

Role-Playing Peace Education in Gujarat, India

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Project Summary :

My project took place in the city of Rajkot in the state of Gujarat, India. The project was based in schools within Rajkot's low-income New Thorala school district located in between Jungleshwar, the largest Muslim residential neighborhood in Rajkot, and the Hindu residential neighborhood of Ganjiwala.

I was in Rajkot, running my project, for a period of about six weeks, beginning May 23rd, 2007 and lasting through June 28th, 2007. During that time, I worked extensively with my staff in Rajkot: my team of two private school principals, Mr Bharatsingh Chudasma of the Khodiarkrupa School and Ms. Sheetal Joshi of St. Tulsi School, along with a trained staff of five teachers led by Saurabh Parmar, a teacher at the Shree Amarnath Vidyamandir School. Kirit Shah, an independent school consultant, helped managed the logistics and finances of my project.

The primary goal of my project was to develop and implement my creative role-playing education program to be run for a period of 29 weeks in 10-15 local private schools in the New Thorala region. The program was designed to foster and facilitate better understanding, cooperation, and friendships between local Hindu and Muslim youth within the Jungleshwar and Ganjiwala communities. A secondary goal of my project was to have my program gain acceptance in the larger Rajkot community by petitioning the city's board of education for program integration into local government public schools.

Project Results :

1) Developing an Effective Role-Playing Peace Education Program:

Although I had prepared a very basic outline of my program and curriculum in January with my team in Rajkot, I met with several peace organization leaders, both in the US and in India, who helped me immensely in creating and refining the detailed lessons of my curriculum to address my goals and to reach my target audience.

Even before I left for India in May, I went through my program with former president of the International Peace Research Association Foundation, Michael True, who had created several peace education institutes in India under two Fulbright fellowships. I also discussed my project with and took suggestions from Linda Lantieri, founder of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, the largest school peace education program in the United States.

In India, before arriving in Rajkot, I spent 4 days in Mumbai creating role-plays with Jalinder Adsule, professor at the Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work. Mr. Adsule once led the Solokha Project, the largest and longest run school based peace education program in the city, created in response to the violent 1993 city riots.

Shortly after arriving in Rajkot and meeting with my own staff in the city, I traveled to Gujarat's largest city of Ahmedabad to spend a week with curriculum developers at the Pratham¹ organization's Gujarat headquarters. During this time, I learned from the five curriculum developers the specifics of how to design and evaluate education programs in the region. Moreover, I was also able to test out my role-plays on students of my target 9-14 age group at Pratham Education Centers throughout the city.

In the end, after much collaboration and discussion, I created a program that not only allowed me to convey my intended lessons to students clearly, but also effectively allowed my teachers and students to add to and refine my program over the course of its year long progression. Each one of my teachers received three books printed in Gujarati: a full curriculum, a book with questions for teachers to comment on and improve the curriculum, and a book with evaluation sheets for students to fill out after every week. A network between teachers was instituted, led by head teacher Saurabh Parmar, to review reports and consider improvements every month.

¹ Pratham organization is the largest youth education non-governmental organization in India, established in 21 states of the country.

2) Implementing the Program in Rajkot:

- *Finding the schools:* I was able to successfully implement the program in 7 private schools in the New Thorala region. Limiting the number of schools was a decision that I made based on favoring quality over quantity. I was, at first, offered the ability to run my program in 13 private schools in the New Thorala district. Mr. Chudasma and Ms. Joshi, as principals, helped me set up meetings with administrators from these prospective schools. But, after the meetings, I decided to narrow this list down to only those schools that could best run my role-plays for the year. Having only seven schools allowed for greater time to be spent on each individual school and focused on those schools with the most conducive environments for teaching and implementation. For the affirmation of the program's continuation after my departure, I made these remaining seven schools sign contracts guaranteeing a time slot every week for my classes for the one year time period and ensuring an adequate classroom environment for my teaching staff.
- *Hiring Teachers:* I was able to hire five full-time teachers to teach my classes for the year. Having hired my lead teacher, Saurabh Parmar, who came highly recommended by Principal Bharatsingh Chudasma, I selected the rest of my four teachers from the 7 different private schools, based on advice of each school principal and school students.

3) Program Success and Appeal to Larger Community:

- *Success of the Curriculum:* Having set up the basis of the program after five weeks in Rajkot, I spent the last week attending classes and listening to student input directly after classes finished. During that time, the program was quite successful at capturing the attention and interest of students. Being the first activity-based education program to be run in Rajkot schools, my program's level of student involvement and discussion specifically appealed to local teenagers who never had the opportunity to freely vent their experiences of the 2002 riots. A month after I left, the results of student surveys rated my program overall as an 8.5 on a 10 point scale.²
- *Acceptance by the Government of the Program:* During the last week, I presented my work to the government's board of primary education for program implementation into government public schools. The board reviewed my program and agreed to grant me permission to run the program in four government schools in New Thorala district.

Project Implications for Peace :

- *Future Impact of Program:* By opening the lines of communication and offering interaction of students, the program was able to and will continue to bring members of both religious communities in Rajkot to at least a better understanding of each other, a crucial first step in preventing future communal violence in the area.
- *Future Prospects of Program:* Fortunately, during my time with the Pratham organization, I was able to effectively promote my program to the group's senior staff, as the organization was looking to begin work in the Rajkot area. The organization therefore agreed, based on the results of the one-year program, to continue my work in the Rajkot area for another year and also to begin teaching parts of my curriculum in their centers in Ahmedabad as well.
- *Overall Experience:* In working with my staff, many of whom had spent more than twenty years working to improve this city and region, I learned to look beyond short term gains and focus more on long term project impacts on the community. I also learned to appreciate the importance of including the local community in project development and implementation, allowing community members to take an active role in improving their futures.

² The average of the results of 768 student surveys, collected and analyzed at the beginning of August by Saurabh Parmar, asking students to both evaluate how much they have enjoyed and learned from course lessons.

