

## **Training teachers in war affected areas in the North and East of Sri Lanka.**

**by Daniel Graves**

I have just returned from an eye-opening 12 day trip which encompassed two five-day teacher training sessions in Mannar, an island just off the coast of North West Sri Lanka and Batticaloa, a small city on the East coast. Both of these areas were heavily affected by the civil war which only ended in May 2009 when the Sri Lankan military defeated the LTTE – more recognized as the Tamil tigers.

This was my first time to visit either of these places and while Batticaloa is now slowly becoming known as a tourist destination with some very nice hotels, beautiful bay leading onto the beach and a thriving town centre., Mannar is still a very under-developed region, with only two hotels we could find but also a very beautiful beach and huge potential as a tourist spot.

The main personal highlight for me was the response from the teachers to the course and the effort they put into nine hour days for five days running. One teacher from Mannar told me that he was the only English teacher in his school, and that he had never before received training in ideas on how to make the class more communicative. Other teachers had similar stories and it was hugely gratifying to hear their enthusiasm for trying these out with their students and to think of the potential impact this could have on their students lives.

We also asked the teachers to put on Bollywood film style plays that each team organised and presented on the final day. – the acting was occasionally both genuinely touching and funny with the topics chosen by the students ranging from the power a teacher can have to change a life, illegal immigration and overbearing mothers reflecting real issues from their lives.

Other highlights were being shown around Batticaloa by the chairman of the local council and his wife, enabling us to see the effects of both the war and the tsunami on the region but also on the development taking place there now and on the close nature of the different communities, Muslim, Catholic and Hindu all living and working shoulder to shoulder. His story of his experiences during the war and what happened to him and his family were as fascinating as they were shocking. As were those of others we met, for example a man who is now developing a large sports complex in Batticaloa but had had both his parents killed in a suicide bomb blast and had to flee to the UK. It shows the real resilience of the people to keep coming back from both man-made and natural disasters that I think show great promise for the region now that peace is here.

The trip was organized through Mohan Sumarasinhe's SPICE charity in the UK <http://www.spicesrilanka.org.uk/index.htm> and was an opportunity for us to try out a new course, developed by my colleague Rhona Brown, called English Teachers in Action. This has a focus on promoting a communicative classroom through observing videos of five lessons conducted by local teachers in local schools, noting what was good and what could have been changed then practicing through micro teaching and giving feedback on each other's lessons. The overall aim is take the lessons away from being teacher centred and making them more student centred through activities and methods that give the students more involvement in their own learning.

The two groups were initially very different, with the first group keen for everything from the off whereas some in the second group were initially rather resistant and unsure of the perceived benefits the course would give them. By the end though both groups were fully engaged, more able to reflect on what they were doing in the classroom and why they were doing it and coming out with some very imaginative ideas during the micro teaching sessions; the making a bus out of string one being particularly memorable.

Part of the course is that they will have to go back to their schools and conduct workshops on what they learnt. Then, in two months' time they will write a report back on how the ideas have been used and the response from the students involved. I am really looking forward to seeing the effect the course has had as this is a way to ensure that the course is not just a moment in time but an on-going developmental opportunity.

Now sitting back at my desk in work I can't help thinking if it all did actually happen, but that is fairly normal after travelling in Sri Lanka.

I won't even mention being mock charged by an elephant, the inauguration ceremony with armed guards, the absolutely delicious food, the insects, the priest who helped us out, the 500 year old tree planted by Arabic sailors, the meal with the local general or the exhilarating journey back with a driver who seemed to be in a particular hurry.