

Charlotte Chorley (English) – Nepal, Summer 2013

With the knowledge that I would receive funding, I was thankfully able to partake in a summer volunteering project in the isolated Helambu region of Nepal. For four weeks (30th July – 30th August 2013), I volunteered at Shree Bhumeshowri Secondary School in Churitar, Helambu on behalf of CU HELP. This is a particular branch, based at the university and now headed by Valencian Helen Denyer, of the charity HELP (Helambu Education and Livelihood Project) established by Jimmy Lama in 2008. I travelled with fellow Valencian, Jessica Currie, and met up with other Cambridge volunteers when I was out there.

The purpose of our trip was to teach English to the children at the school (volunteers are sent to various schools throughout the area). Because of the disparity in teaching between government funded schools (especially in the mountainous/isolated regions) and private schools, these children are often neglected and under-educated. Furthermore, because a basic/intermediate level of English comprehension is essential for any kind of further education, these children, by virtue of not learning good English, are severely limited in their future career and educational prospects. Being so far away from technology and resources,



they are forgotten by the government and are often, instead, destined to work in agricultural work even though their potential and eagerness indicate wider ambition. The aim of the charity is to send volunteers to these government schools who will teach the children English in order to help their future. I felt that this would be a perfect way to spend the summer, not least because I want to see the world and experience new cultures, but because I felt that this would be a great opportunity to help those who have been less fortunate than me. Having gone to secondary school with a Nepalese girl, who told me about the instability of the nation and the effect that this has had on education in the country, as well as demonstrating the hard-working ethos of the children, I felt that these children would benefit massively from our presence. And we were not disappointed.

Spending two days in Kathmandu after arrival, we were soon whisked off by charity helpers to the Helambu region – about four hours jeep ride from the capital. This area is mountainous, lush and isolated. Villages are basic; the facilities at a minimum. The village that Jessie and I stayed at was only a 10 minute walk away from the river and retail area, and luckily, only a 40 minute walk from our school. The house we stayed at was one of the richer in the village – equipped with a TV (although the satellite was temperamental and electricity was never guaranteed). We stayed with a male teacher from our school, his wife and their two children who studied at the local primary school. Such a living arrangement meant that we became completely integrated in traditional Nepalese life – we had meals with the family (lots and lots of dhal bhaat – which is rice and lentil soup with potato), walked to school with the host father and played with the children of the village. Eating is massively important within the culture, so we felt very privileged getting the opportunity to eat with the family – always leaving a piece of rice as tribute to Shiva. Throughout our stay, we also picked up lots of Nepali – so much so that I could have a basic conversation with border control at Kathmandu Airport. My pronunciation was



often the joke of many a Nepalese conversation, but I think the villagers and teachers admired that I was making the effort. It also meant that we could have conversations with the kids and teach them English with greater ease as they are usually quite shy so speaking in Nepales ('Namaste, mero nahm charlie ho' means 'Hello, my name is Charlie') put them at ease and gave them confidence to respond to me.

As volunteers, we had the responsibility for planning and

teaching lessons throughout the week (school weeks run from Sunday to Friday afternoon, with Saturday as holiday). I had planned lessons before I went, thanks to help from friends who study Primary Education, but nothing could really prepare me for the school. Arriving on the first day, we were overwhelmed with the amount of students. Bhumeshwari is a very large school and there are not enough teachers for every class – which runs from nursery (aged 3) to grade 10 (aged 16) – so our presence was very helpful. The attitude towards teaching was, we quickly found, not great; teachers looked down on their own job, because of the low pay rate and poor reputation, so they would often not bother teaching. Students were often left unattended, and teachers would only teach for about 20 minutes (talking directly from a book and getting the children to repeat it) before returning to the staff room for tea. Both this attitude and the method of teaching, we felt, needed to be changed. We ended up teaching English to nursery and grades 1, 2, 3, 8, 9 and 10 and Maths to grades 4 and 5. So we had a very busy schedule – teaching 6 or 7 out of the 8 lesson periods a day. As we would only get to teach for 3 weeks we aimed to get basic pronunciation and basic conversation done before we left – with a far-out hope of doing something creative with the children, as they are so used to being drilled by repetitive facts and are never encouraged to use their imagination, that we felt this would be really beneficial.

We soon formed very strong relationships with the teachers and staff at the school which made it very easy to teach and get what we wanted. Although the teachers were less enthusiastic than we hoped, they were very keen to learn English too so our lunchtimes were often spent going over our classes with them. This meant that we could leave the school knowing that they could pass on our lessons to future generations. Lessons consisted of fun pictures on the boards, dancing, actions and higher/lower repetition. The kids loved this change in teaching and we even had children come up to us on our breaks to run over phonetic pronunciation with them. Even though, to us, we felt that these were pretty basic/boring lessons, to see the interest that the lessons generated in every student made us feel that what we were doing was worthwhile. To have kids we hadn't even got round to teaching yet come and seek us out to run over what their friends had been teaching them really made us feel proud and that we were making a difference. The Nepalese language does not distinguish between the 'P' and 'V'F' sounds, so we spent a lot of time running over this distinction and by the end of our stay, they were pronouncing the phonemes correctly – which was so good to see. The other noticeable change was in

basic conversation – the kids had been taught only “I’m fine thank you” as a response to “how are you”, which we felt was inadequate. It was systematic, and boring, and had no individuality. So we spend a long time working on various responses, using role play and imaginative thinking to get them to think of new ways to respond. Every class, at every age, responded well to this generation of creative ideas. We then moved on to questions such as “What did you do yesterday?”, “What



will you do today?” and “What will you do tomorrow?” in order to give them more material to work with, as well as addressing grammar and tenses which was very poor. To get them to think creatively, we worked on role plays – getting the kids to imagine themselves as zoo keepers, or tourists and then to answer, which, for the first time in their education, meant they could think for themselves and not merely regurgitate answers. This laid the groundwork for our greatest day. Grade 8 were our favourite class – they were the most responsive and enthusiastic, and were really taking to the idea of creative writing. So, for our final few days we decided to work with them solely. We got them to use the skills we taught them to write a creative piece based on the opening line “Once upon a time” (we had read Cinderella and other fairy tales to them to introduce the concept of storytelling) and were amazed at the results. They had come on so far. We then took one of their stories – a tale called the Kind Wizard about a boy called Rohan who left home and met a kind wizard in the jungle – and adapted it to drama. They had never done anything like this before, but were so enthusiastic and responded really well to physical theatre and hot-seating exercises. They even wrote the script themselves and organised it all on their own – Jessie and I just sat back and directed at crucial moments. They then performed it in front of the teachers on our last day. Watching how far they had come in three weeks – speaking in almost-perfect English, performing a piece that they had created and directed themselves, with proper grammar and tense control – was amazing. It was worth it just for one or two children to have improved, but to have an entire class doing it was mind-blowing. I never felt that I could make that much of a difference there, or how enthusiastic and keen the children would be for teaching methods we take for granted in the UK.

Leaving on the last day was emotional. We didn’t want to leave. The teachers and all the students were crying, and we had a leaving ceremony in which a few of our grade 8 students gave speeches and said how much we’d helped them. Then all of the teachers, and our favourite students, put tika (a kind of chalky paste used in celebrations) on our faces and dressed us in scarfs. We left the school with heavy hearts and plenty of memories, and with the knowledge that we had made a difference – to both teachers and students. We gave strict instructions to Jimmy and other HELP workers of how we wanted the money we raised to be spent. I had raised over £400 on my JustGiving page for the charity and decided that I wanted the money to be spent on wall

displays so that the kids could take pride in their work and have it displayed on the board. I wanted bright colours in the dull rooms, posters of the world and phonetic exercises, and an "About Me" wall that they could update and change regularly. I wanted lots of art supplies – pens, pencils, books, glue and glitter – and for the school to implement art/creative classes once a week so that students could unlock their imagination. I don't want the children to lose imagination, because it is so essential – it needs to be nurtured. If there is any money left over, then I want my money to go towards laptops (the school have two but they are very old) and better seats in the classrooms – as the ones currently are so hard and uncomfortable. This, I feel, will make a massive difference.

Leaving Nepal on my final day was an emotional one, but I felt as if I had completed what I came there to do. I left feeling inspired – those kids appreciate every bit of education they get, and it made me appreciate what a fantastic and lucky position I am in to. Although the experience confirmed that teaching is not the career path I want to go down, I enjoyed every second. I never said 'no' to anything, and it meant that every experience was a new one (I often went on treks with my host father to various religious festivals, which was absolutely incredible!). The experience has made me look at inequality, and enlivened me with a passion to make a difference and fight. I take Western luxuries for granted, but I returned with an awareness that I hope will not rub off. I'd love to return to the country and to the school, perhaps to build rather than teach, or to work primarily on drama and creative writing with the children – but for now, I have the contact details of those important few I met (my host father has already emailed me!), and I look forward to keeping in touch with them and hearing all their news.

Knowing that I will get funding for the trip allowed me to book my flights in the first place – without which, I would not have been able to go and have the experience that I did. An experience which did not only affect me, but the people of Bhumeshowri. So thank you.