Cultivating Hope: Healt

Cultivating Hope: Health Sovereignty, Indigenous Ecological Knowledge & Education in Spiti Valley, India
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Summary

In collaboration with Munsel Ling Home School, children learned about their local environment, especially indigenous medicinal plants, from local ecologists such as farmers and doctors. This project encourages stewardship in Spiti by including local ecological practitioners into schools to generate and situate context-specific knowledge towards attaining sovereignty.

Project Description

Planning strategies and building partnerships

I conducted a literature review (reading relevant articles from the first 50 pages on “Spiti Valley Himalayas” search on Google Scholar), and visited Spiti Valley for preliminary research in August 2019: I engaged in participation observation, surveyed about 50% of households in Chicham Village, and visited Munsel Ling Home School to interview Lama Tashi (Founder). I employed methodologies to gain a longitudinal understanding of Spiti through two visits (Summer 2016 & 2019); to connect with locals in Hindi (my native language and some Spitians second fluent language); to forge a multidimensional understanding of households using surveys to explore socio-economic structures; and finally to ground my understanding of Spiti and its peoples, I engaged with locals in within their everyday life (participation observation).

I learned that as a result of land-use changes, Spiti is experiencing a loss of agrobiodiversity and indigenous knowledge, and food, water and health insecurity. Furthermore, climate variation is exacerbating anxiety. The importance of reviving indigenous knowledge is realized in the attainment of sovereignty, which enables the building of anticipatory capacity in the face of wicked problems.

Education has the capacity to affect indigenous food sovereignty. With this project, I have chosen to collaborate with Munsel Ling Home School, in Rangrik, which boards children from all across Spiti Valley. Children here begin their schooling as early as kindergarten and until the 12th grade. Lama Tashi Namgyal is the principal at Munsel Ling and the Founder & Director of the Rinchen Zangpo Society for Spiti Development (with Munsel Ling School as a branch), which aims to “preserve and promote enjoyment of Spiti's peaceful, Buddhist culture.”

During my preliminary visit, I noticed that children's health was a major concern and conferred with Lama Tashi to confirm that flu-like symptoms are observed in majority children all-year round. Upon further discussion, I learned that even though there is a humble space for a clinic in the school's compound, no doctor visits regularly to prescribe medicines. Lama Tashi expressed the dire need for facilities offering medical attention in Spiti Valley, which substantiates on data from surveys. Data from surveys also indicated that the majority of villagers find their local medicine man to be the most trusted and seek him as the first avenue for medical attention.

I proposed to Lama Tashi a potential collaborative project to develop a curricula focused on indigenous ecological knowledge when Lama Tashi excitedly said, “if we start now, younger generations can inherit knowledge.” I also suggested the idea of mirroring the significant role of local medicine men in Spiti within Munsel Ling Home School. Bringing in medicine men would emphasize their role as educators of indigenous plant knowledge and ethical harvesting. In addition, we discussed the involvement of local Spitians as facilitators to teach and train younger Spitians about the indigenous plants and animals, and traditional agriculture. Through this we hoped to strengthen the School’s relationship with indigenous elders, medicine men and local conservationists to reintegrate the context of Spitimeaningfully into the education of its children to embrace the intergenerational transmission of traditional ecological knowledge.
Changes in Plans

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, we had to push project implementation from Summer 2020 to 2022. So, in terms of adapting to circumstances, a lot had changed in Spiti but, the significance of this project only grew, as the importance of health sovereignty became an urgent requirement. On the other hand, I hadn't met my collaborator since August 2019 and so in order to discuss the plausibility of project implementation in Summer 2022, I met with him in Delhi in Dec 2020. And then, after all that I had planned to travel to Spiti on 15 May 2022 but then my collaborator contracted COVID and we had to delay our plans by another month. So, there were a lot of challenges that we adapted to.

Fundraising

I received $1500 in funding from the Lassoie Travel Grant at Cornell University, which supported my visa application fees to return to the US after completion of the project. It also covered my health costs incurred during travel, in addition to some expenses incurred in Mumbai due to the unexpected delay of heading to my field site.

Future Directions

My collaborators at the school and community members involved in the project were very pleased with how the project weaved the socio-cultural knowledge of Spiti into modern educational institutions to address real-world problems. The remaining funds at the school will be used towards continuation of the project. In fact, the school has already found sponsors interested in funding the continuation of the project.

Reflection

Defining Peace

“Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice” (Spinoza, Theologico-Political Treatise, 167). Violence is realized in the lack of sovereignty, and so to be food, health, water, energy insecure is a form of violence. We must note the implications of the wicked problems faced in insecurity such that structural violence is a constant possibility especially in vulnerable communities and that the “denial of self-determination over food and medicine is a repudiation of fundamental rights of autonomy as guaranteed by Article 24 Section 1 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

> Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals. Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services.”

Cultivating Peace

This initiative actively centered indigenous ecological knowledge in schooling to emphasize self-determination and to pave the path towards food, water and health sovereignty, especially in the face of wicked problems such as climate change. To work with children using a dialogic method empowers and generates capacity (Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed). We not only began including indigenous students in the decision making process of what their education provide them with but, with the socio-culturally appropriate tools needed to strive and succeed within modern society, utilizing the skills of indigenous knowledge that surrounds them in everyday livelihoods while making conceptions around health sovereignty relevant.
Challenges & Dilemmas

Conflict is a part of a relationship, and to address it only builds the relationship. I most definitely encountered conflict with my collaborator but, to talk through our ideas and thinking helped us appreciate each other's perspectives, and to thoughtfully design the project each step of the way. I learned about the ways in which modern schooling institutions further patriarchal ideas and found myself following the path too at some points because sometimes I was not in the appropriate position to challenge community structures as an outsider. Nevertheless, I was aware of these dynamics and tried to address them with my interactions with the children and other community members.

Shifts in Perspective

I was inspired by the children I was working with at the School. They were truly the most memorable educators I had in my time in Spiti. After the trips, they shared with me how the knowledge they gained was “healthful,” and this gave me hope to keep on pushing through even in challenging environments and times. I felt privileged to have worked with them and to be able to be a part of their learning process while being situated in such a warm community.

Personal Statement

I feel privileged to have spent time with the children of Spiti Valley; to be able to learn from and with them. In addition I felt my hope in the world revive while being welcomed into homes and lives of the Spiti’s families and to hear from the children the kind of impact that the project had on their conceptions of health, community, and sovereignty.