

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

LIZ NEWBON

'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 Bengaluru (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.



Young people playing during a holiday camp at Madhuvana tea estate, Devala.
Photo: Liz Newbon/ActionAid/ACCORD/AMS.



ActionAid's online resources include:

- Downloadable geography teaching material: www.actionaid.org.uk/102745/free_downloads.html
 - Chembakolli: www.actionaid.org.uk/102789/chembakolli.html
 - Schools site: www.actionaid.org.uk/100006/schools.html
 - Vidyodaya School pupils blog: www.chembakolli.com/blog/?p=1832
- Chembakolli photo gallery (GA members only): www.geography.org.uk/resources/photogallery/chembakolli/

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 singing in assembly, organise themselves for their classes, and look after their school and each other. You can see how much 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 and back home on the rare occasions that the internet or an interactive whiteboard went down. There are power cuts here most days and one laptop is shared among 100 pupils.

May

The forest here has many rare and unusual plants and animals of all shapes and sizes. At the weekend I went on a walk in the native forest in the Madhavana tea estate in Devala. This plantation is owned and run by the Adivasi community. We didn't have to go far before we were completely surrounded by towering trees, a sea of green leaves and the deafening noise of cicadas. 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; flashes of lightning light up the sky like 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 Gudalur. In the city you notice even more the many variables between rich and poor that exist here.

March

I have been learning lots about some of the many crops that are grown here. Last week I visited Vijayakumar and his family in the village of Kaapukunnu. I wandered around his garden gazing in wonder at all the different plants: pepper, coffee, ginger, turmeric, bananas and many more. We drank tea, made using leaves freshly picked from his garden. Further along the road someone clambered up a coconut tree and a few minutes later we were drinking fresh coconut water. So often children can grow up without ever really knowing or seeing where their food comes from (beyond the supermarket). Here everything is alive and growing outside your house.

April

I have just got back from an overnight school trip to Kozhikode (Calicut), a coastal city in Kerala, about 130km away. We went to the beach in the evening and it was the first time that most of the pupils and teachers had seen the sea. I don't think that I will ever forget the looks on their faces and the smiles and shouts of glee as we all paddled and splashed in the water.

I have been in India for four months now and things can feel a little difficult sometimes, but the many amazing and rewarding moments make it all so worthwhile. A lot of the pupils here have everyday problems to face that are far, far bigger than my own, but they are ever cheerful and ready to live life to the full.

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 pester the girls to open up the library. Their library is just a small metal trunk with a few books and puzzles, but it has made a big difference to the lives of these young people.

September

I have lots of different feelings bubbling up inside of me, sad to leave but excited to be going home to see family and friends. India is a huge country of contrasts; I have glimpsed just a tiny snapshot of it and the lives of a few of its more than 1 billion inhabitants. When I think of India I will always remember the colours, sounds and smells 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 arrive each day; the singing, dancing, playing and laughter; the pupils' enthusiasm and determination for learning; 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.