

Computer Lab for the Children of G.B. Road | New Delhi, India | Summer 2021

Previously called Computer-Based Curriculum for the Children of G.B. Road

Team Leader: Himadri Seth, India, Ithaca College'23

Team Members: Aman Singh, Delhi University'23; Anirudh Sengupta, Sciences Po'22

Our Project Goals

The main goal of our project was to provide a sustainable educational asset in the form of a computer lab, a long-term computer skills tutor, and immediate basic skills workshops for the children of sex workers in G.B. Road, New Delhi. We aimed to also raise awareness about the daily struggles and injustices faced by sex workers and their children, which are further propagated by the widespread stigma surrounding sex work.

Other Fundraising Efforts

We have made no other fundraising efforts yet to contribute to our project. We hope to remain connected with Kat-Katha and conduct a book donation drive, when possible, to expand the computer lab into a library. We may also eventually work with Kat-Katha to raise funds for a computer-skills tutor beyond the first year.

The Inspiration for Our Project

When I (Himadri) was in high school, I volunteered for a couple of organizations that provide education to underprivileged children who are subject to discrimination - sometimes due to their socio-economic status, and other times due to their gender or other identity. Since then, I have been very passionate about working to prevent injustices, especially against children. I believe that education is one of the best ways to empower children. It helps them grow up into adults who know their rights, can support themselves and their families, and further educate any children they may have, breaking the cycle of poverty and exploitation.

When I heard of the project, I immediately knew that I wanted to do something related to education for children. After that, it was simply a matter of researching and finding a section of children that could really use our help. In the research process, we came across an article about the problems that children of sex workers in Delhi face in getting an education, and I knew immediately that this was our project. Both my teammates, Aman and Anirudh, loved the idea too. Aman told me about Kat-Katha and their work, as he knew someone who had previously volunteered there, and that's how our collaboration began.

Why The Problem Exists

There are two fundamental reasons why the problem of inadequate education among the children of sex workers exists. The first is poverty – the sex workers do not earn enough to send their children to good schools, or any schools at all in some cases; the second is social stigma – even if their mothers work hard to send them to school, the social stigma surrounding their profession, as well as the violent environment in which many of them grow up, prevents the kids from blending in with their peers at school. Often, the children end up getting bullied or harassed at school.

A bridge school/informal school becomes necessary to provide these children with adequate educational opportunities. There, they can study with other children who have similar experiences as them in a safe environment, without having to spend any money. What our project has added to Kat-Katha's existing informal school are facilities and classes that allow these children to learn at a higher level, explore their creativity, and obtain the many advantages that a computer-based education has to offer. These skills will make them competent in a job market where they will have to compete with people who went to regular school and did not have to face the same challenges as them.

Why We Chose Our Host Site

One major factor behind choosing New Delhi was that Aman, Anirudh, and I have all spent significant parts of our childhood here. Growing up, I would always see children begging on the streets - shivering in the cold in December, sweating in the heat in June, and selling small wares that they were not old enough to know how to source year-round. I have always wanted to do something for children like them, to make them visible as individuals beyond just faces outside a car window. Thus, as soon as I saw the opportunity to get funding for

such a project in Delhi, I knew I had to grab it. Moreover, because all three of us are Hindi speakers and know the culture, communications with the nonprofit, the children, and others involved in the project were a lot easier.

Working In Our Host Site

Working in our host site was a very fun, engaging, and sometimes challenging experience that we all learned a lot from. We got to experience a side of Delhi that none of us had really witnessed before. Not only did we get to talk to Kat-Katha employees about the work that they do, but we also saw it in person. We talked to some of the women who live there who started a small business sewing and selling small bags, hair-ties, and wall-hangings. We were introduced to the children for the first time when we visited Kat-Katha's school to scout out the area for the lab, following which we interacted with them on multiple occasions in our workshops. Seeing the world from their perspective and seeing all the talent and excitement they brought to each session boosted our confidence in the work we were doing.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

There were sometimes when it felt like aspects of the project were not going to work out. This was especially true because at the time we started the project, India was in the end stages of the massive second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made news globally as one of the worst in the world at the time. Many people were yet to be vaccinated, especially children, and that greatly limited our ability to work on the ground and in person. We had to figure out ways to move our workshops online and have a Kat-Katha instructor present in the lab every time we conducted a workshop to make sure the children were able to access the video. It's something we laugh about sometimes, but because of this, one of the first computer skills the students learned was to operate Zoom and Google Meets.

Another challenge we faced was getting permission to use the space that we had initially shortlisted for the lab. This space is located right above an all-women police station, and while the police officers were okay with us using the space, we still had to get permission from the D.A. to use it. When we reached out to the D.A. though, we didn't hear back from him for weeks. We had no option but to change the location of our lab later and set up all the computers in one of Kat-Katha's existing classrooms. While this was more cramped, in the end it worked out. There were challenges and time crunches throughout our project, but I believe that working through them and still finishing our project made us even prouder of the work we did and gave us a lot of useful insights for the future.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

Initially, when the second wave of COVID-19 cases was still not fully out of the way, it was difficult to stay in regular communication with Kat-Katha and work on our project remotely. Everyone was preoccupied with other concerns as things were swept out of place by the completely unexpected and devastating second wave. Due to this, some phases of our project were delayed, and miscommunications also occurred.

However, we dealt with every miscommunication or conflict as it came, and I believe that taught us a lot about teamwork and accommodating different ideas and styles of work. Another challenge was coming up with an appropriate lesson plan for the first computer skills workshop. We didn't realize how hard it would be to start from the fundamentals of what a computer is and how to use it. However, the enthusiasm and perseverance of the children kept us motivated and left us feeling fulfilled after each session.

How do you define peace?

Peace, for me, is a state in which as many people as possible in the world are in an environment where they are given an equal chance to achieve their potential and given extra resources for the same if they are in a disadvantaged position at birth. In this utopian state, there is no injustice or cruelties, and everyone is given a chance to find happiness and live their lives on their terms.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

I think our project contributes to peace as it provides additional resources to those who find themselves disadvantaged at birth to rise to the level of others born with more privilege than them, and to achieve their potential. While this project doesn't help every underprivileged child in the world and doesn't even solve all the problems this one group of students might have, it begins to make a meaningful effort in that direction. In the short-term, it will contribute to peace every time a student forgets about their bad day making graphics on Canva for hours, or dreams about being a professional photographer after successfully editing a picture for the first time or attends an online class and can finally relate to all the Zoom jokes everyone's been making.

In the long-term, it will contribute to peace by empowering these students with education and critical computer skills that most jobs these days require. It will give them a chance to stand up for themselves, rise beyond their circumstances, and perhaps even be an inspiration for their juniors or other children like them. It will give them a chance to find a path to greater happiness for themselves and their families, and perhaps start living life on their terms.

How has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

This project has changed the way I think about the world as it has made me feel like I can have the power to bring actual, tangible change in people's lives. I am not a stranger to seeing poverty and children from very different backgrounds, I have experienced this even in my past volunteering work. What is new is that finally, I feel like perhaps I'm not so helpless when it comes to making big changes. This also directly applies to how it has helped me evolve as a person – it has made me more confident in my change-making abilities, and more driven towards working in a field that allows me to help other people.

Personal Statements

“Interacting with the children of G.B. Road has taught me a lot about how starkly different their lives are, and I now find myself attached to this cause, with hopes to continue working with them in the future.” – Himadri Seth

“Working on this project helped me realize the deep divide that the education sphere has today in India, especially in our marginalized and overlooked communities and how the pandemic has exacerbated the effect of the same.” – Aman Singh

“I enjoyed every moment of working with the children and seeing them learn and express their creativity during the workshops.” – Anirudh Sengupta

“One of the most touching stories is of a four-year old boy from G.B. road who grew up in a detrimental environment where he learned to cuss very frequently. He started visiting the computer lab with his elder brother during the pandemic. Upon engaging with other children, he became everyone's favorite. He sat in front of the computer and listened to music all day long. Everyone loved his energetic personality. Eventually he stopped cursing as frequently and his behavior improved to a large extent.” – Young Writers' Fellowship students' report*

*A group of students who did a project on our computer lab for a program called “Young Writers' Fellowship.”

