

Friends of Taktse *UPDATE*

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Lifelong Learners

by Ms. Reshma Thapa

Every week, a group of Taktse teachers shuffles through the hallway toward the audio-visual room in the new building. Once inside, they sit down on the blue chairs in a semi circle. Some quietly stare at the screen in front of them, while others

discuss in hushed tones the adventures of the day. They have in front of them notebooks, stationery items and a copy of a short story from the Grade 10 syllabus. The Skype ringtone buzzes, an icon is pressed, and Mrs. Denjongpa's familiar face appears on the screen, greeting everyone enthusiastically.

This is the literacy class for a small group of middle and high school teachers, who meet every Friday afternoon, not as teachers, but as students of English language and literature. On top of their regular teaching responsibilities and the challenges that come with it, they come together to analyze characters, discuss the implicit and explicit meaning of a text, infer, discuss writers' styles, and learn many more reading and writing skills that they are expected to teach their students. Having come from an educational system that stresses rote memorization and regurgitation of facts, with little room for analytical discussion or appreciation of literature, this new kind of teaching can be overwhelming. But neither the overwhelming content of this class nor the exhaustion from the long week of teaching have deterred these teachers from attending week after week. They come with an attitude to learn, having struggled to analyze difficult texts with their students during the week. They share stories of how the implementation of these new skills went.

During one of my rounds, I walked into the teachers' lounge and noticed a group of teachers huddled around a round table planning a lesson using their new skills. Some were talking animatedly, while others were writing in their notepads. Not only were they doing their lesson plans, but they were also working as a team on what can be daunting to work on alone. I sat nearby and watched them, fascinated, as they continued to talk and write. A few minutes later, having completed the task, they all gave each other high fives and got ready to go to their classes. As she gathered her papers, Ms. Bhawna glanced at me

and said proudly, "We can't wait to share our classroom experiences this week!" The others concurred with giggles and yeses. Moments like these are the best part of my job.

I remember our ride home after the first literature class. We had just finished the first reading of The Phoenix by Sylvia Townsend Warner. The somewhat ambiguous ending had left most of us confused. Throughout the ride, everyone talked over each other about their own interpretation of the story and what actually happened in the end. Not even a comment from another faculty member asking them to stop talking about the class and think about how they wanted to spend their weekend could change the subject. As I sat in the front seat listening to their conversation, I smiled at how engaged these teachers are and how much they have grown over the years. Their upward trajectory from the confused first years at Taktse to this engaged discussion of a complex text inspires me to work harder to support their learning. By the time we reached town, we had imagined all kinds of diverse interpretations of the story and the ending. *(continued on page 2)*

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Thank you to Mr. Namgyal, and to all who contributed to this newsletter!



Lifelong Learners (continued)

Everyone talks about developing an attitude of lifelong learning in our students, but how is that possible if the adults in their lives are not modeling it? A good teacher continues to be a student, and this group of dedicated Taktse teachers exhibits every single day what it means to be a lifelong learner. I am grateful to them for being such wonderful role models for our students, for having the courage to say, “I don’t know,” and for stretching beyond their comfort zones. I can proudly say that they are genuine life long learners!



Teacher Training: East Meets West

by Mr. Sonam Paljor Denjongpa, Trustee

We’ve been wrestling with the challenges of teacher training at Taktse for a long time. Our school is affiliated with the Cambridge Educational Board, which requires that we impart problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Visits to progressive U.S. schools and guest teachers from India and America have helped enormously with this, but teaching in a new and completely unfamiliar way remains a huge challenge for our teachers.

Laila Goodman, biology teacher and Dean of Students at Gann Academy, recently joined me to brainstorm about this challenge. Gann, a Jewish day school in Waltham, Massachusetts, is one of the schools that our Taktse teachers have been visiting for several years. Gann teachers and students have visited Taktse, too. Laila visited Taktse when we first began the school and has hosted and supported Taktse teachers visiting Gann for the past several years. When I described how difficult it is for our teachers to “teach for understanding” rather than rote memorization, Laila understood immediately.

I explained that in the Himalayas, most of us are visual learners. We struggle with communicating abstract concepts to our students. We are more comfortable using specific lesson plans, but sometimes our students don’t grasp the big picture.

“Our science teachers need this kind of professional development the most,” I said. Laila listened closely.

“How about some kind of “science institute,” Laila mused, “where Taktse science teachers could work on specific units with science teachers at Gann? They could work with Gann teachers on the units they find most challenging and learn how to teach those units for better comprehension by the students.”

Once we got started talking we could not stop. By the end of the evening we came up with four goals:

1. Divide Taktse’s two-year science syllabus into units, and assign the number of days required,
2. Teach units for better comprehension by students,
3. Match the units in the Taktse syllabus with Gann’s lesson plans and lab experiments, and
4. Assess student comprehension.

We also talked about ways to make learning “stick.”

“After they return from visiting Gann in winter, could Taktse teachers continue to confer with Gann teachers via Skype in spring?” I asked.

“And maybe our Gann teachers could visit Taktse the following summer,” Laila replied.

As she stood to leave, Laila added, “I also want to explore what we share in terms of keeping our traditional wisdom alive – Jewish traditions at Gann and Sikkimese traditions at Taktse – but we are both trying to bring healing and peace to our kids and our world.” I smiled and nodded. I can’t wait to brainstorm on that challenge next time.

I felt energized after Laila departed. We had begun with challenges and ended up with an exciting path forward. We hope to organize a “Science Institute” this coming winter when our science teachers visit Gann.

Several other schools have hosted exchanges with Taktse teachers, and I am hoping that if this teacher-training model succeeds, other schools might try it too.



Gallaudet Howard teaches Humanities and chairs the Health Department at Waring School in Beverly, Massachusetts. She also works in Urgent Care as a Family Nurse Practitioner at Lynn Community Health Center in Lynn, Massachusetts. Her husband, Dr. David Mulder, is a staff physician at Brooksby Village, a retirement community in Peabody, Massachusetts. Their sons Sparhawk and Rowan are both students at Waring.



An Engaging Visit

by Ms. Gallaudet Howard



A few days after we arrived at Taktse, I noticed that my family kept going missing. When it was time to have lunch or catch the bus home, I'd search for my husband, David, or my sons Sparhawk (15) and Rowan (13), but they weren't out looking for the mountains behind the monsoon clouds, or playing basketball, or even in the teachers' room. Instead, I'd eventually discover the boys camped out on the Library floor, playing Dungeons and Dragons with a group of kids their age. Or I'd find David (who's a doctor)

teaching Mr Parash and Mr Lenny how to take a blood pressure in an empty science classroom. Sometimes, I could hardly see my sons because they were so tightly surrounded by other students. Sometimes I could barely drag David away from a Biology class. It seemed like whenever I wanted to claim them, I discovered that Taktse already had.



But far from being exasperated by this, I was delighted. We'd come to Taktse for just two weeks, and we were trying to cram everything we could into our brief stay. We'd been overwhelmed by the generosity of everyone on campus--the teachers who welcomed us into their classrooms, the students who gathered around asking questions during recess, the administrators who knocked themselves out making sure we could get where we needed to go, when we



needed to go there. We'd been amazed by the performances at the Taktse Collage, from teachers performing "La Bamba" in rockstar style, to the kindergartners dancing across the stage in sparkling fish costumes, to two senior boys delivering a heartfelt speech about mental health. And we'd been seriously impressed with everyone's eagerness to learn, from the teachers who bravely asked for feedback, then incorporated new ideas and techniques into their classrooms on the very next day, to the students who immediately picked up the complex card and imagination games my sons brought with them. But the most precious moments for me personally were the ones when I saw my own children invited into Taktse's warm, familial, hyper-intelligent culture and flourish there.

At a different school, my family might have found it very difficult to put themselves out there--to walk off into the school's mysterious world all by themselves and figure out what they were supposed to do. But at Taktse, they felt welcomed and encouraged, and so, far from sticking by my side, they all three took off and made their own friendships, did their own things, learned their own lessons. I was proud of their bravery, and infinitely grateful for Taktse's diverse, rich, grounded world and the people, students and teachers alike, who make up such a unique place. But I do think, next time we come, I will put little locating devices on all my guys, so I can find them when the buses are leaving!



Writers Meet

by Ms. Dawa Yolmo

The last block of every Tuesday doesn't feel as tiring as the other last blocks of the week do. At 3:25 the bell rings and the hallway fills up with the noisy 11th graders and quieter 12th

graders making their way to the warm semi-circular lounge. This is the venue for the creative writing class – a class that breaks the monotony of writing only to complete our assigned classwork, a class where we all become writers and set our imaginations free, a class where I get to share the warmth of writing for pleasure.

Over the course of the first trimester, this grey lounge, dotted with red cushions, has heard poems and essays on things we love, things we have lost, things we are sorry about, and so many more things that we have yet to write and share. This grey lounge has witnessed soft smiles and knitted brows over simple and complicated writing prompts. This grey lounge has tasted pride at the end of a flowing piece of work, fear of having to share with the whole group, and a sense of wonder at the end of a piece that warms your heart.

As the trimester drew to a close, I felt a deep urge to bring all the seniors together and celebrate their writing in the form of a meet. My suggestion was met with two distinct responses. While Yeshey, Rheah and Yuden hurriedly began to leaf through their notebooks to find a piece they would like to share, Yeewang and Topden's eyes lit up with an idea that I could sense was not entirely about writing.

"Some food would be great," the usually quiet duo said.

"Some writing pieces would be great," I curtly replied. But my quick smile of approval followed, and spread contagiously around the room. The two boys skipped across the room to join the group of girls whose hunched backs and fervent glances told me that they were intent on doing something meaningful for the meet. Once again the grey lounge began to hear soft whisperings, muffled plans and heightened heartbeats for the coming Tuesday.

The quiet morning of the 18th was like any other, except for the waft of warm chicken nuggets that I brought with me and hoped would fill the boys and the girls. As the food cooled and the aroma dissipated, we

gathered outside the student lounge. I walked towards the closed door of the lounge only to be greeted by a hand-made yellow sign that said "Writers Meet."

I grinned and walked in.

A group of seven girls and two boys sat in a perfect circle, in perfect silence each with a piece of paper or a notebook in front. I could only hear the turning of pages as Yeshey opened her yellow notebook.

The room was a concoction of warmth, onions, garlic and a heavy dose of anxiety.

"Should we start?" I said breaking the nervous silence.

Feeble smiles and quick glances passed around the circle. Who should go first? A long heavy silence followed, which was broken by Rheah's soft, shy voice. How I wish it were louder, how I wish they would sound more confident, I thought. As if she had heard me, her voice cleared and resounded after the first two lines of her reading, leaving me with a sense of pride and relief.

It appeared I wasn't the only one to feel so. The circle now started to follow a rhythm of its own as the others resolutely picked up their notebooks and their voices, and began to share.

The quiet room quickly grasped some beautiful fragments broken from their complete pieces:

"Halfhearted confidence,"
"Impermanent youth,"
"Sincerity of an apology,"
"Like a warm chicken egg,"
"Love that I can love,"
"Belief that we stay young forever,"
"An orange plastic cat,"

The room rejoiced and our circle was filled with loud applause and gentle nods of appreciation. The warmth of the afternoon sun was still on our backs, and the delicate words were still lingering in

our minds as we passed the chicken nuggets, spicy aloo dum, and juicy momos around the circle.

What a meet, what an afternoon! I thought, as I watched Yeewang gently pat Topden's back after he had shared the last writing for the day. These brave plunges that students make, the soft whisperings that transform into confident voices, the unsaid understanding that takes place within the circle are the real gems, the real moments that give the most joy and turn an uneventful day into a special one.





Softboard Competition

by Ms. Anugrah Rai, Grade 4 Teacher

What is softboard competition?

Softboard is a competitive activity held every month at Taktse. Students from kindergarten through Grade 12 present what they are learning or simply their common passion and interests in a clear and innovative way on their respective softboards outside their classrooms.

How is it done?

It all begins with discussions during class meetings as different students have their own different ideas to present. Then the students form their own small groups and put forward their unique ideas to the class. Eventually, through a process of convincing each other, agreeing and disagreeing respectfully, they vote for a topic and decide to put that up on their softboard.

After the softboards are completed, they are judged by 3 to 6 faculty members and a few senior students. The whole school is divided into three sections; lower, middle and upper school. A winning softboard is chosen for each section of the school according to the following criteria:

- Clarity Are the topic and title clear? Is there a written explanation for the title? Does the content on the board connect or relate to the title?
- Understanding and application The judges are allowed to choose a member of a particular softboard team at random to evaluate their understanding of the content of their softboard.
- Creativity, layout and neatness



Why do we do it?

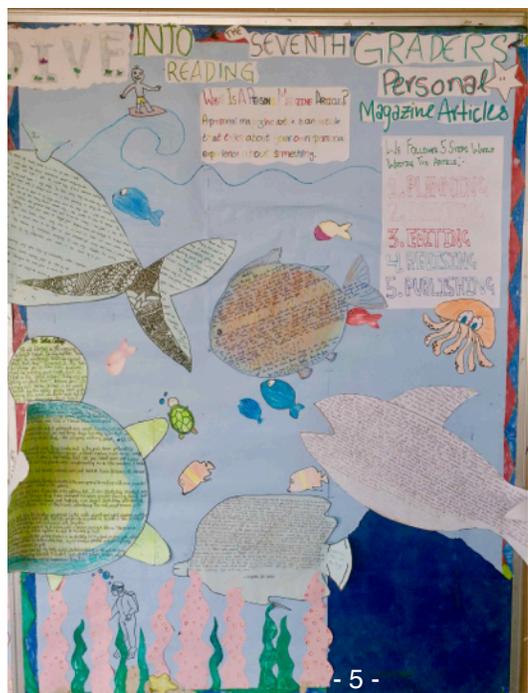
Creating softboards provides an opportunity to exercise specific skills such as:

- Summarizing Students have to summarize the content put up on the softboard and come up with a suitable title
- Writing skills: Students are highly encouraged to present concepts in their own words rather than plagiarize the source.

The initial stages of discussions and brainstorming also allow students to practice various skills required to be an effective team member such as active listening, disagreeing respectfully and problem solving.

Using softboards to teach and learn various skills contributes to education at Taktse by developing creativity, communication skills, and teamwork.

Check out the video about softboards at Taktse at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nc7wJ6awAeg>



Out of Chaos, a 10th Grade Assembly

by Ms. Teresa Tamang, 10th Grade Teacher

Mr. Ganesh, the assembly manager, asked me to organize a Grade 10 assembly.

As I walked into the semicircular turret where the 10th graders were gathering, I heard a roar in the hallway. It was utter pandemonium! Rabgyae ran after Kaushal, almost slipping and falling. Another group of students yelled at the top of their voices, frantically chasing each other around.

I was horrified by the chaos. I wondered, "What's going on?" Then I remembered that I was supposed to maintain order. I shouted, "What's happening, Grade 10?"

The students froze and stared at me. I felt my pulse racing. I held back my urge to scream at them and said through my clenched teeth, "I am going to count down from ten to one. By the time I finish, I want everyone in a circle." "10, 9, 8..." I began.

The unruly crowd slowly gathered into a circle. I could still feel my voice shaking as I said, "I didn't expect this from you. Why is Grade 10 so unruly this morning?"

Twenty pairs of eyes lowered and an awkward silence filled the room. I recalled Mr. Ganesh's instructions and asked myself, how can a chaotic class like this conduct an orderly and constructive assembly?

I sighed and began, "We have to organize an assembly in one week and this is how you all are preparing? Can you use your energy instead to come up with a plan for the class?"

The lowered eyes began to rise and there was a gentle murmur.

A usually quiet Rikzim suggested "Shall we dance?" Gyalden fussed, "Oh let's not dance, we always dance."

Another voice called out, "Group Song?".... "No."

"Musical?"... "No."

I sensed the latent chaos returning. "OK, Grade 10. I think we should do a fashion show where you dress up as your favorite superhero. Even the kindergartners would love that."

There was a gentle murmuring. Then we had a breakthrough. "Let's do a parody!" shouted Paljor and Kinga in unison. Suddenly the whole class was excited by this idea. I too was intrigued by this suggestion.

(continued on page 7)



Out of Chaos, a 10th Grade Assembly (continued)

So the planning began. We decided that the parody would center around superheroes who would come together to celebrate a wedding but during the celebration the bride and the groom would be challenged by the villain. The characters would ultimately resolve the impending fight by showing their dance tricks instead.

Over the following week, the tenth graders carried out their plan with zeal.

I spotted them all huddled together in the mornings and during recesses, discussing how to make it simple for the kindergarteners to understand while at the same time being fun and exciting for the rest of the audience. I was filled with pride to see them assign roles to each other and divide up the workload.

In a far corner Rabgayee and Tshering Yangden worked on their costumes. In another corner Prashanti and Rikzim discussed the props they would need. The exuberant Veera practiced his moves. As the big day approached, I could see that we were slowly getting into shape.

On a sunny Thursday morning the whole school gathered in the upper courtyard to witness Grade 10's class performance. The stage was set and I could see that the 10th graders were excited and ready. However, I could not help feeling a little nervous.

The audience sat on the warm marble steps; surprised and impressed by the Taktse version of 'Marvel Comics.' While the 1st graders pointed at Tshering Yangden's marvelous handmade crown coiling around her head like a white snake, the kindergarteners nudged their friends to look at Mingma's incredible face paint. The two of them had transformed themselves into the Marvel Comics characters, Wonder Woman and Rocket Raccoon. The audience laughed uproariously when they heard Dremey howl 'Wakanda Forever' in a shrill voice. They laughed even louder when they saw Super Man, enacted by Tshepel, marrying the Black Widow, played by Tenzing.

Rikzim and Kaushal worked in total synch to make the wedding perfect with a burst of party poppers, glitters, and booming background music. In the meantime Mr Suraj, my co-homeroom teacher, ran around the actors filling the air with white and gold snow spray. It actually seemed like a real wedding. At this point Bill Gates, played by Rabgyae, entered the scene and walked around throwing money in the air—money represented by the kids' Pokemon cards. The first graders reacted instantly by lunging forward to pick them up. After a moment of confusion, some of the teachers quickly helped bring the kids back to their seats. The skit ended with an amazing split jump on the pavement by the Hulk, played by Karma Chamling.

The sustained applause and the smiling faces of the audience proved that they were completely enchanted by the performance. The tenth grader actors were encircled by inquisitive audience members who wanted to know everything about their bright costumes.

While the tenth graders were busy shaking hands with the audience and counting their compliments, Ms. Prameela, a Grade 7 teacher, grabbed both of my hands and said, "Thank you for raising the bar for the school assemblies. Grade 10 did great." I gently squeezed her hand in acknowledgement, but I was thinking, "If she'd only seen the chaos at the beginning!"



Check your mailbox!

Taktse donors should be receiving their calendars for 2019 any day now. They were mailed from Kolkata on October 4th.

We hope you enjoy them!



Teaching



Learning



Seeking Resource People for Academic Session 2019!

Our Resource People Program helps fulfill Taktse's [mission](#) by merging the Best of the East with the Best of the West, enriching the lives of resource people, students and Taktse faculty members alike.

Upper School (Grades 9 to 12)

We especially seek those with expertise in high school sciences such as biology, chemistry and physics. We also need humanities such as creative writing, history and poetry; business-related subjects such as economics and accounting; and math and computer science.

Lower and Middle School (KG to Grade 8)

Math, science, reading, leveled literacy intervention, literature circles and great books, project-based learning, classroom management, student counselors, and sports coaching.

Taktse is in session from February to December. Food and lodging are provided. Resource people typically stay at Taktse for at least six weeks, and sometimes considerably longer. For more info, see: www.taktsefellowship.org, or email Ms. Meenakshi Pradhan at meenakshi.pradhan@taktse.org.



Seeking Skype Tutors

Are you a high school teacher? Do you want to make a difference in the world?

We urgently need teachers to teach/tutor our 10, 11 and 12th graders over Skype. Following are the subjects in which we need help: biology, chemistry, physics, math, business studies, history, geography, literature, and computer science.

Class times can be flexible, according to the time difference. The number of classes (minimum of one per week) is flexible too.

If you are interested in volunteering or know a teacher, retiree or grad student who might be, please contact: Meenakshi Pradhan at: meenakshi.pradhan@taktse.org or Malisha Chhetri at: malisha.chhetri@taktse.org.



Seeking College Mentors

Are you interested in mentoring a Taktse student through the college application process? It involves bi-weekly Skype calls to help a student identify appropriate schools, negotiate the Common Application and financial aid process, and revise essays.

If so, please contact:

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or Mr. Rinchen Pakhrin
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