

In a village as stunningly beautiful as Marpha, situated in the Kali Gandaki valley in Nepal, it was not usual to be indoors for long. Nature education and education in nature became a core part of the approach to early learning at the Rosehips Centre for Creative Learningⁱ started in 2016 in the village of Marpha. The approach of the Marpha Foundationⁱⁱ with older children had been through creative projects that would invite curiosity, appreciation and wonder through experimentation. It was very much part of the approach to integrate themes from the surrounding geography and cultural context; use local materials and creatively repurpose waste. The Foundation took inspiration from the village way of life and honoured it.

There is a meme of two young fish swimming in the water, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish nods at them and says, 'Morning kids, how's the water?' The two young fish swim on for a bit and then one of them looks at the other and says, 'What is water?' This highlights how often we cannot notice the most obvious things around us. A good education can invite the ability to see from other perspectives and help us appreciate or critically view many of the things that we take for granted.

The breathtaking natural beauty that surrounds the village in Marpha inspires different relationships with the different generations based on their education, values and lifestyle/daily practices. Embedded in a balance with nature was the older generation's way of living, with minimal dependence or interference from the outside world. They held the deepest knowledge about the landscape, seasons, farming and forest practices in the village. With time and the drawing of state boundaries, education, travel, more exposure to the outside world and interaction with tourists, the older generation was pressured into altering their traditional ways of life and livelihoods. This led to the opening of homestays, apple farming, growing of ingredients for herbal products, etc. The younger generation, exposed to the world through television and social media, has a whole new set

of aspirations that has little or nothing to do with nature-based living.

This dichotomy is not easy to resolve, especially when there are vast inequalities of power, respect, money and access to opportunities between families that practise agriculture and those that have settled in cities. It was this dichotomy on which the Foundation based its work, creating pathways to reconnect the knowledge in local practices, like traditional farming, festivals, and intergenerational relationships which are not given importance in formal education. It provided the children exposure to some of the most engaging tools of education – illustrated children's books from around the world, teachers adept at using alternate pedagogies and creative practices that need problem-solving and working with hands.

Marpha is also a village where there is a divide between the indigenous community and the more recently settled communities that plays out in the village democracy, ownership of land and hence, family wealth. The kindergarten, therefore, was an important place of inclusion, where the little ones from families that do not mingle culturally in the village apart from village festivals and functions were eating, playing, learning (and napping) together.

There were three learning levels at the kindergarten – the playgroup, lower and upper kindergarten. The learning spaces for them included the kindergarten building, the garden, village fields, the stream, the horticulture centre in the village and the village grounds, the last two being the longest walk for the youngest children and considered 'an outing'.

Playgroup

For this age group of 2-3 years, working with clay was an important part of their schedule. We included the children in as much of the process as we could – from collecting different types of clay from the riverbed and mountainside to preparing it for use. We used clay as a means to talk about the body, members of the family, mountains and trees. We introduced a topic in a variety of ways, which

helped children in listening, imagining and asking questions.

Collection walks were also an important part of their learning. This age group notices minute details. Pre-verbal learning is an important developmental stage when an incredible amount of learning takes place through observation and touch. Themes for the children included the sky, the changing patterns of clouds and large animals in the village, like cows, horses, and donkeys.

Lower KG

Children of 3-4 years are always excited to file new words into their vocabulary, seek answers to questions, and sometimes, they require immediate validation for their efforts. In a learning environment, they are exposed to and are actively making associations with all the things around them verbally.

With this group, the garden was a beautiful site for learning. Not only did we involve them in the process of sowing seeds, planting and transplanting saplings, but we also extended this experience into the understanding of the concepts of the lifecycle, and interdependence between creatures that they see – earthworms, caterpillars, bees and ladybugs in the soil – and using these to expand vocabulary and teach even arithmetic.

For example, we first introduced an edible plant through a story and asked the children questions about what they knew of it, where they had seen it, and if they liked it when it was cooked in their homes. Then, depending on the season, we had an activity with either the seeds, leaves, vegetables or fruit. This could be a craft, cooking, painting or matching activity. The children had individual cups to germinate the different types of seeds. This made them realise that some seeds take up to two weeks to germinate, while others have very low chances of germination. The disappointment of the latter was usually balanced by their joy in seeing seeds in the other cup sprout and the plants grow over the weeks.

Upper KG

For the older children in the age group of 4-5 years, the emphasis was on language learning. The children first learn Nepali formally and are then introduced to English.

The learning sites for these children extended to the village fields, slightly longer walks and the horticulture centre which was colloquially called the *pharam* by everyone in the village. The horticulture centre is where the villagers buy seeds, saplings and vegetables. Trips to the horticulture centre not only engaged the children in various aspects of farming but also gave them a sense of pride and institutional validation for the profession of their parents and elders.

At this age, children are eager to assume responsibilities. In homes where there are chickens, many of the children took care of the chicks or the goats – feeding and looking after them. So, an important part of the UKG schedule was house visits as learning trips.

The fields were also an important learning site. As a village that practices traditional rotation crops, walking through the fields in different seasons was to witness a spectacular change in colours – the fresh green of the saplings to the delicious golden of the barley, the gorgeous pink flowers of buckwheat, the giant greens of winter, the inconspicuous flowers of the potato plant. Children enjoyed walks and activities around the fields.

Another aspect of their schedule was activities and exercises that answered students' questions – how does a caterpillar become a butterfly? How does a dog or cat have babies? Why can't we lay eggs?!

Conclusion

Our main aim, as teachers, was to guide learning experiences that would help the children to grow up into curious, confident, expressive, sensitive and intelligent versions of themselves. Working at Marpha, confirmed that at the core of our lives lies cultivating a sense of belonging to the place where one lives and being able to open one's senses to what surrounds us, for instance, creatures, and seasons. These are the threads in our culture that connect different generations and reinforce a sense of being and belonging. Education that includes meaningful learning from nature helps enrich our lives. Non-verbal visual memory and a subjective sense of time facilitate the all-around development of children.

Note: The year the pandemic hit was very difficult for the kindergarten. Since the model required external support, both in terms of funds as well as people and resources, when the lockdown was enforced, the core

functioning of the Foundation and kindergarten came to a standstill. In the midst of some very testing times, the village committee took a decision in September 2020 to close the kindergarten.

Endnotes

- i <http://marphafoundation.org/kindergarten/>
- ii <http://marphafoundation.org/>



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