Indigenizing Pedagogy: A Freedom School Concept for Harsukh
Pakistan
Denison University
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Summary:

My project, “A Freedom School Concept for Harsukh”, was implemented in partnership with Kitab Ghar, a public library, and Harsukh, a school in Lahore, Pakistan. The Freedom School program curated teacher training and organizing workshops, developed a “freedom summer” program, worked with student interns and volunteers, and is in the process of creating a resource archive.

Project Description:

The stark reality of social inequity in Pakistan is self-evident in the elitist network of private schools and the state’s failure when it comes to education. Furthermore, the learning process is often instituted through spaces, tools, and vernaculars that are unfamiliar and do not honor the students’ lifeworlds, communities, and passions (Zulfiqar, 2). When learning is not socially relevant and does not benefit students and their communities, it is a tool of oppression and reinforces inequalities (Jackson and Howard, 157). As someone who has navigated many spaces of this landscape, it means a lot to me to work with and learn from those actively trying to challenge the status quo and working towards a transdisciplinary shift in youth education.

Kitab Ghar, a public library, hosts many community events aimed at promoting the arts and platforming local artists and performers. It regularly hosts workshops on music, writing, languages, and more and has also published an anthology on education in Pakistan. As an initiative started by young people, Kitab Ghar is sustained through this programming and young people’s activism. Zara Zulfiqar Mannan, an educationist, musician, writer, and one of the founders of Kitab Ghar, facilitated the freedom summer workshops aimed at empowering Harsukh teachers and equipping them with writing, analytic, and organizing skills. Sanina Batool Gilani, an arts-based pedagogy specialist, conducted another set of workshops with the teachers focusing on curriculum, the history and present of freedom schooling, and tools and skills for designing classrooms and lesson plans. The ongoing work and existing networks of organizers and educators enabled the project to collaborate with and benefit those most engaged in revolutionizing public education in Pakistan.

I had to make certain changes to the initial plan as the teachers, facilitators, and organizers at Kitab Ghar and Harsukh were always in conversation with each other and I made sure that the project continually incorporated their feedback and needs. This included adjusting the initial budget plan, the timing and number of workshops, and the format of the workshops and of the work produced. The teachers and students were able to choose what they wanted to do for community-wide programming, resulting in a menstrual awareness workshop at Harsukh! It was an honor to be in community with the incredible organizers and educators at Harsukh, and I continue to work with them and on my own research on pedagogy and inequality.

Reflection:

My project was designed in “the interest of the preservation and survival” of the communities where it is situated. The project design is predicated on the notion that knowledge already exists within communities and a successful education responds to, understands, and honors that knowledge (Robin D. G. Kelly and Fred Moten). The anti-racist slogan “no justice, no peace” is a useful paradigm to ground my definition and understanding of peace. I am interested in the idea of ‘peace’ as inextricably linked to a collective recourse from and abolition of systems of violence, injustice, and exploitation. My work with community members and educators over the summer has reaffirmed and expanded this framing for me. The project allowed for the educators to develop and articulate a framework for their work on their own terms and to delineate their needs as educators. As a community of educators, organizers, and students, we worked through our social realities towards understandings and model(s) of the kind of educational and community spaces we want to create for ourselves and our publics. During the workshops, we translated and disseminated feminist, anticolonial, and pedagogical texts, and our discussions and work built on these works. We will make our collection of materials, including translations of socialist feminist texts,
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1964 Mississippi Freedom School material, rubrics for teacher self-evaluation, and collective writings and notes on teaching and working at Harsukh, public and accessible soon.

While working at Harsukh, which has the explicit mission to work against colonial thought and violence in education, I gained heightened awareness of the dissonance or conflict in separating indigenous pedagogy and liberatory educational practices from broader contexts including community, land, and the environment. Thethar village is situated on the periphery of present-day Lahore and surrounded by military-owned elite housing societies. The vast expanses of land around the school, but more generally all around Lahore, have been cleared of “underdeveloped” and rural communities for gentrified suburban housing, expansive roads, parking lots, and commercial blocks, presenting a neoliberal landscape and the (false) promise of development. Much of this land has been cleared and leveled, villages and homes demolished by force and coercion, and gated and walled from all sides with the former residents and other migrants turned into dispossessed labor for elite neighborhoods. These realities that inevitably traverse any school setting in Pakistan represent a social condition in which some populations enjoy social, political, and legal prerogatives and protections while others are marked, depoliticized and exploited. It will be impossible to imagine an anticolonial education or liberation pedagogy in a setting that does not pay attention to its own community members, its place in hierarchies of systemic exploitation, and the emergent forms of resistance.

Personal Statement:

Through my work at Harsukh this summer, I am more convinced than ever that the struggle for a liberating education cannot be separated from various other collective struggles against exploitation and inequities. Communal peace is inextricably linked to community health and should be seen as communal recourse to justice and liberation from historical and contemporary forms of oppressions and exploitative practices. - Ali Imran