

Friends of Taktse *UPDATE*

Taktse International School
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Chris Stodolski and her teenage daughters Grace and Corrina spent nine months at Taktse from August 2012 until April 2013. Chris shared her administrative expertise with Taktse staff, and the girls joined the student body.



Sikkim Sojourn by Chris Stodolski

I had always hoped to take my children abroad for a school year. While Taktse principal Pintso Lauenstein was at Harvard getting his graduate degree, he and I decided that I would come to Taktse with my two daughters Grace and Corrina in tow. My husband Glenn would stay behind, but would come visit us while we were on our adventure.

Once we had settled our plans, I was excited and could not wait to go. Glenn was thrilled about the opportunity for me and the girls but Grace and Corrina themselves were less than enthusiastic. Grace did not want to leave her friends in America; she cried for two hours on the plane to Delhi out of sadness and fear. Corrina loved her math class and her math teacher at her previous school and did not know how she could possibly learn math or science at a remote school in the Himalayas. As for me, I did not know what

to expect. I knew the experience would be wonderful for me but I was concerned that it would be too challenging for the girls and that their fears would prevent them from soaking up all that Taktse had to offer.

Make a Difference!

Taktse is seeking professional educators to mentor our teachers in classroom management, math, literature, and critical writing skills, especially in the upper grades. We need experienced, motivated individuals who are sensitive to cultural differences. Since Taktse is closed in winter when there is no heat, we are in session all summer. We are seeking educators who can stay for a month or more. Food and lodging are provided.

For more information on Taktse's fellowship program, see: <http://taktsefellowship.org/>.



On our journey to Taktse, I faced some of the most difficult soul searching of my life. Had I made the wrong decision? Was I pushing the girls too hard? I worried about being a single parent with two children stressed by their new surroundings, ones so different from the comforts they had at home. And at first, we struggled. The girls were wary and I was exhausted. There were unfamiliar names, smells, accommodations and customs that put us on guard as we tried to anticipate what might happen in a given situation and most often missed the mark! But as the weeks passed, new friendships emerged for each of us; we quickly discovered that the Taktse community was happy to help us understand how the world works in Sikkim and at Taktse. With the help of everyone we met, we created a home away from home in Gangtok (at Chanbari House) and we found plenty of opportunities for learning in the warm and welcoming environment that Taktse has created.

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Flash forward nine months. Our time at Taktse has transformed all of us. Grace (16) has made such close friends that she has moved up to the hostel to live with them. "They are my family, too," she said. "How am I going to leave them?" In fact, we can all tell that Grace has found a part of herself here in Sikkim. She has taken to the customs and culture as if she were raised with them. I am so proud of the way she has allowed herself to be immersed in a place that at first seemed so foreign. Grace also learned the art of formal essay writing in Mrs. Denjongpa's class and earned a B on the AS Level Cambridge Exam with the help and support of her teachers and classmates.

Corrina (13) has become an orchid enthusiast while at Taktse. On a hike in a nature reserve she learned to identify the five different species of orchids. "Only at Taktse!" she said about the amazing orchid workshop she attended. Corrina was reluctant to come to Sikkim, but she has learned that she can create a sense of community in a place so different from her comfortable home. She and her friends swap favorite books and everyone at school has encouraged Corrina to continue the origami work she brought with her from the US.



Chris Stodolski added to her **Sikkim Sojourn** blog at: <http://sikkimsojourn.blogspot.in/>. Excerpt from **We have landed home**:

"I am going to miss the enormous hospitality and kindness of the people in Sikkim and at Taktse. When you live so close to so many people as one does in India, you will only survive if you learn to get along. Here in the US, our notions of self-reliance and independence allow us the illusion that we don't need other people and therefore can mistreat and dismiss them at our whim.

I will miss the daily confrontation of the use and misuse of the resources we have. In the US it is so easy to overlook the impact of our usage – of water, of packaging, of food –because we tuck the evidence away in tidy white garbage bags (that smell nice no matter what you put in the bag!). I am going to miss the simple way of eating that is whole food and organic by necessity. And I am going to miss the mystical sense that the earth is alive."

As an experienced school administrator serving as Assistant Head of School and Dean of Studies, I have worked closely with the leadership teams of many different schools. The level of dedication to the mission at Taktse is like none I have ever seen, from the board members who work tirelessly to build the new building and the school infrastructure, to the hard-working teachers, to the American volunteers who dedicate their time and expertise, this school is unlike anything I have ever experienced.

All of us have undergone a transformation during our nine month stay at Taktse. For myself, the school has helped me to have more faith in myself. I have learned to trust my instincts, and I have learned that I know a lot about running a school! The warmth of this community and the faculty's openness to trying new things has made me feel like I could give of myself to this place; and in return so much has been given to me and my girls.



Guided Reading at Taktse

by Reshma Thapa, Headmistress



Click on: [Guided Reading at Taktse](#) to see a video by Mandira Chhetri and Phuntsog Dorjee of Maark Pictures.

Mrs. Denjongpa learned about Guided Reading from Linda Chang, then a teacher at Cambridgeport School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Guided Reading was originally developed by [Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell](#). Linda Chang came to Taktse and helped set it up in 2007. The first year we introduced Guided Reading in grades 1, 2 and 3. The following year we introduced it up to the 8th grade.

Guided Reading is based on the idea that students read at different levels, even though they may be in the same grade. It is important to have each student read books at his or her own level.

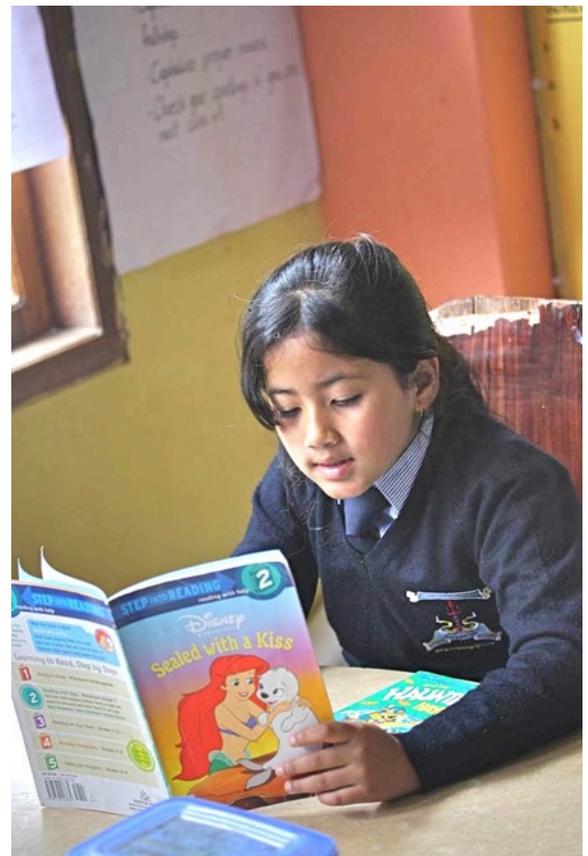


The teacher administers a reading assessment called the Benchmark Assessment at the beginning of the year. The teacher determines the reading levels, which range from A to Z, for individual students. She then groups all the students reading at the same level together and gets ready for instruction. There is usually more than one guided reading group in each class. The teacher meets with a different group every day for 25 to 30 minutes during the reading workshop.

We have a Guided Reading library that consists of fiction and non-fiction texts from levels A to Z. These books have been purchased at www.raz-kids.com. The teacher chooses a text at the group's level, keeping in mind the

interests of the students in each group. All the students in the group read the same book during that session. They may read a different book the next week.

The goal of Guided Reading is to teach reading strategies to students using texts at their level, so that they can apply those strategies when reading independently. After a particular group of students have had four to five guided reading sessions with the teacher, they are tested. If they score well, they go to the next level. Otherwise they stay at the same level and have more sessions with the teacher.



"Guided reading is a context in which a teacher leads a small group of students with similar needs and strengths to help them develop effective reading strategies. We focus on decoding and comprehension skills to help them understand the text better."

- Ms. Bhawana Thapa

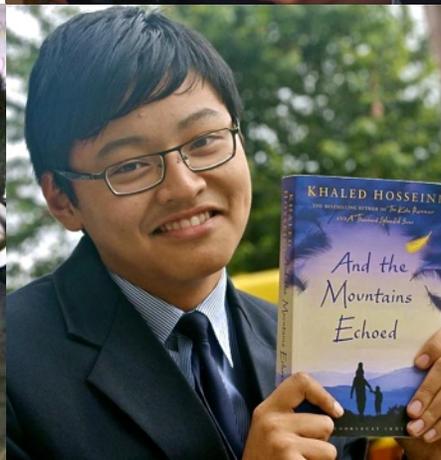
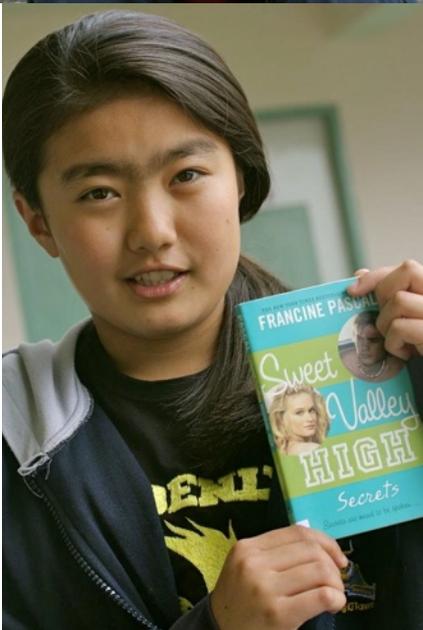


Drop Everything And Read

Reading has great importance at Taktse. Every week students throughout the entire school drop everything and read (D.E.A.R.) for one entire period.

Realizing that the senior students are role models for younger students, the literacy teachers decided to collaborate with them to instill enthusiasm for reading in the younger students. The seniors come into the classrooms and talk to the younger students about the pleasure of reading. Each D.E.A.R. class begins with book experiences, which are different from book reports. Students share their feelings about the books that they are reading, rather than merely summarizing the plots. Seniors then introduce new books that are appropriate for the reading levels of the younger students.

The literacy teachers and senior students meet biweekly to discuss successes and plan ahead. They recognize and celebrate seniors who succeed in getting even just one book in a younger student's hands. Ms. Yolmo, a literacy teacher in the upper grades, describes D.E.A.R. as "fostering a community of budding readers."



Ms. Reshma Thapa and Ms. Maria Lauenstein-Denjongpa attended the Asian Festival of Children's Content in Singapore from May 25-30, 2013.

Asian Festival of Children's Content

by Ms. Reshma Thapa, Headmistress

Mrs. Denjongpa and I journeyed to the [Asian Festival of Children's Content](#) (AFCC) in Singapore, unsure of what it would be like. We were taking a big risk, as the trip was expensive, but we told ourselves that we would never know what we had to gain unless we actually went. "We wouldn't have known about Bookaroo if we hadn't gone there that first year," Mrs. Denjongpa reminded me.



What I saw at AFCC surpassed my wildest imagination. It was well-organized with an impressive line up of experienced educators, writers and illustrators. The interactive sessions were stimulating, the bookstore had an amazing collection and a knowledgeable staff, and the Singapore National Library Building where the festival took place was spectacular. It left me wishing we had something similar in Sikkim.

John Gunnarson's workshop on supporting dual language learners and how to ask open-ended questions to get kids thinking was immensely helpful. I was secretly pleased that, while it seemed an alien concept to many participants, it was something that we are already doing at Taktse.

I had a similar feeling during a workshop on how to read aloud, expressively using your hands and body. I thought of our teachers who do this routinely and are really good at it. I even thought that some of them would be competent to lead a similar workshop. Learning about educational techniques used worldwide gave me confidence in what we are doing at Taktse.

"Kiran Shah's read aloud and Susan Kosoff's movement exercises reminded me how important theatre is for learning. Taktse is lucky to have had theatre resource people help us produce plays such as [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#), [Richard III](#), and [The Crucible](#). It is satisfying that Taktse is implementing much of what the educators suggested at the conference."

- Maria Lauenstein-Denjongpa

Susan Kosoff's workshop on reader's theatre was fun and interactive. She distributed handouts of children's poems and gave us all a small part to recite. Mrs. Denjongpa and I, along with a group of strangers, read our parts in front of a sea of unfamiliar faces. I felt as excited as a student to read my small part, and triumphant after having recited it the best I could. Mrs. Denjongpa acted out every role assigned to her with enthusiasm. I marveled at her energy and eagerness to learn even at her age. This is what being a life-long learner means.

I never expected to meet so many writers, illustrators, editors and publishers of children's literature from Southeast Asia, Japan, India, Australia, Germany and the U.S. all in one place. To actually hear about their challenges and successes encouraged me to try to write a children's book myself despite my fear of rejection. For example, Candy Gourlay, an award-winning young adult novelist from the Philippines, was rejected many times before finally getting her book published. The dearth of children's literature set in Asia with Asian characters is sad, but it

represents an opportunity for aspiring Asian authors. Some of our teachers and students at Taktse are amazing writers and I think we could help fill this void.

Mrs Denjongpa and I returned to Taktse more determined than ever to start a writing group. Our trip brought the world of books and authors closer home. I realized that published authors are as human as I am, with the same fears and insecurities, but they persist despite initial failures. The world of publishing is not so inaccessible as I had previously imagined. Sikkimese writers can be a part of it if we try.

All in all, we had a successful trip. I am glad we made so many connections. We hope some of the educators from AFCC come to Taktse to share their expertise, and we hope more of our teachers can experience this event next year.



Taktse 11th graders are assigned to do a "Passion Project," in which they explore their particular passion. Anoushka Shrestha decided to try to revive Soirees at Taktse. Soirees were opportunities for students to showcase their talents by performing for an audience.



My Passion Project: Special Assembly

by Anoushka Shrestha, Grade 11

Passion Project. It was simple. A project about which I was passionate. Music came to mind when I thought about the word "passion," but how was I supposed to work on a music project that was more innovative than just me singing on stage? Halfway through the year, I was still stuck. I wanted to do something I could really put my heart into, and I wanted it to be one of the best projects I'd ever done. But what could it be? I did pursue projects other than music. One of them was contributing to Sagun's slam-poetry group by writing poetry of my own. But that wasn't *my* passion project.

One night when I was in bed watching old videos of "Soirees" that teachers used to organize, I realized Taktse hadn't had a Soiree for the past two years. The next day I asked about ten students if they missed the Soirees, and all of them said they did. That's when I knew what my Passion Project was going to be. I pitched my idea to Mr. Lauenstein, and he enthusiastically said, "That's a GRRREAT idea!" That got me started.

Announcements, flyers, sign-up sheets, proposals, auditions, guest lists, and invitations followed. On the day of the first announcement, at least twenty people approached me with ideas about their performances. However, the turnout for auditions was disappointing.

Once again, Mr. Lauenstein stepped in with some advice about starting small. So the "Soiree" was downsized to a "Special Assembly." The same process went around again. Same effort, same excitement, only for a smaller project now. In a way, I felt it was better. Even though it involved fewer performances, all of them were by people who were passionate about what they were doing. So it became passion projects within a passion project!

After about two weeks of rehearsals, some of which were unproductive but the rest industrious and fun, the morning of the Special Assembly arrived. In all honesty, we were as ready as running the New York City Marathon after only two days at the gym.

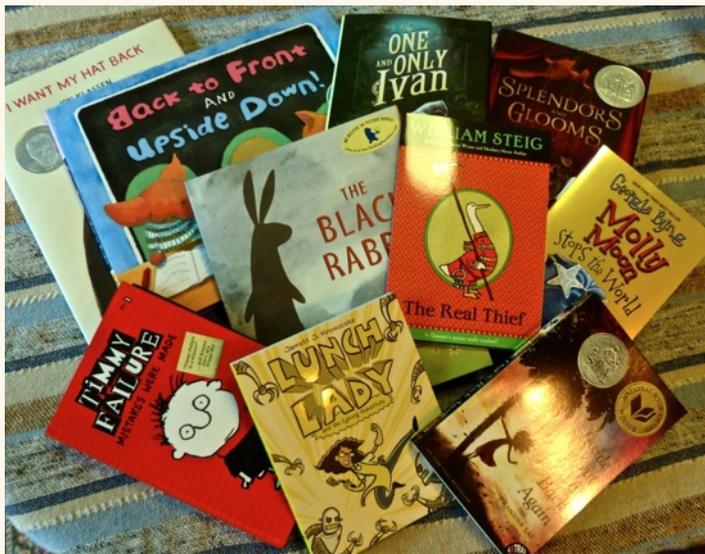
It was over in less than an hour, but it was special indeed, consisting of songs, recitations of writing pieces, and a 'grand' fashion show. People clapped, hooted, laughed, smiled, congratulated us, and shook hands with us. Even if the performances weren't crème de la crème, they required effort and bravery from those who stepped up and performed.

So, by 10 o'clock on that Monday morning, I had completed my first Passion Project.



Taktse Supporters Donate Books

Thank you, Charlotte Lemann, Grace Ruhp, Kay Hamilton-Smith, and David Johnston for donating such great books, Nooks and e-books for Taktse students to read!



Shared Vision for a Sustainable Future

Taktse is proud to partner with Sungevity to promote clean solar power for a healthier environment and a more hopeful future. Sign up for Sungevity's solar energy lease program and they will donate **\$750** to Taktse. Plus, you'll receive a **\$750** discount! Click [HERE](#) to get a free quote!

Sungevity leases solar panels in the following states: AZ, CA, CO, DE, MA, MD, NJ, and NY. For a reference, contact Paul Lauenstein at 781-784-2986, or lauenstein@comcast.net.



The Taktse newsletter is edited by Lonnie Friedman & Paul Lauenstein. To add a friend, or unsubscribe to the Taktse newsletter, email Lonnie Friedman at: lonnie.friedman@comcast.net

Connecting for Change - Oct. 25-27

Plan to attend [Connecting for Change](#), an annual three-day, solutions based gathering in New Bedford, MA that brings together a diverse audience to create deep and positive change in their communities.

[Connecting for Change](#) is sponsored by the Marion Institute, and features many dynamic and renowned speakers such as Dr. James Hansen, designated by Time Magazine as one of the 100 most influential people on Earth for his efforts to raise awareness of climate change.

Taktse's Principal Pintso Lauenstein-Denjongpa will present a workshop. Taktse started out as a school to educate future leaders of Sikkim, but it has grown into a model not only for the Himalayas, but also for India and beyond. At Taktse, the ability to listen carefully, work cooperatively, analyze deeply, and think creatively are prized as ways to succeed and grow in a quickly evolving world.

We invite you to meet Mr. Lauenstein-Denjongpa, learn more about Taktse's model, and share your ideas and experiences about education in the developing world. Also, please visit Taktse's booth, where Taktse volunteers will be selling products from India to raise funds for Taktse.



For more information about keynote speakers, workshops, and other details, see: http://www.marioninstitute.org/connecting-for-change/events?event_type=keynote.

Taktse Wish List

Support Taktse students by providing them with books, [Nooks](#), and [Nook books](#) to stir their imaginations. See Taktse's [wish list at Amazon.com](#). Books and educational games can be sent to:

Lonnie Friedman
4 Gavins Pond Road
Sharon, MA 02067
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Visitors traveling to Sikkim will take donated books with them to Taktse.

