



Learning to make connections across the globe

Jane Conway tells the story of the very special connection that has grown between pupils at Martin Primary School in East Finchley and children at a school 5,000 miles away in western India.

It was a baking hot day in January, the temperature registering 36°C in the airless classroom. I was visiting Tryamboli Vidyalaya School in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, which has shared a special bond with Martin Primary School since their 'twinning' in 2016.

On this particular day, there was great excitement because for the first time, children from both schools were going to talk to each other. In London, teachers Julie Taylor and Shona Glakin had been at school early to prepare for the video call. At my end, it was the afternoon and a group of children were gathered round my mobile phone in eager anticipation of seeing their London peers. They had prepared some questions in English, their third language after Marathi and Hindi, which they were keen to practise in a meaningful context.



Page turner: Tryamboli girls in an English lesson

is never the need for anything but the lightest jacket.

Their carefully rehearsed questions were immediately forgotten, giving way to spontaneous ones. "Why so many clothes?" they wanted to know. "Why are they wearing things on their hands and

and answers, one of the Indian children carried my phone around Tryamboli School, introducing each class in turn and provoking a chorus of high-spirited greetings. It was with reluctance that they said goodbye, keen to keep the link live for as long as possible. But classes were about to begin in London.

For the rest of my visit, the children wanted my help to form a myriad of questions they could ask Martin School children the next time they spoke to each other. Indeed, they were so keen to communicate further that we spent an afternoon writing letters for me to take back to London. It was heart-warming to see them completely absorbed in their efforts to interact with children thousands of miles away.

How it began

My first encounter with Tryamboli School was in January 2012. My husband had organised a two-month sabbatical from his job at University College Hospital to collaborate on a research project with a medical team in Kolhapur. I had taken leave from my teaching job to go with him.

Kolhapur is a busy industrial town, famous for its brick industry, leather shoes and the Shri Ambabai temple. Although visited by many Hindu worshippers, Kolhapur is not on the tourist track for foreigners and Westerners are rarely seen there.

For our stay we were given accommodation on the outskirts of the town where the urban and rural are juxtaposed; busy streets and rows of overcrowded small dwellings lead to open patches of land where animals graze and wander. Behind our bungalow was a sprawling slum area, a maze of narrow lanes and pathways.

Getting to know you

I soon made friends with a family of four generations sharing one room. I invited the two young boys to play in our garden and their mother, Namretta, and I communicated enthusiastically, undaunted by reliance upon improvised sign language and a limited vocabulary of English and Hindi. Each morning she was up at dawn, busy with her housework, but in her free time she taught me the art of rangoli, decorating our path with

elaborate designs, and patiently allowing me to help sprinkle the different coloured powders in my inexpert way.

Early one morning Namretta came knocking on my door and gesticulated that she wanted me to come with her. I followed her and her boys along the lanes behind the bungalow, past the row of single-roomed houses where women were washing clothes on their doorsteps, and then up three steps and through a gate into a large open area of wasteland where, in front of a low brick building, stood 200 children in neat rows, apparently waiting for my arrival. As soon as they saw me, they started singing a song of welcome in English, and from that instant, my heart was irrevocably bonded with the school.

Tryamboli Primary school had been set up on a charity basis to provide an education for the children living in the neighbouring slums, taking them from aged 4 in Lower Kindergarten to 7th Standard (the same as the English Year 7). It started life in a cow shed and had gradually expanded to a row of small brick interjoined classrooms.

However, it still lacked the most basic resources of water and electricity and only the oldest children had desks – the younger ones sat on a hard, concrete floor all day. Most of the items we take for granted in a school setting were absent, even pens and paper and books. The teachers were

use of computers. Particularly important was the size of the rooms, big enough for the 7th Standard children to sit the state exams which would allow them to move on to secondary school.

When I returned to Kolhapur a year later, in 2013, I carried with me a heavy suitcase of children's story books and encyclopaedias which had been donated by the families of Martin Primary School. I will never forget the excitement of the pupils as they opened up the books and turned the pages, full of wonder at the colourful illustrations. For many of the children there, a book was an unaffordable luxury, the significance of which was movingly articulated by one of the pupils. Now a college graduate in IT, and fluent in English, he told me on my last visit that he had never seen a book before that day. "I knew they existed of course," he said, "but when I held them and looked at them, I started to have a different hope for my future, I started to have a dream."

Partners

The partnership between Martin and Tryamboli Primary schools has grown steadily year by year with a reciprocal sharing of cultures and desire to learn about each other. I have been amazed by the inspired ideas of Martin School pupils who have wanted to show their support and friendship for Tryamboli in many different ways, from raising money for new resources, to hand-made gifts of picture books, wall



Love of reading: Tryamboli boys with a book donated by Martin Primary

dedicated and the children keen to study, but funds were desperately needed to create better conditions and to provide more teaching resources.

Water, classrooms and dreams

With the help of medical colleagues in Kolhapur, and friends and family in the UK, we raised initial funds to build two big new airy classrooms with desks and benches, and to install water and electricity – thus allowing for fans to cool the rooms in the heat and to lay the first steps towards the

hangings, personalised bunting and bookmarks, and, as shown in a recent *Archer* edition, cotton bags with a design showing the partnership between the two schools. In return, the Tryamboli pupils and teachers have made ingeniously resourceful presents out of recycled materials, as well as their own picture books, cards, pottery and Diwali decorations, to send back to London. Few of the children have been further than their Kolhapur neighbourhood, but most of them know the name of East Finchley, London!



Classrooms: The primary school is in the heart of a slum area

Questions and answers

After a few technical hitches, Julie and I had a clear WhatsApp connection, just in time for the children with me to witness the Martin School children bursting into their classroom, fully wrapped-up in winter coats, hats, scarves and gloves. The Tryamboli children were astonished and perplexed; even in a South-Indian winter, there

heads?" When the Martin children were sent off to hang up their coats and put away their backpacks, this stimulated new questions. Where were the coats and bags going? Tryamboli children come to school without outer garments and keep their bags with them, so the concept of a 'cloakroom' was unknown to them.

After a series of questions

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