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Project - Amar Jyoti School, Pokhara, Nepal
Placement dates – 19th. November – 17th. December, 2011.

Pre-departure Preparation

Flights from London to Kathmandu were booked online with Air India. We had one stop at Delhi and our outward journey was uneventful with everything going according to schedule. I found the seats in the plane rather uncomfortable for a long flight. We opted to travel by bus to Pokhara This was arranged for us by Tiger Mountain staff, and was an experience not to be missed.

One of the big questions was what visa to buy, as we would be in Nepal for just over 30 days. After some thought I decided to buy a 90 day visa in order to avoid having to go into Pokhara to arrange an extension and I obtained it via the Nepal Embassy in London, a very simple procedure.

Having already worked as a volunteer in Nepal, I was aware of the educational and cultural background in the country, but no knowledge of the school in question apart from what previous volunteers had said in their reports. My preparation for school work was therefore very general until Nicki (who was at the school several weeks before Lorna and me) was able to send e-mails about specific requirements.

Orientation and preparation at the start of the placement

We were met off the bus and taken to Tiger Mountain, arriving mid-afternoon on a Saturday and were able to settle into our rooms before dinner that evening.

Throughout the preparation period, we were kept well informed by Kate and Sallie, who nudged us if we needed to be doing something like getting visas, and sent us all the reports from previous volunteers. They were always helpful and efficient.

People and Places also put the three of us in touch with each other well before we were due to go out to Nepal. Lorna and I had worked together before, but we were able to arrange to meet Nicki for a day in Leeds to swap ideas and to begin to get to know each other before the placement started. This was helpful. We were also put in touch with Marcus at Tiger Mountain who very patiently and clearly answered our many questions and gave us wise advice, for example on not planning to use activities involving water, a very precious commodity.

My experience and work



On our way to school with some of the children

We worked with one teacher each, spreading ourselves through the four classes on the lower school site so that we each worked at some stage with each teacher for some of the time.

There seems not to be a regular timetable in use at the lower school site. Basically the day is divided into three sessions: 10.15 – 11.45, then a short break; 11.55 -1.15, then tiffin; 1.55 – 3.15 then home. I think that Nicki had sort of got the teachers to agree an amended structure, but even dividing the session into two, we found that the teachers tended to let the subject roll over and just drift on.

On the upper school site things are different. Here there are six clear lesson times; 10.15 – 11.00; 11.00 – 11.45; break; 11.55 – 12.35; 12.35 – 1.15: tiffin; 1.55 – 2.35; 2.35 – 3.15. For our first days no-one indicated

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where we should be, so we decided among the three of us who would go with which teacher until eventually we were given our individual timetables, showing which class we should be with, and giving each of us one lesson free. I have to say that I'm not sure that we always needed or wanted any free time in school. My opinion only.

Even with the timetable, lessons were not planned at all, and we very rarely knew from one day to the next, from one session to the next, what we would be working on.

Note from *people and places*: the lack of teacher training in Nepal means that teachers have not realised the advantages or need for forward lesson-planning as a means of delivering the curriculum, or accurate and appropriate time-keeping. This may seem unimaginable to us, but is a fact of life. The following extract is from our local partners at Tiger Mountain:

“Traditionally teaching in all subjects is by rote learning and class chants, and the work done follows precisely and fairly rigidly what is provided in the work books. It is this syllabus which must be taught, and on which external examinations are set and marked, and is therefore non-negotiable. But within this framework it is possible to encourage teachers to spend less time on making the class chant out the answers and more time on ensuring that their pupils can understand the questions and answers required.”

This is how successive volunteers work with the local teachers in the classrooms – demonstrating alternative methodologies and best practise – a system that is slowly beginning to make a real difference.

The school is very poor and has very few resources apart from what has been left by previous volunteers. We tried to encourage the teachers to use materials which were freely available – e.g. pebbles from the grounds – and collected “junk” items from Tiger Mountain – bottle-tops, loo-roll insides, cardboard, in order to show the staff that more imaginative ways of teaching could be found without cost. To a small extent this has worked and we did see some glimmers of hope.

Among other bits and pieces I took out some scissors, some pencils, rubbers and pencil-sharpeners, two rulers and a couple of geometry sets. I also left some English and Maths books which might be useful for ideas, but the material is too advanced for the children at the moment. We bought some picture books and a couple of reams of A4 paper. All of this has been left, either with the teachers, or in the metal box (rat proof) which we bought as a storage item.

Recommendations for the future

I feel that at the moment at least, the English-medium aim is a bit of a tall order.

I would hope that the next set of volunteers could **encourage understanding** of the English which is being taught. The staff teach, and children learn, say, the spellings of colours, by chanting as a class, but cannot recognise one colour from the next.

We tried to introduce a new passage from the book by preparing the class for it, so it would be good if staff were encouraged to approach the stories in the book in ways which do this. It could be achieved by having key words explained, by acting out the meaning, or by pictures, or by explanation in Nepali.

It must be understood though, that THE BOOK is king, and it is this to which teachers teach, and they are understandably reticent about doing anything which does not appear in the book. It is also the basis of the very important exams.

The English book is dire, but until that is changed nationally it is what will have to go on being used. It would therefore be extremely helpful to future volunteers to have a copy of the books they will be using for at least the duration of their placement. It would also be helpful if the local staff could be persuaded to spend even a very short time talking about how to review work done the previous day/lesson with the class so that what is taught one day can be reinforced the next.

Future volunteers can use, or make, opportunities to introduce some English into other areas of the curriculum.

In general, I believe that the best way at the moment to help the school is to encourage the teachers to teach the book in a more flexible way, and to show them ways of doing this.

Note from *people and places*: all of which we shall of course continue to encourage with future volunteers as the most effective way forward. This has all been discussed with our local team (Marcus & Hari) who will continue their own support and encouragement with the school.

Successes and disappointments

We have to remember that the project lasts longer than our participation in it, and what we see is only a very small part of a bigger continuum. Viewed in this light, although the successes seem very few and rather insignificant, built on and followed up they could be more important than we now realise. I hope so, anyway.

Before Lorna and I arrived, Nicki had visited a Montessori school in Pokhara, and as a result had arranged a visit for the primary staff from Amar Jyoti. This, I believe, has sown some seeds which we tried hard to nurture. So it was lovely that, at the very end of our placement, the teachers began putting posters on the walls of their classrooms on their own initiative. These were posters which we had uncovered in a metal box in the school and were largely Nepali publications. Something has rubbed off from our efforts to brighten up the rooms a bit. Another small success was when one of the teachers went out to collect some pebbles which he then used in teaching addition.



learning through play: maths – with building blocks, coloured marker pens

I hope that maybe we have encouraged teachers to ask individual children to reply to a question rather than have the whole class shouting out a response. I achieved some success in encouraging the children to say “please” and “thank you” – words which did not feature in their vocabulary before.

Note from *people and places*: and as Evelyn says, these small steps – which may seem imperceptible at times – are indeed making slow and steady development in the school. Gradual change and learning is more firmly rooted than sudden and dramatic differences – the slow and steady approach will build confidence in the teachers and continue to build through the work of future volunteers!

Disappointments there are a-plenty:

in the quality of the English on the part of most of the staff. Only about two in the whole school seem to have any degree of fluency;

in the quality of the English curriculum which uses out of date and irrelevant language and content; in the lack of communication between school and us. We discovered by chance one day that the following day would be a school closure to prepare for exams. We had not even been told that there were to be exams until late in the day. Each of the meetings we had with various members of staff was at our instigation;

in the lack of planning, even though I understand that teachers often have additional work outside their teaching job;

that the primary school children, or at least those classes on the lower school site seem not to be viewed as part of the whole school. Although one of the teachers from the upper school site came up most mornings to do the morning “drill” with the children, there was very little other contact, and no sense that what goes on there is related to what comes next.

Note from *people and places*: we deliberately include these less than positive comments as a means of showing the realities and context within which volunteers need to work. We cannot and should not attempt to change the national education structure – it is of course frustrating for volunteers to work within these parameters. Again, we would mention that slow and steady is the way forward.

Highlights.

Without a doubt, the children were the greatest pleasure. They would run up the road to meet us in the morning, and accompany us part of the way home at the end of the school day. They are affectionate, and most of them want to learn. There are some very bright children in the school who deserve to be encouraged and helped. Equally there are some very naughty children, but unless they are fully occupied doing work which is within their grasp and relevant, how could it be otherwise?

It was also a pleasure getting to know the teachers. Over the four weeks of the placement, I did feel that they relaxed with us, and began to want to learn from us. Their generous picnic in our honour on the penultimate day was very moving, as was the ceremony the following day at which we were treated as honoured guests, and bedecked with masses of flowers by the children.

Another highlight has to be the care given to us by all the staff at Tiger Mountain, and the commitment to the project shown by Hari and Marcus.

Volunteering - I would certainly recommend volunteering to other people. Passionately. We enjoy so many privileges; things we take for granted and grumble about if they are not there. We need to remember that we are all part of humanity, and working as a volunteer is not only rewarding for the volunteer, but it also reminds us that our society is hugely privileged, some would say at the expense of the third world. One of the posters I saw in Amar Jyoti school has the words "changing the world begins with educated children." Or something like that. And it may sound a bit pious, but I believe that those who can should put a bit back into society as a whole, and try to make even a little bit of difference.

However, I would advise anyone thinking of going as a volunteer to a third world country to find out as much as they can about that country before committing themselves, and not to go believing that our ways in the west are necessarily the best. We need to be open-minded, and flexible.

Leisure time - our day off, Saturday, is the Nepali equivalent to our Sunday so some places are closed. We spent some time in Pokhara, and visited a nearby Tibetan village; we spent one idle Saturday at the Lodge; we went on a walk from the Lodge another Saturday.

On the surprise day off (exam preparation) we visited the Ghurkha Museum and the Leprosy Hospital. The latter was a most humbling experience for me, and one which I shall long remember.

The Lodge is a lovely place to spend a peaceful hour – by the pool, or sitting on your veranda reading or watching wild-life, or preparing work (which just might be useful the next day!) or on the terrace enjoying the afternoon tea and cake.

Accommodation - Everybody comments favourably on the accommodation at Tiger Mountain. The staff take enormous care of all their guests. The food is very good, and plentiful, other guests often very interesting, views often spectacular. The rooms are adequately furnished, but we were grateful for the heaters, and the hot water bottles.

Any volunteer on this project must be fit though. In addition to the walk to school and back each day, at Tiger Mountain you have to be sufficiently agile to negotiate lots of steps, and at night, to do so by the light of a wind-up torch and kerosene lamps placed at strategic points. The rooms which it is likely volunteers will occupy are away from the main lodge, down several short flights of steps – over 100. These need to be negotiated every morning and evening, and in-between, every time you've forgotten something, or want to go for a swim or whatever.

On each of our overnight stays in Kathmandu we were accommodated at the Samsara Resort, a posh sounding name for an adequate hotel. Its location is good, very handy for a Pilgrim's Bookshop, and for souvenir shopping, but the breakfast was not very good, and on our return journey we were all very cold in bed.

Overall - This was my second spell as a volunteer in Nepal, and this placement was just as frustrating, just as fascinating, just as rewarding as the last one. If anyone reading this is thinking about going, I would say, go for it. The teachers and the children need a great deal of help, not only in achieving the aim of becoming an English medium school, but also in achieving a better standard of teaching in general. Go for it!

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