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Report from Lorna Williams
Amar Jyoti School, Nepal.
20 November – 16 December 2011

Pre departure preparation

1. Practical and personal

I had previously volunteered in Kathmandu in 2008 so I had some ideas about what to expect.

- I obtained a 90 day visa from the Nepali Embassy. This seemed somewhat absurd as I was only staying just over 30 days. I did not want to waste precious time off with a trip to the Pokhara immigration office

Note from *people and places*: Nepali tourist visas are only available as multiple entry visas for periods of 15, 30 or 90 days ... visa extensions can be purchased in Nepal, but is not always convenient as there are few visa office locations.

- I booked flights for Evelyn and myself. I opted for Air India via New Delhi as they were some of the cheapest and at convenient times. There is a new terminal at Delhi which is a good place to while away a few hours.
- I organised my insurance through the company recommended by People and Places.
- I took some American Dollars. These were useful at Delhi Airport and are widely accepted in Pokhara. It is very easy to change money at Kathmandu Airport, in Pokhara and at Tiger Mountain.
- Deciding on what to take to wear was problematic. Days can be very warm during November and December but nights get progressively colder. I opted for a selection of Tshirts and easily washed 'cargo' trousers with some long sleeved shirts and fleeces for the evenings. Several layers proved to be a very useful combination.
I took a warm fleecy jacket, good walking shoes (absolutely essential), insect repellent, suncream and a swimsuit (sadly unused as the water was just too cold for me).

2. Preparation for work at the school

I tried to prepare by scouring the internet for useful websites, referring to those suggested by previous volunteers and by exchanging information with Evelyn and Nicki. However it was very difficult to plan constructively due to lack of information from the school about exactly what was expected of us.

Note from *people and places*: every volunteer is provided with a placement outline prior to travel, but as explained to all volunteers, an 'outline' is all that can be realistically expected from the project. Amar Jyoti and our local partners knew that all three volunteers have professional histories as educators, so were comfortable with a fairly general outline, knowing that observation and flexibility are fundamental requirements of all *people and places* volunteers.

It was also difficult to know what resources to take out. After consultations with Nicki I opted to take fairly basic things. I took paper, pencils, pens, felt tips, crayons, rubbers, glue sticks, ready mixed poster paints and wet wipes. I also took a selection of flash cards (letters and numbers), a magnet board with letters and numbers and several different types of matching/ lotto type games all of which proved very useful in the Nursery class.

Stationery can be purchased in Pokhara but it is quite a trip to get there and therefore not always convenient.

Orientation and preparation at start of placement

We had a hassle free trip to Kathmandu and the following morning took the Greenline Tourist bus to Pokhara. Six hours on Nepali roads is not everyones idea of fun but I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. We were warmly greeted by the staff at Tiger Mountain and it was good to meet up with Nicki and hear about her experiences. We arrived late on Saturday afternoon and on Sunday morning Hari accompanied us to the school.

After being greeted and presented with garlands by the head, staff and children at the secondary school we were whisked away to the primary school where we were to spend most of our time.

Note: The primary and lower secondary schools are on different sites, though close to each other. There are three classrooms in the primary school, which is a few minutes' walk uphill from the secondary school

Work experience



Lorna walking to school with children & co-volunteer, Evelyn



primary school playground & assembly

There was no timetable for us when we first arrived and so we spent the first week dividing our time between the four youngest classes. I spent the first few days helping individual children, talking to them and trying to gauge their understanding. I did not take over from the teachers but endeavoured to work alongside them. I attempted to be as diplomatic as possible in order to show them that I was there to help rather than inspect. I tried to help by explaining concepts in the text in simple, relevant language, by extending vocabulary, by using visual clues (e.g. by pointing to different parts of the body, finding examples of different colours etc.) by questioning children and getting them to answer individually (an uphill struggle!).

Note: the headmaster is the only person with responsibility for timetabling in Amar Jyoti. His absence at the start of Lorna's placements resulted in there being no timetable at first. The matter has again been discussed with the headmaster and our local partners – and it has been agreed that this will be part of their preparation before each volunteer placement.

The teachers understanding of English is poor but some are keen to learn. There is no lesson planning and thinking on one's feet is essential if you are going to contribute constructively to understanding. The teachers stick rigidly to the textbook and therefore you have to try and find imaginative ways of working using this truly dreadful resource.

From the outset we stuck rigidly to the rule of no teacher/ no volunteer. Absenteeism is a problem and I am certain that if we had not enforced this rule teaching on our own would have been accepted as the norm.

Note: the 'no teacher, no volunteer' rule may seem harsh, but volunteers must work WITH local teachers for effective skills-share to take place. Because volunteers made their position clear on this point, Hari Pariyar (local volunteer co-coordinator) was able to deal with the situation immediately. This immediacy and openness is vital for clarification and co-operation.

At the end of the first week we had a meeting with Hari, the head, members of staff and even the village elder. It was a warm, friendly meeting and we were able to air many of our concerns with Hari acting as a brilliant interpreter. We discussed ways in which we could help improve the school environment and our need for a timetable. This meeting took all afternoon and the children were unsupervised throughout – this was viewed as completely normal.

By about the middle of the second week we were issued with the timetable and began to feel that we were getting a little more organised. We now had lessons with classes 4 and 5 first thing in the morning and we all had a free period which was very welcome.

The Nursery Class

I had spent a lot of time before I retired as a pre school teacher and I was keen to spend as much time as possible in the nursery class. This I was able to do and I felt that this was where I was most useful. Saradha, the nursery teacher, is a delightful lady with a great sense of humour but very little English. On arrival I was mystified as to how she could contain 8 small children for a whole day in a small dark room with no resources.

There are 2 large, illustrated alphabets painted on the wall, (one English, one Nepali) and 2 number charts (numbers to 100). The children spend their entire time chanting, (shouting), these out and then copying endless letters, words and numbers into their (usually very tatty) exercise books.

The sessions are long and needless to say concentration wanes throughout the day. The children spend a lot of time doing nothing in particular. Sometimes they get fed up and leave the room. Many of them bring food to school which they eat as and when they feel like it, this is disruptive, makes a lot of mess and encourages rats.

The children in the nursery and the other primary classes are delightful, warm and friendly but they often fall out and many can be quite aggressive towards their peers. Smacking children when they are unruly is often accepted as the norm and all part of the rough and tumble of everyday life.

Note: gradually volunteers can encourage more of the 'carrot' and less of the 'stick' – this is already beginning to happen as teachers understand that children who are occupied and interested present less of a challenge to classroom discipline

I introduced a variety of activities and gradually felt that I was having a certain amount of success. I got the children to sit still and listen at the beginning of sessions. I used flash cards, (their names and colours were very successful), introduced a variety of simple matching, singing and counting games. I gave them simple worksheets which made them start to think for themselves. I got them to draw and colour and even managed to get them doing some finger painting which they loved. It would have been great to have been able to do some more creative activities but there was little time and water was a problem. Water is a very precious resource and the school has only one tap outside the secondary school.

Despite her lack of English Saradha was very keen to learn and eagerly embraced everything that I tried to do. She understood that if they were occupied they would not be fighting. The dilemma is that to be occupied the children must have access to basic resources and this is a major hurdle.



Nursery Saradha and children



brightening the classrooms

Exams

After our first two weeks I began to feel that a certain amount of progress was being made. Unfortunately this began to unravel during the third week when exams began. All the children were involved down to the youngest in the Nursery. As with many things in Nepal the structure of the primary school day during exams was very vague. Every day we turned up at 10am and it was very difficult to find out what was expected of us. We made it clear that we could not help with the actual exams. We entertained the children outside for an hour or so with games, singing etc. Pencils would then be sharpened, exam papers would appear and we left the teachers to get on with it.

It would have been better for the children to do their exams first thing when they were fresh and bright. It was a difficult position for us to be in and in many ways the last two weeks were wasted. We used some of this time to sort through resources. Sadly much of that left by previous volunteers was in a sorry state – filthy and rat eaten. We purchased a large metal trunk and stowed most of the useable resources. The trunk has a padlock and two keys – one was hung on a pink ribbon above the primary staffroom door and we left the other with Hari.

The way forward

Converting to English medium is something of a pipe dream. At the lower end of the school the teachers' grasp of the language is very weak and Tara is the only member of staff making a determined effort to learn. In order to make a real difference there needs to be a steady supply of volunteers. The resources that had been left were not being used and were in a very sorry state.

Note: experience shows that schools initially view new resources as precious treasures that must be kept safe (i.e. locked away). Gradually, the staff realise that such resources are for their use and become more confident in how they can be used, through the encouragement and skills-share offered by volunteers.

As volunteers we realised that we weren't going to achieve a great deal in four weeks but we set ourselves some goals one of which was to improve the environment. This involved clearing litter from the outside area, brightening up the classrooms and trying to get the children to stop constantly eating indoors. We wanted to encourage both children and staff to take more pride in their school and I think we began to achieve this. It is obviously an ongoing process which needs to be embraced by future volunteers.

We had many discussions about the best way forward for the primary school and I think the most important idea was that there should be someone in charge. At the moment some of the teachers have little motivation and their discipline is weak. The primary school is very much the poor relation of the secondary school. It needs strong leadership if improvements are to be made.

Note: this is where the role of our local partners is vital in their ongoing relationship and liaison with both the school and volunteers. Regular meetings, pre and post placement briefings and discussion – this ensures that individual placements and skills-share are part of a larger picture and a sustainable whole.

Highlights of the volunteer experience

There is no particular highlight but now looking at photos one is filled with a great sense of pleasure and satisfaction at having ‘done it’. Despite the frustrations, the dirty conditions, the terrible toilets and the endless chanting and shouting one remembers warm, sunny days, happy, smiling children running to greet you in the morning and the delightful teachers with whom we could laugh and joke despite the language barrier.

Volunteering

I would recommend volunteering at Amar Jyoti with one or two provisos. Firstly you need to be quite fit – the walk to and particularly from the school is quite strenuous. You need to be very flexible in your approach and able to think on your feet. Your goals need to be realistic. You need to be open minded, be able to grab the moment and be willing to work within the confines of their curriculum. You need a strong bladder!

Leisuretime

Tiger Mountain was a wonderful place to stay but a little remote for those yearning for the bright lights of Pokhara. The people who work there are delightful, the food delicious and the scenery stunning. Wildlife abounds and it is well worth going on some of the walks organised by the knowledgeable staff.

We did not have a huge amount of leisure time but went into Pokhara on several occasions. We visited a Tibetan monastery, the Ghurka museum, went shopping at Lakeside and on one memorable afternoon we visited the local leprosy hospital. We were given a warm welcome and a very interesting conducted tour. Nepal has the fourth highest incidence of leprosy in the world. It is curable and preventable but the belief remains that it is ‘a curse from the gods’ and people are still abandoned by their families and ostracised by their communities.

Two other memorable outings were both in school time. One morning Hari took us to another feeder primary school. The environment here was much more cared for than at Amar Jyoti and the children better disciplined. We felt that the main reason for this was that they had their own head teacher solely responsible for that primary school.

Our other visit, arranged by Nicki, was to the Fulbari Montessori School. The Amar Jyoti staff enjoyed this trip and although they felt lack of money prevented them from doing anything like it some of them were inspired and talked about it a lot.

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