

Fabia Crole (Classics) - Nepal, Summer 2013

Over the summer I spent 6 weeks in Nepal with the student-run organisation CVN (Cambridge Volunteers Nepal). CVN is part of HVP (Hindu Vidyapeeth) - a charity tackling educational problems in Nepal. The government schools receive very little funding and are therefore lacking in basic resources and private educational establishments exploit this problem, with independent schools often being used as a money making endeavour. However, HVP aims to counteract this, with a vision of an education which is holistic in its approach, embracing the best bits of the modern western style of academic education, together with an emphasis on open-minded thinking, global awareness and tolerance.

HVP has 3 schools, two based in and near Kathmandu and one in a remote area of the country called Dang. I was teaching at the school in Dang along with 2 other volunteers from Cambridge and 5 from Oxford. We were hosted by The Children's Peace Home which provides a home and a family like environment, as well as a guaranteed place at HVP school, for 35 children. These children have often lost at least one parent or come from families who either treated them badly or were unable to support them. Despite their extremely difficult backgrounds, the children, once settled into the home, are happy and healthy. We were warmly welcomed by all the children and Bhola Yogi, one of the founders of the charity and the principal of the school in Dang. Bhola-Ji opened up his home to vulnerable children 20 years ago and since then, with various building additions, has taken in more and more children. We could not have been better looked after or more warmly welcomed – what Nepal lacks in terms of luxuries like proper beds or hot water, it more than makes up for with unbelievable and touching level of kindness and hospitality.

We were thrown in at the deep end on day one in Dang (having spent a few days at the school in Kathmandu first) and were assigned 2 classes to teach. All teaching was done in pairs and I was given Class 3 (aged roughly between 7 and 8) Social Studies and Class 7 English to teach. We quickly realised that our efforts were slightly wasted on teaching them anything other than English; although their text books and exercise books seemed to suggest that they were capable of understanding fairly complex English, it didn't take long for us to ascertain that much of their learning was based on copying, and the level of understanding they had of these topics was minimal. We therefore decided that a sharp focus on grammar and proper sentence structure, English conversation and, most importantly, creative writing and thinking for oneself, was going to be the most fruitful approach.

Having laid aside the text books and gone off-piste with regards to the teaching, we began to see real improvements in the children's language. The shy students in class 3, who initially exhibited very little signs of understanding English, soon grew in confidence and began to respond much more enthusiastically to questions. Class 7 who had been enthusiastic and hard working from the start, also continued to improve. My degree in Classics really helped me when it came to teaching grammar as it enabled me to explain with confidence different grammatical constructions that often even native speakers do not fully grasp.

We also took on Class 6, who presented us with slightly different challenges. Whilst Class 3, because of their age, had very limited English which severely limited their understanding and made communication difficult, Class 6 were a challenge largely because of the levels of noise they created! They were highly excitable and often needed constant reminding to concentrate. Yet despite this, they ended up in some ways being our most rewarding class to teach. Beneath all their chattering and excitability, every one of them had a genuine desire to learn which made them a pleasure to teach.

Teaching was harder than I expected but also far more rewarding. Teaching in a school where the rules and regulations were somewhat of a mystery to us – where punishment was standing in various yoga positions and the best way to do well in exams was to learn word-for-word the text book – meant that, undistracted by bureaucracy and school procedures, we were able to focus fully on what we were there to do – teach. Although initially encouraged to use the text book, when we aired our concerns we were given the freedom to teach how we wanted to and were able to see first-hand the results of our work and I am confident that the children we taught will continue to improve. .