

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

First and foremost I want to send out a sincere thank you to the JJCF for all of your support. I would not have been able to come to India without your generosity and for that I will be eternally grateful. You have enabled me to grow both professionally and personally this year in one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

As the weather is heating back up to its usually 100°F, it is signaling the end of my year here in Trichy, Tamil Nadu. School has been intensifying, with final exams creeping around the corner. Subsequently, my classes have been limited to a minimum while they prepare for exams, as in any educational system.

The students are coming to the realization that we will be leaving soon. They keep asking us to stay on longer and continue on next year. I will miss all of my students immensely as I'm sure they will miss me.

Coming into my school I did not know what to expect from my students, but their joyful enthusiasm for my classes is unrivaled by any classes I have ever taught or experienced. I worked hard at devising a spoken English curriculum that would be tailored to the needs of my class, especially since most of my students were illiterate and had a very weak grasp of the English language.

After a trial and error period I developed an introductory system of pictures, dialogues, and interviews, which seemed the most effective. Paired with interactive games and activities, my classes made huge strides in their English comprehension and are on their way to speaking. Covering units from jobs and occupations, following directions, going to the doctor, and even tongue twisters, they really worked hard at building their vocabulary, formulating sentences, and improving pronunciation. Their favorite lesson still remains a following directions treasure hunt that took them all over campus.

Sharing Tamil culture has been at the heart of my experience here in Tamil Nadu. Everyone has been so kind, and perhaps overly generous with food, and in sharing every holiday and events such as weddings and bridal showers with me. From Diwali at the Gandhian School where I joined in their celebration complete with and exploding firecrackers and a colorful sparkler event, to the Tamil state holiday of Pongal, a harvest festival, which was celebrated at my school with the cooking Pongal (a sweet rice dish), as well as joyous singing, dancing, and of course eating, this year was filled with a world of new experiences.

Learning about their heritage and traditions was such a meaningful experience for me and led me to find a way to reciprocate and find a way to share my culture with them. I was fortunate to receive micro-grant from the Shusterman Foundation to

share my Jewish heritage with the girls, one they knew nothing about. With their help I was able to host two Shabbat dinners (with the help of my school's kitchen staff) with the girls of orphan status on campus, complete with a candle lighting and challah-like bread as we raised our cups of juice and enjoyed an enormous meal including chicken biryani with gravy (creamy, spicy blends of chicken with onions, spices, yogurt and tomatoes), vegetable rita with eggs and spices and dessert. This was quite a treat and a break from the usual watery broth and rice, which we normally eat each and every day. This was a magical evening to share with the students and staff, and it warmed our hearts as well as our stomachs.

This year has been a year of challenges, adventures, and learning. Teaching in Trichy has been unlike any of my previous teaching experiences filled with ups, downs, and sometimes even confusion. I have learned to be more patience, to creatively think on my feet, and be readily adaptable. Working in an Indian government school taught me more about how different educational systems run, showing both the strengths and weaknesses of the Indian educational system. By working with India's poor I learned about the diversity of living conditions in a developing country, the role of women in Indian society, and the importance of education, as well as place of English as a Foreign Language, in India.

What I will take away from my experiences are the close bonds I have created with my students and fellow volunteers. I have learned how easy it is to form bonds with people who do not speak the same language as you simply with a smile and time spent together. The girls have been extremely sweet to me, if at times a bit naughty, and they have definitely left a mark on me, perhaps more that I have made on them, making my experience a really rewarding challenge.

Thank you again for enabling me to come to India this year. It was truly an experience of lifetime.