'They’re looking for a teacher to go to Chembakolli...’.
Within a few months of a chance conversation on an INSET day Liz left behind a chilly British winter for southern India. Here, she reports on the nine months she spent living, learning and working alongside Adivasi people in the Nilgiri Hills.

The tiny village of Chembakolli in southern India is known to teachers and pupils across the UK through ActionAid’s educational resources and website. During my time there I was based at Vidyodaya School, in the town of Gudalur, a study centre for young people from Chembakolli and the surrounding villages. Vidyodaya’s mission is to ‘improve the quality of education received by underprivileged children in Adivasi communities and to establish a culturally appropriate learning system with active participation of the community’. A teacher training scheme has been established at the school and Vidyodaya also supports community education programmes for young Adivasi (indigenous) people attending local government schools. My role involved teaching various subjects to pupils aged 5 to 14, sharing teaching methodologies and developing learning materials. I also helped the pupils write a weekly blog for the ActionAid UK schools’ website (see web panel) and kept a diary of my experiences, extracts from which are provided below.

Time passes quickly and I am now back teaching full-time in the UK. Chembakolli is thousands of kilometres away, but the memories of my time there will always be with me.

Part of my role at Vidyodaya School was to collect images and resources for ActionAid. On my return to the UK I helped to put together new interactive content and lesson ideas for the charity’s schools website. My current class (a mix of pupils from years 2, 3 and 4) learned about southern India recently. Being able to share artefacts, photographs, games and stories from my own experiences helped to bring the topic alive for the pupils. Above all I wanted to challenge any of the pupils’ preconceptions about India and to emphasise the diversity of what is an immense country in language, dress, food, religion, culture and landscape. We explored a number of localities, from the bustling metropolis of Bengalaru (Bangalore) to the peaceful village of Chembakolli. We shared a blog with the Vidyodaya pupils through the ActionAid Schools website (see web panel). Pupils used the blog to exchange information about what their schools and lifestyles are like, from food and farming to playground games.

My experiences have also made me question ideas of development and wealth. Economic prosperity is often used as a measure of how ‘developed’ a society is. Often we think of ‘wealth’ as how many things we own, the size of our house, the car we drive, the clothes we wear. The pupils at Vidyodaya School may not be ‘rich’ in material possessions, but perhaps wealth should really be about family, friends and community. In this way many of these pupils are wealthier and happier than most.

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Liz Newbon was class 3 teacher at Blackawton Primary School in Devon and is now travelling and working in Africa.
January
The teachers and pupils at Vidyodaya School are like one big family. It is wonderful to see how the older and younger pupils interact and help each other. The young people have a real sense of responsibility for their learning: shown in the way they lead the prayers and younger pupils interact and help each other. The one big family. It is wonderful to see how the older pupils appreciate and enjoy their learning the school day is filled with smiles and laughter.

February
There is so much greenery here with the forest, endless tea and coffee plantations, rice fields and banana and papaya trees. Gudalur itself is a hustle and bustle of brightly-coloured buses, shops selling all kinds of fruits and vegetables, tea stalls and bakeries filled with tempting sweets and cakes. It is almost evening as I write this and, as always, the town is alive with sound: the non-stop chatter of the birds, honking of rickshaws scurrying along the road, ring of distant church bells, chanting from the temple and the prayer call from the mosque.

        I am starting to realise all the things that I used to take for granted: a hot shower, safe drinking water and electricity. I remember the moans in the staffroom to read, write and use numbers but also learning about our history, culture and values; about each other and the world around us. It was a chance to learn and the pupils’ enthusiasm and determination for learning; and to see skyscrapers and shopping malls after months of living in a small town of Devala. This plantation is owned and run by the Adivasi community. We didn’t have to go far before we spotted a bright green vine snake, a wild elephant and lots of blood-sucking leeches, the forest floor was covered in them.

June
The monsoon has finally arrived and when it rains here it really rains. It’s as if buckets of water are being emptied on to you by the clouds; lightning light up the sky, the fireworks and thunder echoes around the valley. Even under an umbrella you are soaked through in minutes.

Community and culture play important roles in school life with plenty of time for singing traditional songs, telling riddles, acting out stories and learning about the forest and Adivasi history.

July
I visited Bengaluru (Bangalore) and Mysore last weekend, two big cities in the state of Karnataka. It was strange to see skyscrapers and shopping malls after months of living in the small town of Devala. In the city you notice even more the many variables between rich and poor that exist here.

August
Last week I took a bumpy, one-hour jeep ride to the tiny settlement of Veramanga. I went there to learn more about the village libraries programme that Vidyodaya supports. Jayanthi and Nandini, both 16 years old, are the dedicated librarians in Veramanga. They run the library on Sundays and in the school holidays. They usually meet in the veranda of a house in the village. Smiling shyly, Jayanthi told me that before the younger pupils, just wanted to play and weren’t interested in reading. Now they want to read and pesters the girls to open up the books and stories that swallow you up whole as soon as you step outside your door.

What will I remember the most about Vidyodaya School? The "Good morning Liz akka [sister]" when I arrived each day; the singing, dancing, playing and laughter; the pupils’ enthusiasm and determination for learning; and above all their sense of community and togetherness. It has been a reminder of what education is: not just being able to read, write and use numbers but also learning about our history, culture and values; about each other and the world around us. It was a chance to learn and share; a reminder of what really matters in life. I feel very lucky to have been a part of this special community for the last few months - a family which I will never forget.

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Diary extracts.