



HOME ABOUT RESOURCES EVENTS SUBMIT SUBSCRIBE SEARCH

## Out of Disaster Comes Opportunity: Initial Lessons from Teacher Mentoring in Banda Aceh, Indonesia

[Joy Lesnick](#) & [Katherine Schultz](#)

[View the PDF version](#)

Note: You will need [Acrobat Reader](#) to view or print these notes in Portable Document Format (PDF).

[Send Page to a Friend](#)

[Comment on this article](#)

*As a science educator, I have learned that teachers sometimes feel like they can't teach science without specialized equipment. In my experience, however, there are many science concepts that can be demonstrated with very basic tools. Building a sundial is one activity that is rich in content and requires very few materials.*

*Building sundials had been a successful activity for me with both students and teachers in the U.S, so I was excited to share the activity with teachers in Aceh during our two-week professional development session.*

*When I conducted the activity in my school in Pennsylvania, I used an existing pole near the school (often a flag pole) and outlined the shadow that the pole made each hour. Students and teachers alike became quickly engaged when within five minutes, we were all able to see that the shadow had moved. It always led to an interesting discussion about the earth's rotation, time zones, the sun, and the larger solar system.*

*In Aceh, with no conveniently located poles for the activity, I decided to pound a stake into the ground and draw lines in the dirt to chart the movement of the sun. I started by tracing a line created by the shadow. The participating teachers and I spoke briefly (through translators) about how sundials had been used to establish prayer times in Islam, and then went back inside the classroom for the remainder of the period. At the end of class, we returned to the sundial to examine the movement of the shadow, but to my surprise, there was no new shadow in sight.*

*With the help of my translators, I explained my confusion to the group. I told them that I had expected to see that the shadow had moved. We checked the sun. We checked the earlier mark. People suggested that the pole had been moved, or that the line had been drawn wrong. Finally, one of the teachers took another stick and held it across the top of my stake, making a "T." The shaft of the T was indeed along the line created by the earlier shadow, but the top of the T was closer to the stake than the original shadow top had been. Because it was close to the solstice, and we were close to the equator, the sun had been moving across the sky in a more direct east-west direction than I had anticipated.*

*The Earth had not stood still, and neither had I. This activity was much more of a real inquiry for me than I had expected, while being equally appropriate for the participants. The shadows continued to follow the line until close to midday, when they created a tiny arc around the stake before continuing the line in the opposite direction. And we had figured it out and understood it together. -NancyLee Bergey, Science Methods Instructor*

The moment that NancyLee describes above is a poignant example of an opportunity that we had as U.S. professors and graduate students to teach and to learn from 100 veteran Achenese teachers

for two weeks in July 2005. We came to teach and found ourselves learning more than we imagined. This opportunity arose from a terrible disaster. On December 26, 2004, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake - the most powerful in more than 40 years - struck deep under the Indian Ocean. It was centered about 100 miles southwest off the coast of Aceh, Indonesia, and triggered massive tsunamis across the coasts of Asia and Africa. In Aceh province, located at the northwest tip of the island of Sumatra in the Republic of Indonesia, as a result of the earthquake and tsunami more than 150,000 people were killed, and more than 500,000 were left homeless. In Aceh, the tsunami destroyed more than 800 km of the coastline, damaging roads and bridges, destroying approximately 2,135 schools and more than 120 health facilities. Reports indicate that over 40,000

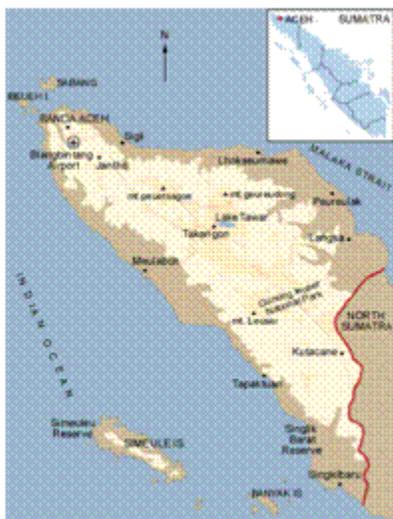


**The Republic of Indonesia**

students and 2,500 teachers and educational personnel died in the tsunami. The enormity of the disaster led to a temporary ceasefire of a 30-year ongoing separatist conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and Indonesian troops (TNI). Foreigners who had been banned from the province at the height of the conflict were allowed to enter the area to provide aid and supplies to people affected by this disaster. By one report, more than 1,000 relief organizations came to Banda Aceh, the provincial capital city and hardest hit area.

The education system in the Aceh province had struggled prior to the tsunami due to the lengthy ongoing conflict. Out of the devastation of the tsunami arose an opportunity for education officials, including the Minister of Education, to focus attention on children, on schooling, and on rebuilding for the future through education. In Aceh, many schools responded quickly after the disaster. Novice teachers were quickly hired to replace teachers who were lost in the disaster, and temporary bamboo structures and tents housed schools. By late January, just a month after the disaster, the Achenese community was working hard not just to rebuild, but to provide children with opportunities for the future, highlighting the resiliency, hope, and community efforts to rebuild after the devastation.

The education system in the Aceh province had struggled prior to the tsunami due to the lengthy



**Aceh Province on the Island of Sumatra**

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) was one of the NGOs supporting the Achenese people by focusing on protecting and educating children. Throughout the next few months, out of the disaster came the opportunity for IRC and the University of Pennsylvania to develop a partnership and plans for U.S. professors and graduate students to work with teachers in Banda Aceh, Indonesia for two weeks in July. In this article, we describe that experience, highlighting the opportunities that arose as a result of the disaster of December 26, 2004.

#### *Partnership and Negotiation*

In response to the tsunami, Penn's President Amy Guttmann appointed the Dean of the Graduate School of Education (GSE), Susan Fuhrman, to craft the University's response to the disaster. Rather than a focus on short-term relief, the University made the decision to focus on longer term development work for its Penn Education Tsunami Relief Response and looked to four NGOs to partner with for this work. One of these organizations was the International

Relief Committee (IRC). Based in New York City, this organization was able to respond quickly and work collaboratively with several other similar organizations. Soon after the partnership, the University of Pennsylvania was contacted to find out whether there was an interest in working with the staff in the office in Banda Aceh on teacher training. Although at first the call was for teacher training materials, the request soon became a proposal for a trip to the Indonesian city and direct work with teachers.

As director of teacher education at Penn, Kathy Schultz was approached about this project. Immediately seizing this opportunity to translate her work with teachers in a wide variety of professional development contexts to this situation, Schultz worked with GSE Assistant Dean Tom Kecskemethy and others to build a team of six teacher educators, including two graduate students—Joy Lesnick and Anita Chikkatur, two instructors at Penn—Angie Barr Feltman and NancyLee Bergey and a professor from Swarthmore College—Lisa Smulyan.

The first task was to develop a working relationship with colleagues in Banda Aceh. When Schultz initiated contact with Dean Brooks, Child and Youth Protection and Development Advisor for IRC and the lead in this project in Aceh, it became clear that they shared a common language for talking about education. As a result, negotiating the schedule and planning the workshop became much easier. Although it was difficult to imagine how our time would be spent in Aceh, we were excited about the possibilities that we started to imagine based on the descriptions Brooks provided and the research that all of the team members were conducting to learn more about the destination. By the time we were ready to leave for Aceh, we had also found two generous education supply companies, Delta Education and School Specialty, to provide science and math materials for the teachers in addition to private donors who helped us to purchase nearly 50 children's books. Brooks and his colleagues went to the nearby markets and purchased many different kinds of supplies that we requested including poster board, markers, watercolors, containers, string and a wide range of other materials. In addition, they made trips to the shore to find shells and other natural materials primarily for the science methods classes, but also for the other classes as well. We had a few images of what it might be like to work with teachers in Banda Aceh and those images became reality once we landed in Indonesia.

### *Teaching Through Translation*

Approximately 50 male teachers and 50 female teachers from across the province of Aceh assembled in Banda Aceh for four weeks of professional development in July 2005. The teachers were veteran elementary level teachers (K-6) from 40 districts across the province. Three to five teachers were selected by the head of each district to attend the training session in Banda Aceh, along with some additional teachers from Banda Aceh, and teachers from schools serving students with disabilities. Teachers were invited to attend with the intention that they would return to their schools and become mentors to other teachers – especially those novice teachers with no training who were hired to replace teachers lost in the December 26 earthquake and tsunami. Many had traveled for 1-2 days to participate in the training, and all teachers stayed together in a university dormitory while in Banda Aceh.

We divided the 100 participating teachers into four groups of 25, and they rotated between four different professional development sessions during the first two weeks – science methods, math methods, literacy methods, and a course on pedagogy or theories of teaching and learning. As instructors, our goal was to share broad conceptual ideas while also giving teachers resources, strategies, and ideas for practical use in their classrooms. All communication (including teaching) between the American professors and Achenese teachers took place through translators. Each of the four classes was assigned 3-6 translators for the duration of the two-week training. The translators were selected based on their English skills, yet few had done formal translation in this past. Many were students, lecturers, or faculty in the English department at Syiah Kuala University (UNSYIAH) or the Muslim University (IAIN) which was located nearby. Two translators worked with an instructor for each class, taking turns with the work of translation and interpretation. An attempt was made to match the translators with the subject areas with which they were most familiar in order to make the concepts and vocabulary more easily understandable for the participants. In hindsight, we speculate that the translators may have benefited the most from the courses since they heard each lesson three or four times, and may have used what they learned in a variety of different ways – as university instructors, as parents, and as undergraduate students learning to teach and sharing new ideas with other pre-service teachers.

For the 10 days of instruction, we each taught three classes a day punctuated by coffee breaks, times for prayer and for lunch. For the literacy classes, Kathy Schultz and Anita Chikkatur focused on the teaching of writing through writing, editing and making books for teachers to take back to their classrooms and schools. This process included teaching reading and writing in several genres and explorations of how stories are told and represented in several different media. The math class, taught by Angie Barr Feltman and Joy Lesnick, focused on teaching basic math concepts through concrete materials and collaborative activities that emphasized problem-solving. In the science methods class, the teachers worked with NancyLee Bergey to take an inquiry approach to investigating the world around them. They began by keeping track of the moon and offering explanations for its shifting size and shape in the evening's sky. Finally, in the class that focused on pedagogy or theories of teaching and learning, Lisa Smulyan introduced the theories behind the teaching methods we introduced, offering simple versions of Piaget's theories, Bloom's taxonomy, the logic behind using group work and the like. During the time prior to the tsunami, there had been practically no opportunities for professional development because of the wide spread internal conflict. We were asked by the NGO and the people they worked with in the education department and university to bring new ideas to the teachers that would help them to mentor the new teachers and also to grow in their practice. Our Indonesian and US colleagues in the NGO interpreted this to mean that we should introduce teachers to new ways of learning at the same time that we taught them new content and ways to introduce the material they were required to cover in their

[object]

standardized curriculum. We wondered how the teachers would respond to these new methods that seemed to us to be more typical of US and western classrooms. Although it seemed that most teachers had mainly experienced didactic teaching, these new methods fit with the national emphasis on child-centered learning. Perhaps because of the emphasis on engaging the teachers in learning by using these same methods (e.g., we taught them how to teach writing through asking them to write books and math by introducing math games that they played), from the beginning we found the teachers to be receptive to these new ways of learning. A summary of the class topics appears in Table 1.

**Table 1. Class Topics for Two-Weeks of Professional Development in Aceh**

	Literacy Methods	Math Methods	Science Methods	Pedagogy/Learning Theory (?)
Class 1	Storytelling and Introduction – Stories of Our Names	Introduction to the Inquiry-based Math Classroom; Glyphs, Graphing, and Groupwork	Introduction to Science Processes; Observations; Plants, Gardening, and Architecture	Piagetian Theories of Cognitive Development & Gardner's Multiple Intelligences
Class 2	Beginning Writing & Conferencing; Leads to Stories	Whole Number Operations, Place Value, Negative Numbers	Sorting and Classification; Day and Night; The Reason for Seasons	Learning Disabilities
Class 3	Teaching Reading and Teaching the Craft of Writing; The Elements of a Story	Data and Probability	Properties of Matter; Making Tools	Bruner – Inquiry & Discovery Learning; Bloom's Taxonomy
Class 4	Different Genres in Reading and Writing	Fractions and Equality	Simple Machines	Unit and Lesson Planning
Class 5	Reading and Writing Poetry	Geometry – A Tangrams Exploration	Moon Simulation	Small Group Instruction
Class 6	Storyboarding and Bookmaking	Putting it all together – Performance Tasks and the Mosaic Tile Problem	Food Chains; Food Webs; Energy Pyramids	Differentiated Instruction and Thematic Planning

Throughout the two weeks (10 days) of professional development, there was a constant stream of visitors through the classrooms, including students and professors from the host university, Syiah Kuala (UNSYIAH), the neighboring Muslim University (IAIN), a variety of workers from NGOs in the area, and staff from the Achenese Ministry of Education. A strong effort was made by the IRC to have the program reach beyond just the 100 teachers in attendance, by inviting others to visit and participate in one or more of the professional development sessions.

After two weeks with the U.S. professors, the Achenese teachers received two additional weeks of training from professors from Syiah Kuala University – the university host for the professional development session. These professors attended the first two weeks of professional development as participants, and many worked hard to incorporate the new methods with the more traditional educational style familiar for them.

### *Out of Disaster Comes Opportunity*

Prior to the tsunami, a network of professional development centers had been established across the province of Aceh. Named the "gugus" system (roughly translated to mean the center of a star), regional centers were established to be a source of support for the surrounding teachers and schools. Within a cluster, one main school served as a meeting and training place for teachers and administrators from surrounding schools. Due to the conflict, this system had lost support and funding and the network and opportunities had fallen dormant.

Despite this dormancy, in the time leading up to the tsunami, the national curriculum mandated new teaching methods that emphasize active, creative, effective, and joyful processes (in Indonesia it is called PAKEM: *Pembelajaran Aktif, Kreatif, Efektif, dan Menyenangkan*). Teachers were told by the Ministry of Education that this form of education was more beneficial to students than more traditional methods. The teachers had no experience with these new methods and little

[object]

understanding of how to shift their practice. However there was a desire—on the part of some educators—to learn these new pedagogies.

In policy research, it is quite common for support for a policy to be established, and then supporters wait for the right time to advance their ideas – when the “policy window opens” (Kingdon, 1995). This typically occurs when events and circumstances are primed for the solution that the policy intends to provide, and often after some kind of focusing event that brings attention to the problem at hand. In this case, the focusing event and opportunity for change was the devastating tsunami. Because of the work that had been done prior to the event – the existence of the gugus system and the growing belief in (and support for) child centered learning – a policy window opened at the time that we went Aceh to work with the teachers. Out of disaster came possibility – possibility to reestablish the gugus system of support training and teacher networking; possibility of shifting pedagogical methods from teacher-centered to student-centered; and the possibility to build a collaborative mutual partnership between an American university and the Achenese educational system.

The focus of our work with the teachers became introducing new pedagogies through teaching in the manner we hoped that the teachers would use with their students. We taught them this way not only because we hoped this would model practices we believed in but also because it seemed to match the kinds of educational practice they were most interested in learning. An extended example from the literacy class illustrates how we tried to bridge their knowledge and expertise with these new teaching methods.

Many, if not most, of the teachers taught in schools with few or no books or printed materials. Several were teaching in temporary buildings or tents with scant resources. The few books and materials they had prior to the tsunami were destroyed by the disaster. Although some teachers had textbooks to teach reading, most only taught students the writing they needed to pass tests and complete forms. In spite of these conditions, all of the teachers came to the class as storytellers with a vast knowledge of legends and stories mostly from the Koran.

We began the literacy class by asking the teachers to tell stories of their names, illustrating what we meant with our own stories. From the start, these stories were as unfamiliar to us as they were familiar to the teachers. Many teachers had short names connected to their families or the Koran. We had known that storytelling was a part of daily life in Aceh and wanted to use this oral tradition as a bridge to writing, which we knew was less familiar to most of them. Most seemed practiced in telling stories; few seemed to have ever written these stories down and most had rarely written extended texts. We hoped that by telling and listening to each other tell stories that they would become more activity engaged in writing. Further, we wanted them to notice these possibilities for their students.

They began by telling stories of their names. Some names contained meanings that indicated the future paths their parents hoped they would follow. A typical story went something like this: “My name is a kind of flower. My parents gave me this name because the flower is beautiful and they wanted me to live a beautiful life. And that is why I have chosen to become a teacher.” More than one person said that they no longer had the name they had as a child because of an event or tragedy—often an illness—they had overcome. The new name signaled a new beginning. From these initial stories we learned that their stories often had positive and forward looking endings, which coincided with the stories we had been asked to tell about our work in Aceh. Stories nearly always contained lessons and most of these were more optimistic than punitive. The stories introduced our goals of teaching reading and writing through texts that had meaning to the teachers’ – and their students’ – lives.

At the conclusion of the first class, we explained to the teachers that a goal of our time together was to write and make a bound book for the children in their classrooms. The idea was for the teachers to learn how to teach writing while composing a book for their students and to learn writing and bookmaking so that they could make books for their classrooms. Further, we hoped that by learning these bookmaking methods, the teachers could introduce them to family and community members, who might, in turn, teach new students and adults, which might ultimately lead to more books in the schools. Most importantly, we used bookmaking as a way to introduce the ideas of teaching reading and writing through literature and to teach the teachers about how to teach—rather than assign—writing. As the week wore on, we asked the teachers to tell stories in several different ways. For instance, we gave groups of teachers books such as Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* and asked them to tell the story of the book using only the pictures, illustrating the relationship between text and story.

During the initial classes teachers wrote their own stories, experimenting with a wide variety of

[object]

ways to represent the ideas through oral and written texts and illustrations. After working on the stories in their dormitories, several performed them, narrating the story without reading the words they had written. One woman ended her story with a beautiful song that introduced the practice of singing to our classroom. After that, the teachers frequently broke into song when phrases reminded them of Achenese songs they all seemed to know.

Many of the stories told individually and in groups were about the tsunami of December 26th. It seemed important to tell and retell this story. We were careful not to suggest the tsunami as a topic until each group brought it up on their own. Many of the teachers seemed inclined to follow rules, especially those given by people in authority positions and we worried that they might feel that this was the story they were supposed to tell or write we talked about telling stories of the tsunami, we emphasized the various ways to tell the stories—including stories told through animal tales, friendship and survival, personal narrative, journalistic accounts, and poetry, among other genres. Most frequently, the teachers told the legends and fables that had been related to them by their parents and grandparents. Many of these stories concluded with a lesson: "So this is why people consider the tiger a wise animal." While some embraced the idea of telling their stories of the tsunami, others chose completely different topics that either resonated for them or felt safer in the company of outsiders.

On the second day we taught them a simple way of folding paper to make small books as described by Routman (1994). We decided to introduce the idea of writing a book early on so that the teachers would become accustomed to writing, in addition to telling stories. We saw storytelling as a bridge to writing, a practice highly valued in the U.S. We tried to emphasize that we were not asking them to exchange practices but rather to add writing to their repertoires. At the same time, we wondered how to add storytelling to our own way of teaching.

The results were unexpected. Each teacher folded a single piece of paper with only one small cut into an eight-page book and took it back to their dormitories to compose a book. Many borrowed crayons. They returned with beautifully illustrated books of legends and of the tsunami. In class, they read stories to each other in small groups. Next, many read their books to the entire group. After they finished reading we pronounced, "Now you are authors." There was silence and then they broke into applause and smiles. We continued, "And this is how you can set up your classrooms, so that your students become authors. It's very different to write for tests or for the piece to be graded than to write because you feel as though you are an author and have the ability to tell a story to others." One of the teachers gestured around the room, "I would like copies of each of these books." We quickly realized that this was completely possible. We asked one of the teachers for her book and unfolded it. The entire book was written and illustrated on one side of the page with only a slit in the middle. We said that we could collect the books, take them to the office and xerox the pages so that each of the teachers could have 100 books. While some of them left their schools with no books, they would return with 100 and the ability to teach their students, colleagues and parents how to make these simple books so that they could have many more in their classrooms. As teachers translated our assignment to tell stories and write books into their own understandings of the role of stories in their lives and teaching, we learned from each other. They learned about the possibilities of transporting a familiar practice (storytelling) into the classrooms, taking a practice they had used informally with children outside of school and bringing it to the less comfortable and more formal space of school. We learned more about the possibilities for storytelling as a bridge to writing and the power of collective storytelling in the classroom.

One participant, Amiruddan, a principal of a local school in Banda Aceh, wrote a striking narrative that he illustrated with simple drawings done with pastels. He had written several other stories, often choosing to read and perform his stories aloud. One early story concluded: 38 people in my family died. The words of his children's book, translated for us by one of the Achenese NGO workers, follows. To see the illustrations in a slide show window click on the photo:



**The Sad Sunday in the Last of December 2004**

On a shimmering Sunday, with morning sunshine cheerfully dotting the ground, daughters and sons went outside. Birds chattered and the heavenly sounds and sights of nature welcomed and proclaimed the day.

[object]

That day was December 26, 2004. Nobody ever wondered what was going to happen. That morning at 08.00 pm, the earth opened and it felt like the end of the day. Fifteen minutes afterwards, big waves and seawater covered the ground. People screamed hysterically for help and ran.

Deep voices came from the sea and the shaking of the earth never ended. The fortunes and houses of people living near the beach were suddenly gone, taken away by the tsunami's wave.

It was 15 minutes. Afterwards the world felt so terribly hot. Children were scattered and could be counted. Only debris was left where there were once houses. All were silent. The only communication between humans was tears.

A lot of people searched for their families looking to see whether they still survived. All they could find was mass burial.

Those who survived the tsunami's angry storm were evacuated into emergency tents. Day by day and month by month, they faced a future they never thought would come.

Living in barracks, they educated their surviving children.

There were some who left and built a hut near the beach to begin to make a new living.

Both the government and foreigners now are helping the tsunami's victims by building houses for the Achenese on their land. Now they are ready to begin a new life.

This story captured the sadness and also the hope embodied in the stories we heard and were told. Each one contributed to our understanding of this context so far removed from our own, yet connected to us through shared humanity and stories.

### *Tensions*

Although there were a number of positive opportunities that arose during our trip, there were also a number of tensions that remained prominent in our minds. These and other tensions are described in greater detail by Anita Chikkatur (Notes from the Field -- this issue). Four tensions were especially salient. First, as professors, we were given a high level of status and were expected to provide expert information to the teachers that would help them improve their practice. Admittedly, we knew practically nothing about the context of schooling in Aceh. We did not speak their language, were not familiar with their national curriculum, did not know what kind of resources were available, nor how for each of us, our race, gender, age or religion would be perceived or interpreted by the participants. Despite our efforts to become informed prior to the visit, as well as our ongoing attempts to "work with" teachers – to learn from them and mutually construct knowledge - rather than "teach" the veteran teachers, we could not deny that our Western understandings, priorities, values, and perceptions were part of our teaching, our interpretations, and our interactions with participants. The two-week training was established as part of a tsunami relief effort, so the intention was for us to bring something to the teachers, to help them in some way. Although we hoped that we were doing our work in the best interests of the teachers, we couldn't help but worry whether we were acting as colonialists and in some way trying to teach our "better" ways of teaching to replace the "lesser" existing practices of Achenese teachers.

Before we went to Aceh we tried to understand as much as we could about the geopolitics surrounding our work. This was sometimes difficult to untangle because there had been so little contact between the West and Aceh over the past 30 years, due to the conflict. Further, the severity of the conditions caused by the tsunami meant that the Achenese government and people were eager to embrace aid from Westerners to help to ameliorate a situation that threatened to spin out of control. It was complicated to delineate the ways power was being used and misused, since the need for help was so great. As we examined our motives, we constantly raised questions about our reasons for going to Banda Aceh, trying to police ourselves to make sure they were connected to responding to their requests rather than satisfying our needs to respond to a difficult situation. While we could not completely resolve the tensions inherent in our travel, we attempted to infuse our work with these questions so that it would be more difficult to lose sight of the complexity of our presence and work in this part of the world.

We wanted to teach in a way that built on their knowledge and ideas and rested on notions of inquiry, which suggest beginning with a stance of not knowing. This conflicted with their

[object]

assumptions of our expertise and authority. All of us, even the graduate students, were referred to as the professors from Penn. When we suggested that there were things we were not so sure of and wanted to learn from them, we worried that we were violating their expectations of our roles as teachers or professors. Yet we did not want to fall into the traps of assuming that "our" Western ways of teaching and viewing the world were the "right" ways or even that they would work well in their classroom. Instead we were eager to offer ideas and discuss, with them, how and whether these ideas might make sense in their local context.

This led to a second tension. Because of our relatively limited time in Banda Aceh and also because our travel was restricted due to the on-going conflict, we were not able to visit schools in session. As a result we instructed the teachers in how to teach without the opportunity of observing classrooms. This made it difficult to know whether our ideas for teaching were a good fit for their local contexts. Further, the national curriculum was not translated into English. As a result, although we were interested in matching our work with the teachers to this curriculum, it was difficult to know enough about it for that to work. Angie Barr Feltman elaborates on this tension below:

We were trying to introduce "different" ways of doing something, but we didn't know much about what was already being done. How could we be respectful of what we didn't know much about while also suggesting we had a better way? Rather than teaching a "better way," our goal was to share some child centered approaches with teachers and suggest that they explore those with openness while thinking critically about how they could make sense within each of their own unique contexts. At the same time, however, we were defining "child centered" based on our own norms regarding what it means to best support children in a Western context. The very notion of putting children's needs and interests at the center implies the center of *something* - and that something (whether it be community, learning environment, or something else) is culturally specific. It led us to ask ourselves whether there are universal psychological, cognitive, or social/emotional progressions that are developmentally appropriate and not culturally specific from which we could connect with our participants? We wrestled with that a lot while we were in Aceh.

Angie points out the difficulty that we had in trying to make professional development relevant to teachers, and how our understanding of foundational concepts are often culturally-specific. As described in the first tension, we intended to "work with" teachers, but discovered that participants expected us to be the "experts," despite our best efforts to convince them otherwise.

The third tension that emerged was a tension between teaching and learning. We utilized cooperative group work methods and asked students to work together in groups to discuss concepts, solve problems, and apply the new knowledge to their classroom context. Yet while this was occurring, we were not able to understand or interpret the participants work, thoughts, or ideas. Translators would translate for us if we asked, but for the most part, we did not want to interrupt and trusted that the small group conversation was beneficial to the participants even though as instructors we were often unsure about the content, direction, or relativity of the remarks to the given task. Lisa Smulyan wrote about this tension in a post-trip reflection:

...A clear tension emerged for me between teaching and learning. The gap between these two always exists; a teacher can never be sure what a student learns, how the student hears or incorporates or makes meaning of what happens in a classroom. But in Aceh, this gap was extremely salient for me. To what extent do these theories, which make such good sense to me, speak to the ways of thinking and knowing that the teachers bring to their own learning and teaching processes? To what extent did the practices we espoused match in any way – or challenge in untenable ways – the contexts within which the teachers work? ... Even without the complications of translation – which so clearly add another layer to the "space between" teaching and learning – the possible lack of a common framework frequently led me to wonder what teachers heard; what it meant to them; what use, if any, they would make of it. Perhaps we always teach in a kind of vacuum, not knowing what are students are learning, but we rarely admit to or realize it. Given the language and cultural and cognitive barriers involved, this experience brought home to me how hard it is to know how what we teach is received and reconstructed by learners.

Lisa points out two questions that remain with us a year after the trip: What did the participants really learn from us? And what, in fact, could we really teach them based on our "expertise"?

A fourth tension was one of relationship. Based on the smiles, hugs, and constant requests to be in pictures, we felt like we had made some positive personal connections with participants. Yet at the same time, by the end of the two weeks, we knew the names of fewer than 20 students. In short, we knew almost nothing about the teachers – and they knew even less about us. Although

teachers in our classes seemed to be actively engaged, enjoyed our attempts to learn Bahasa Indonesian, and gently teased us in both English and Indonesian, the relationship was very different than those we had previously experienced. Lisa describes this tension:

...Our relationships were limited by our lack of common language and, perhaps, by the power differentials of teacher and student and, perhaps of white and brown, or of American and Indonesian. I'm sure there were other dynamics at work there as well. I only learned the names of a few of the teachers during the two weeks, in part because they were so different from any combination of letters with which I was familiar (at home I can often learn a class of 30 names by the end of the first class). I could only have conversations with translators, not with teachers, limiting our interactions to what happened in the classroom. And even in the classroom, I couldn't really engage with teachers as they engaged with the materials, because of the language barrier. As a result, I felt limited in my effectiveness as a teacher, since I depend so much on those personal relationships to guide me in my teaching (how can you differentiate instruction when you can't even begin to know your learners?!).

It quickly became evident that the "expertise" we relied on as teachers in the United States was not easily transferable. We lamented that we didn't know enough about our students, and did not have enough time to learn more during the short two-week visit.

In the end, the teachers and university instructors, as well as our colleagues in the IRC office, seemed pleased with our work. We were told that for the most part, when the university instructors continued the work with the teachers, introducing them to key aspects of the core curriculum, they borrowed and continued the methods we had introduced.

Still it was always difficult to know how much they learned from our work and perhaps even more importantly, how useful this work was to them. They were polite and gracious and we felt appreciated. In nearly every class there were final projects that they seemed proud to display. For instance, in the literacy class the teachers were asked to write children's books, illustrate those books and finally bind them using a Japanese binding technique. During one of our final periods of time together, the teachers met in their class groups and read their stories to one another. For the most part they seemed proud of their books which many had worked on for many hours. In the math class, teachers worked in groups to solve a problem using pattern blocks – one that had many different options and many correct answers. Once the group agreed on a solution, they made a poster describing their strategy, and presented this solution to their peers. Finally, in science, teachers had the opportunity to use every day items to make science tools to take back to their classrooms, use with students, and share with colleagues. Yet, even with these outward signs of success, it was difficult for us to know whether they took these ideas and translated them into their classrooms.

### *Moving Forward*

We were invited to return to Aceh in July 2006 to work with 20 of the 100 teachers and a larger group of university and NGO instructors as part of the continued relief effort. Two of the original team members returned along with a three additional people: Jeanne Vissa, Rachel Throop and Chonika Coleman. The emphasis of this more recent trip was to find a way to make the mentoring program for teachers a lasting practice tied to an institution. Our colleagues at the NGO, along with the Ministry of Education and the instructors from the universities are interested in restarting the gugus system with schools as centers for professional development and teacher support. After visiting classrooms, they have asked the new group to work with both university instructors and teachers to teach them how to mentor new teachers.

While last year the work seemed to be shaped by the disaster and the strong desire to make the lives better for children and teachers displaced by the tsunami and the war, the focus this year is on sustainability. This seems to be a critical goal. The disaster led to opportunities to touch other people's lives and to get to know people, even in limited ways, who we may never have known. The work this year went beyond short-term aid to imagining what a longer-term commitment to building infrastructure with the citizens of the country. The emphasis in the first year was on building knowledge and capacity to teach using child-centered and active methods. During this past summer, we worked to revitalize the gugus system through providing methodologies for teachers and school supervisors to support each other in teaching. Many NGO's do not continue to work past the emergency phase. The commitments of IRC and the University of Pennsylvania to continue to work together for deep change initiated and sustained by Achenese educators gives us all hope for the futures of our countries.

## References

Kingdon, J. (1995). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. New York: Longman.

[CONTACT](#)