

The Role of Men in Community Pre-School Programs

In Puno, Peru

Robert G. Myers


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In Latin America as in the United States, child care and programs of pre-school education are generally carried out by women performing in stereotyped extensions of the maternal role. Only rarely does one discover a male teacher in a nursery-school. That is not true in Puno, Peru, however, where most of the teachers in an innovative program of community-based nursery schools are men. During a recent visit to Puno, that deviation from the norm piqued my curiosity and led me to ask "why?" Answers were thought provoking.

The Peruvian Department (State) of Puno, surrounding Lake Titicaca and adjacent to Bolivia, takes ones breath away--literally, with its altitude of 11,000 feet, and figuratively. Crisp cobalt blue skies, the majestic sweep of mountains and high plains, herds of llama tended by women in colorful garb--these and other marvels of the region camouflage the inhospitality of nature and ever-present social inequities. Enchanted tourists experience the beauty of Puno but unlike the inhabitants, they need not contend for long with the persistent biting cold nor try to scratch out a living from infertile soil. They need not put up with a meagre diet consisting primarily of dried potatoes. The fascination visitors feel upon hearing Quechua or Aymara spoken does not lead easily to an appreciation of the subordinate position Indians occupy in the political and social pecking order within Peru's Spanish-dominated society.

Impoverished but beautiful Puno seems an unlikely place for a pioneering program of child care to have taken hold. Nevertheless, over

the last ten years, pre-school care has grown impressively in Puno's rural areas. In a program supported jointly by the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and the United States Agency for International Development, educational stimulation and nutritional supplementation are now provided for a half day on each week day to more than 10,000 children, ages 3-5. These activities take place in "childrens' houses" (Wawa-Wasi or Wawa-Uta as they are called in Quechua and Aymara, respectively) which are built by local communities and are staffed by locally elected volunteer teachers known as promotores. The program is part of a broader community development effort to improve health services, adult literacy, agricultural production, and community organization. Anecdotal evidence and several seat-of-the pants evaluations suggest that the program seems to be having a significant impact on the social and mental development of the participating children. [Although the program is fascinating for many reasons, I will concentrate in this brief article on exploring what lies behind the overwhelming presence of males in a non-traditional care-giving role.]

The Wawa-Wasi/Uta were not in regular session when I arrived in Puno. Promotores were involved in one of the periodic short courses provided to help them in their task. Fortunately, by visiting a site where one short course was being held, I was able to talk with a large group of volunteer teachers and to observe one Wawa-Wasi that was functioning in conjunction with the training. 

← Yanamayo, the small rural community in which the training course was being held is only 20 minutes from the city of Puno and not far from the main road. Still, a jeep was needed to negotiate our arrival which took us off the dirt side road and led us across treeless, rocky fields.

As we approached a white-washed adobe primary school, we saw a group of about fifteen small children playing outside, dark eyes and ruddy cheeks barely visible beneath the hats all wore. The children were absorbed in a game led by a promotor--a young man about 25 years of age. Inside the one-room school, the rest of the 45 promotores--were busy adjusting a pre-school teachers guide to local circumstances. The four supervisors (three women and a man) who were guiding that exercise greeted us warmly despite the interruption. After introductions, one of the supervisors produced a quena (a highland instrument similar in tone and appearance to a recorder) and led the group in a song they had just learned about a dove. They sang with feeling and in the haunting minor key so typical of the sierra. A second song followed--this one about the Wawa-Wasi. The obvious pride with which the group sang about their childrens' houses made me well up inside.

Approximately 80 percent of those present were men. When I asked one of the women why, I was surprised to hear her suggest, haltingly, that men were generally more sensitive to the needs of the children and better able to play with them than women. The answer was intriguing, but not satisfying. Had I been in the United States, I might have heard exactly the same



statement parroted about women. When I asked why the men would be more sensitive there was no explanation.

Subsequent reading and conversations with others about the "non--traditional" role did provide some support for the idea that men in rural Puno are more "sensitive" than women. In the sierran culture, I was told, men are the musicians. They are assigned artistic and creative roles. Indeed, the only male among the four supervisors was the one who had led the group in song. The explanation had a plausible ring, but alternative explanations surfaced quickly. The most straightforward reason given to me was that men are more often available for the volunteer positions than women. In Puno, women as often as men work the fields. Men do not share in household tasks. Many young men are unemployed. In addition, young women who might qualify for the job are apt to have young children. Until about age 2, the children accompany their mother everywhere, toted along on her back and breastfed on demand. The presence of a baby need not halt work in the fields. It does, however, make it difficult for a woman to provide continuous attention to a group of 20 or more 3 to 5 year olds.

Not only are men in Puno more likely to be available for work than women, they are also more likely to be qualified for the position of promotor. Men are more often than women literate and bi-lingual (speaking Spanish as well as either Quechua or Aymara). These are minimum qualifications for participation as a promotor.

To me, the most telling explanation of the male presence was not any of the foregoing but was instead related to the definition of the pre-school role of promotor. As implied by the term, the volunteer teachers' duties extend beyond the specific responsibility of the Wawa-Wasi to include, in general terms, promoting community development. Such political and developmental tasks are usually male roles in rural Puno. Indeed, men usually occupy positions as community leaders and dominate community meetings. That was the case in Yanamayo. Thus election by "the community" to the post of promotor is as likely as not to be election of the men by the men of the community. That outcome is made even more probable because the role of promotor carries prestige (and a monthly "tip" of about 4,500 soles--the equivalent of US\$15.00).

The Puno experience led me to understand that what seemed to be a non-traditional role was not "non-traditional" at all, given the cultural context. But the experience also showed that men could and did perform well as pre-school teachers. It illustrated how culturally bound we are in the stereotypes we use and in the child care arrangements we set up. There is no reason why women are necessarily better or more logical care givers than men, particularly for the older pre-school age group, 3-5.

It would be fascinating to return to Puno in ten years to see what has happened to the unusual program and to the participation of women in it. Over time, it is likely that the children's houses of Puno will slowly

types carried as urban Spanish-dominated culture continues to encroach upon rural Indian culture. (The fact that three of the four urban-based supervisors were female provides a signal). It will be helped along by the established trend whereby rural women are increasingly likely to be both literate and bilingual. And, it is likely that the "volunteer" role will be redefined slowly, becoming institutionalized as nursery school teaching and losing its community development dimension. It is easy to forget the historical fact that in much of the world similar shifts have occurred or are occurring among teachers at the primary school level. [REDACTED] If women do take over the "non-traditional" role as nursery school teachers it will be an indication that more fundamental changes are occurring also in rural Puno.