

Progress and spanners in the works
Schule macht Schule Newsletter February 2018

Dear supporters and friends of the Medical Centre School in Jharkot, dear students, parents and teachers of the Muisches Gymnasium,

The Christmas decorations have long since been tidied away – in Nepal too (it's indeed a business in a number of places there too), but the memories still make us smile:

For our Christmas visit the children decorate the "Big Room" with butterflies, colourful paper chains, stars and flowers they had made themselves. Wolf draws a Christmas tree on the whiteboard. In the evening, 40 plates are laid out on the floor at the top of the room, laden with cakes, sweets and breadsticks. Eager anticipation.

Mohan asks me to explain briefly what Christmas means. Briefly? For Buddhist and Hindu children between 6 and 15? Hmm ... the story of Mary and Joseph's search for shelter? I talk enthusiastically. Mohan translates for those who don't speak enough English. He's full of enthusiasm too. Mary and Joseph, tired and with no roof over their heads. The unsympathetic innkeepers. Mohan and I improvise a bit of theatre: Mary cries, Joseph pleads, the innkeeper scolds and threatens. Breathless silence among the audience ... The birth in the stall, ox and donkey. And then shepherds come with gifts, and even kings come to the penniless child, who will later found a great religious community: there's a happy ending after all? And we celebrate, with a birthday cake for baby Jesus Christ...

... a little insight into our experiences on the Christmas visit to the project. Read more in our first project report of the new year:

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1) The new winter school quarters: a true blessing

In recent years the winter school has been based in a private house: tiny rooms, some windowless, the kitchen a makeshift arrangement under a veranda, drawing impotable water from the concrete tank with buckets, toilets with no flush, no yard for the children, no furniture, thin mattresses on the floor. But affordable. Due to increasing irritability of the elderly landlords towards the children, the accommodation had to be abandoned after last winter, and we gulped a bit when we learned that the replacement shelter that had been eventually found would cost double the rent.

The new home for winter

It's worth every Euro! A former school, which is put to a different use in the summer. Big rooms, cheerfully and informatively painted, a simple kitchen, with proper roof and walls and big enough for dining too. Toilets that flush, tap water that is suitable for drinking after filtering. Simple metal beds for the children. A big room (known as the Big Room) with a heat-insulated floor where everyone can gather, a yard in which to play and go wild with table tennis and the best of all: no-one complains when the kids are kids. And in contrast to previous winters, barely anyone is coughing or sniffing!

Tsering Dolkar, Tibetan teacher and boarding school mother, puts it like this: "We feel like we own the place"...

Once a week everyone heads to Seti Khola, the white river, a few minutes away, to take care of laundry and personal hygiene. After all, water is expensive and the river is fun!

Mixing "work" with pleasure: the weekly swim in Seti Khola helps to both save water and stay clean



2) The cooperation with the public school: occasionally a hassle ...

There has now been approval from the district school authority to teach Class 6 (the application was filed too late last year). Wonderful, but: the authorities won't pay for the required teacher until the school has paid the salary for two years. This is how the need is to be proved! We have now started Class 6, but with not enough staff: it's not just the new teacher who's missing; since June only 4 of the 5 state teaching posts, to which the cooperative school is entitled even without Class 6, have been filled.

That's Nepal. And so is this:

The government has decided that the school year for mountain schools now starts in January, rather than in April as in the rest of Nepal. The Upper Kindergarten children have now advanced to Class 1 in the winter school. Children who spent the winter with their families will join Class 1 in the spring and will have missed the first three months of teaching!

3) ... and sometimes a success: steps in the right direction

Our All Teachers Meeting was a success:

- **"Balanced schedule"**: There's now a timetable that changes daily, so that the children are no longer going through the same teaching programme each day with the same subjects at the same times. Instead, for example, English is sometimes taught in the first lesson, sometimes in the fourth.
 - **Breaks**: After two lessons there is now a ten-minute break.
 - **"Revolving door"**: Children who are weak in one subject, but otherwise do well in lessons – for example because they come from a school in which English wasn't taught – go to a lower class just for the weaker subject, rather than being placed in a lower class overall. As soon as they've caught up, they can join their usual class for this subject too.
- **Team teaching**: English lessons will now always be taught by a local teacher. Our volunteers will no longer replace the teachers, but will instead act as assistants. There will thus be more continuity in lessons and different abilities and academic levels can be better considered.



Rewards for achievements in the previous school year: books with pretty covers - and a tikka



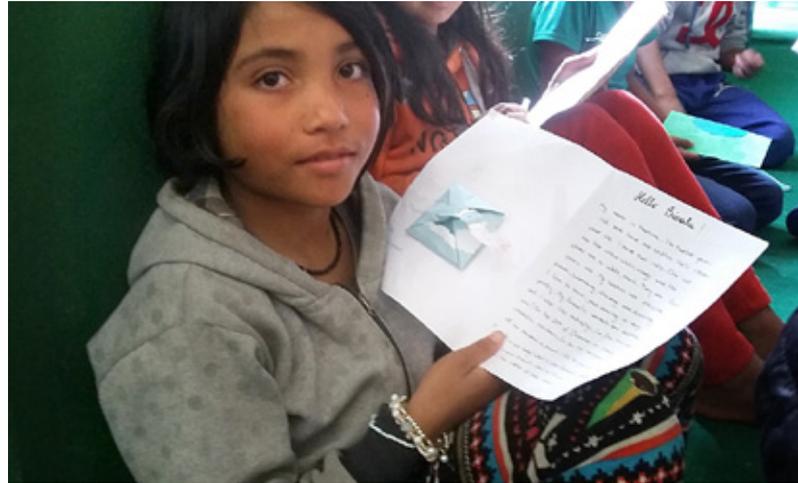
Another important issue: reducing differences

In the cooperative school the differences between the boarding school kids and “normal” village kids are striking: the boarding school children are constantly in a demanding and supportive learning environment; the village children often don't even regularly attend school, to say nothing of support outside lessons – or rather the lack thereof. The children's performance and attitude to work differ accordingly too. The winter school does a great deal to help: everyone comes together not just for lessons, but for independent study time and recreational activities too.

We have thus agreed that *Schule macht Schule* will

- provide better English books for *all* the children (village and project children),
- provide for dentist visits for *all* children and
- facilitate an excursion for *all* children to Nepal's longest suspension bridge.
- ... and meanwhile any child from the village school who wants one, has a pen-pal at the Musisches Gymnasium!

(The evening before our departure I finally find time to take part in the evening Puja – the project children's ceremonial prayer. To my surprise almost all the village children take part voluntarily, Hindu and Buddhists alike! Apart from me there are no adults present. I allow myself to be carried by the children's powerful voices. After about half an hour of continuous speech song, clapping, prostrations, the little gathering disperses. It is a joyful atmosphere and I think that this daily shared ritual certainly plays a part in the soothing atmosphere of the project



Bimala from the village school enjoys the first letter from her new Austrian pen-pal

4) Putting an end to slaps

There are almost always delegates (volunteers) from *Schule macht Schule* at the project in Nepal. Cyros from Pennsylvania, USA, had a lot of good news to share after his first three weeks – which you can read at the end of the newsletter. One observation bothered him though: at least two of the public school teachers hit the children (something that Wolf and I didn't see.)

We had only seen these teaching staff behaving benevolently towards the children. So why do they hit them? Corporal punishment of children at school has only been banned in Nepal for a few years and all the grownups experienced beatings as an unquestioned means of education. A lack of awareness about the effects of fear on learning and development may be behind these blows, a lack of alternatives perhaps. What can be done?

At our request project manager Mohan and Basanta Subedi, local therapist and manager of a project for traumatised children, organised a workshop for all teaching staff at the cooperative school. In less than a week!

A day later Tsering Dolkar sent this message:

"Today we had the workshop with Basanta and the staff from his project school. It was very good. I think all our staff learned a lot from today's workshop!"

5) Sponsors at *Schule macht Schule*

In the previous newsletter we presented three new children at the project. Two of them, little Sonia from Purang and Sonam Dhendup from Upper Mustang are delighted to have already gained sponsors. Pema Dolkar is still waiting. But admission to the project has fundamentally changed her life: the eleven-year-old, whose parents moved from the extremely poor region of Dolpo to near Jharkot, is attending school for the first time in her life!

What exactly does being a sponsor mean?

Our sponsors are prepared to pay for the personal needs of a child in the project in the long-term: for 50 Euros per month all maintenance costs, clothes, medical care, school materials etc for a child can be covered. (Unallocated donations finance personnel, equipment, energy costs, rent, transport etc). Once or twice a year, sponsors send post to their sponsored child and receive replies from them: letters, which are put together with great devotion. Further information on sponsorship can be found on the website under "How can I help?" or [here >>](#)



Pema Dolkar, left, with her friends

Who are our sponsors?

Children in the project, as well as those who are in further education or training and couldn't be taken on by *schoolsfaraway.org*, are provided for by:

- 7 classes at the Musisches Gymnasium (2u, 6a, 6e, 6i, 7a, 7m, 8a)
- 5 teachers from the Musisches Gymnasium
- 5 families connected to the Musisches Gymnasiums
- 2 groups of friends (part of the Matura class 8m 2015 and a group headed by our former volunteer Eva)
- 3 families, who came to the project in different ways
- Members of the *Biogena hilft!* organisation

Our picnic on the trip to Manakamana Temple



6) Two disappointments ... but not for nothing

There are times – and they shouldn't be overlooked – when things don't work out. We've lost two boys from the project.

One of the boys had repeatedly and so gravely violated the rules of cohabitation that our managers agreed with the local project committee that he should be dismissed.

The other boy, who during the holidays is surrounded by boys in his home village who see little sense in school education, allowed himself to be swayed to their way of thinking – and after a visit home, didn't return to Jharkot. He is understood to be earning money in India now. Together with the project managers we have decided that should he express a sincere interest in returning to the project, he should be given another chance.

We have followed these kids from a very young age. Of course we are as disappointed as the boys' sponsors. Nonetheless: what they learned during their years in the project goes far beyond what they would have gained in their villages. Whatever path they now take, they have a better starting point. They can write, do arithmetic, speak English and have experienced a functioning community. That will always be of benefit to them.

7) Little Ngodup

At last we have met the young son of our project manager Mohan. As we have shared before, Ngodup suffers from Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Despite his serious illness, he is a jovial child, who immediately set about building the Lego car we'd brought him with concentration and skill. Ngodup has just taken part in the first phase of clinical tests of a new therapy with Ayurveda elements. A small improvement in his health was noticed – something positive in his as yet incurable condition. Phase two, however, could not be afforded. Since the suspension of treatment, Ngodup's condition has quickly worsened and he has stopped walking. His parents are now desperately looking for another way of continuing the medication.



With our four capable girls at Lekshed Tsal School

8) A big family

We took an incredibly bumpy, dusty road to Jampaling, 25km from Pokhara, where at the Tibetan-led Lekshed Tsal School we visited four girls, who started school at the project in Jharkot. Since last April Tsering Lhamo, Pasang Lhamo, Lhakpa Wangmo and Kelsang have been continuing their education in Jampaling. We took them the letter from their *Schule macht Schule* sponsors. They are all very capable girls. Tsering Lhamo represented the Lekshed Tsal School at an English-speaking competition last summer and won the award with her presentations on the subject of climate change! Evidence of the role our Medical Centre School plays in the development of "our" children! The teachers at the Lekshed Tsal School highlight the willingness to learn and good attitude to work that they see in all the pupils from Jharkot – they know six of our children now.

Lhakpa Chenzum visited us, beaming at seeing us again. After leaving the project school, the seventeen-year-old trained as a cook at a vocational



Tsering Pemba and Ngawang Gyamtso inspire a passion for further learning ...

training centre. She is now cooking for a winter school programme of mountain schools from Upper Mustang. Lhakpa wants to complete a further vocational training as a tourist guide. She needs to be at least 18-years-old to join the 3 Sisters agency in Pokhara. We hope to be able to support her in this when the time comes.

Tsering Pemba and Ngawang Gyamtso, now at the SOS Higher Secondary School in Pokhara at the boarding school, were given permission to join us all on a trip to the Manakamana Temple on the other side of Seti Khola. They were immediately surrounded by the children of the project, like big brothers returning home ...

We had previously spent a jolly afternoon in Kathmandu with nine former students - young people, whose training as healers in traditional Tibetan medicine and as Thangka painters is made possible by *schoolsfaraway.org* from Poland, *Schule macht Schule* sponsors and *Biogena hilft!*. They told us all about the collaboration on the restoration of murals damaged during the

earthquake and about excursions to areas that are so remote that the young students were the first medical care for the population there for years. Lhamo Tsering:

"People were so glad that we came. We really made a difference! It was a heart-breaking experience to have to leave those villages again. And, it was a very special thing for me to be on the giving side for once, instead of being on the receiving side. I'm so grateful for the chance to learn something which will help other people."

Please and thank you

On behalf of the children and everyone involved in the project, we say a big thank you for your interest and support – and hope that it long continues! Please do make use of our donation account if you believe our work to be meaningful and worthwhile – and we encourage you to spread the word!

Kind regards,

Christina Klaffinger

Wolf Pichlmüller



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Appendix: Cyros reports

The experiences of our volunteer at the winter school after his first three weeks in the project (personal passages edited out):

3 weeks into the project my time here is proving to be well spent. I can already notice the improvements in the kids' English. Specifically their reading. It's fascinating to note how quickly and how much these kids are improving in such a short amount of time. At the same time, I am learning an invaluable amount being around them and living in this new setting.



Cyros with Lhakpa Tsering at the winter school

You should be very proud of your organization and teachers. I have noted an often dramatic difference between the kids of the project and government program. It can even be slightly disheartening.

On the surface level, the kids (especially the older ones) are FAR ahead in regard to their English fluency. Whatever English learning opportunities these kids were offered in the past has had a great impact on them. Starting from class 3 and up it is very clear who is part of the government school and who is part of the project solely based off of their English capabilities.

More so, I have noted that the kids in class 4 and up, who are part of the project, are more eager and disciplined inside the classroom. I assume from a younger age they were part of an education system that was taken more seriously. From class 3 down, it seems quite equal. Which suggests that all the kids now are learning the same kind of work ethic.

The project children are taken care of with more affection. I believe Tsering Dolkar deserves all of the credit. You are right to say that this place would not be the same without her. (...) She really takes care of these kids. Across the board, from making sure they have clean clothes and keeping clean, to organizing their studying. She's like a mother to them all. Tsering Lama is also

a wonderful teacher to have at this school. I know in the past there have been some serious problems with the government teachers. It must be getting better because I don't see any HUGE gaps, however I have noted that the teachers who are a part of the project dedicate a significant amount of service to the children inside and outside of the classroom.

I have had a difficult time attempting to configure how to relay this message in the proper way. Clearly, I am serving as an educator, but I am also a delegate for this program. I am here for a total of two months and don't want to create tension while I am here. I need to note this. (X and Y), despite the law changing, still strike the kids. I could already see the kids learning in fear of being physically harmed and that is no way to learn. (...) The situation has gotten better, however I still notice it happening. I don't want to create any political drama, nor do I want to create any conflict here and now at the school. However, I am here to represent these children and I want what is best for them.

(Note: see item 4 in this newsletter for more on this)

Serious info aside, everything else is going well. The new schedule is going very well. Having a different rotation of classes everyday is very refreshing. The "revolving door" is being put into action. I think it is too soon to note any significant changes as a result of its implementation. However, I'm sure you're glad to hear that all that time spent was not in vain. Due to the nature of the educational organization, I'm not sure if the principle is as effective as it may be back home. (...) However, I do think it is effective in the sense that the children get to spend more time around the curriculum that they are struggling with.

My lessons? So far, we've focused on a lot of reading. We pulled all of the books out of the storage room and have mowed through most of them already. The kids love to read. I've been teaching the younger classes valuable vocabulary which they interact with everyday. A little writing and spelling as well. The upper levels we have moved into more writing, game play, and reading comprehension. These kids are like sponges and I believe that the more that they can hear, see, and read, the stronger the foundation will be for them to build off their knowledge. They have little workbooks which we have been moving through; completing lessons and activities.

That is the more structured side of the class: the workbook. Not having any background in teaching, it is nice to have some kind of plan such as this workbook. I cannot say that I am not slightly disappointed to see that most of the books are hand-me-downs. That being said, the majority of the activities have been completed in the books. So, in order for the kids to complete the activity using their brain and applying the knowledge they've learned, we have to either erase a whole page of work (which they can still usually see) or we have to find the one (or maybe two) books which have not been used; having the rest of them crowd together around one or two books. In addition, the government and project children possess different workbooks. I may be wrong, but it is my understanding that new workbooks cost around 200-400 rupees. If you don't mind my input, I believe it would be worth the investment for the students to have new books and to have them be the same. In this manner, teachers could work through the workbook in a way that the book was designed; allowing students to progressively build up the level of difficulty in a given chapter. I still have my 100\$ donation and believe this may be a good cause to put the money towards?

(Note: At the teachers' meeting it had already been decided to buy new books for the children from the project budget – see item 3 of the newsletter. The news has just come in that the books have been bought. Copies for our future volunteers are on the way to Austria.)

My health is good now! Water filter has been fixed and everything is in action!

Let me know if you have any questions about anything else in particular.☺

– Cyros