The inequality of the Peruvian educational system is not only rooted in economic inequality, but also in the indigenous, non-indigenous divide. Based on quantitative regression analyses and a qualitative examination of bilingual education, this paper finds that the marginalization of indigenous in Peru is correlated with low allocation of educational resources to the indigenous population. A case study comparing Moquegua and Lima demonstrates that governmental allocation of educational resources is prejudiced against the indigenous population. The incongruity between the high educational inequality levels and the average economic inequality levels across all of Peru inspired this closer investigation. Ultimately, the solution lies in a paradigmatic cultural shift in the treatment of indigenous people. This paper does, however, offer a few policy solutions in hopes that the Peruvian society and government might recognize and address persistent indigenous discrimination.
There are many diverse indigenous groups in Peru. Some are part of isolated communities living in the heart of the Amazon jungle or the Andes, while others are more dispersed and integrated into neighboring Spanish-speaking areas. Historical records and personal accounts of citizens clearly show that the indigenous are a marginalized, victimized, and oft-neglected people. The clash of civilizations during Peru’s colonial history continues to resound in the modern-day division between the indigenous and the non-indigenous. In fact, rather than reversing the power structure evident in this ethnic and cultural divide, time serves to reinforce and even perpetuate the inequality between the two groups as patterns become ingrained and social mobility remains stagnant.

This persistent inequality resulting from indigenous subjugation and discrimination is evident in the Peruvian educational system. Research shows that the non-indigenous score higher than the indigenous on math and language exams by a statistically significant amount and also complete more years of schooling. Many analysts explain this problem by focusing on the correlation between economic inequality and educational inequality. However, as will be shown in this paper, inequality within the school system is also correlated to unfair and unequal educational policies sponsored by the state towards indigenous as opposed to non-indigenous Peruvians. In order to control for poverty levels as an indicator of unequal educational outcomes, a comparison will be made between the educational systems of two communities with the same poverty level but differentiated by the resident populace.

Although measuring academic opportunity is quantitatively difficult, the available data has been analyzed in a way that provides the most rigorous argument possible. Government spending on education will be used as an indicator of educational opportunity combined with a more qualitative assessment of the type of programs, including bilingual education strategies, offered. Additionally, academic performance will be measured both by standardized test scores and attendance rates or years of schooling. As political scientists, we use the data at hand to best approximate the status of our subject empirically. Yet we must also be prepared to extrapolate a more nuanced understanding based on qualitative factors in the hope of suggesting the best course of future action. A contextual history of education in Peru is necessary to developing such a comprehensive and forward-thinking perspective.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN PERU

The Peruvian educational system is struggling to improve. Peru had a 38 percent literacy rate in 1925, higher than Venezuela, Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala, but lower than Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and Cuba – reflecting Peru’s roughly average status in regards to literacy rates among developing nations at the time. While Peru’s modern day literacy rate has improved greatly to 87.7 percent, when compared to the same set of developing nations, it has now fallen beneath Venezuela and Mexico. Therefore, Peru’s educational status is slipping on a comparative scale despite the positive improvement.

Not only do statistical indicators reflect Peru’s unequal education status on the global stage, but they also reveal large inequalities within the country across various regions and towns. The PISA 2000, a standardized test used to compare educational quality across and within Latin America, not only placed Peru at the bottom of Latin America academically, but also showed that Peru has the greatest internal inconsistency in terms of quality of

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schooling. This national educational inequality is quantified using an index that measures the ratio of variance to average performance in mathematical literacy. Peru’s high ratio of variance highlights the extreme inequality existing in its school system.

The implications of this inequality relate directly to the moral dilemma of injustice and the future quality of education as well. As the World Bank report on inequality in Peru asserts, “extreme levels of inequality depressed investments in schooling.” Such variance may be not only harmful to the students at the bottom of the ladder, but also on the infrastructure of an educational system. Inequality complicates the administrative system and widens the prospective challenges a government faces given the increased need for diversified and specialized programs. Concomitantly, the “depressed investments” resulting from the extreme inequality leads to a future lack of funding, resulting in a disintegrating quality of education.

Explanations for Inequality of Education

Most of the existing research correlates educational inequality with regional economic inequality. In poorer regions within Peru, the educational system is of a lower quality than in regions where the wealth of the populace is greater. The accompanying graph portrays this positive correlation between socioeconomic status and the quality of the school’s infrastructure in a given town. The graph depicts the way in which the wealth of a town correlates to higher quality education.

This positive correlation is often inferred to be a causation effect of poverty on the quality of education. In particular, analysts have commented that management in schools or areas with poor clients is less effective, either because the school-level management is less responsive and accountable, or because there are, as yet, no models...effectively reliable for the poor and for those with a linguistic disadvantage.

While this explanation illuminates two dimensions of the problem, namely the lack of resources and the linguistic challenge, it fails to address other intermediate factors that could be more directly involved in the imputation, such as the fact that the majority of the poor are indigenous.

The Indigenous People of Peru: Who they Are

Before studying the relationship between education and indigenous people in Peru, the term ‘indigenous’ must be defined and understood. Anywhere between 25 percent and 48 percent of Peruvian households could be identified as indigenous. According to the World Bank,

The lower limit corresponds to households in which the household head and/or spouse uses an indigenous language (Quechua, Aymara or a native tongue of the Amazon region) more frequently than Spanish. The upper limit identifies all the Peruvian households in which the household head and/or the head’s spouse have parents or grandfathers that had an indigenous mother tongue.

While other sources identify the indigenous as all people that associate themselves either linguistically or culturally with the indigenous community, the statistics that follow in this paper are based on the World Bank’s definition of indigenous as a group of people defined solely by language.

Indigenous Peruvians and Unequal Education

In addition to the correlation between poverty and educational inequality, there is a proven correlation between the indigenous in Peru at both a lower level of academic achievement and a lower quality education. The mean number of years the Peruvian indigenous adult spends in school is 6.4 years, whereas the average non-indigenous adult stays in school for 8.7 years. As World Bank experts suggest, “Explanations for the lower schooling achievement of indigenous students include the quality of the educational environment at home and interactions of greater poverty with rural residence, neglect of indigenous languages and failure to accommodate linguistic diversity.”

Such a wide array of potential factors, including economic, social, and cultural influences, present complexities in...
solving the problem of indigenous underperformance. Not only do these factors influence the length of time the indigenous remain in school, but they also lower their test scores as evidenced by the table below.\(^\text{10}\)

This table highlights the many statistically significant factors contributing to differences in indigenous and non-indigenous exam scores ranging from home-life to teacher qualifications. Despite the multi-faceted nature of this problem, such an analysis is crucial given that the human capital acquired through education is positively correlated with economic growth and stability on both an individual level and a macro-economic level. The higher the level of education, the more an individual is ostensibly worth to his employer, given that a wage is paid in exchange for the quality of service. In fact, some experts claim that education is the primary indicator of income level:

Differences in education are today the most important predictor of differences in income levels among households in Latin American countries...It should not come as a surprise, then, that we find a significant correlation among educational and income GINI’s in the region.\(^\text{11}\)

Such correspondence between education and income levels offers opportunities for individuals looking to escape poverty, for indigenous communities hoping to shed their public perception as “campesinos,” and for the broader economy as a whole. This confluence of benefits should be the impetus to pursue greater equality of education among the indigenous people. The promise of improved and more equal education is particularly compelling when one considers the scale of the economic divide between the indigenous and the non-indigenous.

This graph shows that there are over 30 percent more households in poverty in the indigenous community as opposed to the non-indigenous community.\(^\text{12}\) This large economic inequality is a reflection of the high educational inequality. Therefore, investing in indigenous education is an effort not only to relieve educational inequality but also economic inequality.

While academic inequality causes socioeconomic inequality in Peru, the reverse is not necessarily the case. The following graph highlights the way in which Peru could be considered either as an outlier or a more complex case when the positive relationship between economic and educational inequalities is taken into account.

The following graph plots the GINI coefficients of Latin American countries alongside the ratio of math scores between the top five percent and bottom five percent of students.\(^\text{13}\) Intended to represent the positive correlation between economic inequality and educational achievement gaps, this graph also displays the much higher discrepancy between Peru’s best and worst students when compared to other countries with similar GINI coefficients. This suggests that the large inequality within the schooling system of Peru cannot be explained by economic inequality alone.\(^\text{14}\) Therefore, efforts to equalize economic opportunity may not have the desired effect on equality of educational
Overall, it is clear that the educational quality and academic achievement of the indigenous population is starkly lower than the rest of the population. Most analysts sum up their evaluation by correlating indigenous people with high levels of poverty which in turn corresponds with low quality education, contributing to the nationwide academic inequality. While this flow chart is well-supported by the correlative data between extremes in poverty levels and the corresponding variability of education, economic inequality cannot be the full explanation as indicated in the figure below.

This paper will argue that the lower quality schooling system evident in predominantly indigenous regions is directly related to ethnic marginalization and discrimination. A revised flow chart depicting the relation of these factors is shown below.

Critics of this diagram might argue that indigenous people tend to live in rural areas that are poorer, thereby attributing educational inequality solely to economic inequality. Earlier, however, it was shown that high levels of educational inequality in Peru do not match the country’s level of economic inequality; there must be another contributing factor. Another approach to refute this claim would be to prove that indigenous people typically live in poorer regions due to discrimination and ethnic division within the country. However, an even more statistically irrefutable approach would be to control the effects of poverty, and compare the educational systems of two equally poor regions with different ethnic populations. Using this method, educational inequality will be directly correlated with marginalization of indigenous people evident in both government expenditure levels and also in the type of educational policies employed.

**INDIGENOUS MARGINALIZATION TESTED BY CONTROLLING FOR POVERTY**

If education varies within Peru only due to the influence of economic inequality, testing the educational quality of two regions with the same poverty level should yield similar results. However, there are many examples in Peru in which two regions of comparable wealth offer...
drastically different educational programs that result in a divergence in the quality of education the students from the two locales receive. The following graph drawn from World Bank data compares the returns from schooling between indigenous and non-indigenous people from specific geographic locations.15

This comparison highlights the disparity that remains between the quality of education offered to the indigenous as opposed to the non-indigenous. In all rural areas of Peru which share a similar economic status, non-indigenous people have approximately a two percent higher return to education than indigenous people. Furthermore, in the same province of Lima, the non-indigenous have a four percent advantage over the indigenous. This suggests that even when the two demographic groups attend the same schools, the style of education caters to the needs of the non-indigenous as opposed to the indigenous.

In particular, the unique language needs of the indigenous people need to be addressed in order to end social marginalization. One expert rightly notes the following with regards to the issue of accommodating language barriers:

Unfortunately, social privilege has generally followed ethnic lines, with the indigenous peoples being the underclass. While the country has a national policy of equal access to education and primary education is mandated for all, in practice this has not been achieved. This is due to a number of factors. Perhaps the most significant factor is the language barrier. The mandated education is offered in Spanish...So even though theoretically everyone has the opportunity to learn, because of linguistic limitations, not everyone can take advantage of it.16

While this language barrier is an obvious obstruction to integrating indigenous people into the learning system, deciding how to rectify and handle the situation is highly complex.

Currently, numerous types of bilingual programs are in the trial phase across Peru and are gaining varying degrees of success and support. Recent bilingual primary education programs attempt to provide a more context-sensitive curriculum...in an attempt to overcome the language barrier to education. These programs teach the ‘three R’s’ in Quechua and they have had varying degrees of success. Their general lack of success is most often due to the fact that they do not take into account the social and cultural reality of the populations they are trying to reach.17

This “three Rs” initiative refers to instruction in the three basic subjects of arithmetic, reading, and writing in Quechua.18 While this commitment to attempting to incorporate the Quechua language into the classroom is laudable, many critics like the one above argue that bilingual education currently fails to relate to the indigenous people. Children are taught using stories of city life and other foreign concepts that seem to be an effort to homogenize the population and devalue the indigenous culture.19 As one historian comments, “primary and secondary school curricula are thus heavily laden with patriotic, if not jingoistic, nationalism, elements of which are written into the nation’s textbooks by the Ministry of Education.”20 These nationalistic impulses often disregard the importance of indigenous history. Anthropologist Mariano Grondona warns, “In value systems resistant to development, education is a process that transmits dogma, producing conformists and followers.”21 This precaution is a reminder to both the supporters of and protestors against bilingual education that education should not have a prerogative of molding the values of the students, but rather “help the individual discover his or her own truths.”22 While finding successful bilingual education programs is already difficult, attempting to alter educational philosophies like these adds even greater complexity.

Furthermore, some opponents of bilingual education argue that this system prevents the indigenous from moving up in society and gaining a better foothold. In fact, the indigenous themselves are the most outspoken proponents of this perspective. Given that education in Peru is “regarded as the sine qua non of progress and the key to personal advancement,” it is not surprising that many indigenous Peruvians view bilingual education, which replaces Spanish immersion, as an impediment to rising in society. This perception of Spanish as the key to success has historical roots:

Because of the historical ethnic and racial discrimination
against native peoples, the village school became the instrument and method by which one could learn Spanish, the most important step toward reducing one’s ‘visibility’ as an identifiable object of denigration and being able to gain mobility out of the native American caste. 23

As a result, the indigenous people experience a conflict between assimilating with the rest of Peruvian society in order to escape “denigration” and maintaining their pride and involvement in their own cultural and linguistic heritage.

Without siding with any single perspective in the bilingual education debate, political scientist Oscar Del Álamo, perceptively sums up the issues contributing to the failure of Peru’s educational system to fairly and equitably meet the needs of all of its citizens: “Most indigenous groups live in conditions of poverty, and for years they have been denied the right to an education that considers their cultural, linguistic, and religious distinctiveness.” 24 This self-perpetuating disadvantage forces on those unable to escape a pattern of poorly designed educational systems that fail to meet the diverse “cultural, linguistic, and religious” backgrounds.

**Case Study: Lima vs. Moquegua**

Determining the best way to structure education is highly contentious as it relates to reducing the low quality of education for indigenous people, but government funding is a rarely discussed secondary component that could exert a large positive impact. In analyzing government spending in education by geographic region, a few notable areas for improvement arose.

Although Lima and Moquegua are two regions in Peru with almost identical poverty levels, they nonetheless receive significantly different educational aid packages. The poverty headcount of both towns is around 40 percent. 25 However, there are different proportions of indigenous people living in each town. The indigenous comprise 38 percent of Lima’s population while Moquegua is made up of only 23 percent non-Spanish speakers. 26 The correlation between an increased amount of non-Spanish speakers and a decreased amount of funding in areas with identical poverty levels is evidence of the persistent discrimination towards indigenous peoples.

Not only is there evidence of ethnic discrimination, but there is also evidence of socioeconomic discrimination. The worrisome negative correlation between levels of poverty in a particular region and the corresponding amount of per student spending by the government is highlighted by the opposite graph. 27 This graph shows that increased poverty levels are correlated with decreased government spending in primary education. 28 This pattern of giving lower funding to the poorer districts seems directly counter to our natural sense of fairness and justice. In addition to the negative regression line, the amount of variation in spending for regions at the same poverty levels is troubling. This fact is reflected in the large “r” value that is a measure of deviation from the linear regression. In particular, the large difference between Lima and Moquegua underscores the way in which the ethnic divide translates into unfair educational spending. Therefore, both socioeconomic and indigenous discrimination are evident in the analysis of government spending.

**Future Impact of Unequal Education between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous**

Another critical fact to consider is the way in which current inequality of the educational system will impact inequality down the road: “This high inequality in educational levels is particularly dramatic in Latin America because of the low intergenerational educational mobility.” 29 A lack of intergenerational educational mobility perpetuates the high levels of inequality of schooling. Therefore, the current issue of educational inequality resulting from the distinct needs of the indigenous population will only serve to prolong the marginalization of this people.

**Impetus for Change**

To conclude, there is ample evidence based on quantitative regression analyses and qualitative examination of bilingual education policies to support a correlation between the marginalization of the indigenous in Peru with low quality education. By controlling for poverty and thereby discovering this relationship, a new flow chart depicting the direct impact of native discrimination on both
economic and educational inequality was created. The case study of Lima and Moquegua verified this result in terms of the differences in government spending on education depending on the location and the demographics of the population. The lack of congruity between the inexplicably high educational inequality levels in Peru compared with its economic inequality levels was the basis for this closer examination. Therefore, it is clear that the inequality of the Peruvian educational system is not only rooted in economic inequality, but also in the indigenous-non-indigenous divide.

To begin to rectify this problem, the Peruvian government must allocate resources in education progressively rather than regressively. Furthermore, extra money must be spent on the bilingual education programs to better accommodate the language barrier present for indigenous monolinguals. The discussion on how exactly the bilingual education program should be administered is one that requires further research and open dialogue. While the cultural discrimination and marginalization rampant in Peruvian society might be difficult to alter from the top down, governmental policy can and must aid the transition by making the effort to include and support the indigenous population through educational enablement. As Bill Beattie wisely wrote:

“The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think--rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves.”

ENDNOTES
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