Developing Empathy through Theater

Eugene, United States
Kathmandu and surrounding cities, Nepal
Arun Storrs

Organization type:
nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector
Project Stage:
Idea
Budget:
$1,000 - $10,000
Website:
http://www.thekumariproject.org

- Boys' development
- Child care
- Education
- Girls' development
- Play
- Youth development
- Youth leadership

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

The Kumari Project's program teaches empathy by using theater to help kids understand others' perspectives and become effective, collaborative leaders.

Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?

Recent political unrest has caused the number of orphans to spike in the Kathmandu Valley. Adoptions have been halted for years due to
growing coercion, trafficking, and corruption of orphans. The number of orphans is increasing as resources are dwindling. Girls are especially vulnerable. Orphanages are mis-managed and under-funded. Often girls and boys at orphanages report being discriminated against in class for being poor or from a certain caste, blamed for stealing things just because they are poor, picked on by teachers for unpaid tuition, and being told they are inferior because they do not have what is considered a ‘traditional’ family. This, of course, adversely impacts their ability to learn and their chances of becoming confident, community leaders.

**Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!**

Theater is essentially the art of empathy. One literally embodies another character to tell their story. Theater is also play, so it a perfect tool with which to engage children to learn and practice empathy, collaboration, leadership, and improvise to problem solve. By teaching empathy through participatory theater to orphans, we can build confidence and empathy skills that will empower orphans in the face of injustice. By extending our empathy-focused theater curriculum to school children who are peers of orphans, we can cultivate cultural sensitivity and understanding, practice active listening, and develop the psychological skills of putting ourselves in another person’s shoes to understand their worldview. The workshops will consist of highly interactive workshops in writing, discussing, and playing improvisational theater games. The youth would create and perform theater scenes centered on topics of discrimination, allowing them to build and utilize empathy skills.

**Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.**

In the process of developing and performing theater in these workshops, participants will develop the abilities to problem solve on their feet, understand other people’s motivations through character analysis, listen, cooperate, build confidence, and, most importantly, develop their ability to empathize. We will excite and educate participants using simple, fun theater games. Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed envisions theater as a place to practice new ways of thinking that actors can then incorporate into real life. We will use scenarios that address discrimination and bullying based on ethnicity, wealth, family status, etc. The students will improvise different scenarios, experiment with different endings, and use question and answer sessions to understand the motivations of each of the characters. They can then use what they have learned to collectively problem solve and enact the solution. There will also be a strong writing component based on personal exploration. Participants will begin by writing monologues about themselves. They will also interview a peer and write a monologue from that person’s point of view. Then, the children will write their own short scenes about a conflict and its resolution. Participants will sign up as directors and actors. In rehearsal, we will play, practice, and discuss how to embody the characters physically and mentally. How does the character move? If they are egotistical, how do they walk? If they are insecure, how do they behave? What is causing them to do this in the scene? Finally, they will perform their scenes.

**Impact: How does it Work**

**Marketplace: Who else is addressing the problem outlined here? How does the proposed project differ from these approaches?**

There do not seem to be any NGOs in Nepal with children focusing on building empathy based on difference. We hope to set a precedent for this kind of work in Nepal in other areas of discrimination (such as gender, lifestyle, etc). One group in Kathmandu is doing social justice street theater about relevant social issues. They, I believe, would be a potential partner, as we could collaborate to give children training with actors from their company, and perhaps partner to increase the sustainability of and expand the vision of both our projects. Furthermore, this program is unique to social activist theater programs, which work with adults, not children, and use theater to promote a message, rather than using the process of creating theater to teach participants empathy.
Your role in Education

Other.

The type of school(s) your solution is affiliated with

Private (tuition-based)

How long has your organization been operating?

1-5 years

The information you provide here will be used to fill in any parts of your profile that have been left blank, such as interests, organization information, and website. No contact information will be made public. Please uncheck here if you do not want this to happen.

Innovation

How long has your solution been in operation?

Still in idea phase, but looking to launch soon

Define your company, program, service, or product in 1-2 short sentences [136 characters]

The Kumari Project's program teaches empathy by using theater to help kids understand others' perspectives and become effective leaders.

Identify what is innovative about your solution in 1-2 short sentences [136 characters]

Theater is learning to step into another person's shoes. There is no better way to teach kids to internalize empathy through play.

Social Impact

What has been the impact of your solution to date?

The Kumari Project has provided required school uniforms, textbooks, tuition, and nutrition to over 225 Nepalese orphans. This theater program, however, is still in the concept stage. Our Executive Director has extensive history designing similar empathy-building theater programs, most recently, consulting for Minority Rights Group International's EU-grant funded Street Theatre to Combat Racism Program in four countries. Additionally she wrote about implementing an empathy-based theater project in her Theater Studies Thesis at Yale 'Tibet Imagined: An Exploration of Social Change Theater, Movement, and Empathy Production.'

Using theater and play as a vehicle for children to express themselves and explore other people’s perspectives by creating and writing their own characters will build confidence, critical thinking, problem-solving, team-building, and empathy skills in orphans and non-orphans, creating a more accepting learning environment and growing responsive community leaders.

What is your projected impact over the next 1-3 years?

Within the next year, we expect to pilot this program in four orphanages and three schools, impacting over 210 children (120 orphans). Then, with continued support, we will repeat our program at each orphanage and expand the program to another three schools that orphans attend and four more orphanages. Finally, in the final year, we will expand this program to all eleven orphanages run by the Nepal Children's Organization, and at least one school attended by kids on those orphanages, reaching all 520 kids in the Nepal Children's Organization’s children’s homes and even more children at schools that orphans attend, cultivating empathy-building skills in all children who participate in the program.

What barriers might hinder the success of your project? How do you plan to overcome them?

Due to the political instability, there are frequent public transportation and worker strikes and petrol and electricity shortages. By creating a flexible schedule we will be prepared to overcome potential interruptions.

Culturally, Nepalese schools rely on rote memorization. Thus, it might be challenging for children to develop and write scripts from scratch. However, we designed the program to guide them through the creative process, starting with playing theater games and building up to cultivating creative autonomy. Also, bullying and discrimination might be difficult to discuss, so we will present hypothetical scenarios before discussing the personal reality of the scenes and the consequences on people’s feelings and actions. Our Nepali volunteers will translate if needed.

Winning entries present a strong plan for how they will achieve and track growth. Identify your six-month milestone for growing your impact

Identify three major tasks you will have to complete to reach your six-month milestone

Task 1
 Develop and finalize curriculum for theater workshops with orphans and mixed orphan and non-orphan groups.

Task 2
 Schedule logistics for implementing workshops, such as transportation, location, partner organizations, and supplies.

Task 3
 Schedule and execute pilot workshops totaling 15 hours each in two orphanages (one in Kathmandu and one outside) and one school.

Now think bigger! Identify your 12-month impact milestone

Identify three major tasks you will have to complete to reach your six-month milestone

Task 1
 Develop and finalize curriculum for theater workshops with orphans and mixed orphan and non-orphan groups.

Task 2
 Schedule logistics for implementing workshops, such as transportation, location, partner organizations, and supplies.

Task 3
 Schedule and execute pilot workshops totaling 15 hours each in two orphanages (one in Kathmandu and one outside) and one school.
Strengthen the curriculum, expand implementation to more orphanages and schools in rural and urban communities, and perform!

Identify three major tasks you will have to complete to reach your 12-month milestone

**Task 1**
Revise curriculum as necessary to strengthen it using experiences from implementing the pilot program.

**Task 2**
Implement program in two more orphanages and two more schools.

**Task 3**
Perform retrospective of entire year in a public community venue or Kathmandu theater locale.

**Founding Story:** We want to hear about your "Aha!" moment. Share the story of where and when the founder(s) saw this solution's potential to change the world [125 words]

I co-created a writing and performance workshop for young Nepalese immigrant women in Queens. The girls often wrote about fights with their mothers about their lack of freedom and how their mothers did not trust them. Two sisters performed a scene in which the eldest played the mother and the youngest, the daughter. As soon as it was over, the eldest exclaimed, "I understand what our mom went through to get us here [America]. We should be nicer to her." The two sisters commenced to write and perform a scene portraying how they currently treated their mother and how they wanted to recognize the sacrifices she had made for them and be more respectful in the future. I realized then the power theater has to transform, even more than those who watch it, those who perform it.

**Sustainability**

Tell us about your partnerships

The Nepal Children’s Organization (NCO) runs the eleven orphanages with which we will be working. Their staff and orphanage directors have been our long-term partners. The Kumari Project’s executive director was adopted from an NCO orphanage. Mitrataa, an Australian organization managing NCO's largest orphanage, is a partner of ours, sharing with us best practices for improving the well-being, education, and empowerment of Nepalese orphans. In April, we will begin paying tuition directly to schools. This is when we would start developing the empathy theater program in partnership with schools.

What type of team (staff, volunteers, etc.) will ensure that you achieve the growth milestones identified in the Social Impact section? [75 words]

Our board, stewardship councils, and organizational mentors consist of professionals from across the country with backgrounds in law, finance, education, performance, non-profit/public sector management, business management, marketing and branding, design, grant writing, and implementation of humanitarian service-providing programming overseas. These organizational leaders in addition to our volunteer staff on-the-ground in Nepal will hold us accountable to ensure that we achieve our milestones and support us as we problem solve through possible setbacks.

Please elaborate on any needs or offers you have mentioned above and/or suggest categories of support that aren’t specified within the list

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