

## **Carlton Schools, Tangalle. A visit by Victoria Godsall – Montessori Diploma in Early Childhood, DTLLS, CELTA**

I arrived in Tangalle through the recommendation of Mohan Samarasinhe. He noticed my Montessori accreditation and realized that it might be a good idea for me to visit Tangalle whilst in Sri Lanka. Mohan's work with the SPICE charity (Speaking Promoting and Involving Children in English) and the fact that he has been a Governor of Moss Hall Nursery in Barnet for several years, really compliments the good work of The First Ladies vision of a love of the English language and all the work she, and her team, do in the chain of Carlton Pre-Schools. It's delightful to see two people – Mohan and the First Lady – who already have such busy lives, dedicate themselves fully to the promotion of the English language for the future generations of Sri Lanka.

Before I arrived in Tangalle I had enjoyed 2 very fulfilling and rewarding weeks working alongside Mohan Samarasinhe SPICE charity and Daniel Graves, from the British Council. One week in Batticaloa and the other week in Mannar.

I was a little nervous of suddenly being on my own, without Mohan and Daniel and arriving in Tangalle on my own. I was soon made to feel very welcome and treated with such kindness and warmth and before long I was feeling very much at home.

It was lovely to meet all the teachers from the First Ladies chain of nursery schools. They really are a super bunch. We had a very productive training session on the Monday where we looked and practiced working with diverse Montessori activities and had a workshop on being creative and using what they already have in the classroom. I was most impressed with their creativity and thought which is centered around the child and the child's individual ability. The nursery teachers were extremely keen to learn new songs to sing with the children and they expressed their wish to progress in the English language so that they can pass this on to their children in the nursery. They are well aware of the main problem which is pronunciation and lack of confidence in using new lexis. However, my conclusion from what I saw over the 3 days is that these teachers are a dedicated bunch of women, who are gentle and kind and inspiring to the youngsters in their care. Not once in my three days at the nursery did I hear a raised voice or a sign of impatience.

They are also highly skilled, sometimes having to control and educate 52 children in a class – something I might struggle with. The children that I saw, showed that they are stimulated by their days in the nursery – with a mix of Sinhalese and English in their environments. They also have some great activities, focusing on team building, developing social skills and introducing subjects such as maths, history and geography.

On Tuesday, I was lucky enough to be in Tangalle Pre-school , when it was announced that the First Lady of Sri Lanka would be visiting. The staff seemed surprisingly at ease with this – later I found out and could observe that the First Lady makes these visits regularly and both the students and staff see her as a constant contributor and fellow teacher, hence the relaxed, friendly and informal atmosphere. I was also impressed that the First Lady even dons the same uniform as her staff. When the First Lady realized that I was a volunteer Montessori teacher from England who had come to visit the school, she very kindly invited me to join her on a tour of her Carlton Pre-Schools who are rehearsing their shows for the big concert in December.

We also stopped at a Dragon Fruit/Coconut Farm which is being used as a way of helping young people learn the horticultural trade and therefore provide them with a lifelong profession. On the way back to Tangalle, we saw some of her baby elephants and I was allowed to feed them – bananas and watermelons...lucky elephants! I was amazed at The First Ladies bravery, she has no problem getting close to these enormous animals, AND then she made one of them sit down. They are obviously her very loved pets.

I was then invited to her home – which was surprisingly modest considering she is the First Lady – I was expecting a presidential palace but, in fact, it was a normal family home with photographs of her family and important faces decorating the rooms. The lunch was extremely relaxed (thankfully) and we were joined by the First Ladies friend and her Matron who works with the First Lady at her ‘clinic for the people’. It really was such a nice lunch and we chatted about schooling, animals (she is extremely fond of animals) and the good infrastructure of the road system in Sri Lanka. We had to end the lunch as The First Lady and Matron had to start their clinic – where they worked until 9pm.

The next morning, I was invited back to the house for breakfast as there was going to be a birthday celebration in the pre-school and The First Lady thought I might like to see this and say goodbye to the lovely nursery staff – they even gave me a present – I was so touched.

I’m not an important person, I’m not a journalist, I’m not political and I’m still flabbergasted by the First Ladies friendly response to me as a fellow pre-school teacher as there was no reason for her to treat me with such genuine friendship. I only knew her for two days but in this time she treated me as one of her friends, we fed her elephants together and her love of animals was hugely apparent. Her staff – without exception, adore her and most of them have been with her for years. It’s clear that her staff find her approachable and part of their daily lives. She has this way of making people around her feel comfortable – so much so, that even I forgot I was with the First Lady of Sri Lanka!

So, all in all, The First Lady, has a vision of helping the next generation by providing them a great start in their pre-schools with a special focus on the English language. We discussed together, the benefits of children being exposed to language at a

young age and her vision is to see young people, enjoying and using the English language and improving their pronunciation in order to find work in a competitive future market.

I was genuinely impressed and surprised with her 'hands on' and tenacious work ethic, her humaneness, humbleness and lack of extravagance. What a super Lady! What an incredible experience I've had!