



Helping Others
To Help Themselves

Being a Women's Education & Empowerment Volunteer

"A half dozen women, young and old, wedge themselves onto a single bench placed in the sunshine just outside the Shree Shrada Women's School. There is another empty bench but the women prefer the closeness. They play with each others' hair, put their arms around each others' shoulders, they peer over their class notes together. Every morning it is like this until the "bell" rings signaling the start of the school day. The "bell" is a pot and a spoon that an elderly man bangs together loudly. They ignore him for about five minutes (poor guy) and then shuffle into their respective classrooms to learn English, Nepali, math, and science.

I came to Kathmandu through VSN to teach English as part of the Women's Education and Empowerment Program. I've been placed in Thulo Bharyang at the Shree Shrada Women's School. It is a formal school with paid teachers and exams. There are six classes ranging from level one to eight (with classes four and five empty until there are students to fill them). I work alongside the English teacher, Sanu.

My favorite class is level one. Here the women are fresh and relatively unencumbered by bad learning habits. As other volunteers have noted, the teaching style in Nepal is all rote memorization with very little, if any, critical thinking. In level one I have the opportunity to introduce new ways of learning; or rather, learning how to learn. After a month of teaching, I saw that the women didn't know phonetics. They could spell a word and say it, but could not recognize a similar word without the teacher telling them what it was (for example, they can spell TABLE, but don't know the word TAB).

This is where I saw an opportunity to make an impact. So one day I set out to teach phonetics. The women were completely baffled by it at first. They kept returning to their old ways. But after a few days I noticed two women had picked up on it. They remembered that the letter A goes "aah" and the letter B goes "buh." I got so excited! Something stuck! For some women, phonetics will just not work and they will need to continue using their familiar methods of learning. But for these two women phonetics could really make a difference in their educational development. I have chosen to focus on these two women and really emphasize the importance of letter sounds. Each day I review the alphabet sounds and then give them a new word to figure out. The process is always the same. First they look at the word, totally confused. They look at me with helplessness. Then they turn to Sanu for help. But we wait patiently until they can figure it out. I refuse to tell them the answer, they have to do it on their own! Eventually they get it and we give each other high-fives and laugh with relief.

The name of this program is very important. It's not only about education, but also empowerment. As volunteers, we are here to teach as well as build up their confidence. That is why it is so important to let the student's struggle for a moment. Because when they finally find the answer for themselves without help, you can actually see the change in their faces, in their eyes. They have accomplished something! Even if it is a small thing like reading a new word. The confidence that comes with learning is something that they will carry with them always, even after a volunteer leaves."

Kristin Schutz, USA (27)

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