

SDGs 4+10+17 Teaching Is a Work of Heart: Alberta Teachers Discover Common Ground in Nicaragua

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The wake-up call is the crow of a rooster. Fueled by a breakfast of rice, beans, and Nicaraguan coffee, our delegation of Alberta teachers begins our morning commute in the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in northwest Nicaragua. There are no roads here. After travelling up the Coco River in a dugout canoe, we disembark, ascend the river banks, and are joined by curious children as we navigate the dirt path to the secondary school in the rainforest community of Pamkawas.

We are a delegation of five teachers participating in an ambitious pilot project developed through a partnership between Change for Children and the Alberta Teachers' Association to support the work of local teachers in remote communities.

As we enter the school, the enormity of our task sinks in. There is no library — no shelves stocked with books or teaching resources. There are painted blackboards and broken pieces of whiteboard, but no chalk to be found.

Government teaching materials and resources did not arrive in Pamkawas this year — yet again. Local teachers, some of whom are volunteering their time, cannot afford to purchase their own resources. Even if they could, the closest education supply store is an 11-hour boat ride



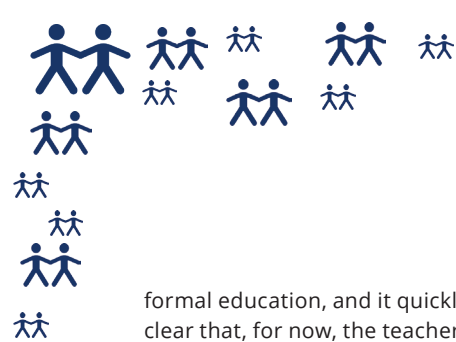
followed by a 7-hour truck ride away. A few teachers carry the few resources they have back and forth to school each day. When scarcity rules, goods are currency and possessions are precious.

Plagued by a lack of resources and by the competing priorities of a subsistence farming lifestyle, educating youth in the Bosawas does not come without its challenges. And while these challenges cannot possibly be overcome by our visiting delegation alone, they do inform what is practical in our efforts to work with local teachers to incorporate arts and technology into the curricula, and to improve educational outcomes. Baby steps.

The pilot project makes Pamkawas the test site for an innovative technology unit known as the Remote Area Community Hotspot for Education and Learning (RACHEL). Operated on a small single-board computer that can fit in the palm of your hand, RACHEL provides users with extensive educational content from across the web without requiring an internet connection. The first of its kind in this area, our goal is to determine if and how this technology can be leveraged in the context of the Bosawas.

We sit down with the school's principal, Omar, and some of the teachers, to explain how to operate RACHEL. They catch on quickly. The science teacher immediately uses it to read up on the carbon cycle on Wikipedia, following the hyperlinks to extend his understanding of related topics. The math teacher watches trigonometry videos to first solidify his understanding of the concepts, and then to gain ideas for how to teach them to his students. Many of the teachers themselves have limited





formal education, and it quickly becomes clear that, for now, the teachers will use this technology primarily to develop their own expertise and understanding of the subjects that they teach.

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Our delegation decides to use RACHEL to design a series of instructional paintings for the walls of the secondary classrooms — a practical and more permanent alternative to material resources that are difficult to obtain, don't stand up to the elements, or tend to walk away.

Didactic materials — the water cycle, the food chain, place values, and geometry — are emblazoned on walls with bright white paint, differentiating the science room from the math room, the math room from the language room. The local teachers participate in this task with a palpable pride, affirming ownership of their respective teaching environments.

The goal in the Bosawas is multifaceted: a more educated Indigenous population, local people occupying positions of responsibility, and informed decisions for the people and the forest being made by those with the most at stake. The goal is ambitious, but not impossible.

We leave Pamkawas with a greater appreciation of the challenges of education in a context drastically different from home. We leave with hope, solidarity, and a special bond with the local teachers, with whom we share so much — a love of learning, a love of children, and a love of community. **Despite differences and challenges and barriers that set apart the pursuit of education in the Bosawas, there is also a common thread. There is resolve.**

In cooperation with the Indigenous people of developing countries, Change for Children aims to build civil society capacity to promote health, human rights, and create solutions to poverty through sustainable development.

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