



Bridging the Educational Divide in India

by Jithin Nedumala, CoFounder of Make a Difference (MAD) and 2010 YouthActionNet® Fellow



Often the solutions to some of our most intractable social problems are relatively straightforward, but it takes a mix of the right people, the right vision, and an irrational sense of possibility for that solution to emerge. What I'm about to share with you is a proven strategy for equipping my country's most marginalized children with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. By marshaling the compassion and drive of college students, our work also builds critical leadership skills. Sounds like a win-win solution? See for yourself.

Six years ago, I walked with four friends into a shelter for homeless children in India's coastal city of Kerala. In just minutes, our lives changed forever. We were young, still in college, and did not get along so well with our teachers, but we wanted to make a difference. We realized that the education system in India created a large disparity in how the rich and poor learned. We saw a huge untapped resource among us as young adults, who if provided the right platform, were capable of bridging that gap.

Fast forward to 2012. Make a Difference (MAD) today is more than a teaching organization; it is a platform that empowers youth to become change leaders who make positive, self-sustaining social impact in their communities. Nearly 1,800 MAD volunteers now reach over 4,000 children in 23 cities across the country.

The average MAD teacher is 19 to 20 years old, attends college, and balances work, studies, and a social life like any other young person. But they are not like every other young person. Every weekend, for three hours, they put everything aside to teach English to a group of local children. Why English? Research demonstrates that a young person's chances of landing a job in India increases by 400 percent if they can communicate in English. With support from our knowledge partner, Cambridge University Press, MAD volunteers teach English language skills that are critical for communication, confidence, and success in today's world.

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After spending one year as a teacher, the volunteers can apply to MAD's leadership development program, Leadership x Design (LxD). MAD Fellows in the LxD program run MAD chapters within individual cities and are given tools and resources to become high-impact leaders whose skills are in high demand. MAD Fellows have gone on to study at some of the world's most prestigious educational institutions, including the London School of Economics, Princeton, and the Indian School of Business. Others have been hired by an impressive array of employers, including Oracle, Google, Yahoo, and Goldman Sachs.

As for our students, the short-term win has been a visible boost in confidence—and skills for the future—as a result of the training and attention they receive from their MAD mentors who also serve as powerful role models. As impressive, less than 1 percent of the children have dropped out of school since the inception of the MAD program at their local center. One of these youth is Jobish Matthew, who attended our first-ever MAD class in 2006 at a YMCA Boys' Home for orphaned children. Recently, Jobish was accepted into the US State Department's 'Community College Initiative Program,' where participants receive scholarships to attend college in the US for a year in any discipline of their choice. His MAD teachers had helped prepare him for the exam, for which English is a primary competency.

As you can see, MAD's common sense approach of linking college-educated youth with students in need has resulted in a low-cost (roughly US\$100 a child per year), easily scalable model for advancing the educations and life prospects of thousands of disadvantaged children.

More than two million vulnerable children in India could benefit from these programs. Over the next five years, we hope to reach at least 15,000 more, while enhancing the quality of our current programming.

When we first started there were those who thought we were crazy (aka MAD) to even consider transforming the educational outlook for our country's largely overlooked children. Now, we recognize that the very same solution that works here could be made to work almost anywhere where the same essential ingredients exist.

Are we mad to think we can change the world? Maybe. But thinking the impossible is often where real change begins. **Y**