

**Report of British Council
Link Visit between
Astley Community High School
(Northumberland, England),
and Medagama National School,
Sri Lanka**

October 19th – 29th 2007

**Participating Teacher: Ian Knight
 Headteacher,
 Astley Community High School**

Link Visit Ref: SLV2007:110

1. Background to visit

When the original application was made to the British Council, it was my intention to involve other members of staff to broaden the experience base of staff to actually visit Sri Lanka.

Shortly before the scheduled departure the designated member of staff was taken ill. As I had already visited Medagama School and had the necessary inoculations, my Chair of Governors agreed that I should make the visit.

2. Context

Astley Community High School has been working with Medagama School since the Tsunami tragedy of December 2004.

Working through a Buddhist charity based in Sri Lanka Success Sri Lanka, we have given ongoing support to four schools across the island.

In September 2006 as part of a British Council International Headteacher Placement I visited Sri Lanka and traveled to Medagama School.

I returned to Medagama School on a private visit with my wife in April 2007 to view the impact of the ongoing support we are giving in terms of resources and educational materials.

Whilst that will continue through an ongoing programme of fundraising, the intention has always been to develop curriculum projects between the schools to better promote international awareness and understanding in both communities and pupil populations.

Astley Community has made a long term commitment to this programme and having visited Medagama and our other link schools I have a real personal commitment to Sri Lanka.

3. Overview of visit

Friday October 19th: flight from Newcastle to Dubai

Saturday, October 20th: Dubai to Colombo. Met at airport by Success Sri Lanka charity representative. Transported to Kandy and to guest house.

Sunday, October 21st: Visit Polonnaruwa, ancient capital, with charity group.

Monday, October 22nd: Travel with Buddhist priest, who is project manager of Success Sri Lanka, to Medagama National School. Left Kandy at 6.00, arriving in the school at 9.40. Straight into classroom work with Grade 7-11 pupils Average 35 per group. Classes finished at 1.30 but I did an optional Grade 8 session – for 65! Stay with local family.

Tuesday, October 23rd: Attend English Medium Assembly at 7.30 then teach Grades 8-11 until 1.30 followed by Grade 9 extra class.

Wednesday, October 24th: Full class project sessions 7.30-1.30. Helped in Grade 11 revision class in preparation for pending exams.

Thursday, October 25th: Buddhist holiday – Poya, so school closed. I had arranged to meet up with staff at Namnapurawa school, about 10 miles away. We also have a linked project with this school and are hoping to make our agreed link visit in February 2008 into a reciprocal one, funded by British Council.

Despite being a holiday, the English Medium students (65) plus staff were in school to meet me, and present initial drafts of project work.

I worked with the whole group until about 1.30. Obtained written agreement from the Principal to support our reciprocal visit.

Friday, October 25th: Led whole school assembly for all 1600 students, with aid of translator. Initial project submissions on agreed international themes collected from all groups. English Medium Assembly and final presentations.

(Brief early morning visit to nearby, extremely remote and impoverished primary school.)

Afternoon departure from Medagama in monsoonal storm for return to Kandy, arriving at 6.30.

Saturday, October 26th: In Kandy, together with charity group, observed preparations for major state funeral of highest ranking priest at the temple. Proceedings brought city to a halt.

Evening meeting with senior officers of Success Sri Lanka charity group, to review the week and to plan for next phase of joint working, plus my next private visit to all our link schools during Easter holiday 2008.

Sunday, October 27th: Travel by car from Kandy to Colombo and flight to Dubai for connection to England.

Monday, October 28th: Arrive back in Newcastle.

4. Evaluation of relative success of visit

The whole visit has been a resounding success. For me personally, as the coordinator of this linking process, it has been extremely rewarding. Spending a week living and working in such an isolated location was in itself a uniquely rewarding experience. In providing me with such an insight into the specific challenges facing poor rural schools in Sri Lanka, the trip was invaluable.

I have a much clearer picture as to what is practical to achieve through ongoing linkage with Medagama school. There is an enormous wealth of cross curricular material which can be accessed and absorbed by pupils in both of our schools.

Whilst the illness of my designated member of staff so soon before the departure date, robbed me of the opportunity to extend the personal expertise of my staff in such a different context, it also created, in hindsight, an important chance to cement the partnership with the Principal at Medagama, and at neighbouring Nannapurawa.

The Education system within Sri Lanka remains very bureaucratic and the profile of a Principal in such large schools is very high. It must be difficult for him professionally when my school is giving ongoing financial and resource support on a scale he could never match. However, through my personal presence in his school for a week, working on themes which have obvious and demonstrable benefit to all our pupils, he has a much better picture of where the venture is leading. The Principal's command of English is somewhat limited so much of the developmental work has been done by the Head of the English Medium section.

I am sure my return to Sri Lanka confirmed in the minds of both Principals that our joint working can succeed and will bring great benefits.

The students of Medagama National School generally, and of the English Medium section in particular, were utterly enchanting. In an area so remote and with conventional resources and opportunities so limited, the students display limitless enthusiasm and commitment to their studies, to a degree that would shame most British pupils. That they can achieve such results with virtually no resources, and then delivered and assessed in a foreign and often antiquated language is frankly humbling.

Eating and living with a village family, walking to school with the pupils at 7.00 a.m. and spending the day in a community of non car or mobile phone users, where the early evening routine of darkness at 6.00 p.m. also brings the routine of monsoonal downpours and power cuts, cannot fail to affect my own personal perspective on what education and community really means. (It was also quite gratifying to find a part of the former realm where the names of Elvis Presley, Britney Spears and David Beckham remain unheard of – there is hope yet for civilization!)

5. Future Plans

Astley Community High School's link work with Medagama National School will continue to develop through the two interlinked strands of:

- a) Financial and education resource provision, coordinated by Success Sri Lanka charity. This provides vital materials to facilitate learning and upgrade the actual learning environment. The actual provision of stimulus materials, particularly those relating to British and western culture generally, can only foster global awareness to better facilitate –
- b) Joint curriculum project working. Already, through resources we have supplied to Medagama and via the materials I have collected during my visit, we have a great amount to share with our pupils.

One of the major frustrations currently relates to the lack of internet access at Medagama. It is our intention to try to facilitate such a link which will really allow real time joint curriculum contact. Through such a mechanism we also hope to seek a way to allow Medagama to access our online curriculum resources through our virtual Teaching Environment.

Working through these interlinked strands our strategic priorities for this joint work are as follows:

- i) Establish an internet link between the two schools

- ii) To seek a method of funding to allow the Head of English Medium at Medagama to visit Astley Community High School to further his own experience of our culture and educational system.
- iii) To continue to target resources into Medagama which will have the greater impact upon the educational experience of their students, and as such, develop the global dimension theme.
- iv) Roll out the curriculum project working with Medagama across Astley's partnership of First and Middle Schools in Northumberland, as agreed in our partnership plan

6. **Thanks**

My thanks to the Principal staff and students of Medagama National School, Bibile, Sri Lanka, for such a memorable and rewarding experience.

Grateful thanks to the British Council for their support in pump priming this excellent project.

Ian Knight
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