Guiding Question for International Placement:

The government has taken policy measures to start ensuring women’s rights in society and access to better education for the girls of Peru, but how are those policies being enacted daily in the school system and embraced by the community and the students?

“My guiding question for my work here is around the progression of girl's education and it's reality in practice rather than policy.  I'm interested in whether the goals set out by the government with respect to women's empowerment in the country has actually been set in motion and can be seen in daily activities and practices in my host school.  At the US Embassy I was told that it varies greatly around the country and is still severely lacking in rural villages, as it is in most of the countries around the world. I learned from a State department representative that my host teacher has done a lot of work around gender and inclusion in the classroom, and I also learned from a Fullbright scholar who presented on the history of terrorism in Peru that the term "gender equality" is part of what has led to three different Ministers of Education in the country in less than a year.  She said that the conservatives across Peru are actively fighting against gender equity.  However, they are in complete support of girls education and women's empowerment.  It is interesting that the SDG's speak purposefully to Gender Equality, but I wonder if they had all that encompasses "gender" in mind when they added it to the list of Development Goals.  It is important to keep in mind when working in communities that connotations and misconceptions can play a vital role in the progression of a cause in a community--and even a country.” ***Blog Post, June 20, 2018***

“We knew that we were going to be judging presentations given by the students in English pertaining to their food and culture.  That I was aware of.  What I wasn't aware of is that when calling groups up to present, every girl asked refused to give a presentation.  My guiding question pertains to the education of girls in Peru, so I took immediate interest in how this would play out in class.  This is a delicate country in terms of progression, and there is certainly still a Machismo culture here, but I have been told that they people are open and receptive to girls education and women's empowerment, so I am curious how that is being addressed in reality each day in the classroom.  I was told in advance that my teacher had attended workshops on this topic and was extremely progressive and involved in changing that culture.  I was also made aware by Bluidson that self esteem in this country, especially with the girls, is extremely low.  So, each time a girl was called and said no, I started joking with them in Spanish that they could just do it the next day.  They would just smile and then look away.  But after four groups of boys went and EVERY girl in class refused, I stopped the class.  Bluidson smiled at me and walked away, knowing what was coming.  In the best Spanish I could muster, I started lecturing them.  I told them that I was so disappointed and that they could do so much better.  That they could only become strong confident and educated women if they practiced here in school.  That they not only owed it to their families, but also to their country--to be able to move it forward from where it is to where they want it to be.  I went on for about 10 minutes and every eye was on me.   When I finished, Bluidson gave them another chance, and each girl promised me on the way out that they would present the next day.  And guess what?  They did!!!!!!  I was so happy.  Many of them looked directly at me for my approval during their presentation and I happily gave it to them.” ***Blog post, June 25, 2018***

“And then I meet the woman in the hills today.  We were taking a tour of La Balanza, the poorest area in Comas where many of our students live, and we were taking photos of the homes and area when a sweet little boy about the age of three emerged playing with his broken skateboard.  He didn’t care that it was broken, though. He was laughing as he tried to ride it down the hill with his mother and his baby brother following close behind.  Bluidson was taking my photo and tried to wait until she was in the frame…but she shyly realized what he was doing and backed away.  I felt uncomfortable, so I apologized and we started talking with her.  She is a single mother of three children living in a shanty on the hill and making money to feed her family any way she can.  She usually finds work washing the clothes of others.  Bluidson told the little boy we had paper and pens for him, so they followed us to the car.  She was just….broken.  You could see it on her face and in her mannerism.  And as she told us a little more, you could see life coming back into her face—just because of her ability to tell her story and to be noticed.  We are all desperate to be noticed and to matter.  And to be loved.  She never asked for anything.  She said it was hard work to provide for her children and she could not manage shoes and clothes in addition to food and survival, but she told us this as reality, not as a request for charity.  I handed her 50 soles, which is the equivalent of $15, and she never even looked at the amount.  She just tucked it quickly into her blouse and thanked us with tears in her eyes.  We gave her little boy stickers and a hug, and then Tembi proceeded to give her 50 more Soles—again she never looked at the amount.  But this time she SMILED!  You could tell that she felt loved and noticed, and there is nothing greater than to see someone realize that.  We see it each day on the faces of our students.  They feel noticed and loved by us.  And that makes them feel special.  After we hugged her goodbye, this young woman took her son by the hand and walked so quickly back up the hill, turning around several times to wave to us again, and we laughed because she probably had seen by now that she had a virtual “fortune” in her hands.  Yep, $30.  A fortune for someone who struggles to earn $1 a day to just feed her three children.  I couldn’t speak after that.  I was silent and stunned by reality all the way back down the mountain.  In 20 short minutes, the landscape and socio-economics changed so drastically you could physically feel it.  I have been in several countries and seen poverty before, but this felt different, and I’m not sure exactly why that is.  I’m not sure I’ll ever know. But grateful for the chance to see it and feel it.” ***Blog post, June 27, 2018***

“In preparation for the project, we were all given the task of asking a guiding question that would be our professional focus during our time in the schools in Peru.  I wanted to know about the actual progress being made toward improving the education among girls.  Specifically, I wanted to see evidence inside and outside the walls of the school that was proof that progress was being made and that education was valued for the girls in Peru.

During our first full day back in Lima together, we did a gallery walk as a cohort and shared what we witnessed in respect to each other's guiding questions.  My colleagues were able to share very little with me and their observations varied drastically.  Some of my colleagues were in the city like me, but others were in all-girls schools in other parts of Peru.  Our observations differed greatly. Shaun and Elise were in a prestigious all-girls school in the highlands and education for girls was highly regarded by the community.  Elise commented that they saw motivation and engaged young women, and that the girls participated in class and had plans to go to college.  It seemed to her that in their school the opportunities were vast.  Deanne and Phil were up north on the coast and she said that "in private education, girls were small in number but empowered with options, while in public education, girls didn't seem to have hopes/dreams and focused more on the reality of expectations of them."  Phil also noticed that administration seemed to have a limited view of a woman's role in society and that played out in the school environment.  I have already commented in a blog about that lack of participation in presentations by the girls in my community, so I started wondering more about this being a class issue, rather than a gender issue.  
  
I think the most revealing for me, however, was the comment left by a TEA Fellow from Peru during this activity.  They commented that "girls are better students in the classroom; the fact is that sometimes they choose to study something simple at an instituto for only one year."  This comment makes me curious.  It seems to be accepted as fact, rather than a challenge to improve or seek to find a reason behind this tendency.  I think it is easy to assume that these decisions are made by choice, rather than out of fear or cultural expectation.  I would like to have had a further discussion with this teacher and challenge their assumptions, but time did not allow for that opportunity.  Clearly, Peru has a long way to go with regard to educating their girls.” ***Blog post, July 2, 2018***