

If I had to summarize my experience working with and learning about Pratham hands on in India in three words they would be: eye-opening, heartwarming, and inspiring.

When observing Pratham learning centers in Ahmedabad and Surat, I explored a part of India I had never experienced before. A part where reading is more of a privilege than a necessity, and a place where getting an eighth grade education is no guarantee. I say "experienced" in this context because I had already *seen* this place, and I was already keenly aware of it. I knew education was lacking in parts of India and all around the world, and I was very aware of the polluted conditions a multitude of people are forced to live in because of near destitute poverty. I would even try to help wherever I could. However, I never understood the intensity of these conditions until I got out the car, looked at the area surrounding the first center I visited, and experienced the atmosphere that was present. Many of the students who live in such areas do go to schools, whether they be public or private. However the quality of these schools would often be very low. For example, a fifth grade student at this school could still be reading at a first grade level. At these schools, students also receive very little individualized attention, which is essential at a young age to encourage learning and good habits. For me, witnessing these conditions first hand was eye-opening.

I learned earlier that this is where Pratham comes into the picture. Pratham works to further the education of youth who fall under this category with extra classes and programs that are supplementary to school. One thing that stood out to me during my observation of these classes was the amount of dedication that people who worked for Pratham had, whether they are teachers, accountants, or anything in between and how much of an impact they are making on students' lives. Also, starting from the first day, when I visited a range of classes with students anywhere from ages five to ten I was impressed by how smoothly and efficiently the whole system ran. I did not get to observe any of these classes in depth, however the level of enjoyment that the students seemed to have jumped out at me. These students were loving class; they worked with smiles on their faces. Another thing that impressed me was the teaching tools that the teachers used. Some of them were standard ones that can be seen at any given Pratham learning center, but many were hand crafted and drawn by teachers. By the end of my first day in the field, I probably visited five to six different learning centers for 20-30 minutes each.





On my second day I visited pre-school classes and sat through one whole two to three hour class. I enjoyed it. The class started with the students, about 3-5 years old, playing with toys that stimulated their minds for 10 minutes. Then the teacher took attendance at which point each student would get up one by one and put a check next to their name. Not all of them could recognize their name so there would be sticker with a picture of something next to their name that they would associate with themselves. Next the kids sang songs for 5 minutes and got ready for some learning. They started with a quick activity in which the students had to point something in room out and say what it does, for example a fan, which blows air. Then teacher had a lesson planned out that had to do with learning numbers. After that the teacher told the students a story that had a moral so they could take something away from the story as well. A few more fun learning-based games followed and then it was lunch time. Each student brought their lunch to class. For lunch time, the students and teacher would go downstairs to wash their hands at a spigot and then come back upstairs to eat their lunch. After lunch the class was over and the students returned to either another class or went home. After observing this class I headed to a few more preschool classes in different environments just to see how they looked, which ended my exciting day. Here are some pictures that I took.





The next day or two was spent prepping for the Pratham Access English Immersion Camp. This is a four day program that many schools are invited to participate in. Its goal was to immerse the students (average about 15 years of age) in the English language so they can improve in it and learn about some parts of another culture because all of the students are studying it in school. My role was to act as an assistant to the team running the camp and help wherever needed, interact with the students as much as possible (which was a lot of fun), take pictures, and give a presentation about my life and the US. I would have to say working at this program was probably the highlight of my whole trip to India.

Parts of My Over All Experience:

My first experience with the Access English Immersion Program was getting to see all of the students dancing and smiling. The moment I saw it I was exhilarated by the loud but fun music, and the many students moving to the beat. Each of the four days of the camp is started with aerobics. This gave the students a chance to get closer to each other, and loosen up before their activities (keep in mind the students are from a few different schools, so they did not all know each other). I thought the activity was very productive and a great way to start a busy but exciting day!



Another activity I observed was a hat making activity. In it, students make a paper hat and paste cut outs of people, places, and things they like and dislike that they find in magazines. It served as a fun and useful activity that provided a way for students to break the ice with each other. For example, one student that has a picture of a car on his or her hat sees that another has a similar picture would then ask, "Do you like cars as well?", and regardless of whether the answer was yes or no, a friendly conversation ensued. This provided a great way for students to practice English with another student who is at a similar proficiency in the language.



I also feel it is important to note that during this experience, at no point did the student seem bored, unenthusiastic, or disrespectful. They were always actively listening to every presentation and many took detailed notes.



After the hat activity, teachers came in the classrooms and taught the students how to construct sentences in a more colloquial manner, instead of relying on textbook structure. The audience was engaged, and answered all of the teacher's questions with success. I thought this gave them a great chance to speak and listen in English, while learning more English.



(Note that the Hindi on the board is just there to show the difference between Hindi's grammatical structure and English's)

The activity that ended the first day was handball. It was run by some students and teachers from the Riverside school. They organized many teambuilding drills and activities. One of them including people forming two lines, linking hands, and having one person run through the lines with their eyes closed.



This was followed by everyone sitting in a circle to talk about what it means to be a team, part of a team, and a good sport. This provided the students with something to take away from their experience. Then, the handball began!



My Personal Experience:

On the first day when I introduced myself, the students were very excited, and so was I. They were very interested by the fact that I live in the US and were curious to learn more. People were eager to talk to me and it felt very good. After I introduced myself, the students were asking a lot of questions about the US and some fun personal questions, like what people in the US eat and wear, or who my favorite Hollywood actor is. As time passed I got to know many of the students by name, and I received many verbal “thanks” and three thank you cards. It was uplifting. The people were an absolute pleasure to work with and it was so fun talking to them. When talking to them in-between activities, I did switch from English to my scratchy Gujarati at their request, but during all of the activities, English was basically the only language spoken. In these side conversations I got to ask them some questions about their life, India, and their interests and the responses were very interesting to hear. The same went for the conversations I had with the students when helping out with activities, or giving



presentations. I learned what they want to be when they grow up, and some of their favorite sports. By the last day, I had given my email and phone number, and gotten some emails and phone numbers to become Facebook friends with some of the students.

I gave a PowerPoint presentation that I created to talk a bit about myself, and the US in comparison to India. While doing so, I tried to be as interactive as possible, and it was a great success. The students followed my whole presentation, understanding what I said, and answering all of the comprehension questions I asked. They also asked many follow up questions on what I presented that kept the conversation very lively and entertaining. For example, at one point I started singing *We Will Rock You* and drawing the Statue of Liberty (the students were laughing and clapping like crazy!) I also was privileged enough to hear some of the students sing. One sang three minutes of Justin Bieber's *Baby*. Then afterwards, the whole class recited the Indian national anthem, it was quite moving.



By the time the Immersion Camp came to an end, I had made many new friends, and lived a great four days I will never forget. The experience was heartwarming.

After the Immersion Camp, I visited a school that attended the Immersion Camp and sat in on one of its classes. This class's theme was a reflection of the Immersion camp, so I helped the students out with that. We did some activities for that and then we played some fun English based games to wrap the session up. One of the games we played was 20 Questions, I had a blast and so did the students.

Afterwards, I went to Surat to check out the centers there. I sat in on another pre-school class which was pretty fun. The layout of the class was very similar to the Ahmedabad class I observed. The next day I took a bus to Chikli, which is close to Navsari. There is a Pratham PACE center located there. When I actually got there it was totally different than what I expected. The building, funded by the Naik foundation, was very large and located on the side of a highway. When I went inside the building was very well maintained and had a modern look to it. Inside I met with the manager of the sight and got a

tour of the facility and learned about the program. PACE centers are places where people between ages 18 and 30 (I think) can come to learn a specific vocational job for a certain amount of months. In the case of this PACE center, it is hospitality, which means working at a hotel in either food & beverages, housekeeping, or bakery and the course takes about three months. This gives people with less fortunate backgrounds a great opportunity to become specialized in a field where they can get a steady income a good lifestyle. I really enjoyed my visit, it was really cool seeing how this whole program worked.



This is one of the teachers lecturing a group of students in one of their classrooms.

This is a student cooking our lunch in their practice facility!



This is one of the managers of the center, one of the managers of the Surat urban centers, and me eating lunch cooked by students.

This is me talking to all of the students and answering any questions they had for me!



After visiting the PACE center, my experience with Pratham in India ended. However it left a lasting impact on me. I created memories I will never forget, met people I will continue to stay in touch with, learned a lot from travels, and I left India inspired to make a difference in any way I can.

Thanks for reading!

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