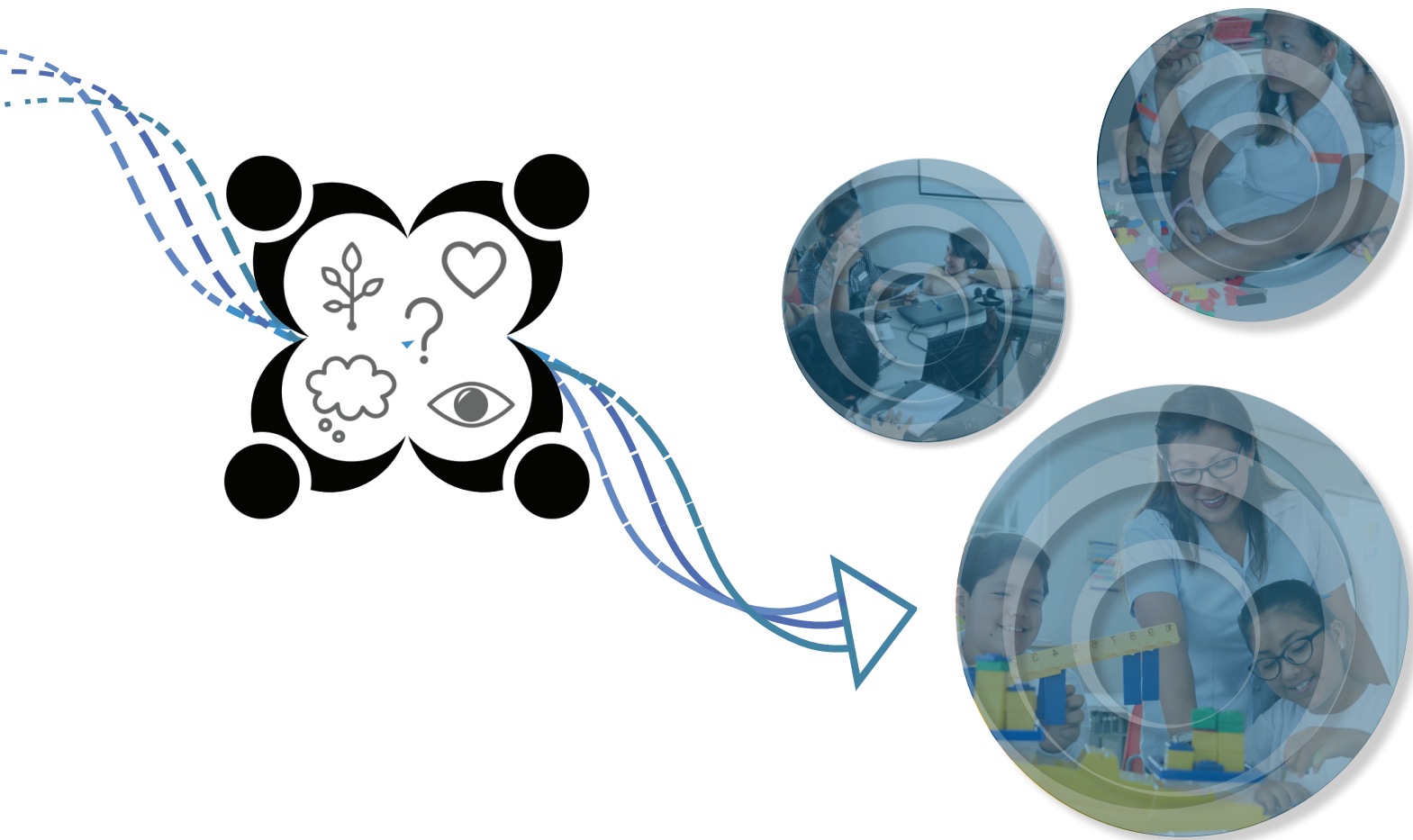


Deeper, Together

Practical lessons on cultivating deeper learning
from a low-cost school network



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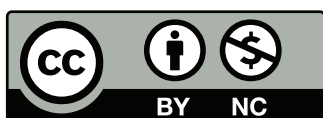
Suggested Citation:

Dawes Duraisingh, L., Garcia, A., Krechevsky, M., and Sachdeva, A. (2023). *Executive Summary: Deeper, Together: Practical lessons on cultivating deeper learning from a low-cost school network* [White paper]. Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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Executive Summary

To begin to take action, to make decisions, we need pathways for reflecting and we need to constantly develop our ability to reflect on what was done, how it was done, how it could be done later. [There's a] metacognitive aspect too. So if I didn't develop that metacognitive awareness of the actions I take, it would be difficult for me to start taking the next step or to think about improvements or to enhance what has already been worked on. So I think that at the heart of starting to make autonomous decisions is developing those pathways for reflection. (Juan, Coach)

We expect students to be autonomous and more reflective but we don't always explain to students how to develop greater autonomy or reflectiveness, do we? What are the steps? And now I realize that we can't help students to be more autonomous if their teachers and the coaches aren't autonomous... So that's a big problem. (Diana, Coach)

Juan and Diana, the instructional coaches who shared these thoughts with us, point to two essential aspects of cultivating pedagogic change in schools. They frame autonomy and practice-based reflection as goals in and of themselves and as means to enact change; they also mention scaffolds and modeling ("pathways," "steps," "explaining") as important opportunities for their own growth and those of the teachers they support. In addition, their words imply dedication to their practice as educators, openness to personal growth and change, and awareness of being part of an interconnected system.

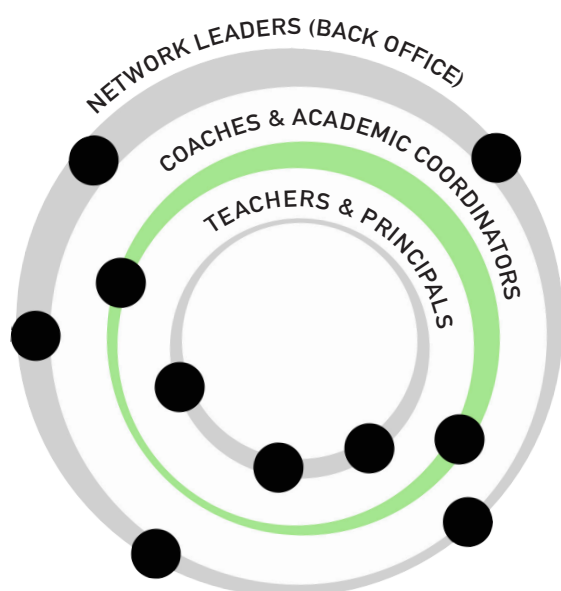
Diana and Juan were participants in the final year of a four-year collaborative research partnership between our research team at [Project Zero](#) and colleagues at [Innova Schools](#): a rapidly-expanding, highly-centralized, low-cost network of 65 K-12 schools in Peru that seeks to address longstanding issues of educational quality in Peru and other Latin American countries. At its outset, the research partnership strove to explore ways in which

the network could support pedagogic change to help its students engage more effectively in inquiry-driven learning, problem-solving, and critical thinking—or what we loosely refer to in this paper as *deeper learning*—with an emphasis on educators as the drivers of pedagogical change. This white paper reports on work conducted from March to December 2021, which involved 20 instructional coaches and 8 academic coordinators.

*We explored ways to support pedagogic change, **driven by educators**, that would help students engage more effectively in **inquiry-driven learning, problem-solving, and critical thinking**—or what we loosely refer to as **deeper learning**.*

Coaches play an important role at Innova: they support new teachers, disseminate the curriculum and pedagogical ideas emanating from Innova's central office, and serve as subject 'experts' to whom teachers can turn for advice

and assurance. While their responsibilities shifted during the pandemic to support online learning and design new curricula, coaches typically travel between schools to observe lessons and hold one-on-one consultations with teachers. In contrast, academic coordinators are situated in particular schools. While they are also tasked with implementing pedagogical policies at the local level, their role is largely administrative and they closely support the principal in running the school. Both roles seemed well situated to effect pedagogical change at Innova by “leading from the middle” (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016).



“Deeper, Together”

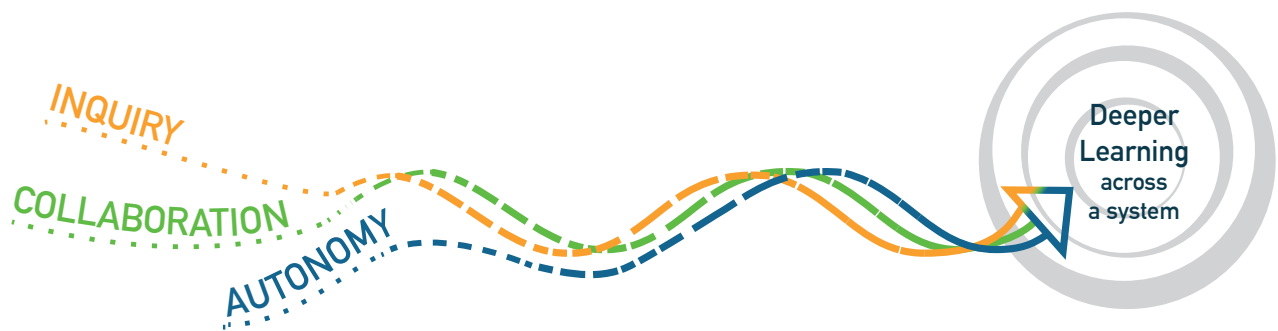
Mehta and Fine (2019) point to the scarcity of deeper learning in US schools even where ample resources are available. They note that surface-level or rote learning tends to be the default, particularly in core academic subjects. But why is it so challenging to cultivate deeper learning in schools? And where do opportunities exist to move toward deeper learning by building on the good work and educator commitment that already exist? Our research, grounded in the voices and experiences of our participants,

suggests that strengthening the interrelated practices and stances of **autonomy**, **inquiry**, and **collaboration** can help everyone in an education system to go “**deeper, together**”—that is, to learn in ways that involve developing the kinds of understandings that are personally meaningful and go beyond superficial content recall, while building intellectual community. Furthermore, the inevitable puzzles and challenges encountered along such a journey may be important for promoting growth and development, both individually and collectively, if participants are supported to reflect on their learning over time.

Three key elements: Autonomy, inquiry, and collaboration

As we envisioned an initial research focus with Innova in late 2017, we jointly decided to focus on the idea of “[creando comunidades de indagación](#)” (creating communities of inquiry) to explore how inquiry-based teaching and learning might become broadly embedded across an entire network of schools. Given this focus, the themes of **inquiry** and **collaboration** were central to the work from the start. While we adopted the language of *deeper learning* later on, our research consistently sought to explore ways of strengthening practice across the network that were aligned with many deeper learning frameworks (e.g., Fullan et al., 2017; Hewlett, 2013; Mehta & Fine, 2019).

In early 2021, after three years of research, Innova’s leaders asked the research team to also incorporate the concept of **autonomy** into the work. Rather than representing a major shift in focus, autonomy complemented and was in



Fostering inquiry, collaboration, and autonomy to promote deeper learning across a system.

many ways already embedded in our existing interest in promoting inquiry and collaboration among educators and students. Indeed, autonomy and deeper learning are intimately connected: deeper learning requires that educators enjoy at least some autonomy in their practice so that they can respond to students' emerging questions, needs, and interests. In turn, educators need to offer students at least some autonomy so that they can grow as learners and get beyond shallower forms of learning, such as memorizing or replicating content. This new focus on autonomy also aligned well with a new pedagogical blueprint being developed by Innova Schools at the time, which was highly aligned with our research team's work and involved loosening some of the network's centralized control to allow for more authentic inquiry and collaboration at all levels.

We saw a type of autonomy emerge among our participants and the teachers they supervised that was deeply tied to the process of collaboration—a phenomenon we did not anticipate but came to associate with Little's (1990) concept of *collective autonomy*. Collective autonomy is not just about teachers and students enjoying greater individual freedom; it involves a distributed form of autonomy that frames teaching as a shared responsibility and

learning as collaborative and interdependent. Each of these three "threads" (inquiry, collaboration, and autonomy) can be found interwoven throughout both the design of the research and the resultant findings.

| What we learned

With the ultimate end goal of promoting deeper learning system-wide, our research team worked with the coaches and academic coordinators through an approach called collaborative inquiry: participants engaged in action research within the context of study groups, learning with and from one another as they tried things out in their daily practice to promote autonomy, inquiry, and collaboration; investigated how those experiences went; and reflected on and learned from those experiences. The research team supported participants in this process via a series of online workshops. We learned about and from their work through surveys (n=28), interviews (n=14), focus groups, observations, and ongoing documentation of the workshop sessions. These data helped us to recognize and better understand the complexity of the challenges faced by participants, opportunities for change related to those challenges, and the ways in which participants grew and developed through the collaboration.

Favorable conditions and challenges

Specific conditions at Innova were conducive for promoting pedagogical change. The very existence of our project spoke to a desire among Innova's leaders to strive for deeper learning within their organization: having established a structure aimed at replicating certain standards of teaching and learning across schools, they were now ready to "take things to the next level" in terms of promoting deeper learning. Recent shifts in policy meant that individuals felt that they now had permission to change things in their practice, especially in the context of new Project Based Learning (PBL)-style curricula. Furthermore, there was a notable cohesiveness and strong sense of mission amongst the educators with whom we worked, as noted in another research study (Pino Benites, 2022).

Nevertheless, the work itself was an ongoing and evolving journey—and was not plain sailing. We experienced challenges commonly found in other contexts, as well as others that seemed more specific to this particular time and place or due to the worldwide pandemic. One major challenge was that many of the participants and teachers had **little direct personal experience of deeper learning**. This challenge is widespread around the globe (Darling-Hammond, 2017) and

relates to what Mehta and Fine (2019) refer to as an asymmetry in learning experiences within many schooling systems, whereby teachers do not have access to the kinds of learning experiences they are expected to facilitate for students. Other challenges were related to working within a highly structured and centralized educational system which had led over time to a **top-down culture**, a **preference for adhering to known plans**, and unreasonable **time pressures** that were exacerbated by a **lack of clarity regarding goals and priorities**. Furthermore, **low levels of confidence and trust** among educators made it challenging, at least

at first, to develop the types of collaborative practices that could help promote a culture of deeper learning. Finally, as mentioned by the coaches at the start of this paper, **a lack of scaffolds and supports, particularly in Spanish**, was also an impediment. And yet, despite these challenges, the coaches and academic coordinators were able to start moving beyond them and even think differently about what they were doing.

Effective tools, activities, and practices for promoting inquiry, autonomy, and collaboration

Unsurprisingly, we learned through our research that it is not enough to simply offer educators more autonomy or opportunities for inquiry and collaboration and expect them to embrace it or know what to do with it, especially if these concepts or practices



lie in tension with deeply rooted aspects of their thinking and practice or prevailing cultural or organizational conditions. Indeed, as our colleague Ron Ritchhart (2015) points out, learner independence or autonomy—be that among teachers or students—is facilitated when supports are offered that individuals and groups can hold onto, such as frameworks, structures, or routines: expecting people to just find their own way is not fair or realistic. Furthermore, a significant shift in mindset may be required for educators to move away from the kinds of teacher-centered or transmission model-type practices they may have experienced themselves as students—and that kind of shift can be very hard to achieve if educators are not working collaboratively.

Given that the research was conducted through a process of collaborative inquiry in which the research team supported participants on their journeys of pedagogic change, we were able to identify several tools, practices, and resources that proved particularly important to participants—both for promoting inquiry, autonomy, and collaboration, and for shifting educators' perceptions of what each of these concepts can mean. These practices included **modeling core practices and values** and **providing scaffolds to promote observation, analysis, and reflection** such as engaging in slow looking, using thinking routines, documenting teacher and student work, and giving and receiving constructive feedback. We also created **opportunities for sustained inquiry and collaboration** by supporting the completion of small-group inquiry projects in ways that promoted collective analysis and reflection.



Study groups served as a space for asking questions, looking closely at evidence, problem solving, building knowledge, reflecting, and supporting one another.

Advances in participants' thinking and practice

Participants described four important changes or developments in their thinking and practice over the course of nine months, although individuals differed in what they chose to foreground and all described themselves as still in a process of growth: (1) **learning to be learners** rather than experts possessing all the right answers; (2) **reflecting on purpose and practice** rather than merely completing tasks; (3) **accepting uncertainty and learning to adapt** rather than sticking closely to known plans; and (4) **developing trust and autonomy**—both in themselves and in other colleagues and students.

Conclusion

While this work is in some ways specific to Latin American educational contexts and the

Innova Schools model in particular, the findings (and the work and processes that led to them) will likely have relevance and resonance for educators in a wide array of contexts and in different size systems, ranging from single classrooms to entire districts or networks. Our findings could be used to enhance existing strong practices among educators or to help plan for ambitious and long-term change, with the ultimate goal of improving the educational experiences and outcomes for all students and the communities to which they belong.

Supporting the development of autonomy, inquiry, and collaboration can open pathways to identifying and developing powerful teaching and learning approaches and to nurturing the professional growth of the educators involved. Further, our research suggests that developing greater autonomy and inquiry in one's educational practice needs to be promoted and experienced in ways that are culturally- and contextually-grounded, and experienced collectively rather than as a solo effort. These findings confirm that promoting deeper learning is not easy work. However, they should also inspire hope that there are constructive pathways forward and that significant challenges can be overcome—particularly through the work of questioning, collaborating, and cultivating trust in oneself and others. **Cultivating collective autonomy, inquiry, and collaboration to advance deeper learning** in educational contexts is ultimately about going “**deeper, together.**”

Project Zero gratefully acknowledges the contributions of many Innova colleagues to this work, as well as the financial support of Carlos Rodríguez Pastor and Gabriela Perez Rocchietti.



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