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Language Arts, from the United States to the Dominican Republic

by Jonathan DiMaio

In 2007, when I traveled as part of a Yale undergraduate “alternative” spring break trip to Batey Libertad—a community in the Dominican Republic whose residents are vulnerable to human rights violations because many are Dominicans of Haitian descent—English Language Arts was far from my mind. We were there to explore, to learn, to practice Spanish, to have fun. But that short trip started something: we became friends with people in the community, we learned about their atrocious treatment at the hands of Dominican authorities, we saw the deficits in public education, and we became inspired to do something. I didn’t realize until much later that Language Arts would be the key.

Ten years on, and the group of students I traveled with is still at work building Yspaniola, an education non-profit that is building a vertical education model from pre-school through university in Batey Libertad so our programs’ graduates can find work beyond non-contracted manual labor, support themselves and their families, and advocate for their communities. We run a Learning Center, where we provide literacy instruction to over 135 children ages four to seventeen, all of whom receive a meal before class. Data from our evaluations suggest that our intervention is having a noticeable effect on children’s reading levels in the community. We also have a University Scholarship Program, which has two current scholars and three recent graduates who all have full-time employment. Dozens of college and high-school students visit us each year to volunteer in the Learning Center. After the inevitable challenges of starting a non-profit—limited funding, missteps with our focus and program design—we have become a small, sleek start-up, building programs as well as institutional practices that will ensure our long-term success.

Our funding base has grown these past few years, which has allowed us to hire professional educators. What I see when I return to Batey Libertad is that what we have asked our educators to create—the Learning Center—is simply our attempt to recreate the learning environment for reading, writing, and analyzing stories that I and my co-founders and co-board members enjoyed during our educations. Obviously, there are some differences, notably our limited resources and Spanish language instruction. But the key elements are the same: a safe, fun space—with high expectations for achievement and behavior—for learning fundamentals to read and write, and then using those fundamentals to think, to be creative, and to keep learning. I knew we were onto something in early 2014, when a 10-year-old Tatiana confronted me outside the Learning Center after class. She had just finished a lesson in which the students were reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and as she left the classroom she peered up at me, paused, considered my beard, and then exclaimed, “YOU are the Faun!” As Tatiana cackled and scampered away, I marveled: only a year earlier, she could barely read, and now she was pulling fictional characters from a book and creatively imagining them outside the classroom, with humor thrown in at my expense.

Commitment to Language Arts is the foundation. The challenges Batey Libertad and its residents face are immense, but not insurmountable. Yspaniola has joined with the community to provide the building blocks: we currently have trained five Batey Libertad residents to be teachers, and a few months ago, we hired one of our university scholar graduates, Mayra Rodriguez, to teach literacy in our Learning Center. English Language Arts education in the United States gave Yspaniola’s founders the skills necessary to build the organization, and now, Yspaniola has given Mayra and others from Batey Libertad the ability to share and teach Spanish Language Arts in their own community. We have confidence that by continuing to provide these opportunities in Batey

Libertad, community members can achieve inside the classroom and learn skills to help them overcome hardships outside the classroom.

Jonathan DiMaio is a founding member and President of the Board of Yspaniola and graduate of Yale University. For more information including service-learning trips, go to <http://yspaniola.org>.