

Periyar Centenary Educational Complex
Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India
Stephanie Gerber 2013-2014
First Report

Founded by political leader and Women's Right's advocate Thanthai Periyar, the Periyar Centenary Educational Complex is home to four different schools, a pharmacy school included. I am working in the secondary school, teaching sixth, seventh, and eighth standards (based on the British System). There are two tracks at my school – English medium and Tamil medium. There is a fee for the English medium classes, thus creating a socioeconomic divide within the school itself. I am teaching the Tamil medium classes. Many of the students in my class are amongst the poorest students in the school and good portions of them are of orphan status living in the free hostel at my school.

The definition of an orphan in India differs from that of the United States. While some of the orphans have no parents, many of the students come from homes where there is only one parent, usually the mothers, who cannot support their families on their salaries due to circumstance. Many of the stories that come out of the hostel are shockingly sad; yet, the girls are so enthusiastic for us to be here. I try to visit the hostel three times a week working in the library that was started by the volunteers last year. We read with the students and they absolutely love having the opportunity to practice their English one-on-one with us. They show off all they know and work on their reading skills too. With additional money that we fundraised we were able to purchase a projector and even have an English movie night for the hostel girls, which they seem to be really enjoying.

At the school, I have been faced with many challenges, the biggest among them being the sheer class size. My classes range from sixty to eight-four students per class. In order to make it more manageable we have divided the classes into groups so I usually have around thirty students per class. By breaking down the classes, we feel that we can be more effective in the classroom. This will allow us to give more individual attention to the students and really be given a chance to assess both their needs and their progress.

The system that is in place in Tamil Nadu is a system heavily based on rote memorization, which lends itself to perfect test scores, but no English speaking ability in the Tamil medium classes. It is extremely difficult to be understood by the students all the time and communication is not always clear, but the students are very zealous to learn from us. I am focusing on basic spoken English. My goal is to provide the students with an elementary level of conversational English in order to communicate – which I feel will become the core of the program that we are developing.

While working at the school, another role I have is as a cultural ambassador. I have been invited as one of the many guests of honor at many events at school from

Sports Day to Independence Day to even a Commemorative Fun Run. It has been a great insight into the cultural and inner workings of India. I have been greeted with great enthusiasm and encouragement from both the school and community.

With a new program like WorldTeach in India, my goals have altered and perspective changed. I will be working hard, developing a curriculum to meet the needs of the students in the school and within the perplexing Indian educational system. It is a learning curve and a huge challenge, but one that I feel that I am up for. Working closely with my program director and fellow volunteers, we are paving the way for future volunteers but more importantly, creating a foundation for the students in our school. Giving them some basic tools in English to help them better their futures is proving to be quite a rewarding experience.