

Bighelp For Education Post Internship Report

By: Priya Merchia

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My name is Priya Merchia and I participated in the Youth Internship program offered by the Bighelp for education organization. The school which I volunteered at was just outside of Chandigarh (the capital of Punjab and Haryana). In the village of Rally, Sector 12a, Panchkula, Haryana. I completed my internship at the government middle school where there are 70 students in eighth grade, and six teachers throughout the whole school. There are two classes for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade which add up to around 210 total students. There are also two administrative staff members and one principal.

Rally village “pind” is located in Panchkula, Haryana, India. It forms a part of a continuous area with the Union Territory of Chandigarh and the city of Mohali. It is about 4 kilometers southeast of Chandigarh and approximately 259 kilometers northeast of New Delhi (capital city of India). The Chandigarh-Mohali-Panchkula area forms a tri-city, with a combined population of over 2 million. Chandigarh is best known for Punjab University, its several gardens, museums, and lakes as well as being the cleanest Indian city nationwide. Because of Chandigarh’s proximity to New Delhi the IT industry is booming. This northern region of India is quite humid and rainy in August as it is the monsoon season. My maternal grandparents have settled in Panchkula sector 12B for over 20 years, none of my family members attended Rally middle school but they have been involved with the school for a few years. My grandfather occasionally volunteers his time and donates supplies in attempt to give back in his community.

The middle school in which I taught has been a place where my maternal grandparents have seen slowly improve over the many years they have lived in Panchkula. From time to time they have gone back to this school and helped build their academic community in small ways. Therefore we chose this school, so our family could continue to support their school community.

Throughout my volunteer experience I was able to recognize the differences between Indian and American life. How the school’s schedule and structure differs as well as how each individual differs. Something I found surprising was their advocating for girls to be educated at the same level as boys, from my previous knowledge I was aware of the stereotypical gender inequality, but was pleasantly surprised by this. The uniforms, books, and materials obtained by the students were all provided by the school along with an additional stipend

for the girls. The children dressed in uniform everyday and sat strictly on either side of the classroom divided between boys and girls.

My interactions over the course of the two days were like none I had ever experienced. Genuinely developing friendships and being able to interact with these kids was eye opening for me. Some of the kids I connected with were Anju and Sapna, the name of the principal is Principal Mrs. Sunil Devi. On the first day of the internship, I gave an interactive introductory speech. Where I was able to give the students a look into my life and where I came from, the kids helped me better understand their lives and where they come from. We discussed numerous topics ranging from my daily life, to the holidays, currency, seasons and time zones in America. I was able to provide visual aids which helped depict my life in America. As we went back and forth I was also able to gain insight in their lives in India, there were obvious differences which I recognized but more importantly there were also similarities. After we introduced ourselves to each other I began my first activity - where we discovered the importance of hygiene. I passed out handouts with pictures and the main points from my lesson, to help the students follow along. We discussed the appropriate precautions taken and when/how they are to be taken. I also touched upon how much it is stressed in America and the bacteria and illnesses which can develop as a result of poor hand hygiene. After the lesson I conducted a verbal quiz summarizing the main points I had discussed. For each correct answer the student received a candy. I then discussed the importance of dental hygiene, why and how to brush your teeth, and the science behind the importance of brushing teeth. As I wrapped up the first day I also introduced the experiment, where I demonstrated the importance of dental hygiene and staying away from sugary goods which can be detrimental to your teeth. The experiment included several eggs being placed in jars of coke for the night, I had each child write a hypothesis of what was going to happen and why. The next day when I came in I attended the morning assembly where the school gathered as a community to sing the national anthem, do morning exercises and perform prayers. Afterwards I distributed 75 backpacks on behalf of the bighelp organization to students who performed highly in academics. My family and I also provided new chalkboards to each classroom as well as functional plumbing for their restrooms. Shortly after I gave my thank you speech to the administrative staff and students of the Rally middle school, I returned back to my classroom. We began by discovering the results of our dental hygiene experiment. I then gave a brief lesson about nutrition and healthy eating, the children continued to be engaged with me and asked/responded to questions. We proceeded to create

a healthy salad consisting of vegetables which were economical and accessible to the students (cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, and sprouts). As an incentive I handed out pencils, various school supplies, and chocolate to the kids who participated.

I have been visiting this area of India for as long as I can remember, but this enriching experience has broadened my knowledge about the area and its social structure.

The most important thing I Learned from this experience was that yes, in every society, every situation, every place in the world there is a hierarchy, there are countless differences between every single individual, every group of people...but in the end everyone is the same. An idea which has been engrained throughout the global community since the beginning of time is the divide between rich and poor, that depending on where you live, what things you have, and how much money is in your bank account... there is difference in the type of person you are. Yes, I agree that the way you look at the world has to do with the circumstances you were brought up in... But I disagree that someone's financial state should determine what kind of person they are and how others should look at them. In my life I have interacted with a countless number of people, but as a 15 year old living in an affluent suburb of Boston Massachusetts, primarily dominated by caucasians, it is arguable how much adversity and diversity I have been exposed to.

This youth internship through the bighelp organization was one of my first experiences where I really interacted with children coming from completely different backgrounds. I have been privileged enough to travel to places like Indonesia, Mexico and Peru (third world countries) but I have never really interacted with the locals and the people struggling to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. Going into the project I was very apprehensive because I thought there would be no way for a person like me to connect with and properly interact with these kids. After about 5-10 minutes of talking with and listening to these kids I began to notice how similar we actually were. Considering the fact that there was a prominent language barrier, I was from somewhere they had never heard of across the world, we dressed differently, talked differently, had completely different lives the children were remarkably similar to me. This was the one thing that stood out to me during the internship and while I reflected on my experience; I continuously revisited the idea that I was so extremely similar to these underprivileged children from India. I think it was probably the most important lesson I learned and the most eye-opening account from my

experience. I would like to thank my mentors Rekha Aunty and Anitha Aunty who passionately worked with me over the course of the past few months, giving their insights and knowledge to help bring this project to fruition. Ultimately, I can quite confidently say that the youth internship with Bighelp has been one of the most outstanding experiences of my life; the lessons I learned, the memories I made, and most importantly the relationships I built have been absolutely



unforgettable.

