

Report about JHP school

(based on visit of Dana and Marek Špinka in February 2013)

The students

The students, both the “veterans” of the sewing class, and the “newcomers” from the computer class were obviously enjoying the classes and the life in the school in general. During the two days we spent at the school, we had the opportunity to watch and hear them not only during the lessons but also at breakfast and lunch, during the afternoon care about the garden, when they were leaving the school on their bikes and those staying in the school also during the evenings. We witnessed that the students are working hard such as when we overheard in the evening, from our guest room, two girls from the fresh class training their first “Nice to meet you” English sentences while they were sitting at small pond behind kitchen. The new students were struggling with the simplest English sentences but they also had quite a lot of fun with it. They were paying attention to each other they tried to help. At the computers, they were really focused on their typing practice. The sewing class students (girls only when we visited) were much more confident with their skills and we saw them working on complicated designs both with their hands and with the sewing machines. Given their advanced skills, they were mostly working independently but in many cases collaborating, helping each other and discussing the work in pairs. Our impression was that there was a nice balance between order and spontaneity in how the lessons proceeded, in how the rooms were spatially organized, and in general how the working day proceeded. The sewing class students seemed to be using the different spaces in the school naturally, working either the room with the machines, or in the ironing room or even at the big table in dining room. The students were keen to see us visitors. Of course they were shy which was natural given our short visit, our very strange appearance etc. But we always felt we were warmly welcome, so we are confident other visitors and potential donors will feel well at the school. The food was simple but good and nutritious. The students worked in the garden (after the classes) in groups and in good mood although it obviously also was good opportunity for socialization and a lot of chatting.

The graduates

We only had the opportunity to see and speak to some of the graduates of the computer class at “their” house in Siem Reap when we visited them one morning accompanied by Sophat. Our impression was that it is very good that they have this “harbor” in the city, together with the (regular, as we understood) supervision and support by Sophat. The house is nice. The experience of working in the city was obviously something very new for them. They seemed to be looking into the future positively, although of course they were coping differently with the new situation. The opportunity of extra English classes even during the apprenticeship is definitely good, as their level of English skills varied quite a lot. Although Sophat and Sarith praised their level of competence compared to graduates from other Cambodian school, we would agree that strengthening the English classes will be beneficial. For instance, extra conversation classes during the last few months before graduation, focused on “communication with foreigners” and run by non-Khmer volunteers might be good idea. Of course, only volunteers with proven abilities to do this job well should be let in and the coordination the Sophat’s „core“ English course must be dealt with sensitively.

The teachers

Our visit, though short, confirmed our opinion that all the three teachers are really dedicated to their work and care a lot about the students. Sophat has a great deal of respect among the students. He wants the students to succeed so he demands from the students not to give up and he be quite strict with the students. At the same time, the students have quite a lot of fun with him the classes so we had the impression they appreciate very much his leadership. The procedure of having half of the class at the computers and the other half having English works very well, according to our impressions. The sewing class teacher (I am sorry I forgot his name and can't find it now) seem to have a very nice calm approach to teaching the skills to the students. During the classes, he was always with a student, observing patiently their work and given advice where needed, and then he went on to see the progress of the next one. We did not really see Sokna at teaching, as he was away during the day at a wedding in the family. We saw him taking care about the garden in the evening and he obviously likes this job very much. Our (fleeting) impression is that he is keen and capable to support new developments in the school.

The equipment

Everybody was very happy with sewing machines. The computers also looked well set for the teaching purposes. The data project we brought a year ago had been obviously used intensely, but when we tried to use it for a presentation, we found that it was not working. Sarith promised to let it repaired. The kitchen is simple but practically equipped for the number of meals it serves.

The buildings

The school building is impressive, the teachers and students are obviously proud of it and CSP should be too. The rooms are comfortable for the classes and the design with windows on both sides gives the opportunity to halve the rooms temporarily as needed. The important thing is that new features are being added and details finished so you have this good feeling of positive dynamism. The "old" house (the one behind the school) is a very valuable addition and we felt comfortable in guest room. We appreciated the wifi availability everywhere in the school. Of course not every visitor or volunteer need to be comfortable with this accommodation, especially during a longer stay, eg because of the type of washrooms etc. Michael and Vladimira visited the house a few weeks before us and according to their opinion (which much more qualified than ours), this old house will need some repairs soon, eg the roof construction and roofing itself. For this, the funds from the grant recently approved for the school from the Czech Foreign Aid through the Czech embassy in Bangkok will be handy.

The garden

The garden is growing in richness and productivity quickly. The fence is very solid and gives the impression of a small Eden inside it – a similar impression that we had when we walked in the Mr. Pean's Rainbow Orphanage garden during our previous visit. We did not see yet the pond but surely it has added more complexity to the garden. Ann obviously made a big impetus in the recent development of the garden and we felt that the garden is now well and systematically kept. From a more long-term perspective, we were not sure how a sustainable sanitation is planned. We cite hear once more the opinion of Michael and Vladimira. The „inherited“ sewage cesspit for the old house is probably very simple and even for the new one at the school building, the emptying et is not clear to

us. We could discuss whether there will be a realistic possibility for an improvement through the Czech Foreign Aid grant.

And finally ... Sarith

We have not mentioned Sarith yet but that is because he is the spiritus agens, the moving principle in every aspect of the school, ranging from plans for the students and their job placements, through the buildings and their equipment to the garden. His dynamism and creativity are crucial for all the developments at the school. At the same time, Sarith is very pragmatic and is able to accept feedback. Sarith is also the key person in the very important „networking“ that JHP school is beginning to develop among the potential employers and supporters in Cambodia. We are very grateful for his crucial role.

General conclusion

In conclusion, we were deeply impressed about how far the school had developed within a year and we were extremely pleased about how well the JHP school is functioning. We are committed, within our limited capabilities, to continue our support both for further development of the school and for its day-to-day functioning. We also think that these very encouraging results give a good basis for turning some of the attention to more long-term plans that are important for sustained success, including gradually increasing self-funding, localizing the governance of the school etc.