



La Loma: Community and Education in a Rural Andean Village

Christopher Lau '12

Today is the day. Throngs of curious onlookers have already gathered around the blacktop where my choreographed dance of the World Cup 2010 song, “Waving Flag,” is about to be performed. I stand eagerly next to a group of 15 of my students representing the village of La Loma. Dressed neatly in white shirts and black jeans, the kids’ green, yellow, and blue pom-poms bounce playfully around their wrists and ankles. Señora Catalina and Señora Mariella (their primary school teachers), the children’s parents, and other members of La Loma beam with pride, waving to us from the crowd. The entire community is present at this annual summer celebration commemorating the establishment of the parish back in 1964. It serves as a festive respite from the toils of everyday agrarian life.

The loudspeaker booms: “The parish of Cuellaje welcomes the Ignacio Burbano Primary School of La Loma.” The knot in my stomach tightens. All eyes fix on me. I take a deep breath, casually put on my sunglasses, and step out confidently onto the blacktop. Whispers of “Who’s that chinito?” reverberate through the crowd. An Asian-American college student whose yellow skin and jet black hair stands out, I’ve already become accustomed to indiscreet side glances and finger-pointing. As I walk humbly towards the other side of the blacktop, I tell myself: Wow, I can’t believe I’m going to dance in front of all these people...in Ecuador.

Teaching in Ecuador

I have been teaching English to primary and secondary students this summer in the small Andean community of La Loma.² At the local primary school, I teach four different levels of English to children ages 6-17. Although I can speak Spanish, I only speak English in my classes, in order to create an immersive language learning experience.

Over the past seven weeks I have become acutely aware of the deficiencies of schooling here, and of the general condemnations leveled against the Ecuadorian public education system. Nationwide, there exists a marked

1. Translation from the Spanish: “Who’s that Chinese [or anyone who physically appears to be of East Asian descent] person?” This phrase can have derogatory, neutral, or endearing connotations, depending on the situation.

2. La Loma is located in Intag Valley, a rural region in the Imbabura Province of Ecuador.

disparity in education attainment between rural and urban areas: in 2001, the average level of schooling in rural areas was 4.9 years, compared to 8.7 years in urban areas.³ There are also serious systemic flaws. As the Ecuadorian academic Quiroz Palacios puts it, “Ecuador’s public school system provides an education that is so repetitive and routinized as to destroy its reason for being.”⁴ Using my experience in La Loma to explore the role of the community in shaping primary and secondary education in Andean villages, I seek to understand this rural-urban divide.

3. Vos, Rob, and Juan Ponce. “Meeting the Millennium Development Goal in Education: A Cost-Effectiveness Analysis for Ecuador.” *Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Working Paper Series* No. 402 (2004): 4. <http://publishing.eur.nl/ir/darenet/asset/19162/wp402.pdf> (accessed October 31, 2010).

4. Quiroz Palacios, Carlos. 1988. “Educación ecuatoriana y curriculum.” *Ecuador Debate*, no. 16 (October 1988). Quito: Centro Andino de Acción Popular, pg. 66.

▼ Over the past seven weeks I have become acutely aware of the deficiencies of schooling here, and of the general condemnations leveled against the Ecuadorian public education system.

Ecuador first piqued my interest in 5th grade. I remember sitting at a small desk in my Connecticut elementary school classroom, enthralled by my Spanish teacher's descriptions of a country that was only about the size of Colorado⁵ but nonetheless has four geographically distinct regions: the Amazon, the Coast, the Andes, and the Galápagos Islands. My small hands promptly added Ecuador to a list of countries I wished to visit one day. This past summer, I resolved to finally explore Ecuador through WorldTeach, an NGO that describes itself as an organization that “partners with governments and other organizations in developing countries to provide volunteer teachers to meet local needs and promote global partnership.”⁶ After undergoing a weeklong orientation in the capital, Quito, volunteers are sent off to their individual sites, working in communities that have specifically requested an English teacher for the summer.

* * *

I am at the other side of the blacktop. I turn around, facing the children who are still waiting patiently. Clapping, I signal the first row of five students, adorned with blue pom-poms, to come forward. They run towards me, abandoning the synchronized entrance we had rehearsed for weeks. I smile. After all, these are the youngest of the bunch: they are only six years old. I signal the second row, with their yellow pom-poms, to follow. Lastly the tallest children, adorned with green pom-poms, complete the formation. Together, the sea of green, yellow, and blue represent the colors of the newly designed flag of Cuellaje, the parish of which La Loma is a part. The green symbolizes “a love for nature,” the yellow “warmth, optimism, and kindness,” and the blue “the pure air and crystalline waters of [the regional] rivers.”⁷

Before the music starts, I look around. I see Enrique and Paola, my host brother and sister, sitting on the pavement enjoying pink cotton candy together. Their parents cannot attend because Rafael, their father, is recovering from a recent accident. Last I week, I had a conversation with Rafael.

Rafael: The Visionary

“If it weren't for the men in La Loma who came and rescued me, I would have died on the cold forest floor,” Rafael says, lying in a semi-reclined state on his bed, his upper body scarred with bruises and his injured legs nestled under a blanket.

5. “Ecuador | Ecuador | South America | Where Do Volunteers Go? | Learn About Volunteering | Peace Corps.” Peace Corps. <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.wherepc.southamerica.ecuador> (accessed November 6, 2010).

6. “WorldTeach - About Us - What is WorldTeach?” WorldTeach - Long-term Volunteer Teaching Opportunities Abroad. <http://www.worldteach.org/aboutus/> (accessed October 31, 2010).

7. Translation from a pamphlet distributed during the August 5, 2010 Cuellaje Festivals, entitled “Parroquia Seis de Julio de Cuellaje: Nuestros simbolos parroquiales.”

At his bedside, I sit on a wooden stool. I had just finished teaching my morning classes at the primary school and wanted to check up on my host dad. Rafael is alone at the house: his wife, Señora Marina, is out working on the farm in place of her husband, and the children are still at school. Two weeks prior, Rafael had been cutting trees with a friend high up in the mountains, clearing land to establish another farm. All of a sudden, a giant tree fell on his back, striking him down. His friend, who fortunately carried a cell phone, left Rafael alone for an hour as he tried frantically to find satellite reception and call for help.

“You know what I was thinking when I was lying there, all alone?”

“No.” I don't know what else to say.

“All I could think of was not being able to see Enrique and Paola all grown up.” His voice is soft and solemn.

I have come to truly admire Rafael. A third generation family in La Loma, Rafael is very much an integral part of this community. As a young boy, he spent most of his time outdoors learning from his father how to pack horses, slaughter pigs, clear fields, and other farm-related tasks. When he is not working in the fields, he enjoys hiking, fishing, and playing *fútbol* with other men in the village.

However, Rafael is not like the others. He owns the largest house in La Loma, which he built by himself right after marrying Marina. The house has four rooms, a kitchen with tiled floors, a fully functional outdoor bathroom with an electric shower, and a spacious attic. In comparison, most other houses in this village consist of one dirt-floored room and one bed for the entire family to share. The relative prosperity Rafael has built up is not a matter of divine providence or good fortune. Rather, it is a result of hard work. Prior to his accident, Rafael would wake at 3 AM every morning, ride on horseback high up into the mountain fields, and work there until dusk. When he came back, he always spent time with his wife and children, playing games or watching an episode of *Escalera al Cielo*, a surprisingly popular Korean drama dubbed in Spanish.

“What are your hopes for your children?”

“I want them to be happy, and not have to work as hard as Marina and I have.” A smile lights up his face. “Well, at least I don't have to worry about *one* of them.”

I chuckle. He is referring to Paola, his 14-year-old daughter who happens to be the most academically gifted pupil in her age group in La Loma. Every year since primary school, Paola

has been designated the *abandadera*,⁸ an honor accorded to the best student in each grade level. Her report cards are consistently full of 19s and 20s,⁹ in subjects ranging from mathematics to language arts. In many ways, she reminds me of myself: an introspective, academically-inclined person. On the weekends, I often seen her curled up in a chair, reading stories from a bilingual Spanish-English book a previous WorldTeach volunteer gave her. In contrast, her 12-year-old brother, Enrique, would much rather harvest yucca with a machete out in the fields than lift a pencil. From my experience in the classrooms, girls appear to be more academically inclined than boys, reflecting the fact that the gender gap in terms of years of schooling in Ecuador has nearly closed: in 2001, the figure for males was 7.5 years of school, and that of females was 7.1 years.¹⁰

Although Rafael only completed 7th grade before he dropped out, he believes in the importance of education. In fact, his children have a private study room. He single-handedly built an entire computer shelf, study desk, bookshelf, and several wooden chairs to furnish the study room. Last year, using funds he diligently accumulated over the years, he bought his children a brand-new computer, a sleek copier/scanner/fax printer, and a computer video camera. He also enlisted a friend to set up a wireless Internet connection. The computer is now fully furnished, with high-speed internet and Skype capabilities. I was stunned the first time I saw my host siblings watching Shakira's "Waka Waka" dance on YouTube. After all, who would have thought that in the middle of the Andean mountains Shakira's hips would be gyrating on a flat-screen computer monitor? At Rafael's request, I have helped Enrique and Paola utilize the Internet effectively, teaching them, for example, how to use a Google search and a Yahoo! e-mail account.

Rafael's efforts to secure an education for his children might indeed make him a visionary. In the latest data collected by the World Bank in 2008, only 29 percent of *all* Ecuadorians have Internet access.¹¹ In rural areas where most families do not even have phone service this figure is likely to be considerably lower. Unlike other men in La Loma who squander extra savings on liquor,¹² Rafael instead invests in the future of his children. He routinely hosts WorldTeach

8. The *abandadera* is the top student in his/her class, and carries the national flag in school and town parades.

9. The grading system is on a 0-20 scale where 0 denotes failure, 20 a perfect grade.

10. Vos, Rob, and Juan Ponce. "Meeting the Millennium Development Goal in Education: A Cost-Effectiveness Analysis for Ecuador," 9.

11. International Telecommunication Union, World Telecommunication Development Report and database. "Internet Users." The World Bank. http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER?cid=GPD_58 (accessed November 12, 2010).

12. There is a strong culture of drinking, especially among males in rural Ecuador. See Pribilsky, Jason. *La chulla vida: gender, migration, and the family in Andean Ecuador and New York City*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2007, pg. 230.

volunteers such as me without any monetary compensation. Señora Catalina informs me that Rafael offers to host volunteers because he wants his children to improve their English skills and be exposed to, in her words, "the world beyond Ecuador." His own knowledge about the world may be limited (e.g. he did not know that China and Japan were different countries prior to my arrival), but he nonetheless wants his children to grow up with a more expansive worldview.

Rafael seems to realize that even La Loma, perched high up in the mountains, is susceptible to external forces. Within Ecuador, market prices for limes, avocados, and coffee beans directly affect the livelihood of farmers in La Loma. On an international scale, the Ecuadorian economy is inextricably tied to that of the United States, since Ecuador uses the U.S. dollar as its currency.¹³ Multinational mining companies such as Ascendant Copper threaten to usurp vast tracks of land in Intag Valley, only to be temporarily subdued by massive village protests and court injunctions.¹⁴ Ascendant Copper is currently prohibited from mining in Intag, but this does not necessarily preclude other ambitious companies from moving into the area in the future. For better or worse, globalization has reached La Loma, and Rafael wants his children to be ready.

"But doesn't Enrique want to just be like you, a farmer?"

13. In 2000, Ecuador replaced the *sucre* with the US dollar in order to stabilize an economy in peril of collapse. For a detailed analysis of the financial crisis that precipitated the currency change, see Jácome, Luis. "The Late 1990s Financial Crisis in Ecuador: Institutional Weaknesses, Fiscal Rigidities, and Financial Dollarization at Work." *International Monetary Fund* WP 04/12 (2004). <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2004/wp0412.pdf> (accessed November 12, 2010).

14. For years, the Canadian mining company Ascendant Copper aggressively pushed for the development of a mine in Junín, a town in Intag Valley. A vigorous anti-mining campaign, spearheaded by the grassroots organization Defensa y Conservación Ecológica de Intag (www.decoin.org) ensued. In September 2007, the government ordered Ascendant Copper to cease all operations in Intag, citing that "Ecuador's mining concessions are in violation of Article 88 of the nation's Constitution, which protects the affected communities' right to be consulted prior to development activities being undertaken." See "Ecuador: Government Shuts Down Ascendant Copper's Junín Project, MiningWatch." Changing public policy and mining practices to ensure the health of individuals, communities and ecosystems. <http://www.miningwatch.ca/en/ecuador-government-shuts-down-ascendant-copper-s-junin-project> (accessed October 24, 2010).

▼ Who would have thought that in the middle of the Andean mountains Shakira's hips would be gyrating on a flat-screen computer monitor?

“He has an interest in animals. I want him to be a veterinarian, so he can still combine his interests in farm life with a professional occupation.”

Rafael wants Enrique to stay in the village when he grows up, and it seems he has succeeded in imparting to his son a love for the picturesque river valleys, scenic cloud forests, and the idyllic pastoral landscape. However, if Enrique is to become a professional, it is unlikely that he will find a suitable job here in Intag Valley. The overwhelming majority of jobs are in the agricultural or informal sectors (e.g. grocery shops in Cuellaje). Will Rafael’s desire for Enrique to become a professional end up breaking the family apart? Which is more important: one’s family or one’s career? At what cost should education be pursued? Certainly, I do not have the answers, but these are some of the questions one must ask when considering the role of the community in shaping education in Ecuador’s rural areas.

* * *

The music starts. I feel a rush of adrenaline...this is it. Almost reflexively, my body moves in sync with the lively music. The crowd erupts in cheers. I turn around, facing my students. Sitting in the second row I see Miguel, one of my 6th grade students. I think about his brother, Alejandro, and wonder if he, too, is cheering in the audience. Two weeks ago, after my afternoon class, I had a chat with Alejandro.

Alejandro: A Student’s Dilemma

Alejandro and I are sitting in the front yard of his house. A 16-year-old, Alejandro is enrolled in my afternoon English class. He is wearing a blue faux Abercrombie & Fitch tee shirt, frayed blue jeans, and muddied work boots. His eyes are cast into the distance, fixed on the outlines of the distant hills. I suppose he didn’t expect me to trek all the way down to his house, located at the very bottom of a steep dirt path overrun by prickly bushes and gnarled roots.

With a tattered yellow washcloth in her hand, Ximena, Alejandro’s mom, gives me an encouraging look through the kitchen window. There is a gleam of hope in her tired eyes that I will be able to get through to her son. She is busy scrubbing grease stains off a frying pan; her husband is sitting on a bench at the kitchen table with a bottle of beer in his hand. Two of Alejandro’s younger brothers, Miguel and José, wave hello to me from atop a coffee tree in the valley below. Perhaps they wonder what brings me to their house, but are too engrossed at the moment with their imaginative game.

With the front door closed and the children off in the distance, Alejandro eventually breaks our silence.

“Why are you here?” he asks. The tone of his voice is neither angry nor accusatory, but rather flat. He glances at me quickly in the eye with a nervous smile, only to look off in the distance again.

“I’m just wondering why you aren’t going to class,” I respond, as nonchalantly as possible. “And not just my class...why aren’t you attending your *regular* classes?” Alejandro is enrolled in 10th grade, attending the secondary school in Cuellaje, a 40-minute trek down the hill from La Loma.

He looks at me expressionless, realizing that’s the reason I have come to talk to him. Two days ago, Señora Catalina, one of the teachers at the primary school in La Loma, decided to talk to me about the home lives of the children in the community. She expressed her concern about Alejandro, who apparently had stopped attending secondary school. Having been his primary school teacher, Catalina was worried by Alejandro’s errant behavior. She had told me that Alejandro had always been a quiet, amiable student who was “not like the other boys.” He kept to himself. She suspected that perhaps Alejandro’s father, a man of “forceful character,” may be coercing Alejandro to work with him in the fields instead of allowing him to attend school.

Such a parental demand would not be uncommon; many men in the village often embark on weeklong trips deep into the mountains to prepare new tracts of land for cattle grazing. In order to earn some money, many adolescent boys accompany their fathers and other men in the village on such excursions. Although Alejandro had been absent for several of my afternoon classes, I was not aware that he had also stopped attending his regular classes. Previously invited to his home for lunch by Ximena, I knew where Alejandro lived, and offered to pay him a visit to determine what was actually going on.

“I don’t know,” Alejandro replies mechanically to my question.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” I give him a few seconds to respond, but he is still looking away. “Is it that school is too hard? Or,” I add teasingly, “perhaps you’re distracted by a certain girl in class?”

He laughs at my joke, his face lighting up. “No, no Chris, don’t be crazy.” I know that he knows that I am aware of his crush on another student in my afternoon English class. He pauses slightly, his expression suddenly serious. “I quit school because I’ve gotten zeros in several subjects.¹⁵ There’s

15. The grading system is on a 0-20 scale; 0 denoting failure, 20 denoting a perfect grade

no point going back; I don't learn anything in school anyway." Although I have yet to bear witness to an actual class taught by an Ecuadorian, I believe Alejandro's frustration with school may not be entirely unwarranted. In the words of education expert Carlos Quiroz Palacios, the Ecuadorian school is "a repressive, repetitive, empiricist pedagogical exercise, without creative, without constructive experimentation."¹⁶ While his critique may be too harsh, there is perhaps some truth to it. My host siblings, for example, are regularly assigned "homework" which basically entails mindless regurgitation of class material. Students are often assigned projects where they simply copy diagrams and notes from the pages of their textbooks onto a larger sheet of paper, decorating the sheet with colorful pictures. The substandard quality of instruction possibly contributes to poor school attendance rates. Nationwide in Ecuador, only 67 percent of boys and 68 percent of girls attend secondary school,¹⁷ with figures for rural areas such as Intag Valley most likely even lower.

"What have you been doing instead then?"

"Working in the fields with my father."

I am not surprised; Catalina was right. Perhaps, like many other adolescent males his age, he has already resigned himself to the life of an itinerant farmer, toiling from dawn to dusk harvesting yucca and coffee beans for a meager U.S. \$7 a day.¹⁸ Perhaps he doesn't dare to dream anymore. He knows that more likely than not he will end up struggling to raise a family of his own on the same soil tilled by his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Alejandro looks in my direction and continues. "I don't care about school. All I want to do is to play *fútbol*."

Having played on his team after classes myself, I can attest to Alejandro's formidable soccer skills. Quite frankly, though, I am sick of the ubiquitous "I'm too cool for school" mentality among adolescent boys here. Every afternoon, my meticulously planned lessons are often disastrously interrupted by boys who not only refuse to go to my class, but who bang on the door of the classroom in order to entice the few remaining boys in my class to join them outside for a pick-up game of *fútbol*.

"But even soccer players need to be educated," I respond. If nothing else, I want to impart a lasting impression on the importance of education to my students during my short stint as a teacher this summer. "You're so close to finishing

high school. It would be a shame if you didn't get your diploma."

"I don't care about school," he reiterates.

"Well, do you want to be a farmer in the future?"

"I don't know." Judging from the tone of his voice though, I can tell that his heart is not set on being a farmer. "If you could do anything in the world, what would you be then?" My question seems to catch Alejandro off guard.

After a long pause he admits, "I want to be a writer."

"That's awesome!" I say enthusiastically, imagining Alejandro as a writer one day. Whenever I see him around La Loma he is carrying a small notepad, jotting down notes in Spanish.

Alejandro is an introvert, preferring to listen to others instead of being at the center of attention. I advise him: "If you want to be a writer, you need to go back to school."

Just then his father, a large, sturdy man, appears at the doorway, slightly tipsy. Alejandro becomes visibly tense and clams up. From what Catalina has told me, his dad, unlike Rafael, places no importance on education for his 10 children, at least not beyond mastering basic computation, reading, and writing skills. I extend a hand towards his father. We shake hands while I introduce myself as this year's summer WorldTeach volunteer. He says nothing, glances coldly at his son, and swaggers back into the house. Ximena quickly closes the door behind him and nods in our direction.

I am taken aback by his father's demeanor but then try to put myself in his shoes. He is trying to support his wife and eight children on a meager salary working on other people's fields. Unlike Rafael, he has no time to ponder his children's futures. Instead, his day-to-day priority is scraping together enough money to put food on the table. I can only conclude that his

▼ Perhaps he doesn't dare to dream anymore. He knows that more likely than not he will end up struggling to raise a family of his own on the same soil tilled by his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Alejandro looks in my direction and continues. "I don't care about school. All I want to do is to play *fútbol*."

16. Quiroz Palacios, Carlos, pg. 82.

17. Given is the gross secondary school enrollment ratio from 2003 to 2008. See UNICEF - Ecuador - Statistics. (n.d.). UNICEF - UNICEF Home. Retrieved October 10, 2010, from http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ecuador_statistics.html#67

18. Field notes, August 4, 2010.

assertion of *machismo*¹⁹ dominance over his household is because it happens to be the only thing he has direct control over. I cannot help but make the comparison between Alejandro's father and Rafael. My host dad would never drink away his problems; in fact, I have yet to see him indulge in alcohol at all.

In hushed voices, Alejandro and I continue talking for hours, until Ximena comes out and suggests that I get going before the path up to my host family's house becomes completely dark. With a firm handshake, I tell Alejandro that I expect him to attend both my class and his regular secondary school classes starting tomorrow. He nods acceptance.

Trekking up the hill, I am overcome with a humbled understanding of what many of my students have to deal with on a quotidian basis.

* * *

The dance proceeds. Standing in front of the children with my back to them, I want to turn around to see how they are doing. Instead, I can only imagine them: their nimble arms swinging in sync in the air, smiles etched on their faces. What I do see is Señora Catalina and Señora Mariella, each expertly maneuvering around on the blacktop with a video camera in their hands. Recently, the three of us sat down together over lunch and spoke candidly of issues that were on our minds.

The Teachers: A Dynamic Duo

I am about to head back to my host family's house for lunch when Señora Mariella pulls me aside. "Chris, come have a snack with Señora Catalina and me before you leave?" Pleasantly surprised, I agree, and follow her into the *casita* (little house) located directly across from the main building of the school. Sitting on a wooden stool behind the kitchen counter, I watch Señora Mariella meticulously prepare three portions of bread and Coca-Cola, a meal fondly referred to as *almuerzo de trabajadores* (worker's lunch). Her black curly hair bounces up and down to the reggaetón playing on the radio; her eyes are cheerful and radiant.

This is where Señora Mariella resides during the week. Furnished simply with bare essentials, the three-room *casita* (kitchenette, a bedroom, and an indoor bathroom) is her home away from home. On the orange walls of the living room hang the scribbled drawings of her first grade students:

19. Machismo can be described as men "being authoritarian within the family, aggressive...promiscuous, virile, and protective of women and children." See Bull, Sheana. "Machismo/Marianismo Attitudes, Employment, Education, and Sexual Behavior Among Women in Ecuador and the Dominican Republic." *Journal of Gender, Culture, and Health* 3, no. 1 (1998): 3. www.springerlink.com (accessed November 13, 2010).

a butterfly, a horse grazing on grass, a boy climbing up an avocado tree.

Every week, Señora Mariella leaves behind her husband and teenage son in Ibarra (a bustling city four hours away by bus) to work primarily with the youngest pupils (grades 1-3) in the rural areas of the Imbabura province of Ecuador. The majority of teachers here are from Ibarra,²⁰ where there is a prominent national teaching school. Given the dearth of qualified teachers in rural communities, the Ecuadorian government compels aspiring teachers to work for two years in rural communities before being officially granted their teaching licenses.²¹ Señora Mariella has already satisfied this requirement, yet nevertheless chooses to stay. She tells me she is fond of this community, that she is on a first-name basis with nearly all the parents of her students.

Señora Catalina arrives, a bunch of freshly picked *mandarinas* and *limas* in her arms. A sturdy, robust woman, she is the full-time teacher of the school, responsible for teaching grades 4-7. As such, she teaches everything from the natural sciences to fine arts. She is unique in that she is 45 years old and unmarried; almost all women in the village are married by the age of 20, oftentimes even younger. She once quipped, "Who needs children? The kids at the school are my children."²²

She wanted to teach children from a young age, inspired by the dynamic way a teacher had taught her in 2nd grade. Born and raised in Cuellaje, Catalina decided to return to Intag after receiving her teaching license from an education institute in the city. Upon graduation, her peers at the teaching institute in Otavalo applied for jobs in the cities, but she wanted none of that and instead wanted to return home and see her family. On a typical day, Catalina spends her mornings teaching, and her afternoons running a butcher shop in order to supplement her meager teacher's salary. In her free time, she bounces in and out of families' homes, talking with parents and checking on students' home lives.

Although they come from radically different backgrounds, the two teachers are more than colleagues. They are very good friends, their friendship reinforced on a daily basis. After all, they are the only ones responsible for educating more than 60 children in a remote area. In a sense, they are thrown together to ensure that primary education is implemented high up in the mountains.

There are structural forces at play that make teaching in

20. Imbabura province is located in the northern region of Ecuador. Its capital, Ibarra, was originally founded by the Spanish in 1606.

21. Interview with Señora Catalina, July 12th, 2010.

22. Field notes, June 28, 2010.

rural communities particularly challenging. In rural areas, there exists a “core-periphery pattern of schooling” in which the government first establishes schools in larger towns (e.g. Cuellaje) and then in “isolated parish hamlets” (e.g. La Loma).²³ Because of this, schools in small villages tend to lag behind those in larger towns in terms of funding, implementation of new policies, and provision of materials. There are also logistical difficulties: it is difficult and time-consuming to transfer bulks of books, pencils, and other school supplies from the cities to La Loma. Señora Catalina and Señora Mariella often pick up supplies whenever they visit the cities on the weekends, spending their own money if necessary.

The two teachers are behind the kitchenette counter, slicing the *mandarinas* to serve along with the food Señora Mariella already prepared. There is a stack of textbooks on the counter. Curious, I pick up the first one in the stack, perusing its pages.

The textbooks used in class are designed and distributed by the government, written only with urban audiences in mind (e.g. students who live in the capital city of Quito). For example, there are references to “*supermercados*” (supermarkets), even though they are non-existent in La Loma.²⁴ My host sister’s English book, *Our World Through English*, is a joint collaboration between Ecuador’s Education Ministry and the British Council, an organization that indirectly serves the interests of the British government.²⁵ Instead of depictions of agrarian life (farmers, horses, pigs), images of things not found in La Loma such as cars, grocery stores, and indoor bathrooms appear on page after page. As the Ecuadorian academic Rivera Pizarro puts it, “the hegemony of the metropolis is reflected in the education system.”²⁶ There is a misguided assumption that children all across Ecuador, regardless of their background, will process and understand the textbooks the same way.

The teachers are still preparing lunch. I put the textbook back on the counter, and look through the window of the *casita* at a group of my students busy climbing a tree. I wonder: Do the children actually learn in school? If so, what are they learning?

Given enough willpower and funding, the education system in La Loma could be better structured in a way that still presents the basic tenets of arithmetic, reading, and writing,

23. Preston, R. “Popular Education in Andean America: The Case of Ecuador.” *Education in Latin America* (eds.) E. Brock and H. Lawlor (London, 1985), pgs. 92-108.

24. Interview with Señora Mariella, July 12th, 2010.

25. Ponce, Rita, Marlene Rivera, Irene Rosero, and Kari Miller. *Our World Through English: Students’ Book*. Quito: Republica del Ecuador, Ministerio de Educacion, 2005.

26. Rivera Pizarro, Jorge. “Escuela y sociedad: tres lecturas de una realidad reciente.” *Ecuador Debate* 16 (1988): 31.

but taught in a manner that makes it immediately relevant to students. As Kevin Lucas, an academic who has explored rural education in Ecuador, states, “the practical mathematical skills that are required to make wise economic decisions regarding the operation of a successful agricultural household are not taught at the *escuela* [school].”²⁷ He suggests that students learn how to “make informed decisions about what crops to plant by calculating expected crop yields, input prices, an anticipated market prices” instead of learning how to “format a business letter.”²⁸

But since the curriculum has not been revamped, the two teachers restructure and add to lessons provided in the books. For example, as a means of teaching history to students, the teachers have brought students to local Incan excavation sites where they have engaged in hands-on archaeological digs.

Finally, the two teachers arrive at the kitchen counter, placing plates of bread and cups of refreshingly sweet Coca-Cola on the countertop. Señora Mariella initiates the conversation.

“Chris, how have the visits to the students’ homes been going?” Throughout the summer, I have been graciously invited over by my students’ parents as a means of becoming more personally acquainted with each family in La Loma.

“Excellent,” I reply, half-munching on an *empanada*.

“That’s good.” Señora Mariella smiles, pleased that her plan to introduce me to each family has been succeeding.

Señora Catalina introduces a different topic. “Chris, are you aware of the future prospects of the girls in your class?”

27. Lucas, Kevin. *Primary Education in Ecuador’s Chota Valley: Reflections on Education and Social Reproduction in the Development Era*. Breinigsville, PA: Dissertation.com, 2010, pg. 74.

28. *Ibid.*, pg. 73

▼ The teachers are still preparing lunch. I put the textbook back on the counter, and look through the window of the *casita* at a group of my students busy climbing a tree. I wonder: Do the children actually learn in school? If so, what are they learning?

“No...I guess not.” I hesitate, wondering if there was something I should have known.

Señora Catalina informs me that if recent trends were any indication, many of the secondary school girls I teach in my afternoon class will not be able to stay in La Loma because there is not enough land to raise new families. The few who do stay will inevitably conform to the culture of *marianismo*, the counterpart of *machismo* that embodies the concepts of “virginity, chastity, honor and shame, the ability to suffer, and willingness to serve.”²⁹ In many families, the woman never sits at the meal with her husband or children, instead eating her meal silently in the kitchen, hidden from view. Women are expected to faithfully carry out the traditional roles of childrearing, cooking, and doing laundry, as well as to help out in the fields if called upon by the men.

However, the majority of young women will likely end up in one of three scenarios: working as a domestic servant to a wealthy household in Quito or Guayaquil, working as a prostitute in the cities, or working in a flower-harvesting plant. Ecuador’s flower industry has been “one of the first types of paid off-farm employment offered to women and the only employment offered to women in [large] numbers.”³⁰ There is the perception among overseers that women “work more efficiently in the detail-oriented, careful work required of flower tasks,” and others speculate that women are willing to work for less money than men.³¹ Whatever the reason, women are gravitating away from education and instead finding themselves in less-than-desirable predicaments.

Just last year one of my students, Rafaela, was almost sent by her parents to work in Quito as a domestic servant. A scout had visited La Loma, targeted the homes of teenage girls, and promised their parents that their daughters would earn U.S. \$300 per month in the city, even though domestic workers in Latin America only earn up to 40.7 percent of the average income found in urban areas.³² Tipped off by one of her students of what was about to happen to Rafaela, Señora Catalina immediately accosted Rafaela’s parents, pleading with them to reconsider their decision. Her parents, albeit reluctantly, gave in.

Señora Mariella passes the dishes of fruit around. I peel the skin of the *mandarina* mechanically, shocked by what happened to Rafaela. I had held her parents in high regard, and could not believe that they subjected their daughter to all of this. In their eyes, was Rafaela just an economic asset waiting to be exploited?

Throughout lunch, as the two teachers continue to share with me the individual stories of my students, I sit silently, processing the information. I am disturbed by the anecdotes. At the same time, I think to myself: How many teachers meet with their students after class? How many teachers go to their homes, and talk with their parents? The answer: only teachers who care.

In a way, Señora Catalina and Señora Mariella embody the heart and soul of the community – a pair of activist teachers who go above and beyond their prescribed teaching duties. At school, they are not only teachers, but also the students’ mentors and friends. As educators, they undoubtedly share the same mindset harbored by parents like Rafael: that education is not only an end in and of itself, but a means to offer future generations a better life in the future. They are also acutely cognizant of the *laissez-faire* attitudes of many parents towards education. By patiently listening to contending voices and continuously assessing ever-changing realities, the two teachers bond the community together. They realize that Enrique’s home life, for example, is much more stable than that of Alejandro. They do their best to foster a non-judgmental, safe learning environment each day in their classrooms.

* * *

The triumphant chorus of the song repeats itself one last time. I listen to the lyrics, contentedly humming along:

<i>Unidos!</i>	<i>(United!)</i>
<i>Seremos grandes</i>	<i>(We will be big)</i>
<i>Seremos fuertes</i>	<i>(We will be strong)</i>
<i>Somos un pueblo</i>	<i>(We are a people)</i>
<i>Bandera de la libertad</i>	<i>(Freedom flag)³³</i>

My heart beats faster. Never in my life have I been overcome with such an intense feeling of camaraderie and community. Perhaps it is the booming music with its proud, defiant lyrics, or the clapping, whistling, and cheering of the crowd as the children and I complete the last of our dance moves. With the end of the last beat of the song, the children and I all jump up together as one entity, ending our choreography with a bang.

29. Bull, Sheana. “Machismo/Marianismo Attitudes, Employment, Education, and Sexual Behavior Among Women in Ecuador and the Dominican Republic,” pg. 3.

30. Newman, Constance. “Gender, Time Use, and Change: Impacts of the Agricultural Export Employment in Ecuador.” *Policy Research Report on Gender and Development* 18 (2001): 1-3. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/wpi8.pdf> (accessed November 13, 2010).

31. *Ibid.*

32. Tokman, Victor. “Domestic Workers in Latin America: Statistics for New Policies.” *Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing*. <http://www.wiego.org/pdf/Tokman-Domestic-Workers-Latin-America.pdf>

33. Lyrics to “Waving Flag,” by K’naan and David Bisbal. See <http://yubemusica.com/david-bisbal-waving-flag-k%C2%B4naaan-en-espanol-letra-y-video/> for full lyrics. Translated from the Spanish.

A People, United

Here in La Loma, primary-age children study together with Señora Catalina and Señora Mariella in the same school, the adults work side by side in the same fields, and families all attend the same mass at the Cuellaje church every Sunday. Each day at the primary school, the two teachers artfully balance the realities of their students' home lives, the expectations of the Ecuadorian government, and their own desire to see the children learn. Some parents in the community view school as a place to keep children busy and out of the trouble during the day, but others, such as Rafael, view education as playing an indispensable role in preparing children for the future. When parents in the community once told Señora Catalina that all they wanted was that their children learn basic reading, writing, and arithmetic and nothing else, she responded, "No, that is not education. That's only a basic part of life. But to teach is to [convey] values, to [convey] respect."³⁴ Education, as she sees it, serves to develop not only a student's intellectual faculties, but also to foster moral and ethical development.

³⁴ Field notes, June 28, 2010.

Note: Names have been changed in this piece.

It may be easy to dwell on the shortcomings of the La Loma school and of the public education system in Andean villages. However, there are positive developments to consider as well. Currently in Intag Valley, the government is refurbishing all the primary and secondary schools, paving the concrete floors with tile, installing air conditioners in the classrooms, and furnishing each classroom with new whiteboards and chalkboards. Señora Catalina tells me that it will soon be La Loma's turn: the run-down government-issued desks will be replaced, and the dirt floors of the two classrooms will be tiled. The day before I left La Loma, I saw a horse with a bulky, strange-looking package strapped on its back. Coming closer, I smiled: the horse was carrying two computers to be installed in Señora Mariella's *casita*, donated by the regional government.