



Teachers share their views about reality of Indian life

TEACHERS who visited India ahead of a summer programme in which school pupils will help transform the lives of children have been sharing their experience.

All around were piles of rotting rubbish and open sewers, they said.

Well-fed pigs contrasted with malnourished children searching through the garbage for anything of value that could be sold for a few rupees.

Yet just a few hundred feet away was the 900-pupil school volunteers came to visit, an oasis of beauty and calm among the surrounding filth and squalor.

This summer, two cross-community teams of young people will take part in 16-day visit to India to work with children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

It has been organised by Saphara, a non-profit, non-denominational Christian organisation which welcomes young people from all backgrounds, races and religions.

Its teams give young people the opportunity to engage in issues of justice and global citizenship through working with the educationally disadvantaged.

Dr Christine Burnett, a teacher for 20 years at Methodist College Belfast, took a career break to set up Saphara.

She has experience of bringing groups of students from Methody to India but wanted to develop a similar programme involving more schools and make it a cross-community initiative.

The trip planned for July will focus on working with disadvantaged children in India through Irish-linked charities in Dehradun and Mussoorie in the foothills of the Himalayas.

In February a group of teachers from Northern Ireland visited the two schools which the Saphara teams will be working in to plan the summer programme.

They encountered many striking experiences during their visit to the community health and education NGO running the school in an impoverished slum community in Dehradun of 10,000 inhabitants.

They said they were impressed to hear young people's aspirations to go to university to study subjects including business and teaching.

One pupil even spoke of his hope of enrolling in a MBA programme.

Volunteers said that children from such deprived backgrounds were so motivated was impressive.

They said the possibility of fulfilling



dreams was underlined by a woman who was one of the first girls from the slum community to attend the school and later returned as a qualified teacher.

"Saphara believes that working alongside such children gives Northern Irish young people the opportunity to discover that even the most disadvantaged children can escape from poverty if given a chance of education," Dr Burnett said.

"The vision of Saphara is to bring together young people from all kinds of backgrounds, giving them real opportunities to become citizens of the wider world.

"As a recent team member, John, put it 'this was a once in a lifetime trip – I learnt things that no school class could ever teach'."

■ For details visit www.saphara.org or email christine.burnett@gmail.com.

■ **MEET AND GREET:** Above, a volunteer with Indian children. Right, youngsters play in a river which runs through an India slum



WRITING BETWEEN THE LINES

Back to life with brand new course

By Maureen Maher

STILL nothing from Penguin Ireland. Is that good or bad? I seem to spend my life asking this question. If a body can't distinguish between the two at my stage, what hope is there for humanity?

Back to real life. Literally. And literately. We have begun a new course: life-writing with Ian Sansom. It is the final taught module of the masters.

After that, the disaster – sorry, dissertation – something Freudian there.

The first week of the course was an introduction – briefly, how to life-write without sounding like an illiterate, egotistical ass.

Pass no remarks.

Ian has read everything. He regales us with novelists and philosophers, essayists and biographers – Roth, Nussbaum, Hazlitt, Ellman.

His classes are a feast of erudition, advice and entertainment.

Next week, we look at biography. *Augustine's Confessions* is the required reading. But that's a story for another day.

Last week's topic was essay-writing.

Volunteers were asked to produce work for reading to the class. In a moment of madness I signed up. It felt good at the time but what to write?

Ian had emailed us about an evening with the American poet, Jay Parini. The subject: Why poetry matters. Why, Ian challenged us, does poetry matter? Answers by email.

And that's what set me off. Why does poetry matter? Who says it matters? And an email turned into a rant which turned into an essay. I described Wordsworth's *Daffodils* as "contrived, self-conscious, cringe-making childishness", before moving on to Philip Larkin. Remember those immortal lines: They 'f you up, your mum and dad. Pure plagiarism. Doesn't everyone say it? My children do.

As for Matthew Arnold – "contrivance and artifice".

I apologised to the poets in the class. Perhaps poetry makes me feel inadequate, I said. One perceptive soul said maybe that's what it was all about. Is it so? Am I really a frustrated poet? It's true I keep trying to write verse.

To let you judge, I give you a poem.

*I used to be prosaic
Until the muse said, kid,
You're going to be a poet,
And so that's what I did.
What do you think? Answers on a post card.*

■ Maureen Maher is a retired teacher and solicitor who is now working towards a masters in creative writing at Queen's University Belfast.

Highlights of college life remembered

I LOVE College by Asher Roth embodies the worst aspects of university life, which are also often the most memorable.

Rather than using college as a means to graduate and get a job, he frequents frat houses playing beer pong. He does at least develop some skills, becoming proficient in aiming, taunting and alcohol tolerance. In the lyrics he lists his four

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loves as "college, women, drinkin' and college". Clearly, the joys of learning are somewhat overshadowed by the temptations of a boorish lifestyle and adolescent frolics and there is little indication of the singer's academic pursuits or goals.

Judging by the grammar and vocabulary used in the lyrics, however, it is probably safe to assume he is not majoring in English. Who are we to judge though? Most of us who experienced higher learning regale friends, family, co-workers,

anyone who will listen really, with some tale of collegiate stupidity, when we were required to be clever.

Few of us, though, felt compelled to write a white-boy rap about it. Our stories are repeated so often they could be recited in our sleep – "remember that time when (insert name here) tried to break into the Catholic chaplaincy after

drinking the bottle of Buckfast?"

Ask us to remember anything from that second year Stuart Scotland tutorial and we're looking to reminisce further about alcohol-fuelled escapades and capers. Getting intoxicated and making a supreme fool of yourself is as much a part of third-level education as sitting exams – so I'm told.