



COMPASSION'S ECHO:

Experiential Learning about India

Kenneth Sider

“Go Manchester!” wrote Leo to his pen pal, Ashish. The cheer echoed across 9,000 miles— from the northern Catskill Mountains of New York, to the desert plains of Rajasthan, India. Two eight-year-old boys spoke with one voice: “Cricket!” When Ashish labored to write his letter in English, he didn’t know that in our elementary school of 250 students, only one child followed the sport of cricket—and that was eight-year-old Leo. What brought the two cricket fans together was a third grade social studies project.

The letter exchange between Leo and Ashish, which grew out of a unit of study on the culture of India, created great enthusiasm in our classroom for corresponding with new friends in our sister city of Dundlod, in the state of Rajasthan in northwest India. A real-life experience is a “moving force” that can indeed be part of the elementary social studies curriculum.¹

Voices of Friends

Whether it is the buzz of American children learning about North Indian culture, guest speakers teaching American students, or simply students writing to one another, the quality of communication in my third grade classroom has surprised me. Our initial outreach projects involved pen-pal letters, through which we learned a great deal about our new friends in India.

“I have a cow at home which gives us milk. How many students are in your class?” Subita asked Ryan.

“I have a goat at home. It gives us milk. There is sand everywhere in our village. I like peacocks, but there are too many peacocks in my village!” Shahina wrote to Felicia.

“Camels are the best animal for helping in this place,” Akash told Karin.

One writer inspired the students to search a map of India, from which a geography lesson flowed naturally. “My family went on a picnic to Mount Abu,” wrote Asharf. “We enjoyed it very much. There are ten members in my family.” My students had to locate Mount Abu on a map and read about it right away.

Our pen pals commented on common themes of childhood as well, which touched upon cultural universals such as food and work:

“My favorite food is rice with chili.”
“I want to be an engineer, what is your aim?”
“Our national flower is the lotus.”

Our first attempt at letter exchanges was a success, although we waited seven weeks before receiving replies to our initial correspondence. Part of the delay was due to the fact that our new friends were just beginning to write in English, which is time-consuming work for them.

Listening to Literature

Each year, as we begin an interdisciplinary unit of study on India, I witness the dramatic transformation of my third graders from learners to activists. Our work in the social studies relies

on engagement with real people and hands-on experiences with Indian culture, thus providing authentic voices from India for my students to hear. As children gradually engage with this material, their intellectual curiosity is piqued.

For example, I read aloud from *The Mahabharata* (pronounced Ma-haa-BHAAR-a-ta), an ancient religious epic of India. “The Virtue of Compassion” is an ancient story of a faithful parrot who is spared death while clinging to his beloved, dying tree. The tree, poisoned by a hunter’s errant arrow, has provided the parrot with a lifetime of food and shelter. Lord Indra, moved by the parrot’s behavior, rewards this act of loyalty by returning life to the tree.² This story led students to discuss character traits such as loyalty and gratitude.³ Such virtues are cultivated best through literature, not textbooks or lectures.

We move beyond the oral tradition to a blend of literature and performance art. When students watch The East-West School of Dance’s stage production of *Shakuntala* (on DVD), they transcend the literal word. In this tale of love between an Indian royal and a peasant, the dancing and music captivate the students. All eyes are fixed on the dancers, drawing them deeper into the twisting turns of the story line.⁴ During our daily story time, students enjoy listening to Jataka tales, colorful fables from Buddhist India about animals who resolve problems through courageous and compassionate

behavior.⁵ Believed to be the inspiration for Aesop's fables, these tales provide the class with engaging content for group discussions and reflective writing pieces.

Living the Arts

Exposure to Indian literature prepares the children for the visit of Pandit Roop Verma, an internationally acclaimed sitar master and teacher. His wife, Tracy, accompanies him on percussion instruments, the *tabla* and *tamboura*. While sitting within 10 feet of the sitar, the children report that they feel the music in their bodies, and that it calms and relaxes them. Mr. Verma describes how the sitar is constructed and played, and then teaches simple percussion and one of the Indian music scales. The Vermas also present a slide show of their most recent family trip to India, highlighting historic landmarks, natural wonders, and cultural sites.

While half the class is with the Vermas, the other students enjoy a visit from local storyteller, Khuki Woolever, who was raised in India and shares her collections of dolls and clothing. She holds the attention of her audience with stories from her childhood, famous tales of India, and a variety of traditional children's games. In one of Khuki's games, the children sit in a circle on the floor while one student counts feet. Every eighth foot must be taken out of the circle. The counting leads to a moment of excitement when the first person whose feet "disappear" chases the counter around the circle. Students have wondered if this traditional Indian game could be the predecessor of the West's "Duck, Duck, Goose." In the afternoon of the same day, the audiences are switched; splitting the class into two allows our guest speakers to relate to a smaller group of children at one time.

Kathak and the Arts

In addition to the social studies curriculum, I also provide art experiences for the third graders with funding from grants through local and state arts councils. We had the great fortune of

bringing Pandit Satya Narayan Charka, a master of Kathak dance, as our artist-in-residence. After a week of dance instruction and costume construction, the students performed classical Indian dances for the public. Costumes were made and decorated to represent traditional Kathak clothing. The students even helped make braided ankle bracelets with bells imported from India.

During this residency, the children also worked with a local artist, Tracy Verma, on *rangoli*, an ancient art form using colored powder on paper, and *mendhi*, using ground henna to create geometric and floral designs on the skin. The students' colorful *rangoli* was exhibited during the night of their dance performance.

My students' fascination with the *sari* (its stunning appearance and length), led to a project on block printing. Under the leadership of professional printer and block maker, Amy Donnelly, we studied the history, craft, and design elements of Indian textiles and prints. The students examined authentic fabrics and Indian wood blocks in order to carve their own, original linoleum blocks. Each student made a set of postcards to keep, and then produced many Postcards for Peace. The students took orders and sold individual postcards (as well as class sets) as a fundraiser for our sister city school.

Religion, History, and the Future

To better understand India, we also study some of the religions practiced by its people: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jain, and Islam. In our rural location, there are no nearby Hindu temples. Instead, we invite guest speakers to our classroom. Dr. Ashok Malhotra, a philosophy professor at SUNY Oneonta, brings Hinduism to life with beautiful statues, works of art, Hindu tales, and personal and traditional stories. The children are fascinated by ancient stories that are from Hindu myth, but are also a part of popular culture in India. For example, Ganesha is a god who represents learning and wisdom. As a boy, Ganesha's head was severed, but he was saved when he

received as a transplant the head of an elephant. Shiva is known in many stories as a god of destruction, yet his hair, flowing from the Himalayan highlands, creates the life-giving Ganges River.

On another day, Ani Samten, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, sweeps into our room with her flowing robes and arms full of *thangkas*, scrolls with intricately painted depictions of Buddha, used for instruction and meditation. The beautiful imagery painted on each one helps to make its narrative accessible to a young audience. The children are instantly attracted to Ani Samten's warm smile, and they occasionally applaud in delight at the unrolling of a colorful *thangka*.

Our friend, Dr. Fida Mohammad, a sociology professor at SUNY Oneonta, describes the beauty of practicing Islam using his personal experiences and knowledge of that religion's holy book, the *Koran*. The children are amazed to learn that Allah has 99 names. They also gain valuable insight and an appreciation of Islam's relationship to both Christianity and Judaism, which share historical roots as monotheistic religions.

I teach a unit of study on the life of Mohandas K. Gandhi which, in addition to teaching the history of India, illustrated how his principle of non-violence grew out of the Jain concept of "ahimsa," as seen in the Jain practice of nonviolence toward all living things. Gandhi's autobiography and public speeches are great resources to help students understand the interrelationships between Gandhi's spiritual convictions and his nonviolent approach to working for social justice.⁶ There are memorable passages that can be understood by third graders.

This multi-layered, interdisciplinary approach creates the foundation for my third graders to move into the second phase of our studies of India. By creating meaning through these experiences, students feel what it means to be human in a different culture. It gives a new perspective and a deeper value to their own lives and cultural background.⁷ Whether reading the words of Abdul

Ghaffar Khan (the Northwest Frontier's "Muslim Gandhi") or studying a map of India's partition in 1947, the opportunity to hear (and feel) enables third graders to find their voices and ask new questions.⁸ Once their minds are opened, children's experiences of the present can inform and change the future.

Student Service Learning

After discovering that our town has a sister city in Rajasthan, India, I decided to learn more. Dundlod is home to The Indo-International School, which now serves 350 "untouchable" students who would otherwise be exploited for labor or left to survive on their own devices (certainly in poverty). Helping our town of Oneonta, New York, to support The Indo-International School has become my class's perennial service learning project. It encourages students to develop a commitment to social responsibility, justice, and action.⁹ My third graders help provide books, food, and clothing to their peers halfway around the world. Each Indian student supported by our efforts is likely to lift her or his family out of poverty in later years simply by having the skills provided by basic education and literacy.

Since beginning our work to maintain our town's commitment to Dundlod, my third graders have raised awareness and support in a variety of ways. One of our earliest and most profitable ventures was a traditional bake sale. This seemingly mundane activity became a springboard for lessons in many areas. During a bake sale, students learn about marketing (making posters, reading scripted messages on the morning announcements, determining ideal sales locations and times), money management (making and counting change, rolling coins, calculating totals), sales and public speaking (talking politely to customers), and staffing and time management (coordinating two classes to run a 90-minute bake sale requires attention to a schedule). The personal reward for holding the bake sale was doubled upon hearing cheers echoing



Pandit Roop Verma and his wife Tracy work with third graders each year. They teach and perform classical Indian music and provide experiences with Indian culture.

down the halls as the total sales figure was announced over the school's PA system. We all had a feeling of being part of something larger than ourselves alone.

Goats and Health

Other service learning programs have grown from this effort. One of the most popular was an adopt-a-goat campaign, which promised that, if a class raises \$40.00 to buy a goat for a family in Dundlod, then the classroom teacher would kiss a goat. This campaign was so successful that every teacher (even the principal) had to kiss a goat, which was brought to our school especially for that event.¹⁰

Another year, an Indian dinner accompanied by music played on *sitar* and *tabla* (performed by local students) raised money for The Indo-International School. Our sister city activities illustrate the good will such efforts can create: our models for service learning projects (all of which include an academic component) have spread to the other three elementary schools in our district.

Community Celebration

Thanks to the commitment of my third grade colleagues, we have recently initiated a community-wide event that

provides the public with an evening of Indian culture including yoga, student art exhibits, clothing and textiles, music, and dance (plus Indian food, children's activities, and arts and crafts such as *mendhi*, etc.). This year, our partnership has expanded to include our school district, SUNY Oneonta (the local state college), and Hartwick College (a liberal arts college in Oneonta). Plans are underway to host the principals from all three of The Ninash Foundation's schools on a visit to the United States. For our 2008 celebration and fundraiser, we are planning to feature student art exhibits and performances, an Indian dance troupe, and music provided by a Bollywood-style DJ. (Bombay is the center of the huge popular film industry in India. Blend the word "Bombay" with "Hollywood," to get the slang term "Bollywood.")

Conclusion

Integrating the arts and service learning has enhanced my social studies curriculum and empowered my students. They learn that one can make a difference in the world by directly helping other people. Listening to voices from India also provides a period of reflection for us. Many of my third grade students are challenged to think about the power of literacy and the value of education. They

contemplate the effects of economic status, gender, and religion in different societies. As we confront issues like poverty or child labor, we build bridges to other social studies subjects such as the history of European domination in colonial America, the Women's Suffrage Movement, and the twentieth-century struggle for Civil Rights. Our year-long study of beliefs and traditions informs our understanding of conflicts in America and around the world.¹¹ By confronting such profound issues, we become more compassionate—together.

In the present test-driven educational culture, many teachers claim that time is not available to lead activities such as those described in this article. In my opinion, school should reflect values cherished by humanity, not merely those of the testing industry. In promoting the social studies, I endeavor to provide my students with opportunities to listen, learn, and respond. I prefer to help children become contributing citizens of the world, while integrating the “basics” into interdisciplinary units of study.

Ashok Malhotra, president of The Ninash Foundation, commented, “These children are the real ambassadors. They embody the quintessence of generosity. What such little hands can do! I am so touched by these children.”

It is incumbent upon teachers of the social studies to move beyond textbooks and worksheets, to engage children in real-life, meaningful experiences that connect them to living cultures, social issues, and enduring humanitarian values.¹² These connections bring the world to the child and the child to world in useful and hopeful ways. 🌍

Notes

1. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1938), 38.
2. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita, *Myths of Hindus and Buddhists* (New York: Dover, 1967), 367. Also, I use the series of books for youth by Demi (who uses a single name), many of them published by Henry Holt, about religious leaders such as Buddha, Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa, and Muhammed.
3. Louis Menand, “Re-imagining Liberal Education,” in Robert Orrill, ed., *Education and Democracy: Re-imagining Liberal Learning in America* (New York: College Entrance Board, 1997).
4. *Shakuntala*. DVD (East-West School of Dance, \$25, 60 minutes, 2001), www.anandaashram.org.



Khuki Woolever, a storyteller and educator, visited Riverside School's third graders each year. A former resident of India, Mrs. Woolever told stories, played games, and taught the students dances.

5. Noor Inayat Khan, *Twenty Jataka Tales* (Rochester, VT: East-West Publications, 1985).
6. Mohandas Gandhi, *Gandhi, An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiment with Truth* (New York: Beacon Press, 1948/1993).
7. Carol Rodgers, “Defining Reflection: Another Look at John Dewey and Reflective Thinking,” *Teachers College Record* 104 (2002): 848.
8. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 120; Eknath Easwaran, *A Man to Match His Mountains: Badshah Khan, Nonviolent Soldier of Islam* (New York: Plough House, 1985).
9. The Ninash Foundation is a nonprofit organization in memory of Nina J. Malhotra, a pre-kindergarten teacher, a social worker, and a counselor. She taught Hindi at the State University of New York at Oneonta and helped found and direct the SUNY Intersession and Semester in India Programs. See www.ninash.org.
10. The Ninash Foundation administered this adopt-a-goat program.
11. New York State curriculum, third grade, www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/pub/ssisr3.pdf.
12. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Standards for Social Studies for Social Studies Teachers* (Washington, DC: 1997), 1:1-6, www.socialstudies.org.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Khuki Woolever, whose friendship and stories have touched our community. She was a local storyteller.

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GANDHI ON SERVICE AND SOCIAL ACTION

“Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy.”

“A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.”



Above: Students studied the art and craft of Indian textiles, then created their own designs. Blocks were made and the prints were used for a service learning fundraiser to support a school in Dundlod, India.