Growing through education in remote village schools in India

Helen Widdop Quinton
Growing Through Education in Remote Village Schools in India
International study program report

BACKGROUND

In partnership with the charity organisation Growing Through Education Foundation, Victoria University College of Education postgraduate students worked with the children and teachers in village schools of the remote, underdeveloped Eastern Himalayan region of India in November 2016.

The international study program was incorporated into the Victoria University (VU) students' postgraduate study through the 24-point credit unit, Enhancing Skills and Knowledge. The participants developed mutually beneficial relationships with the village teachers where the VU students exchanged their educational practice knowledge and the village teachers and local community members introduced their culture. This collaboration is now set to become an ongoing effort as all participants have become volunteer ambassadors for the Foundation and are continuing to work with the teachers in India through online mentoring and communications.

The program was supported under the Australian Government Endeavour Funding Scheme to enable postgraduate teachers and pre-service teachers from the Master of Education and Master of Teaching courses to gain experience in working with young people from an Asian cultural background and from contexts other than Australia to enhance their Asia-literacy and inform their teaching in the future. By living and working with the school communities in this remote region in India the participants experienced a totally different educational context that they are now able to draw upon in their studies and for future teaching activities.

In the words of one participant:

“Observing how each school (Yelbong, Ghoom, Neora valley and Chuikim) reacted to just us being there was amazing. I knew without any reservations that they were keen and willing to learn whatever we wanted to teach. They wanted to know about our experiences and I was just as enthusiastic to learn about their lives and education system.”

The networks of our partner charity, the Growing Through Education Foundation and their associates in India, HELP Tourism, were key to the successes of this unique experience for the program participants.
PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The Growing Through Education in Remote Village Schools in India program involved 18 intensive days of working and living with school students, teachers and school communities in three districts of the Eastern Himalayan region of India: Chuikhim and Yelbong villages in the Kalimpong area, Kolbung school in Neora Valley, and a two day teacher seminar for the Ghoom tea plantations school teachers in the Darjeeling area. Living and working in the villages was complemented by a program of cultural experiences for the participants - the long and difficult travel associated with the region; visits to historic monasteries, markets and significant locations such as a tea processing plant and the Tibetan Refugee Centre in the region and in Kolkata and Delhi (on arrival and departure in India). These experiences all added to this program of immersion in the culture and education of India with a focus on remote north-eastern India.

Participant feedback and data from the program participants and partner organisations attest to the success of the program in achieving our objectives as is outlined below:

Objective 1: Participation in a unique, and potentially transformational experience, living and working in a very different context

The Growing Through Education in Remote India 2016 participant group, including VU students, Lecturer Dr Helen Widdop Quinton, Growing Through Education Foundation (GTEF) Chairman, Roy Smith, three GTEF full-fee volunteers, and well-known and well-respected local advocate for the remote communities, Raj Basu, founder of HELP Tourism and our local guide.

The VU participants best describe the transformative impact of their experiences as part of the program through the following quotes:
“Our trip to India seemed to change everyone. We grew professional, we grew personally and we were able to be the conduit of growth and change in several small but incredibly important schools in India. Important to the lives of humble, proud people who are seeking to improve not only their own lives but also the lives of everyone in their small communities.”

“The lead up to the trip was all about the opportunity I was being given, I never stopped to consider the value I could actually be offering. To see both child and adult alike transform from an inanimate student to a vibrant smiling, laughing and active participant in my activities was one of my proudest moments. To know that I was able to influence a response like that in such a short period is testament to my belief that building relationships is integral to learning and gaining a successful education.”

“I thank you, the Foundation and Victoria University for this extraordinary experience!”

“Completing this life experience subject has allowed me to be more open-minded as a teacher and individual. Thank you for the life changing opportunity.”

Objective 2: Strengthening of VU students’ knowledge, teaching skills, capabilities and connection to Asian-related dimensions

The Growing Through Education in Remote Village Schools in India postgraduate study program involved preparation research and planning for in-country activities and then delivery of educational activities; working with students, teachers, schools and communities in the remote Eastern Himalayan region. Formal recognition of the time, effort and enthusiasm the VU students contributed to the program and their achievements in conducting activities in the schools and as part of the Ghoom teachers seminar program was through the postgraduate College of Education 24-point credit unit EED6011, Enhancing Skills and Knowledge.

The program participants also undertook research assistant activities; undertaking fieldwork and participating in focus groups as part of an associated University research project about adolescents’ valued physical, social and emotional geographies.
The local communities were very excited about the visit of our group from Victoria University and gained permission from the local school authorities to release 60 teachers from the Ghoom district tea plantation schools to attend a two-day seminar program.

This photo shows Steve again, with colleagues Mel, Ricco and Summa, lecturing to the Ghoom teachers.

The VU participant students described how the experience strengthened their knowledge, skills and capabilities.

“Having the opportunity to speak at the teacher’s conference was a huge highlight. Not that I felt qualified to lecture on the best ways of teaching, but I did feel sharing my experience and outlook may have benefited some teachers in Darjeeling.”

“...taking a risk, (such as standing in front of peers giving a lecture to a room full of eager participants who want to overhaul an age old education system) is better than playing it safe and not trying at all; (this) has given me the ability to encourage others to do the same. These are the qualities I can confidently take into my classrooms and beyond.”

Objective 3: A powerful and inspiring experience of making a difference through education

The program participants had much to say about the experience of making a difference through education while working with schools and communities through the program. Their personal observations as well as the data on increases in services, business and populations in the villages through the work of the Foundation in the last six years demonstrates that the villages really do ‘grow’ through the enhancement of education activities. Improving schooling quality in the target villages contributes to the whole community and has been demonstrated to improve the adult lives and successes of village students (Lloyd, 2005).

“It was the most amazing feeling to see the sheer excitement that the children at Yelbong, Chuikim, and the Neora Valley expressed when we handed them equipment that they would own, to see their reactions to educating them within the classroom in ways that are foreign to what they are normally accustomed to, providing them with a resource bank full of tools that they could
only dream of using with their students, and simply conversing with them about their personal lives, experiences and families. It was these little pieces of evidence that allowed me to see what we were really achieving by being there.”

“VU Master of Education student Mel Brooks took her Chuikhim student group outside for sun orientation and mapping activities.

“As much as our team was able to successfully educate students and teachers on what they would believe were ‘unconventional’ methods of effective teaching and learning, it was the intrinsic, personal, and deep-seated impact that I believe we had on these people that was our greatest achievement as volunteer educators.”

“It wasn’t what we were doing that was making the real difference, it was the fact that we were actually there in their presence that was having the real impact on their lives!”

“Students and teachers alike had the opportunity to meet people like us of whom I think they believed were individuals that had succeeded in life, achieved, prospered, and were ultimately happy. We allowed them to see who they could become themselves, individuals with passion, compassion, courage, willingness and determination. I truly believe that we were inspiration to these people more than anything else, and that more than anything should be something to be proud of.”
Objective 4: Opportunities for VU students to reflect on their educational practices and challenge their underlying assumptions about education

Again the VU program participants best express the impact of the program on their teaching practices and perceptions:

“Before we began on this life-changing journey I expected it would be a fun study tour where I would learn and extend my skills and knowledge in teaching. However I could not have anticipated the emotional and spiritual growth I made, developing confidence in my teaching abilities, the relationships I would form, the incredible insight into a vastly different way of life, how it would feel being a contributor to the growth of the education system in north eastern India, and the enlightening perspective I would gain from this experience.”

“Now being able to look back on my experience I can say that my expectations were blown out of the water and I feel as though learnt a lot about myself personally and as an educator.”

“I look forward to working closely with the Growing through Education Foundation as this has been one of the most thought-provoking and encouraging experiences of my life. What I have learnt during this experience is invaluable as it has changed and inspired my personal outlook on teaching.”

Objective 5: Participation in a research inquiry as part of the project that has a direct connection to participants’ VU studies

Preparation for the in-country activities required the students to identify generative themes that provided a basis for planning demonstration teaching activities and resources. This research, with the subsequent in-country modelling of activities with students, seminar presentations and train-the-trainer sessions with teachers enabled the students to fulfil (indeed exceed) the requirements of the EED 6011 Enhancing Skills and Knowledge unit of study, contributing to their Master of Education/Teaching course work.

In addition all students elected to take on a research assistant role with Dr Widdop Quinton’s allied research project, Exploring adolescents’ preferred environmental places and learning in remote India, contributing to developing an understanding of teenagers’ place and nature connections and engagement with environmental learning in a non-Western context; building on the Dr Widdop Quinton’s previous research in this area. A number of the students are now intending to connect their Research Capstone or Minor Thesis studies with this research inquiry in 2017.

Objective 6: Using their educational expertise to propose recommendations to the Growing Through Education Foundation (GTEF)

All program participants have opted to continue working with the Growing Through Education Foundation. The group has already had two meetings in December 2016 since the conclusion of the program in India and a number have taken on leadership roles with Foundation to effect a new social media marketing campaign and organise a fundraiser for early 2017 (see Objective 7 following).

In addition an online community is being established for early 2017 to enable the program participants to continue to work with and mentor the teachers from the Ghoom seminar. As one of the VU participants commented:

“Having the opportunity to see how schools run in another country and be able to share with those educators our experiences and resources was something I will treasure forever. I look forward to continuing work with the Growing Through Education Foundation and continuing to develop more resources and schools in the Eastern Himalayas.”
Objective 7: Making a long-lasting difference to the village schools through fundraising and sourcing educational resources to provide the schools, working with GTEF.

As indicated previously, the program participants have embraced the opportunities with energy and enthusiasm, continuing their collaboration with the communities in India through the work of the Foundation. Already a ‘Raise The Roof’ fundraiser has been arranged for February 2017 to effect the completion of the Yelbong school. VU student Sophie Elliott is the chief organiser of this event, even co-opting other friends into this venture as shown in the social media event campaign below.

As one of the other trip participants commented:

“I am proud of what we achieved as a team, how effective the diversity and passion of our small group was, how committed we are to continuing our own growth and supporting the growth of teachers, students and communities in India. I am also very much looking forward to what lies ahead for my newfound group of friends.”
MEDIA COVERAGE IN INDIA

Local and India national media reported on our activities with the schools in this remote region, spotlighting the work of the Growing Through Education Foundation and the connection (through this international study program) with Victoria University. In particular our work with the Yelbong village captured the attention of the media. In Yelbong we inspected the progress of the Foundation’s school building project and engaged in a day of sporting and cultural activities with the local community. Yelbong is currently only accessible on foot but the local government has committed to establish a road to the village since the Foundation started working with the community a year ago. On our visit we were also shown new homestay accommodation that has been built. Village leaders indicated that new families have moved to the village in anticipation of enhanced educational opportunities for their children and tourism business opportunities. This is a story that was repeated in all the villages we worked with, indicating a very tangible and direct benefit to the villages from the volunteer educators’ work through our program and the previous Foundation volunteer groups’ work. By partnering with the Foundation the Victoria University program was able to integrate with an existing, successful program of capacity building in local communities through education.

Media articles:

1. Local paper featuring a photograph of the Victoria University students being welcomed to Yelbong village with flowers (close up followed by full page article):
Growing Through Education in Remote India program report – page 9

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Melbourne Australia
2. Hindustan Times, again featuring our visit to Yelbong village:

"Darjeeling discovers a new kind of tourist"

Amitava Bamejee, Hindustan Times, Darjeeling | Updated: Nov 30, 2016 13:25 IST

Darjeeling discovers a new kind of tourist

Amalita Bamejee, Hindustan Times, Darjeeling | Updated: Nov 30, 2016 13:25 IST

Hindustantimes

Darjeeling discovers a new kind of tourist

Amalita Bamejee, Hindustan Times, Darjeeling | Updated: Nov 30, 2016 13:25 IST

So, what is the expression 'voluntourism' mean? Simply put, it's tourism and voluntary work in charity combined. Travellers are encouraged to visit an area that is underdeveloped and participate in its development. For instance, building a school or even teaching kids of the locality for some time. (HT Photo)

You may not be even familiar with the term, but Darjeeling and its adjoining hills are already basking in the success of 'voluntourism'.

So, what is the expression 'voluntourism' mean? Simply put, it's tourism and voluntary work for charity combined. Travellers are encouraged to visit an area that is underdeveloped and participate in its development. For instance, building a school or even teaching kids of the locality for some time. Tourism data reveals that even in this off-peak season, the rural areas of Darjeeling hills have an occupancy of 30 per cent which is much higher than the previous years.

Like ecotourism and adventure tourism, 'voluntourism' could involve tourist groups or just individual travelers. "It is basically resource exchange. The foreign tourists help in uplift of society, teach new things and even help develop infrastructure by building schools, thereby empowering the community."

Read: Stay away from Darjeeling during the rains (http://www.hindustantimes.com/Kolkata/Stay-away-from-Darjeeling-during-the-rains-pub-61b451cf8438453a9f38cc2be5d1a5b9.html)

The voluntourists in turn benefit by knowing more about the environment, biodiversity, different cultures and how people manage to live happily despite economic problems," said Raj Basu, one of the founders of Help Tourism, that is jointly working with Growing Through Education Foundation (GTEF) in the voluntourism sector for the past one decade. For the past six years, volunteers from the foundation have been coming to Darjeeling and helping set up schools in the region.

The GTEF, a non-profit organisation, aims to provide financial and practical assistance to schools and school communities with specific development needs. The outfit is looking to raise sufficient yearly funding to directly support schools through teacher training and improving educational infrastructure.

Read: Darjeeling Toy Train's world heritage status under threat (http://www.hindustantimes.com/Kolkata/Darjeeling-toys-world-heritage-status-under-threat/story-4lYVtw2Ebfu4J4iXz1j.png.html)

The Australia-based foundation recently brought in volunteers to Darjeeling as voluntourists. The foundation has different fund-raising programmes including 'Buy a Brick' whereby a donor buys bricks for $100 a piece to help build schools. Already, tourists and volunteers have built a volleyball court and a fence around the Chuklim Primary School in Kelimpung.

"This is tourism with a purpose. We thank Help Tourism and GTEF for having chosen our area as their area of activity," said Pomba Tshering, member of the Gorkha Territorial Administration."
3. Summit Times featuring photographs of mural painting with the school community at the Kolbung School in Neora Valley and the Ghoom teacher seminar:

4. Siliguri Times article about the new school the Foundation has commenced building in Yelbong village:
5. National coverage in The Echo of India, again about the building of the school in Yelbong:
6. More local press about our visit (relevant extract and full page as follows):
7. Local documentary filmmaker shadowed our visit.

An Indian national who is a freelance filmmaker with connections to the BBC shadowed us for a number of days, documenting our activities and interviewing the participants and the villagers we worked with. It is expected that a feature on our work will be produced and distributed through Indian and international television networks.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

The international study program, Growing Through Education in Remote Village Schools in India, has been an outstanding success on many levels, as outlined above. The key contributors to the program success were:

- **Funding support**
  
  The Australian Government support for this international study program through the Endeavour Funding Scheme enabled VU students to participate in the program who would not otherwise be able to fund an international study experience.

- **Course work articulation and recognition**
  
  Students indicated that one of the key attractive features of the program initially was the recognition they would receive as part of their Master of Teaching/Master of Education course. In fact undertaking the study program in the Summer semester has enabled some of the students to accelerate their course.

- **Partnership with the Growing Through Education Foundation charity and program leadership by Chair, Mr. Roy Smith**
  
  The program leveraged the existing networks and structure of the Foundation, dramatically enhancing the study tour by locating this within the existing structure of the Foundation’s support programs. Chairman Roy Smith co-led the program with VU Lecture Helen Widdop Quinton, adding great value through his past experiences with schools and the region. Roy’s participation also meant only one VU staff member was required for the program. All trip participants have been extremely appreciative of Roy’s dedication, enthusiasm and leadership.

- **In-country support from HELP Tourism and local advocate, Mr. Raj Basu**
  
  Raj Basu is a local identity in the Eastern Himalayan region of India. He has been supporting local communities to develop their opportunities through tourism and education for over 25 years. His award-winning group, HELP Tourism, use tourism as a tool for conservation and sustainable development. Raj was instrumental in establishing the pioneering Ghoom teachers’ seminar that was so successful. Again all trip participants are indebted to Raj’s dedication, knowledge and leadership.

Dr Helen Widdop Quinton
Program Leader
Victoria University

Photo credits: Helen Widdop Quinton and other trip participants