

BUILDING A LITERATE



A Mercer University student reviews parts of a story with first graders in Liberia.

WHEN OLU MENJAY FLED Liberia in the midst of a civil war, he always hoped to return to his homeland. He just didn't expect to go back to run a school.

As the teenage son of a Baptist minister, Menjay escaped to the Ivory Coast, where he was befriended by a Baptist missionary who helped him

gain admission to Truett-McConnell, a Baptist college in Cleveland, Georgia. After two years studying in the United States, Menjay moved on to Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, where he majored in sociology and Christianity. After graduation he received a master's of divinity from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, and a master's of sacred theology from Boston University.

His plan was to eventually leave the United States and return home, where he would teach or do research. But when he graduated from Boston University in 2005, the Baptist convention instead persuaded him to take over the helm as principal and chief administrative officer of Ricks Institute in Virginia, Liberia. The boarding school dates back to 1887 and today serves more than 600 kindergartners through twelfth graders.

"When I came I was very discouraged," Menjay recalls. The school had been looted and had been the scene of fighting during the civil war, and also had served as a refugee camp.

WORLD

A young boy with dark skin and short hair is shown in profile, looking down at an open book. He is wearing a blue and white striped shirt. The background is dark, and the lighting is soft, highlighting his face and the book.

BY SUSAN LADIKA

One of the greatest barriers to educational success in the developing world is the high rate of illiteracy. Students and faculty from colleges and universities are going overseas to help improve literacy and create better futures for children.

EDITOR'S NOTE:
This article is the sixth in an occasional series on international development and international higher education. Each article focuses on one kind of international development work. The first article, "Fledging the Phoenix," on reconstruction efforts after natural disasters was published in the July/August 2009 issue; the second, "Developing K-12 Education," was published in the November/December 2009 issue; the third, "Feeding Mouths and Minds," was published in the March/April 2010 issue; the fourth, "Water, Water, Anywhere," was published in the July/August 2010 issue; and the fifth, "A Quest to Cure Disease," in the March/April 2011 issue.

In many places, efforts to improve literacy also are hampered by massive class sizes; lack of teacher training; cultures that value oral traditions rather than reading and writing; and students' limited familiarity with the English language, even when it's the official language of instruction.

Ricks Institute reopened in 2007, and over the years Menjay's efforts have received continuing support from Mercer University. In 2009 Mercer started sending its students to Ricks Institute to help teach literacy skills to the youngsters, as well as helping the educators strengthen their teaching skills.

Liberia is a country of 3.7 million, and according to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), about 50 percent of the population is believed to be illiterate, though Menjay says the illiteracy rate is much higher. In addition, more than 40 percent of the population is under the age of 15.

"The key to the future in this country is relevant education—literacy, numeracy, creativity," Menjay says. "Without it, we will be repeating history," and the 14 years of civil war that racked the country, which was founded by freed slaves.

Illiteracy Afflicts Much of the Developing World

A LACK OF LITERACY SKILLS is a problem that plagues much of the developing world. In 2008 nearly 800 million adults worldwide were illiterate, with Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa accounting for three-quarters of the world's adult population that was unable to read and write, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Sub-Saharan Africa had the lowest rate of youth literacy in the world.

In many cases, educators from U.S. universities who have spent time working in these developing countries have found that although students often can handle basic reading and writing, their skills tend to be far below those of students in comparable grades in the United States.

Students at Ricks Institute "need a lot of help. They are probably more like struggling students in our schools," says Emilie Paille, an associate professor of education at Mercer, who has led teams of education majors to the Liberian school for three years. In many cases, the Ricks Institute teachers' "own educations have been hampered by the war years."

It's a similar situation in the Dominican Republic, where Honors Program students from Shippensburg University in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, have traveled for the past two years to work with students and their teachers at Pathways of Learning elementary school in Santo Domingo.

"Some teachers were barely literate themselves," says Kim Klein, a history professor and director of the university's Honors Program. "If you're not literate, how do you teach?"

Obstacles to Improving Literacy

IN MANY PLACES, efforts to improve literacy also are hampered by massive class sizes; lack of teacher training; cultures that value oral traditions rather than reading and writing; and students' limited familiarity with the English language, even when it's the official language of instruction.

In rural Jamaica, classrooms are so overcrowded that children share desks. "It's bedlam. You can't talk, you can't even hear yourself think," says Eric Wills, an adjunct professor with the State University of New York-Potsdam, and director of the Jamaica Field Service Project. The project operates in various rural areas of Jamaica, and all students in the SUNY system, as well as from about 40 other universities, can take part.

Literacy rates in rural Jamaica are low, and only 50 to 70 percent of children attend classes at any given time in those areas. Because teachers face an ever-changing sea of students, they teach the same things over and over, Wills says. Those parents who do place a value on education get fed up because their children are being taught the same thing repeatedly, so they stop sending their youngsters to school. "It starts to feed on itself."

The schools in poor, rural areas may be far removed from where a family lives, so they must pay taxi fare to send their kids to school each day. "It's almost more convenient not to send them," Wills says.

On top of that, at home the children and teachers usually speak the local patois (or patwa), also known as Jamaican, which is a Creole language that slaves had developed in the seventeenth century, even though English is the official language of instruction in Jamaica.

Education majors who take part in the Jamaica Field Service Project tutor elementary school children in literacy, and they work one-on-one or one-on-two with the students, giving them much needed individual attention. "A lot of what we're trying to do is instill excitement" for literacy, Wills says.

That's the goal of many of the university programs that bring American students to far-flung parts of the world.

Klein says Shippensburg University's efforts began as part of the Honors Program's capstone project in 2009. Students were given the option of doing a thesis or being involved in a service-learning project. Those who opted for service learning decided to focus on the Dominican Republic because one of the students had been involved in a project there the previous semester.

The Honors Program effort had to have an international focus and had to be something that could be sustained. And it “couldn’t be a ‘stuff’ project,” where the students simply collect items and ship them to another part of the world. “It had to improve intellectual conditions,” Klein says.

The class opted to work with the Pathways of Learning School, which serves kindergartners through middle schoolers, because they already knew people with contacts there, and the youngsters’ reading and writing skills “are not up to par,” she says.

For the capstone project, Shippensburg students developed materials to help teach the teachers, and traveled to the school for the first time in January 2010. Education at the school is in Spanish, and about one-third of Shippensburg students on the trip spoke Spanish, while Klein’s co-facilitator for the trip, Jose Ricardo Osorio, chair of the university’s modern languages department, is a native of Colombia.

Honors Program students must apply in the spring to take part in the weeklong trip, and then they start working on the project when classes resume in the fall. They then head to the Dominican Republic in January, with about 12 to 15 students traveling abroad.

Those who aren’t chosen to take part in the trip still are involved in developing the curriculum and with fundraising efforts. Because the Pathways of Learning School is so crowded and noisy, the Shippensburg students are raising funds to construct a new school building “so teachers can teach and students can learn,” Klein says.

One of those chosen for the most recent trip to the Dominican Republic was Kristen Imboden, who was then a senior majoring in elementary education with a minor in reading. At the start of the 2010–11 school year, she was asked to develop an instructional handbook that the Honors Program students could use to help the Pathways of Learning teachers solidify their teaching skills.

Imboden says she consulted with the Shippensburg students who had spent time in the Dominican Republic on the first trip in order to tap into their experiences. She also drew on what she had learned during her own college education and experience to craft the handbook, which covers topics like phonics, comprehension, and writing and outlines step-by-step exercises and activities for the teachers from the Dominican Republic to undertake with the youngsters.

The handbook was translated into Spanish, and when the group arrived in the Dominican Republic in January 2011, Imboden presented concepts from the book to the teachers while Ricardo interpreted.

After watching the modeling, the teachers had the opportunity to practice the principles in their classrooms, with feedback from the Shippensburg students, and then the Pathways of Learning teachers gave feedback on what worked and what didn’t, so the handbook can be revamped as needed before the next group of students visits the school in January 2012, says Imboden, who is about to become a first-grade teacher in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

For universities that are embarking on new programs, such as the partnership between Ship-

Children greet a college student volunteer participating in The Jamaica Field Service Project, an initiative of the State University of New York, at Pondsider Primary School in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica.





A University of Wisconsin-Madison student teacher in a Ugandan classroom.

pensburg and Pathways of Learning, Klein warns, “you’re not quite sure what’s going to happen once you get started.”

It was a similar situation when Mercer students traveled to Liberia in 2009. “We went in with so little information,” Paille says. The program was launched as part of “Mercer on Mission,” through which students conduct service-learning projects in various parts of the world for about a month and receive college credit.

The school chooses to work in locations “where can we go into the world and really make a difference,” Paille says. The students who travel to Liberia are education majors and their goal is to “strengthen the faculty” at Ricks Institute, while also giving the Mercer students the opportunity to teach in the classroom.

Although Ricks serves students through twelfth grade, the Mercer students focus their efforts on those in the elementary and middle grades because in order to receive a teaching certificate from the state of Georgia, students need specific experience working with specific grade clusters.

On a trip this summer, Paille was accompanied by 10 education students, who focused on improving youngsters’ reading, as well as two students who are already experienced teachers, to help mentor the newer ones.

Many of the youngsters at Ricks simply sound out words when they read out loud, and Paille wants to help increase their fluency and understanding. The Mercer students bring picture books with them and then read to the classes every day.

Menjay, who also has a doctorate degree in philosophy from the University of Wales, says one of the key things he learned

while studying in the United States was to see the potential of students and teachers. “People in the United States saw the potential in me. I seek the potential in people who will then become excellent servers [to their communities] in the days ahead.”

Programs have been put in place that provide scholarships for the top Ricks Institute graduates so they can earn a four-year degree at Mercer, and scholarships are also available for junior high and high schoolers to study in the United States for a semester or a year.

Going the Extra Mile

A LONG WITH IMPROVING LITERACY and fluency in English in the countries where they are working, in many places the U.S. university faculty and students also strive to help the local teachers and youngsters learn to think outside the box, which can be a challenge.

Many of the countries where the U.S. students travel had been British colonies, and the education style is very “teacher centered and didactic. There’s little group work,” says Jim McDonald, a professor of science education at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Michigan.

McDonald has traveled to Ghana with Central Michigan elementary and secondary education students since 2006 to work with elementary and middle school children at four schools run by SOS Children’s Villages International, which



A student participating in State University of New York's The Jamaica Field Service Project tutors a student in reading and writing at the Ponds Primary School library in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica.

provides long-term care for children who are orphans or whose families can no longer care for them.

The university's students specialize in a wide range of subjects, but particularly literacy and science. As part of the experience, the student teachers model educational methods for the local teachers. "It's truly a partnership," McDonald says. While the university students provide input to the Ghanaian teachers, "they're giving us a place where our students can learn" how to teach in a classroom setting.

The students stay in the "village" with the children, who live in houses with a house mom. In their free time, the university students might tutor the youngsters or play sports with them.

Central Michigan University students spend eight weeks student teaching in Ghana and eight weeks in Michigan. The university is located in a rural part of Michigan, McDonald says, so by going to Ghana the students "see various ethnicities, religions, and ways to do things."

It's a similar situation in Uganda, where students specializing in curriculum and instruction in the elementary teacher education program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison spend 10 weeks student teaching at the Rwentutu Community Christian School in Kasese, Uganda, along with 10 weeks teaching in Wisconsin.

Maggie Hawkins, a curriculum and instruction professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says this can give the Wisconsin students a leg up when they look for jobs after graduation. "We believe, given the population trends here, they are going to have English learners in the classroom. The

difference they're going to have in understanding (of those from another culture) is huge."

Uganda is another country where the teachers typically lecture and the youngsters take notes. The school can't afford textbooks, so the teachers write lessons on the blackboard, the class reads what has been written, and they write it down.

"It was all rote and memorization," says Whitney Newman, an elementary education major with a minor in English language arts who traveled to Uganda in 2010, and now is a fifth-grade teacher in the Menomonee Falls school district in Wisconsin.

All coursework is geared to preparing for exams administered by the Ugandan government, and there is little student-teacher interaction or critical thinking involved. Another complicating factor is that the teaching is being done in English—a language many students never encountered before they enrolled in school.

But the Rwentutu Community Christian School is hoping to improve the curriculum by bringing in educators from Canada and the United States. Hawkins first became aware of the school while she was teaching in Vancouver, Canada, and met Amos and Edith Kambere, who run a center to assist African refugees in the Vancouver area.

Amos Kambere is a former Ugandan high school teacher and member of Parliament who had to flee that country when the government fell in 1986. He and his family eventually settled in Canada, and in the mid-2000s he started raising funds for a school in his home village of Kasese, which had never had a school located there before.

When the Rwentutu school opened in 2007 it had 90 pupils. Now it serves about 250 youngsters in kindergarten through sixth grade, and a seventh-grade class will be added for the 2011–2012 school year.

While Uganda has free universal primary education, many children don't attend school because their families don't have the money to pay for uniforms or to cover other costs, Kambere says. And at public schools, many classrooms are jammed with 80 children, while classes at Rwentutu are one-half to one-third that size.

Along with teaching the children, the school also offers a literacy education program for their mothers. Kambere views it as the only way for parents to improve their standard of living, while also being able to help their children learn. Literacy is "the only way you can impact a nation and its economic well-being," he says.

For students from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the effort with Rwentutu school "is life altering," Hawkins says. "It's much more of a partnership than traditional student teaching."

Because the area is so rural, the student teachers bring school supplies and books with them.

Given the fact the youngsters at the Rwentutu school come from a storytelling culture, the children love the stories con-

veyed in books, but didn't always understand the words they were reading, Newman says. They also had problems with tasks like journaling and free writing, but did better when asked to write about concrete topics, like a soccer match they had with the Wisconsin students.

Despite the differences in education styles, "we wanted to show the teachers we respected what they did," Newman says. "Just because we were from the United States didn't mean we were the experts."

For those U.S. university students who spend time working to develop the literacy skills of youngsters abroad, the impact can be profound.

By going overseas, "you learn so much more about other people, but also about yourself," Newman says.

McDonald says in his experience he has found that Central Michigan students who have taught in Ghana "develop a great deal of passion," compared to those who don't go abroad to student teach.

Inspiring a Passion for Reading



STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS at other U.S. universities have taken different measures to try to instill a passion for reading in young people in other countries.

Students from Westminster College in Salt Lake City began working with children in the village of Wai, India, in 2010 in order to improve literacy there. "We realized libraries were a good way to make a difference on a broad scale," says Diane VanderPol, the college's library director and coordinator of the Wai-Westminster program.

VanderPol traveled to Wai and brainstormed with teachers there about how to build excitement for reading, and they came up with the idea of a reading camp—giving youngsters an alternative to dance and sports camps.

Students from Westminster's education department traveled to Wai in May 2010, where they held a weeklong summer reading camp with local children in partnership with one of the village's libraries. The camp drew 35 local children on the first day, and as word spread, 45 turned out, ranging from pre-kindergartners to teenagers.

And working with Room to Read, a U.S.-based organization that works to improve literacy skills and encourage a habit of reading in developing countries, the college donated hundreds of books to help stock the library in Wai.

Another university that is intent on polishing reading skills is Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar. The Virginia university has a campus at Education City in Doha, where the focus is on art and design.

Robin Fetherston, an assistant professor of literature, launched the School-Wide Reading Program, based on the



Students greet a student volunteer at Pondsides Primary School in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica.

concept of the One Book, One City campaign held in various U.S. cities. While many U.S. universities have a similar program for college freshmen, Fetherston wanted the whole school to be involved. All students are assigned a particular book to read each semester, and faculty and staff members are also asked to join in.

The book is discussed in class, and one or two activities are held each semester that allow the students to use their artistic creativity, such as taking part in a writing contest or designing posters tied to the book of choice.

When Fetherston arrived in Doha in 2003, "I was very concerned about the lack of role models who read," either in Arabic or English. VCU-Qatar students, and society in general, did not read much. The national library was closed, and the city had only six small book stores.

At the time, students were "quite weak" in reading and writing skills. But that has improved with time, and the country has been "transitioning from an oral society to a text (based) society," she says.

While reading is crucial in general, Fetherston says research has shown, "pleasure reading increases overall academic performance."

Other efforts are aimed at educators in other nations, to help them bolster their students' literacy skills.

One such program involves a partnership between the University of Cincinnati and Salahaddin University—Hawler in Kurdistan, Iraq. In September 2010 faculty members and graduate students from the Ohio university's School of Education began working with English and education faculty at the Iraq school under a three-year grant from the Academy of Educational Development, a nonprofit organization based

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in Washington, D.C., that before recently shutting down operations, aimed to improve education and other aspects of society in various parts of the world.

The goal of this education program is to help the Iraqis update their curricula and teaching methods, says Connie Kendall Theado, assistant professor in the University of Cincinnati's School of Education.

Holly Johnson, director of the School of Education, was part of a group from the university that traveled to Iraq to discuss what kind of assistance educators at Salahaddin University—Hawler desired. As a result, three Blackboard communities were formed in fall 2010 to facilitate discussions on teaching literacy, teaching English as a second language, and using technology to assist with teaching.

The next step is a workshop this summer, with about 20 educators coming from Kurdistan to the University of Cincinnati for about two weeks. The workshops will focus on pedagogy, with opportunities for teaching demonstrations and practice, Theado says. They'll also discuss syllabus creation and practice using technology tools.

Johnson says there are even discussions within Iraq to have all teaching done in English in the next 10 years. If that occurs, "they need to have the capacity." Although the educators tend to be proficient in English, because Iraq was cut off from the rest of the world for so many years, "students have greater difficulty in negotiating English," Johnson says.

The University of Cincinnati educators also are working to help their Iraqi counterparts adopt new material since much of what they are using, "we haven't used in literature in 15 years," Johnson says.

The impact projects such as this can have may be felt years down the road. Back in 2005, George Washington University was part of a U.S. State Department-funded program that brought secondary school classroom teachers from India and Pakistan to Washington, D.C., as part of the South Asian Teacher Training Project (SATTP).

Although funding for the program ended in 2007, a strong bond still connects the teachers from both countries, as well as George Washington University School of Education and Human Development Adjunct Professor Judy Findlay.

"They are an extraordinary group," Findlay says today, praising "how deeply they care about making a difference and being an element of change."

Under the program, more than two dozen teachers from the two countries spent six weeks at GWU, strengthening their knowledge of literacy teaching techniques. That included urging them to ask questions and encouraging them

to learn to give their curiosity full rein. "They grew up in a system where they didn't question," Findlay says. Instead, the teachers are "the authority, you learn the answers (to questions), and you repeat them in an exam."

Changing a mindset and teaching style "is not an easy transition, but it's an essential transition," she says. "It's needed so students take responsibility for learning."

The group forged strong friendships, and as part of the program, the Pakistani teachers traveled to India to help teach the Indian teachers, and then the Indian teachers traveled to Pakistan to help train the Pakistanis.

One of those who took part was Itbar Kahn, a secondary school teacher and now a teacher trainer in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, which abuts Afghanistan. "I think the impact of SATTP is everlasting. That totally changed my life," he says.

While he expected to learn interactive teaching techniques, improve his English language skills, and interact with those from other cultures, the program motivated him to continue his own studies. He received a Fulbright to attend Boston University, where he trained to teach English as a Second Language (ESL). As a result, he has written teacher training manuals for primary and secondary school teachers and trained other teacher trainers.

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Another teacher who took part in SATTP was Vimmy Singh, who does secondary school teacher training in Delhi, India. She expected to learn new teaching techniques, but also found the program had a great impact "in shaping my personality into a confident teacher trainer."

Singh says it's essential to sharpen students' literacy skills so they can contribute to the development of society and themselves. "Without education, one cannot think of progress and development."

In Pakistan, Khan says the Afghan war has had a major impact, displacing people and stemming the flow of visitors to northern Pakistan. "There is Kalashnikov culture due to the ongoing war. There is no investment due to the disturbances in the country," giving rise to prejudice and unemployment. "I think quality education is the only remedy." **IE**

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