

Miss Lloyd – India Diary January 2011

My name is Miss Lloyd and I am a Languages teacher at Leeds West Academy. I work as part of the 'TeachFirst' scheme, a programme that aims to maximise the educational achievements of students across the country.

Teach First is also part of a global network of organisations with the same mission to address educational achievements. This network is called Teach for All and in January 2011 they held an annual synergies workshop in Mumbai, India.

The workshop was hosted by 'Teach for India' with a theme of 'Change begins Within' – an aim to 'find the personal responsibility and resourcefulness to achieve at the classroom level and beyond, even in very challenging circumstances.'

The following is a diary of my trip and my experiences:

Day 1 – Tuesday 4th January 2011

I arrived in Mumbai from Manchester airport at 8:00am having had 2 hours sleep. I was tired and as we left the airport I immediately noticed the humidity and heat, despite this being India's winter! A taxi was outside to pick me up and the driver tied my bags to the roof. I put an empty plastic bottle down and two women who were walking through the car park came over, picked it up and walked on their way. It shocked me that they would want that bottle so much, and made me realise that I was now in a totally different culture, with far different needs and desires to my own back in England.

I was exhausted from the travelling and instantly trying to adjust to the new environment. As we left the airport the differences between England and India were immediately evident. The first road out was not properly constructed and was similar to a dirt track through a building site. As we joined the main roads I was overwhelmed by how busy it was! There seemed to be no order – 3 rows of traffic would become 7, cars weaved in and out, it was hectic! I had never experienced

such a chaotic road system, and felt slightly overwhelmed as children also weaved between vehicles, barefoot on the dusty roads, begging for money. Other children waved at us from school buses and it surprised me how excited every child was to see us.

I arrived at my hotel and met with other people on the workshop who had arrived the night before. I was staying at The Ramada, a luxury hotel, and the view from my window really summed up Mumbai. From the comfort of my hotel I saw the neighbouring slum communities, stretching into the distance towards the tall buildings of the city. This stark contrast of rich and poor is a devastating reality in the city.

Having arrived after some of other workshop participants we were immediately involved in one of the first group activities. We were driven by bus to a slum community and told to go out, individually, and “connect with a child”. I was hot, tired, overwhelmed and very apprehensive – I did not feel ready to walk alone through the community and talk to children I had never met! I started off with another teacher from Teach First – we walked through the slums and started waving, smiling and speaking to the people we passed. The adults seemed weary at first but the children loved it – they would come and crowd round, try to speak English back to us, wanted to shake our hands, wanted to have their photo taken.

When the adults saw that we were interested in their community they started inviting us into their homes. I went into one lady’s home and she made us Chai (tea) – it was lovely! I was completely taken aback by how welcoming they were, how proud they were of their homes and how much they wanted to speak to us and show us around. They had little, but they were such a proud and cheerful community. They had certainly made real homes from what they did have. I wasn’t envious of their physical environment, but I completely admired their community spirit and positivity. They must have been the happiest, friendliest neighbourhood I have ever come across!

By the end of the 2 hours I was happily walking around alone, wondering why I had ever been worried. I got lost at one point and asked a child to show me the way back, which he did. We went down small alleys, where it was dark and damp

between the homes. I felt completely comfortable walking alone with this child in his community and it was an incredible experience to be able to do so.

Days 2 and 4 – Wednesday 5th and Friday 7th January

On both of these days I visited schools in slum communities and sat in the classrooms with children from the slums. Secondary school in India begins around 7am and finishes at midday. Primary school starts at around 1pm and finishes at 6pm. The same school is often used for both secondary and primary teaching, which is why the school days are staggered.

On both days I was visiting 8 year old pupils and therefore at school from 1pm. This meant that I had the morning free with the 'Teach for India' teacher that I was shadowing. On both days the teachers took me out into the school communities to and I was able to visit the homes of the pupils and teachers. Again I was struck by how small the homes were; a single small room would have a kitchen area (sometimes just a cooker on the floor), bed, and washing area.

In both schools the pupils had most of their lessons completely in English. In one school I talked to the class about England and schools here. I also taught them a song and listened to their own songs, including Jonny Nash's 'I can see clearly now', which was wonderful! In another school it was sports day, which involved lines on the yard marked out with crushed chalk so that pupils could play volleyball and do simple running races.

In both schools there were no working toilets for staff, which terrified me! The staff work for 5 hours without a toilet to use! In the first school I saw 90 pupils packed into benches in one classroom. Most classrooms had 60 pupils, and the rooms were half the size of my classroom here at LWA. In the first school there was no staffroom to store things, nothing could be stuck on to classroom walls, and teachers could not sit down. They had very few facilities to use, only a blackboard and very little, if anything, in the way of ICT equipment. It is interesting that in India the amount spent on education is relatively low compared to other countries. However, despite the huge lack of resources, the teachers I saw were constantly engaging, motivating and inspiring their large classes. As I watched the teacher doing maths work on the

board with a pupil, I almost forgot where I was. It made me realise how, despite obvious differences, there are enormous similarities between teaching, regardless of where we are.

There were small windows in the first classroom that had to be shut when smoke from a factory next door made everyone cough. There was a fan, but it didn't do much at all. Being English and rarely experiencing hot weather, I found the temperatures almost unbearable (and this was their winter!).

Teach for India draws attention to India's current educational crisis, in which classrooms are often understaffed (one in four teachers will be absent on any given day) and teacher engagement poor (only 50% of teachers are likely to be teaching at any given time). I also discovered that some teachers in India still hit pupils as punishment, which I was not comfortable with at all.

Days 3 and 5 – Thursday 6th and Saturday 8th January

On the other days, and also most evenings, we had talks from key speakers and leaders involved with Teach for India. We also had the chance to discuss teaching issues, ranging from our classrooms to national strategies and government policies, in all of the countries that we represented.

There was a really strong focus on the 'Ghandi Approach', as this is a key theme with Teach for India. This involves a real focus on personal reflection (we tried meditating!) and promoting a positive self. We were really encouraged to be more accepting of ourselves, i.e. to 'go easy' on ourselves. The founder of Teach for India, Shaheen Mistri, was very inspiring about this. She helped us to acknowledge that teaching is one job in which we will never achieve everything we want to at the end of the day - because there are so many big things we aim for! Whilst we continue to strive for improvement, we must realise that each day we are also making a difference in the smaller things we do.

This is another key message from Teach for India - that actually, as teachers, we are being the change, rather than seeing the change in our pupils straight away. Essentially this means that we do make a difference - even if we cannot see it. It

also emphasises the importance of integrity. A famous Ghandi story highlights that in order to influence others and make them change, we must change ourselves first. Integrity is rarely mentioned in education, yet it is crucial to our relationships with pupils.

Another key commitment of Teach for India is community engagement – being proactive in knowing and understanding more about the pupils. The teachers regularly walk through the slum communities to visit pupils and parents. It gives such a valuable insight into their students' lives and has an obvious effect on relationships within the classroom. Although cultures in England and India are very different, the underlying principle of really knowing and understanding the community, parents and pupils is a very powerful one.

Since I have returned to England I have taken all of these things on board. I take heart from what Shaheen told me – be gentle. I am more accepting of who I am, what I do and what I am trying to achieve. I realise that teaching does not have to be rewarding in obvious ways for me to know that I am making a difference.

I continue to be very optimistic about what I am trying to achieve here at LWA. I strive for my students to engage with my lessons and be the change themselves, so that they have a freedom so sought by the pupils I met in India. I feel a huge responsibility to guide the young people in my classes, both within my subject and as individuals in a modern world. I want my pupils to understand what India was like for me, what I have learnt and what the pupils there are experiencing.

More than anything else I want my pupils to have a real sense of possibility and a 'can do' attitude – to believe that they can be the best that they can be. I want to inspire my pupils in the way that I have been inspired by this trip!

In the last few months students in my EEP group have written letters to send to the young students I met in India. We are sending some small gifts from LWA and a presentation about the school. I have shown my students videos and photos from my time in Mumbai, and we have discussed cultural differences and the value of education in both countries. We are also talking to a school in Germany and now have contacts at a school in Peru. I hope that communication between our schools

will develop the pupils' cultural, religious and spiritual understanding of the world. My EEP group are already starting to think about what they can do to further help the students in India.

To conclude, one of the classes in India sang a song when I was there. It went like this:

“The more we read, the more we know. Knowledge is power and power is freedom”

Teacher: ***“And do you want it?”*** Pupils: ***“Yes, we do!”***

I hope my pupils have realised that although there are stark differences between their own and the Indian pupils' experiences, education has, wherever we are in the world, the power to give us freedom.