Tigers, tea and the chance to teach

Vidyodaya school is the star of our award-winning resource for UK schools, Chembakollie: life and change in an Indian village. When ActionAid offered the chance for a qualified teacher to spend six months at the school, blogging about their experience and bringing our Chembakollie resources to life for children in both the UK and India, Katy grabbed it with both hands.

Nestling in the lush Nilgiri hills in Tamil Nadu, Vidyodaya school is small. Just 100 children aged 5-15 learn in classes of 10, taking English and maths classes in the morning, and then – depending on their age – either craft classes or more vocational classes in the afternoon.

The school, Katy explains, focuses on confidence-building and developing the whole personality of the child, not just academic ability. And whatever it lacks in mod-cons is more than made up for by the diverse curriculum, the responsible attitude of the children and their unbounded enthusiasm to learn.

Add to this the fantastic scenery and the chance to see elephants, tigers, leopards and other wildlife, and you soon realise that this is not your average teaching placement.

Part of the community

"I love working with young people and being in school allows you to be part of a community," says Katy, freshly returned from India as Action went to press. "I taught English, and one of the best things was being able to discuss with the children and learn about their lives and views – and their impressions of how I live at home.

"The curriculum, tailored to the needs of local children, means they’re interested in what they’re learning and are far less likely to drop out of school," explains Katy.

With the ethos that children learn through play, afternoon sessions for younger children involve tribal dancing, singing and storytelling. They also learn crafts such as basket weaving, jewellery making, embroidery and art.
Older children learn woodworking, tailoring, IT and soap making. All produce is sold, with profits invested in savings accounts that each child draws on when they need to pay for pens, pencils and books. Some of the money is used to pay for exams.

Katy helped to train ‘village librarians’ – young Adivasi (tribal) children willing to be peer teachers and help others to learn to read. She also helped develop a group of ‘trainee teachers’ – young adults who had dropped out of school but were now eager to help children with their schoolwork. A big part of her job was writing the regular Chembakolli blog, keeping schools in the UK up-to-date with what was going on and her experiences.

Freedom to teach

‘Being in India gave me the freedom to explore different ways of teaching, to be creative and have fun with it – it was so refreshing. I’d left teaching because I was burned out, but this experience reminded me about the nice bits of teaching that you rarely have time for here. There’s no moaning and no hierarchy – everyone pitches in and takes responsibility – one of the best aspects of the year was the atmosphere between the staff.’

Now home, Katy misses the genuine community spirit of a place where the invitation to drop in for tea and a chat at any time of the day is truly meant. She also misses the children. ‘They are lovely,’ she says. ‘They are very accepting and interested, and love learning. They see it as a privilege to have an outsider who’s interested in them – and like children everywhere, it’s good for them to hear what’s good about their lives and what they should appreciate from an outside perspective.

“When I first set off I thought ‘what have I done?’” Katy recalls. “Then I realised that six months wasn’t enough – in fact, however long you’re there, it won’t feel like enough. I’d recommend it to anyone.”

CHEMBAKOLLI
TEACHING RESOURCES

Chembakolli: life and change in an Indian village is ActionAid’s multi-award winning teaching resource. To find out more about Vidyodaya school, Chembakolli village, and how your school can become involved, please visit www.chembakolli.com

In April this year, one lucky teacher from the UK will follow in Katy’s footsteps and have their own life-changing experience in India. Could it be you?

If you have more than two years’ teaching experience with a PGCE or equivalent qualification, you’ll qualify for the chance to:
- volunteer for six months at Vidyodaya school
- teach a range of subjects to local pupils aged five to 15
- blog about your experience on a weekly basis for the ActionAid website

This placement is voluntary, but travel expenses and accommodation are covered, in addition to a local living allowance. Call 01460 23 8000 for more details.