

Meeting the Need before Learning to Read: A Holistic Approach to Educational Achievement

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Traveling to Peru with a group of students from Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota opened my eyes to the numerous possibilities in my career as a librarian to make a difference in the lives of students who confront seemingly insurmountable obstacles to success. Our January Interim service learning course *Education, Healthcare, and Poverty in Peru* asked us to reflect on our individual purpose, expectations, and philosophy of service. Our small group of about 20 students came to the program from different fields with varying interests motivating our desire to participate in the course. The majority were nursing or education majors seeking to contribute their expertise through medical field work and English instruction, while others were either bilingual Spanish speakers or showed interest in pursuing a degree in medicine. I was drawn to the program because of the service aspect and the opportunity to use my Spanish language skills to engage with the people I would meet, live, and work with in Peru and to interpret for my team.

Before embarking on our flight, we articulated our primary objective through extensive conversation and collaboration. Through our work in Peru teaching English to classes of children, teens, and adults and assisting in clinic and hospice visits, we sought to work alongside members of the community “to promote health, wellness, and learning by serving the Chimbote community with compassion and respect.” We hoped to grow as world citizens through our cultural exchange with the people of Chimbote, and we hoped they would benefit from our cultural contributions as well. There would be many opportunities to engage each other in cultural and political discussions during our time there – gathering at the tienda at night, teaching and learning from our students, and having discussions with community leaders. At the outset, we had a basic understanding of the connection between poverty, health, wellness, and education; however, our experience truly showed us how deeply intertwined these facets of daily life are and how individual and community needs must be addressed holistically to achieve true transformation.

As an environmental activist I often read, write, and talk about the impact we have on our environment; however, in Peru I gained a new perspective on the intricate relationship between humans and their environment as I saw the relationship between people and place in reverse. A largely overlooked contributing factor to poverty, the environment bears a heavy impact on the lives of Peruvians. With little rainfall in Peru’s desert and mountain regions, the people who live there rely on water from the mountains, and those living in cities might receive a weekly or monthly allotment of water or buy water if no city services exist in their district. Warm weather, compounded with vast tracts of sand, make water an even more precious resource in these dry regions. The value of this limited resource is unfathomable to many U.S. citizens who can rely on an immediate, accessible, and seemingly endless supply of well or city water. Having to choose between cooking, washing, sustaining a garden, or doing laundry before having to purchase privately sold water is unthinkable where we live. We conserve water because we are trying to be “green” or “environmentally-friendly,” not because we have no other choice.

Prior to my travels, I had seen the poverty of central Minnesota, but the differences between the struggles I saw there and those in Peru were stark and eye-opening. Outside my

local public library, the homeless sit and wait long before the doors open, then spend the rest of their day there—reading, sleeping, and making use of free internet, water, and bathroom services. When I worked the closing shift, it was difficult to watch them leave at 9 p.m., groups slowly migrating to the door from all parts of the large, beautiful building. My personal experiences with poverty in the U.S. were nowhere near that which I saw in Chimbote and the mountains of Peru. The men and women I talked with who live in the poorest outskirts of Chimbote, known as the invasions, live in conditions that demonstrate the drastic difference between socioeconomic standards and resources in the two countries. Low wages and even lower employment rates drive many Peruvians to uproot their families and begin new lives under uncertain living conditions, moving to the outskirts of the city to live as squatters. In the invasions, many reside in these communities for seven years or more without receiving running water or other services from the city; thus, the neediest in the city lack the necessary social services and financial assistance to raise their standard of living.

Unable to meet these basic needs, which many would agree are fundamental to human achievement and self-actualization, Peruvian children are at a severe educational disadvantage. Not only are their schools underfunded and lacking resources, but poor students are striving towards success while struggling to survive. Many government services that provide assistance or personal and professional development programming in the U.S., like public libraries or community centers, are few and far between in Chimbote. Instead, these services are offered by the church and its outposts or small NGOs. The work performed by these agencies is tremendous, inspiring, and uplifting, yet a city with a population of over 300,000 needs more support than these efforts can provide. Soup kitchens, healthcare assistance, and opportunities for education and employment are life-changing services, yet they are being offered by agencies that rely on charitable support from the U.S. rather than funding from the Peruvian government. These services are essential human rights and need to be addressed by government funding and support of institutions, and this is where I see the role libraries can play to serve all citizens freely and equitably.

In my future career as a librarian and archivist, I plan to focus on the connection between poverty, health, and literacy to inform my work in higher education. Libraries exist to serve communities by inspiring intellectual curiosity and providing the resources to pursue these questions, and everyone should have an equitable opportunity to achieve his or her academic potential. I see an opportunity to increase literacy by improving educational resources and assistance for those with intellect and potential who fight to overcome poverty. By reaching out to members who most need the library's resources, I plan to engage with them to learn how best to serve their needs and generate individual investment in their education and professional development. Some public libraries have worked toward these goals by offering career and job searching services and providing services in response to needs they have observed in their community while others offer evening English classes and afternoon tutors for students. In academic libraries, however, serving the community can take the form of scholarships, research internships, free access to course materials, such as textbooks, desktop and laptop computers, scientific calculators, and online resources, as well as reference services.

The children I worked with in Chimbote deeply touched me, and I cherished knowing we had contributed to their desire to continue pursuing their education. A truly unique experience to be a part of, on our final day we shared laughter, smiles, and heartfelt words intermingled with tears, letters, and long looks. On the bus ride from Chimbote to Lima, I confronted the regret I felt for leaving them behind to find a way out of poverty alone as I continued enroute to another

airport to spend my final week in Peru as a tourist, experiencing their beautiful country in a way they never could. I remembered conversations with some of my adult students who had been excited to hear we were going to Machu Picchu. We had sat in the mission's courtyard, the women's eyes sparkling with pride for their country's cultural heritage, as they told me its story. Intuitively responding to the wonder in my eyes, they exclaimed over its beauty and told me fact after fact about the city nestled in mountains, before sadly admitting they had never been there themselves. Leaving these people, touring their country, and abandoning them to return to my comfortable home felt wrong, as if I were choosing to forget the friendships we had forged and the struggles they continue to face. The opportunity to work, study, and immerse myself in Chimbote allowed me to gain a global perspective on poverty and developed my sense of duty to the underserved. Having the opportunity to serve the people I lived with—teaching English, nurturing creativity, and sharing customs—has given me a greater appreciation and understanding of South American culture and the simple power of relationships. The men, women, and children I lived with and learned from make it impossible for me to turn my back. I know that this will not be my final goodbye to Chimbote.

From this experience, I now have a clearer vision of what my role will be in the effort to eradicate poverty. Chimbote's educational environment was a stark example of the obstacles faced by already poor students who lack access to free resources to improve their potential for success. My memories of Chimbote will remain a constant reminder of my responsibility as a librarian to serve all the individuals in my community, so that all people have the opportunity to achieve self-actualization through their education. Despite the support services already offered in many academic libraries, there remains more that can be done to target users with limited economic means and tailor services to their needs, providing them with the proper resources, assistance, and support to attain scholastic achievement. I also see opportunities for academic libraries and archives to incorporate their communities in their attempts at educational outreach. Academic institutions have invaluable resources that should be extended to enrich and support the communities where they reside, and I plan to pioneer these integrative programs at my future institution. Whether I devote my life to historical research that dignifies and nurtures a community's story or dedicate resources to support those who experience financial inequity, I know my work will reflect what I learned and lived in Chimbote.

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