



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2009

Pretty Neat Stuff

It seems that I haven't yet taken the time to tell you why Taktse is so cool, why Taktse is so different from other schools in this region. The longer I stay here and the more that I see of Sikkim outside of Taktse, the more aware I become of the significance of this anomaly called the Taktse International School. It has taken time for me to appreciate this, because, as weird as it may be, when I first got here I didn't find very much strange at all. This is exactly what makes this school so special, though; it feels like a school that I, a girl from the north shore of Massachusetts, might have attended as a kid. When I got here, I needed to be reminded that I was not in the northeastern United States but in northeast India, and that this sort of school is truly one of a kind here.

Even beginning with the basics, the things that I immediately take as given, essential parts of even the most basic education, Taktse starts to differentiate itself. I was naively shocked to hear that the absence of corporal punishment at this school is abnormal in this part of the world. Most children have been raised, by both their parents and their teachers, to obey the slap or the stick and not much else. At Taktse, it is with words, with "soft discipline," that the teachers

control the students. Here, it is through constructive criticism, not humiliation, that the kids learn to obey.

In its education philosophy and methodology, as well, Taktse sets itself apart. For example, there is a huge focus on reading (in English!) in all of the grade levels. Reading recreationally is not a part of this culture, for the most part, as many of the teachers have explained to me. Reading picture books to children is



A mural of Desperaux the mouse (from the book!) at Taktse School

not widespread, and literacy, especially in English (the primary language of business and higher education throughout India) is pretty low. Here, reading aloud is near-constant, "book talks" happen daily at morning assembly, and each classroom has its own small library apart from the impressive central library. During library classes, the children pick a book to read, gather a few comfy pillows, and sprawl, happy, across the room,

creating lasting positive associations with books and reading. The effect is obvious when I hear the children talking comfortably and intelligently in English, making use of their broad vocabularies and demonstrating a real awareness about the world around them.

Apart from the reading, the teaching style in the classrooms of Taktse also sets the school apart. In all of the grades, the class spends most of its time in a circle, sitting cross-legged on the carpet that forms the centerpiece of each classroom. This provides a prime forum for discussion and cooperative learning, allowing for a conversational style that results in more effective understanding among the students. This progressive style has not even been implemented in most schools in the West, and is not only unusual but revolutionary in this part of the world.

One day a few weeks ago, I was walking through one of the residential neighborhoods in Gangtok with a friend, and we came across a dilapidated building just off the path. The small yard next to the building was littered with mounds and mounds of stinking household and



commercial trash and human and animal waste. Just past the dump, a steep cliff dropped off and at the bottom of a long drop was the overflow from the trash heap above. Apparently, waste disposal by the city is pretty much nonexistent in this area, and an impromptu neighborhood dump was created in the yard of the – get this – *government-run school*. This is where children go each day to learn. This hazard to public health, this place that most people from my world wouldn't dare approach, is where they spend their days, where they must go for an education. I wanted to cry, thinking of the incredible facilities at Taktse, of the clean bathrooms and well-lit classrooms and the large library and even the creative architecture. This government school may not be representative of most, but it is heartbreaking to know that places like that even exist.

My hope is that, when Taktse succeeds, when word spreads of this remarkable institution, when people recognize that this type of education is essential to the growth of an intelligent, conscious new generation and to the responsible advancement of the developing world, more places like this will pop up and will, in time, become the norm. I idealize, of course, but I think that with more positive investment from both East and West and with the influence of some truly creative minds, this can be possible in time.



Posted by Heather Lyon at <http://www.imherethereeverywhere.blogspot.com/>



Heather Lyon of Rockport, Massachusetts is 18 years old. She attended the Pingree School, and plans to start college at the University of Chicago in fall, 2010. A family friend, Nancy Bonne, who visited Taktse last May to help organize its library, inspired her to volunteer at Taktse during her gap year between high school and college. Ms. Lyon has been at Taktse since October 7, and will stay until December 20. She has been working with Taktse students on music and drama, and is acting as program and stage manager for the Autumn Collage, a music/drama/dance performance.