

My Experience as a Volunteer at KIRAN

The first few weeks I spent at Kiran were very intense for me. I received so many new impressions just by being here, that I didn't feel like going to the city at all for about six weeks. Instead, I took care to relax enough in between to avoid being overwhelmed by all the new experiences I was making. Of course, the whole atmosphere was different, the climate, the food, the environment, the plants, the buildings, almost everything. But the most important experiences were the encounters I had with so many people. The children and other people at the hostel where I stayed, the children at the school, the KIRAN staff members I met and who helped me to settle down in various ways. I was very touched by the overall friendliness and helpfulness of all those people and till now I keep enjoying the many smiles I exchange every day on the KIRAN campus. I very much appreciated the help my then volunteer colleagues, especially Madeleine, offered me in getting to know the ways in which KIRAN works. The expertise and assistance they offered to me was very valuable and especially their introducing me to many people.

The major difficulties I faced concerned my work as a teacher in a school which was organized in a way very different from what I was used to and whose main language Hindi I was not sufficiently able to understand. Some of my usual means for ensuring discipline in my classes were not at my disposal. Especially, I was unable to speak with the children the way I would have liked to or to contact the parents. When the first few honeymoon weeks were over I faced a tough time in some classes and had to find my own means of dealing with the situation. It was particularly difficult in class 5 to which I had been assigned as a class teacher, a job I did not feel qualified for due to my lack of speaking the childrens' language. I tried to do my best and class five and I went through many ups and downs together. I have managed as good as I could but I think teachers who don't speak the children's mother tongue should not be assigned this job. Fortunately, I had a more than average basis in Hindi when I arrived here and was able to develop it considerably throughout my stay here. Otherwise it would have been even more difficult. The help Surita, the then headmistress, extended to me was precious and I felt a clear difference when she had resigned from her job.

Another difficulty I faced throughout the school year was the way information arrived or did not arrive with me. Evidently, I was not able to read any written information like signboards at the beginning and was dependent on other people to inform me. Sometimes information would reach me from the students and not from my superiors or colleagues, which I found rather irritating. Sometimes I also got wrong information from students taking advantage from my situation. I didn't have the impression that my superiors had a clear-cut plan for introducing their foreign collaborator to the workings of the school, the duties that were expected from him to fulfill or updating him on special events or new decisions. My impression was that these things happened in a quite unsystematic way. I would suggest that if ever another teacher from abroad came to work for the school department one teacher should be given the task of informing the volunteer on all organizational matters throughout his or her stay.

When I started teaching I soon realized that the syllabus I had been given was not what I would have expected it to be, namely a solid foundation for teaching. I approached the

headmistress to talk about the matter and she agreed that I design my own teaching program. After the half-yearly exams I was finally ready to teach in a way which made sense for me. I put a strong accent on the productive skills of speaking and writing and I tried to offer the students the necessary tools to form sentences, which to my horror I had found they were largely incapable of. I insisted that students do exercises on their own and I showed them how they can do that. I also changed the tasks of exams to make them more skills-oriented. I purchased dictionaries for the school and introduced all the students to the use of them. At the beginning, students were very reluctant to speak, to write and to do exercises on their own. But after a while they became acquainted with this approach, which was new for them, and many of them improved their performance considerably. Encouraged by this success, I thought it might be beneficial for the school to have a syllabus which would enable teachers to adopt a skills-based approach to the teaching of English. After proposing the idea to sister Sangeeta I got the necessary signal to go ahead and from January to the end of March I developed such a new syllabus. Currently, I am introducing my English teaching colleagues to it and one of the colleagues is adding Hindi translations to a list of nearly 3000 words which I have selected from those employed in the textbooks to be learned systematically by the students. My idea is to turn this into a booklet to be distributed to all students at Kiran, which would serve as yet another element to enhance the quality of English teaching. I have also introduced the use of easy readers and DVD's of classic stories of English literature. At the moment, there is one set of 22 books with DVD at the school library and I intend to provide two more such sets which will make for motivating teaching material. I have also provided the library with 25 English language comics which interested students from the upper classes can borrow to practice their English reading in an enjoyable way.

Throughout my stay here at KIRAN I have been impressed by the natural way people with and without disabilities interact. I was particularly impressed to see how many people here speak sign language. I've never been to any place before where this had been the case. I also liked the way togetherness is celebrated on the frequent festive occasions by including disabled children in all the many artistic performances which are an integral part of KIRAN's school program. I consider this a major achievement. Another thing I generally appreciated a lot is the way values are taught to the children through the activities in the assembly hall. I have certain reservations towards the nationalist aspects of this, though. Generally speaking, the atmosphere of happiness which reigns at KIRAN, especially among the children and particularly among the disabled children, is impressive. It is the fruit of all the idealism and work that many people contribute daily for the wellbeing of the children.

I have had a great time here. It certainly has been one of the most profound experiences of my adult life to live for such a long time among people with such a different cultural background, to work with them, to share with them. I have been touched by people's kindness. Many of them have become friends and I sincerely hope we will stay in contact. Positive experiences by far outweigh the difficulties I have encountered.

I have agreed with Sister Sangeeta that I will work for KIRAN's "Circle of Friends" after going back to Switzerland. I don't know yet what exactly my collaboration will consist of. I just know it will be about reorganizing that body and infusing it with new life. I will contact the chairperson of the "Circle of Friends" after my return to Switzerland. I am happy that I will stay connected to KIRAN in this way. I have also discussed with Nidhi and Sangeeta about

coming to Madhopur once a year to offer help to the school department and in particular to work with the English teachers on the implementation of the new syllabus. The details of this are still to be discussed.

As I have been working for the school department my suggestions will concern the workings of this department. I have already discussed them with Nidhi and Sangeeta and Sangeeta has asked me to put them into writing in my final report. In order to strengthen the school's organization and improve its quality I suggest the following measures:

- The head of department is overburdened with work and finds it difficult to devote time to core areas of her job like overseeing the quality of the teaching going on in the classrooms and taking care of school quality development projects planned for the next three years. The HoD should therefore be helped by an administrative assistant. This person should be capable of handling school software to deal with the school's data and to prepare the timetable. I strongly recommend such software to be introduced in the department. It will be time and energy saving for many people.
- The HoD also faces complex leadership tasks in the context of the school development projects that form part of KIRAN's strategic planning agenda for the next three years. I strongly recommend that she be allowed coaching from an experienced person from outside during at least the initial phases of this process.
- The HoD should also be assisted by representatives of the teachers in this process. These should discuss important issues with the HoD, lead their respective groups and maybe assist class teachers in difficult disciplinary situations. They should NOT be asked to assess the teacher's skills or qualifications. That should strictly remain a task of the HoD. It would be good if these representatives would be elected by the various groups. That would most certainly increase their acceptance among their colleagues.
- Groups or bodies of teachers should be formed at different levels of the school, e. g. nursery school to lower primary, upper primary and secondary, NIOS. These groups should discuss important issues, point out grievances to the HoD via their representatives, put forward proposals for the improvement of the school in general and for the implementation of the school development program in particular and possibly elect their representatives.
- Subject groups should be formed mainly for the development of the syllabus and the approach to teaching. Following an ongoing world-wide tendency advocated by the UP government also, I recommend to shift the teaching methods and exams content from a knowledge-focused approach still widely diffused in India to a skills-focused approach. To achieve this the teaching will have to become less teacher-focused and more learner-focused.
- I strongly recommend to strengthen the role of the class teachers. At the basis of school improvement, there should be a systematic attempt at improving discipline, especially in the areas of attendance and homework. There, working with the parents on a long-term basis is indispensable. I therefore recommend to appoint class teachers to follow the same class over several years with only one or two changes of class teachers between nursery class and class VIII. The class teachers will be able to work much more effectively with both the children and the parents if there will be such a continuity. Long terms for class teachers will also allow them to follow children with special needs much better, to coordinate efforts between subject teachers, physiotherapist, psychologist, speech therapist, etc. over a long period of

time and to set individual learning goals for those students who need that in discussion with all the specialists and caretakers involved. For a school with KIRAN's profile this seems pivotal to me and it is one of the goals in the strategic planning as far as I know.

- One last point I would like to mention is that I have the impression that children with dyslexia go largely unnoticed and are far from getting the support they would need. Their situation should be improved and children with whom there is such a suspicion should be sent to the speech therapist by the class teacher to assess their situation and plan assistance.

Thanks to all the staff at KIRAN who contributed to my fully enjoying my stay here! I hope I could be useful and may continue to do so.

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Martin Merz