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**Expansion of Excellence Centers in Nicaragua
With an Emphasis on the APA methodology
(EXCELENCIA)**

**Quarterly Report Two
January 1, 2006 – March 31, 2006**



Submitted by:

American Institutes for Research

With:

**Academy for Educational Development
Save the Children Federation, USA**

U.S. Agency for International Development
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PROJECT SUMMARY

Project Title: Expansion of Excellence Centers in Nicaragua
With an Emphasis on the APA methodology (Excelencia)

Primary Contractor: American Institutes for Research (AIR)

Associates: Academy for Educational Development (AED)
Save the Children Federation USA

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ACRONYMS

AED	Academy for Educational Development
AIR	American Institutes for Research
APA	Learn, Practice, Apply (Aprendo, Practico, Aplico)
BASE	Basic Education and Training Program II
COP	Chief of Party
CTO	Cognizant Technical Officer
EQUIP	Education Quality Improvement Program
EXCELENCIA	Expansion of Excellence Centers in Nicaragua with Emphasis On the APA Mythology
MECD	Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports
PRONICASS	Nicaraguan Program for Social Sector Support
SO	Strategic Objective
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout the January - March 2006 quarter, EXCELENCIA established offices at the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports building, in Managua. EXCELENCIA also managed to select and hire staff needed for the project; and begin the search for the hiring of the Atlantic Coast coordinators. EXCELENCIA developed a work plan for 2006, and began implementation meet all goals for the present quarter.

In Result 1, "Expansion of the Network of Schools of Excellence that apply the APA Methodology of Active Learning with Community Participation," EXCELENCIA hired and trained the facilitators for the different regions, who prepared their work plan to strengthen the schools that already belong to the EXCELENCIA school network.

In Result 2, "A New Basic Education, Competency-Based Curriculum, Including Intercultural Bilingual Education," EXCELENCIA prepared the "work notebooks" for students and the "didactical guides" for teachers for all of the grades of the regular and multi-grade schools for content taught in the first two trimesters. EXCELENCIA trained 615 teachers of both genders and representatives from a sample of 150 schools of the Pacific Coast in the usage of the educational materials corresponding to the first school trimester, for their validation during the present school year.

In Result 3, "A Quality Control of the APA Method Based on Systematic Evaluation and Research" EXCELENCIA has formed an evaluation and supervision plan and a proposal of research studies to be executed during the project.

The official launch of EXCELENCIA took place at a school that will soon become a mentor school. The launch inaugurated the first Resource Center of 2006. EXCELENCIA established the National and Technical Committee of EXCELENCIA to support the actions of the project and serve as a link between the project, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, and the different sectors of Nicaraguan society that can contribute to the quality of education.

EXCELENCIA has taken the first steps to implement activities for the Autonomous Regions of the North Coast. EXCELENCIA solicited and received letters of interest from all NGOs interested in working in the Autonomous Regions of the North Coast. EXCELENCIA also developed Terms of Reference for the sub-contract proposal for the execution of the activities of EXCELENCIA in the Autonomous Regions.

EXCELENCIA partners organizations have been registered in the country, and the Academy of Educational Development (AED) signed, through the COP of the project, an agreement of cooperation with the Ministry of External Affairs that allows EXCELENCIA to act in the country under the national regulations for international non-governmental, non-profit organizations.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The main objective of EXCELENCIA is to support, at a national level, an improved educational model that promotes active learning with community participation and the introduction of a new competency-based curriculum that incorporates the particular educational needs of the indigenous and ethnic communities. These activities directly relate to USAID's Strategic Objective #3 in Nicaragua: To invest in the people a healthier and better-educated population; in particular with Intermediate Outcome 3.2: to increase and improve opportunities for elementary education.

EXCELENCIA is an integrated program that combines AED's experience in APA's methodology with AIR's execution of research studies and the Save the Children expertise in educational transition. EXCELENCIA's activities are carried out according to three primary outcomes:

- Result 1: To implement the active learning model with community participation in 2000 new schools and incorporate centers of excellence.
- Result 2: To develop and validate educational materials that use the competency-based methodology in a way that those materials, at the national level, are ready to be used.
- Result 3: To carry out longitudinal studies and other research to evaluate the project's impact and to conduct field studies to determine the effective channels to improve the transition towards elementary and of the elementary schools.

Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To strengthen the capacity and experience of the MECD team at a central, school, and community level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Educational materials designed and validated for the new competency-based curriculum. ◆ Faculty trained in how to use the new educational materials for validation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Longitudinal studies ◆ Elementary transition study ◆ Transition from elementary to secondary

GOALS AND ACOMPLISHMENTS OF THE TRIMESTER

Goals per Result	January	February	March	Status
Result 1:				
APA Expansion				
- Hiring and Training of Facilitators	-----	-----		Completed
- Assign head offices and prepare work plan for expansion		-----	-----	Completed
- Beginning of expansion activities			-----	In Process
- Installment of the first Resource Center			-----	Completed
Result 2:				
Development and Validation of the New Curriculum Materials				
- Materials created for the first Trimester for regular and multi-grade schools			-----	Completed
- Printing of Materials for the first Trimester for regular and multi-grade Schools		-----	-----	Completed
- Materials created for the second trimester for regular and multi-grade schools			-----	Completed
- Schools chosen with MECD for validation			-----	Completed
- Train teachers from 150 schools, regular and multi-grade for material validation of the first Trimester			-----	Completed
Outcome 3:				
Studies, Research, Monitoring and Evaluation of the work plan				
- Choose research topics in agreement with MECD		-----	-----	Completed
- Present Monitoring Plan		-----	-----	Completed
- Validation Plan Revised by MECD			-----	In Process
Direction and Administration				
- Proposal of work plan for 2006			-----	Completed
- Project launch			-----	Ready
- National and Technical committees of EXCELENCIA			-----	Ready
- Registered Organizations			-----	Selected
- TORs NGOs Atlantic Coast			-----	Completed
- Convocation letters of interest			-----	Developed

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Result 1. Expansion of the network of schools of EXCELENCIA that apply the APA methodology

EXCELENCIA has hired and trained eight facilitators assigned to visit a number of developing schools. The facilitators successfully develop a work plan and a training program for the directors of the schools that will adapt the methodology in 2006, and for the pedagogic advisors of MECD. All of these activities were coordinated in close collaboration with MECD to ensure the participation of the educational authorities of the region.

The facilitators began their fieldwork the last week of March, visiting the first assigned schools. One of the first stages of their job focused on strengthening schools already part of the network in order to identify which schools are ready to become mentor schools in support of the expansion. Facilitators were able to build upon the strong work of BASE II in implementing this activity.

As part of the program of expansion, and making the most of the launch of the EXCELENCIA project, a Resource Center has been equipped and installed at Gran Ducado de Luxemburgo school in the municipality of Ticuantepe. Resource Centers are instruments of the EXCELENCIA methodology and include books, computers, photocopiers, cameras, video cameras, a TV and VCR, as well as furniture and other resources to make it easier for teachers and students to develop classes and find information for schoolwork.

Result 2. New elementary, competency-based curriculum that includes intercultural bilingual education, validated and incorporated to the national education system.

EXCELENCIA hired a team of fifteen specialists, three supervisors, and two diagrammers for the first trimester for each grade of the regular schools and multi-grade schools. The materials consist of work notebooks for the students and didactic guides for the teachers. EXCELENCIA printed these materials to supply teachers and students of 150 schools where the validation has been initiated (of a sample of 200 selected).

In order to develop the validation, EXCELENCIA decided with MECD that a sample of the schools would use the validation materials during the present school year. Both parties agreed that a total of one hundred school centers (with two shifts of classes), to complete a total of 200 schools, (fifty of which correspond to the autonomous regions of the Atlantic Coast), would validate the materials.

The materials produced for the regular and multi-grade elementary for this trimester are:

- 6 work notebooks for the students (WNB)
- 6 didactic suggestions for staff members (DS).

Grade	Area and Component	Current Trimester				Projections for the following Trimester	
	Contents of the Materials	W.N.B	Pgs.	D.S.	Pgs.	W.N.B	D.S.
First Grade	-Culture and Communication (Language & literature). - Mathematics. - Environmental Science (Social norms). - Environmental Science (Geographic Space). - Environmental Science (Environmental and life science). - Citizenship and productivity (Coexistence and civil duty)	1	191	1	82	1	1
Second Grade	IDEM	1	225	1	83	1	1
Third Grade	IDEM	1	234	1	99	1	1
Fourth Grade	IDEM	1	170	1	98	1	1
Fifth Grade	IDEM	1	146	1	100	1	1
Sixth Grade	IDEM	1	205	1	115	1	1
	Total	6	1171	6	577	6	6

The materials created for the multi-grade elementary schools for the present trimester have been the following:

Grade	Materials	Materials	Materials
First Grade	An integrated science and culture guide	A mathematics guide	
Second Grade	IDEM	IDEM	
Third Grade	IDEM	IDEM	
Fourth Grade	A language literature guide	A Mathematics guide	An environmental and life guide
Fifth Grade	IDEM	IDEM	IDEM
Sixth Grade	IDEM	IDEM	IDEM
TOTAL	6 Guides	6 Guides	3 Guides

EXCELENCIA also reproduced the six curricular guides prepared by MECD, which represent the conceptual standards of the new competency-based curriculum, in addition to other support materials to be used by pedagogical advisors and MECD representatives in the regions.

To apply the educational material for validation, EXCELENCIA with the directors of MECD developed a four-stage training session, each one-week long. A total of 615 teachers were trained (103 male and 512 female).

WORKSHOP	PLACE	MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL
Multi-grade Elementary	Managua	57	187	244
Regular Elementary	Managua	29	158	187
Regular Elementary	Esteli	6	65	71
Regular Elementary	Chontales	11	102	113
		103	512	615

EXCELENCIA specialists and supervisors participated in the training sessions, each one contributing their own special knowledge. According to the reports about the training sessions, prepared by MECD, the contents were very well-received by the participants. They praised the created materials, and in general, the focus of the new curriculum. The participants seemed satisfied with the trainers' presentations and their knowledge of the subjects. The specialists also developed materials that correspond to the second trimester for regular elementary and multi-grade schools, which will be printed and distributed in order to be validated the following trimester.

Result 3. Quality control of the APA methodology, based on the systematic evaluation and research studies.

With the support of two AIR consultants, EXCELENCIA and MECD analyzed and agreed upon a course of action to produce a series of studies in support of EXCELENCIA's expansion and validation components. The suggested studies list was reviewed by various directors of MECD, and will serve as the basis for future research plans. The research team is currently developing a work plan and budget for a mentoring study and is researching ways to support the validation of the curriculum (Result 2).

The processing and presentation of a preliminary proposal of the monitoring and evaluation plan for the project includes:

- Defining the project indicators, according to US AID indicators.
- Defining the goals to be reached by the project, annual and final.
- Defining the mechanism of how to collect information from the schools from each one of the indicators, in coordination with the evaluation directories and external cooperation of MECD.
- Elaborating the formats to get information from the schools.

In support of Monitoring and Evaluation, EXCELENCIA has established a baseline of schools that selected according to the category, (regular, multi-grade, mentors, and satellite) and including former BASE II and GDA schools. This baseline also encompasses schools in the autonomous regions of the Atlantic Coast including regular bilingual, multi-grade bilingual, regular monolingual and multi-grade monolingual.

In coordination with the Curriculum Development administration of MECD, EXCELENCIA has produced a proposal for the validation plan. EXCELENCIA is committed to completing this work and is identifying areas in the budget that can support this activity. In addition, EXCELENCIA has developed an alternative proposal of validation to the one presented by MECD in order to streamline processes while collecting all of the relevant information needed to complete validation.

Direction and Administration

According to the general work plan presented in the cooperative agreement proposal, the entire EXCELENCIA team, in coordination with MECD, participated in developing an annual work plan proposal for the first year of operations, 2006.

For the launch of EXCELENCIA, the team decided to choose one school, and in coordination with USAID's officers and the United States Embassy, to inaugurate the first of the planned Resource Centers for 2006 at the selected school. In close coordination with the authorities from the chosen school and the school government, parents, faculty and the director, planned the launch and transferred their established budget for this activity to the school.

The school rose to the occasion by managing the event in a professional manner. The school also provided visitors a good view of the quality of teaching that EXCELENCIA promotes. EXCELENCIA prepared and distributed the invitations for the event and made promotional brochures about the project which EXCELENCIA distributed at the event. The launch took place in the first week of April (Tuesday the 4th) and will therefore be included in the next quarterly report.

With MECD's participation, EXCELENCIA formed the EXCELENCIA National and Technical Committees. Prominent members of the various sectors of Nicaraguan society form the EXCELENCIA National Committee, chaired by the Minister of MECD. Its duty will be to act as a link from the project to said sectors in order to achieve the support it needs for its expansion objectives. The EXCELENCIA Technical Committee consists of MECD directors who have a close relationship with the project's activities. Their duty is to help with the planning and evaluation of activities, and to ensure the necessary coordination at the local and national levels.

EXCELENCIA prepared the Terms of Reference for the proposal for the subcontracts for the activities in the two autonomous regions of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. The project announced the request for letters of interest and eleven non-governmental organizations responded. They will receive the terms of reference and a term of one month to present their proposals. An Evaluation Committee consisting of representatives from EXCELENCIA, USAID and MECD will evaluate the presented proposals. The list of participating NGOs will be included in the next quarterly report. The meeting for the delivery of the Terms of Reference and explanation of objectives and EXCELENCIA methodology took place the first week of April.

EXCELENCIA has moved forward with its communications' strategy. The first activity under this strategy was the inauguration of the school resource center which took place in the beginning of April. In support of the communications component, EXCELENCIA also developed a project logo. Consulting all project technical and administrative staff, including home office partners, EXCELENCIA selected a logo which with the USAID logo will be placed on all project documents. The EXCELENCIA logo will be in lieu of all other organizational logos (AIR, AED, and Save the Children). In order to strengthen project identity and raise the profile of USAID, EXCELENCIA proposes using only two logos on project documents: the USAID logo accompanied by the developed EXCELENCIA logo. Where applicable, EXCELENCIA will also place the MECD logo on documents. EXCELENCIA hopes to receive approval from the USAID/Nicaragua for this proposal. EXCELENCIA continues to work on the communication plan and will submit a draft next quarter.

SUCCESS STORY - Dolores Mercedes Sosa

Dolores Mercedes Sosa, one of the eight facilitators of Project EXCELENCIA, began her first week assigned to the Estelí region, in northern Nicaragua. Her goal for the week was to encourage eleven schools to become part of the network of Schools of Excellence, and to adapt the education methodology that is transforming elementary education in the country. *"I was so depressed by the poverty in the area and distance between schools and I didn't think I'd be able to reach my goal."* says Dolores, with the same gesture of resignation that she had the Monday she started her job.

When Dolores met with Juan Ramon Espino, the education department's Ocotol representative, she didn't expect to encounter so much enthusiasm. The pedagogy of Project EXCELENCIA had already been introduced to the region through the BASE project, and the educational authorities had been able to make sure there was efficiency in improving the quality of education in the schools. *"Take my truck,"* Professor Espino told her as he pointed to a beat-up old vehicle, *"it's available to you so that you can go to the vast majority of the schools in the province. You will see that the people are waiting for the project to return."*

Professor Espino's good disposition wasn't the only one that Dolores came across that week. The next day, Mrs. Alba Alicia Agurcia, the representative from the province of Madriz, wanted to personally accompany Dolores on her visits to the area schools, and she insisted on having all the representatives' interest in being trained in the methodology in order for them to personally be able to promote it in the schools. *"The representatives from the municipality of Nueva Segovia are all already trained. Why can't we train all the rest? We could promote the methodology in the schools ourselves, and the network will grow more quickly."*

At Ruben Dario School in the community of Sipian, municipality of La Sabana in the province of Madriz, members of the student government welcomed Dolores. *"They were kids, no more than eight or nine years old, and they expressed themselves like adults; it was exciting."* After proudly showing her the school gardens they're developing, they surprised her with the following idea: *"We want to make salads from the vegetables we harvest from the school gardens and sell them, to buy educational materials for the teachers who don't have the money to do so. We are already learning how to make them and soon we'll be ready to sell."* Dolores, who's been a rural teacher her whole life, out of necessity, says that she felt a lump in her throat when she heard those words.

Professor Felix Jose Guzman, the municipal representative from the municipality of San Jose de Cuzmapa, in the province of Madriz, continued to astonish her a few days later. In light of Dolores' request that one of the schools of the jurisdiction allow itself to be converted into a mentor school, Professor Guzman insisted on offering six schools and all the necessary support so that *all* the schools convert to mentor schools. Dolores had to curb her enthusiasm and ask for his patience. Dolores Mercedes Sosa isn't so worried now about the goals she thought before were almost impossible to meet. *"The people are waiting for EXCELENCIA; they have been able to make sure that with the project's methods the schools have improved. The students are brilliant and the communities are eager to participate and collaborate,"* she says grinning from ear to ear.

SUCCESS STORY – Supporting Student Government

Maria Asuncion Orozco, 9 years old, was recently named the Minister of Family of the student government cabinet at the Gran Ducado of Luxembourg School in the municipality of Ticuantepe. She didn't hesitate when responding to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, *"During my term, I'm going to fight so that the children of this municipality aren't mistreated and so that families can get along with each other."*

The engineer Miguel Angel Garcia Gutierrez, minister, swore-in the student council members as part of the launch ceremony of Project EXCELENCIA. Seven girls and boys, from various grades in the elementary school raised their right hands and solemnly swore before him, *"to work responsibly, transparently and with a spirit of sacrifice to improve the quality of education at their school."*

Student governments are one of the tools from the educational method that Project EXCELENCIA promotes to encourage student involvement with their schools' decisions and to facilitate this learning of participatory democracy as one of the cornerstones of education. In our country, when we speak about education, we're always obsessed with quantities: the increase in number of schools, students or teachers, higher salaries for the faculty...all quantities. I've never seen a true preoccupation for the qualitative, for the quality of education that we're giving boys and girls," said Dr. Jaime Incer Barquero, at the same ceremony. He immediately accepted to become part of the National Committee of EXCELENCIA, as he swore to a sixth grade girl at the event.

The National Committee of EXCELENCIA is the political arm of the project. This committee will serve as a link between society and the project objectives, supporting them to accomplish their goals and assuring the methodology's sustainability throughout future Nicaraguan governments, without regard to their political doctrine. The committee is made up of prominent representatives from the different sectors of Nicaraguan society and under the chairmanship of the Minister of Education, Culture and Sports.

Engineer Hugo Holman Chamorro, director of La Prensa, Nicaragua's most important newspaper, spoke with the Honorable Orlando Mayorga Sanchez, President of the Legislative Assembly's Education Commission, about the important role that the means of communication can fulfill in the improvement of the quality of education in Nicaragua.

At the official launch ceremony for EXCELENCIA, the Ministry of Education and the Ambassador of the United States inaugurated a resource center at the school. This center, made up of books, a computer, photocopier, projector, digital and video cameras and other educational support materials will be of use to both faculty and students at the school so they can prepare for their classes and do homework, while also being able to offer services to the community so that will allow them to get some funding to pay for the supplies they need in order to operate.

"We are so grateful because they have included our school in the EXCELENCIA network. We've been taking steps toward being admitted to the network for a while, and today we've finally fulfilled this dream. I assure you we won't disappoint you: our school is not only better today than it was yesterday, but each day will be even better, because this has encouraged everyone – parents, faculty, and students – to continue improving it." With these words, Professor Mario Antonio Rojas Merlo, the school's director, thanked the representatives from the Ministry of Education and USAID.