

Re: Scholarship report – Kolkata, India

Dear LUTSF Secretary,

Please find enclosed a report of my travels to Kolkata, India, as detailed below:

Dates: 22nd August – 15th September 2011
Project: Volunteering at BASHA: A Home for Primary Education and Health Care for Under Privileged Children
Address: 188/62 Prince Anwar Shah Road, Kolkata, 700 045, West Bengal,

How far the aims of the project were achieved:

I went with an open-mind, but the trip fulfilled and exceeded any expectations that I might have had. To quote the original application: it gave a perspective to the work in my local community in the UK, provided me with ideas, refreshment and knowledge, as well as a vast skills development in a challenging and new environment. It has hugely inspired my future practice, which I see continuing in work with early years. I had to draw on all my resources and respond to what was appropriate when I arrived and it was a vast personal development opportunity, for my own spiritual growth and maturity.

I identified in the application that, over an extended period, my work in India might involve staff training, mentoring and role modelling. I was delighted that the staff were immediately keen to bounce ideas and take on ideas for the future. I had originally hoped to visit for two months, but my trip was shorter, due to work commitments in the UK. I have applied to return to the school next year, where I hope we might be able to extend this practice further.

Whilst I was in Kolkata this summer, unfortunately, there were elements that meant that I spent less time working directly with the children: two religious festivals, several funders visits to the school, the children's exam study period and a bout of sickness. However, this was all part of the rich experience of India and the culture, which gave me so much inspiration to bring back to the UK.

Although we had agreed that a CD player would be at the school when I arrived, initially we were working with no music. Working in a very small space, in a communal classroom was also a challenge, which in fact became a source of creativity as I explored ways to move within a small space and looked at our own relationship to space. I detailed in my application that I would be interested in experiencing South Asian dance, yoga and exploring the perspective of the older dancer. I did attend one yoga class, which was very different to my experience in the UK. Given longer, I would like to experience the dance scene more, but in just a few weeks and during monsoon, this was not possible and my priority was to work with the children. I did however experience some Indian folk dance at the Banglanatak conference.

Highlights of my travels:

- Working with the children and their teacher in the school was hugely inspiring. Discovering commonalities, differences and sharing ideas completely refreshing my practice and approach.
- Attending the Banglanatak conference (as detailed in the report)
- As identified above, a phenomenal all-round personal learning and development journey and a desire to return to the city next year.

Suggestions that could help future awardees:

- Apply! Go for it! I wanted to go to India for several years and life got in the way.
- Reserve a good amount of time and energy for a trip like India and be ready to embrace it wholeheartedly. Also reserve time before and after your trip, to rest, prepare and to process when you return.
- Plan and research as much as possible before you go, but be open to opportunities that might arise out there and go with a 'can do' attitude.
- Try to set up the project through trusted contacts. It helps to ensure that you are on the same wave length before you go, so that you can maximise your experience and use your skill.

Plans to share information about the project to others:

- This project is feeding into my current MA studies in Early Years, which I began in September (2011). My experience led to two assignments: one on children existing in small spaces and another on the significance of children's shoes and what they tell us about the beliefs and values of children in different times and places.
- I have run Indian-inspired dance sessions at two children's centres in Yeovil, with two local Brownie and Rainbow groups and a group of adults with learning difficulties.
- I have written a case study of my experience for the Early Arts website www.earlyarts.com.
- I have approached managers of Early Years settings and Arts Agencies locally, with a view to sharing my experience as a twilight session, with a presentation of slides and video clips.
- The project features as part of an interview of my practice, which has been published in a Practice Journal for "The Kids Own Publishing Partnership", Ireland, www.kidsown.ie or <http://practice.ie>.
- I still keep in touch with staff at the school. I have applied for further funding from the Winston Churchill fund, to return next year, to spend longer at the school and experience more of the South Asian dance scene. Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful in this application, but hope to raise the funds to return again independently.

I hope you enjoy reading the report and thank you once again for this incredible, life-changing opportunity.

Kind Regards

Hannah Lefevre
Awardee 2011/12

**Lisa Ulmann Project Report
Working at BASHA, centre for slum children in Kolkata, India
Hannah Lefevre, August – September 2011**

Context

The following report outlines my journey to Kolkata, India, where I spent one month at BASHA, a centre for slum children. In a city where child poverty and exploitation is rife, my study of movement with early years children was bound to stretch beyond the confines of a

single centre, set up for just one section of the starkly defined social ladder. The following report outlines some of the activities we explored at the centre and my own observations. Where appropriate, these are paralleled with my experience of children on the street. My observations are merely impressions. They are not conclusive or reflective of the entirety of India. However, they may be of interest to other practitioners.

The centre

BASHA (meaning the bird's nest) was set up in 2007 to serve high-risk children from slums. Unusually, the school takes children from 2-years, believing in the importance of the early years. According to the annual reports, BASHA is a 'pre-school', but in terms of our understanding, they are a primary school, which includes a Kindergarten.

First impressions

On arrival at the school, I quickly notice the different approach to the under 5s children. The older children learn by rote, assemble in neat lines, stand when their teacher enters and are generally extremely appreciative to be at school. There is a sense of order about their movement, which seems comforting in a busy, chaotic city. The younger children however, seem disengaged and restless and are generally allowed to 'play' freely, with excess energy, but limited space to move. They are often scolded for getting in the way, breaking things or fighting. None of this is a criticism of the school. The teachers have a lot to keep track of and with the older children approaching exams, they need to study.

However, this makes for fascinating raw research and my presence as an early years specialist is valuable. I quickly devote my time to the youngest children, working in a small area of one of the classrooms, partly shielded by a screen. Initially I watch them. They fight a lot, run, sit, look vacant or restless, but don't play. Since we don't have a means to play music initially and very little space in a communal area, I begin by playing with the children.

Activities

I introduce a number of heuristic play sessions - the simplest way to interact without language and requiring minimal intervention so that I can observe their movement prior to introducing any dance or movement sessions. I use simple, readily available resources cannot be argued with (I am informed by older children and some staff that younger children "should not be trusted with luxury items", as seems to be the perception in the slum culture). So we play with cardboard boxes, newspaper, paper shopping bags, umbrellas (as it's Monsoon), bottle tops, plastic water bottles and water play. The children pick up on provocations instantly and happily play for 30-40 minutes, often role-playing what they see in everyday life. With newspaper, one boy finds various places to sit in the room, his legs crossed, laughing at intervals, as though reading the paper. Another boy meticulously covers the school table, perhaps mirroring a street vendor setting up his stall, or a family laying out newspaper to eat or sleep on. Another girl rips up the paper and screws it up into small balls, then packs it into one of the boxes. She puts the box on her head and transports it across the room.

With the boxes, they build temples, houses and, due to one child's fascination with his car, we turn smaller boxes into cars, tunnels, flyovers and eventually realise that we can fit inside the larger boxes and 'drive' around the room. The boy's car is brought into every activity: tyre tracks on the playdough, creating a road with masking tape on the floor and singing songs about the car. Gradually the boy becomes less reliant on the car and happily engages in other activities.

On one occasion the toddlers are moving the small wooden chairs. Without any language, I coax them into making the chairs into a train. They understand instantly and delight in hopping down the train in sequence, taking the tickets, creating rhythms and making the sounds. On a real train a few weeks later, I encounter many begging children who I can't give such attention to. One boy is naked, hopping through the carriage, out of necessity. One of his legs has been removed.

From these initial observations and interactions, I start to realise the children's movement needs and begin to integrate more movement into the play.

Movement needs

In terms of movement, everything that I have been exploring in movement in the UK is, as I had hoped, applicable to these children but also turned on its head. For example, in the UK, I encourage over-clothed, car-seated, clean children, to take off their shoes, touch their toes, crawl, take physical risks, roll around on the floor, have physical contact and be messy. In India, the floor is dirty and a place for the poor, they don't need to be encouraged to crawl or squat and touching one's feet is taboo. They need sanitary techniques instilled in them, in order to survive. They happily crawl all over each other, push their way to the front or the top of the pile, working in tiny spaces. But they struggle to spread out in the room and give each other personal space. The teachers request ballet technique, for posture, alignment, grace and deportment - all indicators of social stance. Perhaps this is what is needed.

In one session, I ask the children to show me how they sleep (older children are present, so they manage the translation). The children immediately pile on top of each other, legs and arms strewn over each other, or tightly integrated into the pile. Keen to encourage the children to stretch out, we spend some time looking at how we wake up, from curled up 'sleepy' movements, to wide, expansive 'waking up' stretches – reaching to the outermost of our kemispheres.

The older children stand in seconds and won't allow me to squat to speak to them. They show me immaculate exercise books - drawings and writings about beautiful sights of India, different types of homes, maps and famous Indian sports people. On one occasion, they are learning about wind and the air. On the board:

True or false:

1. *We can see air*
2. *Fresh air is not important for healthy living*
3. *Wind helps in flying a parachute*
4. *A storm is a gentle wind*

What is a wind vane?

How does wind help us? (Hanging out the washing, the windmill, flying a kite etc.)

We use these themes of wind and the air in our movement sessions the following day, feeling the air between the hands, breathing in fresh air, creating a storm together, washing and drying the clothes and so on. Keen to continue exploring expansive movement, we look at movement within bubbles, starting with a small, safe energy bubble and expanding to the biggest bubble they can stretch to – either side, up, down and so on.

Songs and sounds

We share a number of English and Bengali songs during our time together. Certain songs have a particular resonance – the 'beep beep' car song, songs about the weather and perhaps most chillingly:

*See the sleeping children sleeping
Til it's nearly noon
Come and let us wake them
With our merry tune
Oh how still
Are they ill?
Wake up soon*

Songs turn out to be a great way to share movement together, using just our voices as accompaniment, some school cassettes or part way into my trip, CDs on a new CD player.

My time at the school is hugely enriched by one of the teachers, Sreetama, a social worker, teacher and MA student, who lives in the children's community. I find her inspirational and we quickly develop a rapport of bouncing ideas and supporting each other. 'We all have it in us to be creative' she says, 'in whatever way that is.' She wants to bring in 'creative time' – unusual in an Indian school. Our days together are dense, we achieve a lot.

Donations and resources

During my time at the school, a number of donations arrive: beautiful clothes, English story books, cushions and fabric. We decide that the items should be kept at school and talk about the importance of putting things back, looking after things and sharing. Using some donated cushion covers I create three sacks, of socks to make puppets or 'sensory socks' animal items and a sort of treasure sack of various textures.

We also set aside clothing that can become costumes, for their dances that they will perform on teachers' day. On teacher's day, the girls perform a dance about the bird, the boys, a song about the importance of youth and bringing sunshine into their lives. Both are touching. The children learn dance routines quickly and their gestures, expression and sincerity in performance are poignant.

We initially have these tracks and limited cassettes to work with. But after a lot of politics and assumptions about my wealth, I buy the school a CD player. With the stereo on, the children are delighted. We dance for most of our final mornings together, using a mixture of CDs I have brought from England, and their own CDs, including 'Heal the World'.

In England, I might explore story books through movement, but without a common language, this is difficult. Here they still enjoy me leafing through the books, making sounds, gestures, exclamations and saying the odd word in English or Hindi. I conclude that it is still valuable for the children to develop relationships with books and to enjoy them with an adult. Some of the children create their own stories from what they see on the pages. I explain the idea to create story sacks for some of the books and the staff are keen. However, since this is late in my visit, I leave a sheet of coloured sugar paper inside the cover of each book, with creative ideas of how to extend the story, using movement, songs, play activities and games.

In my final week, I upload film footage of the pre-schoolers playing onto the school computer. It seems to validate the younger children's play and staff and older children are delighted to see their friends on the screen. I show them images from my UK practice and a non-verbal dance-theatre piece I created for early years children last year. The children and staff love the piece and understand the universal images created with string. During this and my dance and movement sessions, other teachers, funders and stakeholders are brought into the sessions to observe what is happening.

To finish, we create a display board of photos of our play together. I begin to create individual profile sheets for the smaller children, listing their play and movement preferences and using their photos as evidence. All our explorations are documented in a book for the school, with photos, observational notes, ideas and pictures. I leave half the book blank, for the staff and children to continue documenting their play. This will also be a tool for my own reference when I hope to return next year.

Banglanatak conference and dance in everyday life

As well as working at the school, I was fortunate to be in Kolkata during the Banglanatak conference, the culmination of 7 years work in bringing rural artists out of poverty, by ensuring that they receive a fair wage for their art. During the conference, I networked with artists and advocates from across the world and observed a number of traditional dance folk dances and songs and visited rural India. During my stay in Kolkata, I also observed dance in temples, particularly on Krishna's Birthday and dance in Indian cinema.

Conclusion

Overall, the visit was hugely inspiring and refreshing for my dance and early years practice, as well as a significant life opportunity, which enhanced my overall spiritual development and maturity. I soaked up as much as I possibly could in the time. However, there is so much to experience in India and with the physical, socio-emotional culture shock, it is not possible to see everything in on short trip, particularly during monsoon. I hope to return to the school in summer 2012, to build on and continue the work and experience more of this wonderful city and culture.

