetá, the Secretariat of Education of Florencia, and the ICBF's regional office each selected a technical leader. These technical leaders serve as connection points with the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team and are always invited to the program's strategic meetings.

[11] This includes local NGOs such as *Fundación Casita de los Sueños*, *Fundapre* and *CorHuellas*.

With these alliances formed, aeioTU developed a proposal to the LEGO Foundation for the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project. At the end of 2020, the LEGO Foundation financed that proposal with a three-year, US $5 million grant.

The Design of the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project

In 2020, aeioTU met regularly with the *Fundación Pies Descalzos*, the Faculty of Education of the *Universidad de los Andes*, and the National Government, to build a joint program and align goals and expectations. Together, they designed the main components of the project.

The *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project includes three lines of action, all supported by a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning system (MEL):

(i) Training early childhood and elementary teachers and educational leaders, through a Capacity Development Model.
(ii) Supporting decision-makers at the local and national level through an Early Childhood Leadership Program.
(iii) Building a Knowledge Management, Impact, and Sustainability Strategy.



Photo Credit: *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project

Once these basic components of the program were defined, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* partnership focused on designing the capacity-development model they would use to train the educational leaders and adapting educational practices to the local rural context. One key to meeting this goal was hiring local trainers and facilitators for the implementation of the program, as they would provide a source of vital knowledge and feedback for adaptation, a pathway to local acceptability, and an opportunity to build local capacity. In part because of the education levels of workers in the region, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team was able to hire most of its staff from Caquetá. Currently, of the 74 people that make up the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team,[12] 59 were already living in the department before the program started – including the three workshop leaders and 48 trainers ("pedagogical facilitators") implementing the first line of action.

Line of Action (i): Training Early Childhood and Elementary Teachers and Educational Leaders, Through a Capacity Development Model

This training program was designed to engage more than 780 teachers[13] and 120 education administrators working in Caquetá in the elementary public schools and in early childhood education centers run by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF – see box on next page.)

[12] Please refer to the Appendix to find the organizational structure of the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project.
[13] In this Brief, the term "teachers" is used to encompass both elementary-school teachers and the ICBF's childhood educational agents (*operadores*).

With help and guidance from the local government, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team selected 229 early childhood education centers and 160 elementary education centers to participate in the training program. Then, with its local network support – including local government institutions and local NGOs – the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team contacted leaders of the selected institutions to explain the project and get them involved. Having the support of the local network was key to generating trust with teachers and educational administrators, since the network linked the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* program to organizations that teachers and administrators already knew.

The Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF):
"The Colombian Family Welfare Institute, ICBF, is the entity of the Colombian state that works for the prevention and integral protection of early childhood, childhood, adolescence, youth and the well-being of families in Colombia, giving special attention to those in conditions of threat, non-observance or violation of their rights."[14] As part of its functions, the ICBF provides early childhood education centers for the most vulnerable children in the country.

The pedagogical model for the training program, the "Capacity Development Model," was designed to include play as a basic component. This pedagogical model starts from the understanding that teachers already have pedagogical guides that determine the topics that they must teach their students. However, the Capacity Development Model helps them adapt their lesson plans to a learning-through-play structure that has been effective elsewhere in helping children develop. To put the learning-through-play model into practice, the training was designed to be interactive, with a hands-on approach. Motivating teachers to participate in the Capacity Development Model was challenging at first, since it involves new time commitments. According to feedback received through the program's MEL system, this hands-on approach was recognized by the teachers in Caquetá as one of the key conditions for the program's acceptability.

One of the goals of the project supported by the Capacity Development Model is to smooth the transition of children from early childhood education (the domain of the ICBF) to primary school (the domain of the official institutions). Colombia has made important progress toward this goal – for instance, the government has created a strategy of "educational paths."[15] The *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team is including in the monthly training sessions continuous dialogue between teachers from ICBF and those from the public schools. Near the end of the year, the dialogue focuses on constructing practical solutions to close the gaps between early childhood education and primary school at the local level and allow every child to have a smooth transition.

[14] Innovations for Poverty Action (2018). *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar*. Retrieved from Innovations for Poverty Action: https://www.poverty-action.org/organization/instituto-colombiano-de-bienestar-familiar
[15] https://ote.mineducacion.gov.co/sites/default/files/otepublic/2022-06/Educacion-inicial.pdf

Line of Action (ii): Supporting Decision-Makers at the Local and National Level Through an Early Childhood Leadership Program

The centerpiece of the Early Childhood Leadership Program is the SUMA course – a training program for decision-makers on leadership and educational practices. This course is provided by the Faculty of Education of the *Universidad de los Andes* and is aimed at public officials, community leaders in the early childhood domain, directors, coordinators and managers of educational programs. The SUMA course will be delivered to around 120 decision-makers from the local and national governments.

Line of Action (iii): Building a Knowledge Management, Impact, and Sustainability Strategy

The *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team advocates for learning through play with all relevant stakeholders. With this goal, they work closely with networks including the national and local governments, NGOs and ICBF's early childhood education centers in Caquetá. The *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team also plans to connect with the universities in Caquetá to develop a program to familiarize pedagogy students with the learning-through-play model so they can implement it when they begin working as teachers.

Implementation

Implementation of the project started in October 2021 with an initial offering of the SUMA course. This early childhood leadership course was delivered by the *Universidad de los Andes* to 35 decision-makers at the national and local levels. In Caquetá, 25 decision-makers and leaders received scholarships from *Río, Juego y Aprendo* to attend the SUMA course in Bogota, Colombia's capital. In 2022 and 2023, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team expects to deliver the SUMA course to two more cohorts of 40 decision makers each, to reach a total of 120 over three years. These cohorts will encompass leaders working with the secretaries of education, the ICBF's regional office, and community leaders from local NGOs. These trainings will not only enable short-term implementation of learning through play; they will also put in place capacity to continue improving the quality of education in the department of Caquetá in the longer term.

With the longer term in mind, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team is also looking for new partnerships that will allow it to extend its training program to include other professionals that influence children's educational outcomes, such as administrative staff, educational leaders and middle managers. Stakeholder engagement will also enable extension beyond the public education sector. For example, with the support of Grand Challenges Canada, *Río, Juego y Aprendo* plans to deliver its capacity-development model to private kindergartens in Caquetá in 2023.

The implementation of the SUMA course is helping build trusting relationships between the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team and the local authorities by realizing reciprocal benefits for each. On one hand, the local authorities provide advice to the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* and help it connect with local actors and educational institutions and gain public support. On the other hand, *Río, Juego y Aprendo* is training the local government's staff in practical ways and helping the government achieve its educational goals.



Photo Credit: *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project

In 2022, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team started implementing its training course for early childhood and elementary teachers, school principals and educational leaders: the Capacity Development Model (line of action one), which forms the core of the initiative's field operations in Caquetá. The course comprises 14 training cycles (each cycle includes one group training and one follow-up session in the classroom) delivered over 18 months, devoted to practical training on how to integrate concrete learning-through-play tools into day-to-day teaching. The course serves to help close gaps between early childhood and primary education, since teachers at both educational levels attend together. The course introduces trainees to the power of learning through play, the characteristics of play, and the role of adults to promote learning and child development. The course also introduces possibilities to use recycled and in-context materials that are readily available to teachers, to develop play experiences.

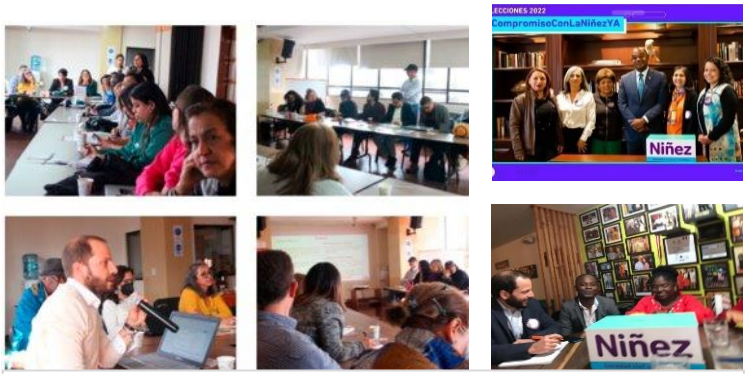


Photo Credit: *NiñezYA*

Regarding the third line of action, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team has been advocating with national and local stakeholders to improve the quality of education in rural areas of Colombia and to garner support to sustain the use of learning through play over the long term. In 2022, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team participated in a range of activities led by local authorities to promote learning through play and to strengthen the program's relationship with the community. For instance, when the municipal government invited the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team to participate in a children's day celebration in Florencia, the team designed a series of games to promote the learning-through-play model. The team also participated in a school supplies donation drive promoted by local leaders.

At the national level, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team is working with *NiñezYa*, an initiative that coalesces civil society organizations to advocate, with a unified voice, for children's rights as a priority in government programs. In this alliance, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team had meetings with the candidates in the recent presidential elections; the focus of the discussions was the early childhood education system's short-, middle- and long-term needs for assuring high-quality delivery. With that as background, the team then began to work with the new government.

Throughout the pilot phase of the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* program, the team will continue its advocacy across the public education system nationally and locally, so that play is recognized as both a right of children and a pedagogical approach that enhances children's development.[16] This advocacy work (line of action three) complements the direct service components of the project (lines of action one and two); as a combined approach to sustainable system change, all three depend crucially on *Río, Juego y Aprendo's* core strategy of establishing and sustaining inclusive partnerships both locally and nationally. The project's major national partnerships were sketched above; we now turn to the local level.

Inclusive Local Partnerships: Building Trustful Relationships with the Teachers, Community and Local Government

Strengthening Teachers' Confidence in the Program's MEL System

Building trustful relationships with the teachers in the region is vital to the success of the project, and it posed challenges, notably because the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project includes robust monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). Teachers reported feeling uncomfortable with MEL when the project started. Showing that the MEL systems were there to assess the project and not the teachers was key to improving *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team relationships with the instructors. For this purpose, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team conducted special sessions before the baseline assessment in which they explained to the teachers, principals and parents the purpose and the format of the program's evaluation.

Moreover, the evaluation methodology of the Faculty of Education of the *Universidad de los Andes* facilitated the acceptance of the MEL system, making that Faculty an ideal evaluation partner. In the first place, one of the guiding principles of the Faculty of Education is to make teachers part of the evaluation process, not its object. Under this approach, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* evaluation system analyzes pedagogical practices and situates them in their social context. The evaluators do gather information about teachers, parents, and school principals, but this is part of painting a broader picture of the education system, rather than a way to assess individual teachers. The results of the evaluations are also given back to the teachers and educational leaders in aggregated terms, so they can reflect on what is happening overall and consider their own practices



Photo Credit: *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project

[16] For more on this theme, please see the final section of this Brief.

without feeling judged. The evaluators present their results to teachers in discussion sessions, where instructors can share their comments and be heard directly. One of the challenges for the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team going forward is how to have the teachers and principals take ownership of evaluation results and use them to improve their practices.

The monitoring component of the MEL system, with its regular user surveys, has already helped the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team adapt the teacher training program based on user experience. For example, the team used early feedback to adapt the language used in the training to the local context; they also simplified the monitoring instruments used by the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* trainers.

Listening to Local Stakeholders

Attending to the local authorities' priorities, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team decided to modify the coverage area of its program, even if this implied some challenges at first. The *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team had planned to restrict its initial operations to the north of Caquetá – an area close to the capital of the department (Florencia) with relatively good physical and digital connectivity. In this digitally connected region, the program could take advantage of aeioTU's free online platform *Red aeioTU* to deliver some of the teacher training virtually, as envisioned in the original proposal.

However, the local government was very interested in expanding the project to the south of the department, its least-resourced zone. To overcome connectivity challenges in the south, the team is adapting the online training resources for distribution via USB. They will use this mechanism to share selected videos from the *Red aeioTU* platform and to invite teachers with internet access to be part of aeioTU's online community.

Moreover, as Colombia has been phasing out Covid-19 restrictions, teachers expressed interest in returning to in-person activities. Therefore, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team decided to modify the structure of the originally proposed online training to incorporate an in-person component in every session. After each training cycle, lessons gleaned from the monitoring, evaluation and learning system are used to improve implementation in the next cycle but one (e.g., lessons from cycle 1 are incorporated in cycle 3).

Working for System Change: The Role of Learning Through Play

The Caquetá intervention was designed as a pilot of a systemic approach for improving children's learning by embedding a learning-through-play pedagogical model in public education from early childhood through age eight. On the one hand, the pilot provides a geographic focus for full implementation of the model in a defined region; at the same time, it lays the groundwork for expansion across Colombia. With this broader aim in mind, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project is committed to a partnership model that engages local and national stakeholders, including government, in ongoing dialogue, both in Caquetá and more broadly, around the role of play in public education.

Consider, for example, the work with teachers. The baseline assessment performed in Caquetá as part of the program's MEL showed that most of the teachers surveyed do recognize the importance of play, but play is not generally explicitly incorporated into their teaching practices. Rather, play is seen as something that should be free and "not instrumentalized." This points to an opportunity but also a challenge for the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team: to help teachers see how "non-free play" can also have its place in the educational context.



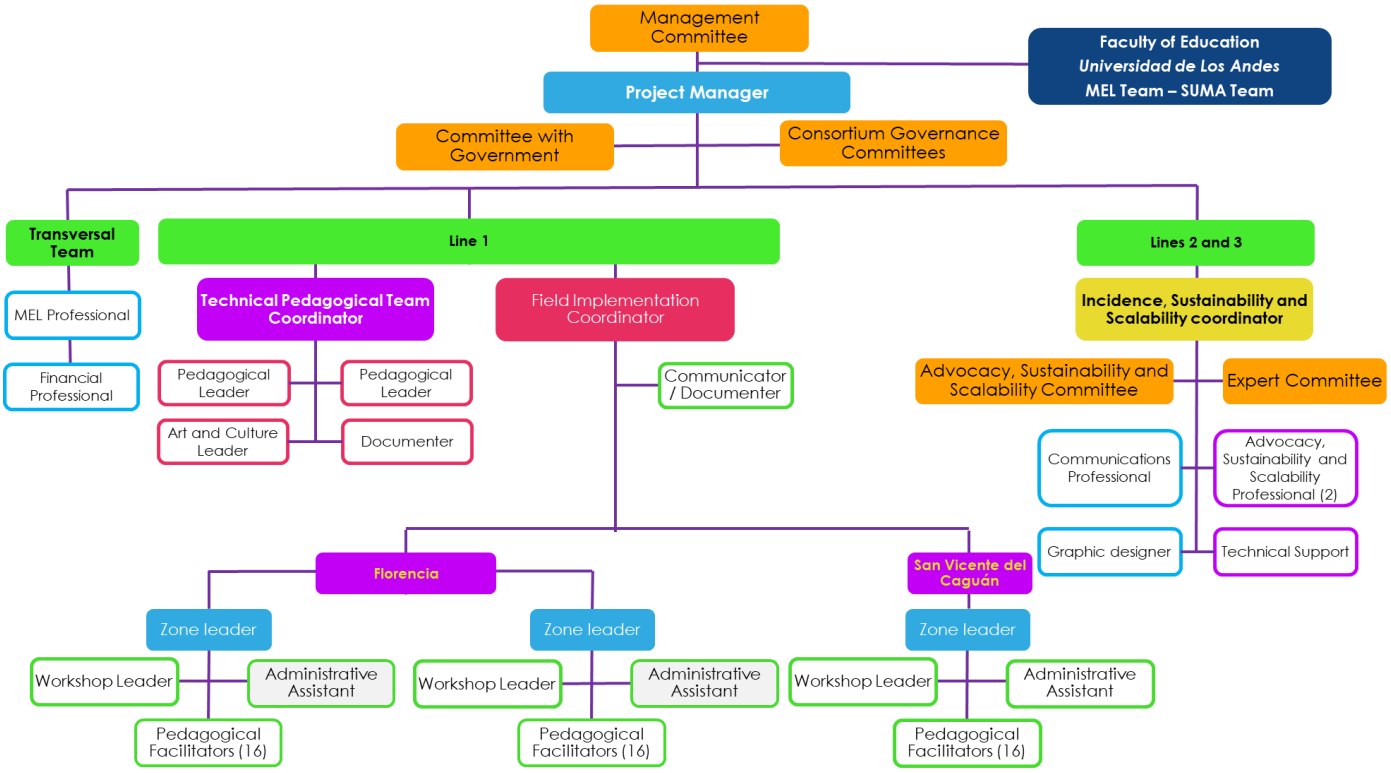
Photo Credit: *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project

At the policy level, as part of the civil society initiative *NiñezYa*, the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team wants to reconceive the role of play in the national educational framework. Until now, play has been recognized by the government as a right of children. However, its relevance in educational settings has been based only on its recreational and physical benefits. The *Río, Juego y Aprendo* team is advocating for acknowledging the importance of guided play as a learning activity and highlighting its value for child development.

In sum, as expressed by Angy Mateus Segura, Project Manager of the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* initiative:

> *"The Río, Juego y Aprendo Project is a multi-level strategy in which international cooperation, the national and local government and civil society are working together to improve the educational ecosystem. With the joint efforts of different agents of change, it is expected that, in the next years, Caquetá can become a living lab of how to transform the educational quality of the country in a sustainable and long-lasting manner."*

Appendix. Organizational Structure of the *Río, Juego y Aprendo* Project[17]



[17] Materials provided by *Río, Juego y Aprendo.*

The work of the Saving Brains Learning Platform Team to engage with this innovation and prepare this profile was made possible by the support of Grand Challenges Canada (funded by the Government of Canada), Porticus, and the Saving Brains Partnership.

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For more information about ***Río, Juego y Aprendo***, please visit their website: https://www.aeiotu.com/riojuegoyaprendo