

Coco Day – Nepal, Summer 2014

This summer I, along with about fifty other students, have spent a part of my holiday in the Helambu region of Nepal, living alongside and teaching locals in a very small, rural village. The village my volunteering partner Helen and I stayed in is called Gufa, and is located a three-hour bus ride and then a five-hour steep uphill walk away from Kathmandu. Its inaccessibility means it is very underdeveloped, compared even to other villages the HELP programme (which we volunteered with) assist, however the villagers were still incredibly kind, concerned and welcoming.



We spent the four weeks we were there living with a host family, which was a great experience in itself – accustoming ourselves to the very different lifestyle gave me a lot of respect for the locals, but at the same time I loved the simplicity of it. Slowly improving at washing our own clothes at the outside tap, getting used to bathing via a bucket of cold water and increasingly enjoying the spicy dal bhat we were fed twice a day are all experiences I will remember.

The school in Gufa is very small and faces many problems – established in 1976, it has eighty students on record but only 50-60 reliably come to school every day. Whenever they are needed to help at home or in the fields, they simply don't show up, sometimes for a number of days in a row – meaning, of course, that they quickly fall behind. Another major issue is the lack of good English amongst the teachers; the headmaster, with whom we had the most interaction, has some vocabulary but cannot form coherent sentences, and the same is true for the other adults in the village who have any English at all (most of the women do not). Add to this the fact that government-issued textbooks are at an impossibly high level for these students, and their English lessons become next to useless.



At the start, even simple communication was very difficult for us – just explaining to the children that we wanted them to write something down or come up to the board took time, but this, along with other things, improved the longer we stayed. The good side to these problems – for me and Helen, at least – is that we very quickly felt like we were making a difference to the children, and by the end of our stay they could communicate with us in ways they certainly couldn't have only a couple of weeks earlier.



We taught four (out of a total of five) 45-minute lessons a day; both of us taught classes 3, 4 and 5 (meaning they had a very high proportion of English lessons whilst we were there) and Helen taught Class 2 while I had Class 1. We tried very hard to make the lessons fun and interactive; right from the start we made the children active during lessons, with miming, singing and role-plays, and tried to combat the shyness and reluctance to speak that was incredibly prevalent. By the end, the majority of the children were much more outgoing – keen to answer questions and come up to the board to write during class, and to earn themselves a sticker! We spent part of the

first lesson with each of the older classes making name cards and then, for the rest of our time there, gave out stickers to put on these cards – a reward system which we found very effective (and helpful for remembering names!)

Another issue we came across and had to try to rectify was the tendency of the students to simply copy down everything that was written on the board in front of them, without any thought to creativity or coming up with answers themselves. This is very much a problem with the teaching and is something that occurs throughout the country, so we spent some time –

particularly with classes 4 and 5 (aged around 9-14) – asking them to write paragraphs about their family and leaving gaps in sentences for them to fill in with words of their own choosing. Even asking them to draw and colour-in objects or animals without a reference to copy from (which we did on a festival day when only 20 or so students were in school) is something that they struggled with at first.



Despite all these difficulties, both Helen and I enjoyed (almost!) every moment of our time teaching – though terrifying at first being put in front of a group of kids when we had no experience whatsoever, the upside to the small class sizes (a maximum of 17) was that we soon formed relationships with the students. The ones who lived close enough (about 20-30) came to our house every evening for a couple of hours, and we played English games with them outdoors until it got dark and they had to go home. Through this, we got to witness them laughing and having a

great time, slowly overcoming their shyness to drag us into the games and laugh every time 'Miss' lost the game or got caught. I will never forget these children, who are so good-natured and never seem to sulk, who uncomplainingly come home from school and spend hours helping their parents with whatever they're needed for. I feel that the experience of living with them and teaching them made me far less self-conscious, and I enjoyed myself more than I ever could have imagined whilst chasing around and doing silly dances.

Overall it was a wonderful, unforgettable and incredibly humbling experience seeing the challenges which some people face in order to get an education, for example the handful of students from Gufa who go on to the secondary school in Jyamire, which involves a two-hour walk down the mountain and three hours back up every single day. I feel like Nepali village life has given me a much greater sense of perspective, which I sincerely hope I will be able to maintain throughout the coming Cambridge year.