

While students were enjoying the summer holidays many members of the Emmanuel College Warrnambool staff were working to provide life-changing experiences for students on the Alternative Schoolies program in East Timor, the World Challenge trips and others were preparing for the new school year.

Teacher Shahne Wilkinson experienced a summer that was several years in the making after volunteering for the Myanmar Project. This project began after a visit to the Ballarat Diocese from the Bishop of Myanmar (formerly Burma) in 2013. The outcome was a partnership established to develop Catholic education in Myanmar. We interviewed Shahne about this experience.



What is the Myanmar Project?



It is a joint mission between Catholic Missions Australia and the CEO in Ballarat, at the invitation of the Catholic Church in Myanmar. A pilot research group went two years ago and talked about how they could go forward. The Church opened up some facilities and a program for the purpose of training teachers but the problem remained that the teachers who were teaching the teachers really had no training themselves.

Myanmar has not been exposed to a western-style education system. They could not even picture from popular culture - from a movie - what a classroom could or should look like. Now they have begun to teach the theory behind teaching but need some help with the practical side. They needed the help of experienced teachers.

What sort of preparation did you have?

This has never been done before by the Diocese – the setting up of an entire education system in a place where one does not exist and where the concept is entirely foreign. There is an education system in Myanmar but it has been so tightly controlled by the former military government. Myanmar is a country in transition at the moment. While they now have an independent President, important facets are still bound by military rule. They are so used to being taught by rote - here is the information, now memorise those exact words! It has been more indoctrination than education.

I was given the senior/middle school age group and we prepared modules before we left. We had one weekend together in Ballarat where we worked with people from Catholic Missions, the CEO and some Burmese seminarians. We practised presenting our modules and gained an understanding of what it is like to work with a translator. When we arrived 'in country' we found that our modules as we had prepared them would not work, so we had to 'wing it', modifying our presentations to suit the varying skill levels of the trainees. Once we arrived there and saw what we were working with, we realised that things work very differently. We started over again in country and went from there!

One of the difficulties was that we are working with three different groups, which were all at very different levels. Some of the people we worked with had very limited English language skills. Many were rural people who had been chosen by their community to undergo teacher training. It was a huge honour for them but many had never been out of their small community, let alone ever being in a city like Yangon.

What do you feel was achieved?

Huge amounts were achieved but probably not what we thought we were going to achieve! One example was in that in one of the groups we had young people who were barely out of high school. The people there know what has been done to them for the last 60 or so years and they recognize that the system of education has been appalling. What they are struggling with is how to change it. People there have been repressed under the military regime and have no idea of how to think for themselves. They have never been allowed to be creative and to learn how to solve problems critically. Seeing them and knowing that they desperately wanted change... even if we opened their minds to show that there is another way, then we have helped them take the first step towards a huge change. We set out thinking we were going to leave them with all these great teaching skills but that is not what we achieved – what we achieved is bigger than that.



What will your ongoing involvement be?

I am left with the realisation that this is bigger than I thought it would be. Everywhere we went, we debriefed with influential members of the community, including Bishops, who asked us how they should set up their education system and we were thinking, 'We don't know! We are just teachers from the Ballarat Diocese!' On our final day, we had an audience with the Cardinal and he was so thankful, he wanted all of the critical feedback we could offer. He said, "Now you are forever friends of Myanmar. We want you to come back."



Although the future is under discussion, we are hoping that our group of four will be able to go again next January and to take another group of four with us. We are hoping this is something we can keep going. We have set up Facebook groups so that we can continue the dialogue with our trainees, and each week we are taking turns to post a lesson online for them to model. Even this morning, I have put up a lesson about writing basic narrative. They will read through it, give us feedback and tell us about any problems they may have had with it, and we can assist with providing solutions for those problems.

How has this experience changed you?

When you get home from something like this, you do look at everything differently. I struggled a bit with hearing about people's 'first world problems'! It is such a privilege to have basic things like paper rather than having to write with a stick in the dirt! In three weeks in Myanmar, I felt that I did more good, helped more people and felt more genuine joy than I would in a year at home with people who have everything. People there are very receptive to learning – they treasure it and know that education can absolutely change their lives. It is hard to adjust when you get home but I am already thinking about January and hoping that I can go back. I would like to go for the whole 6 weeks because 3 weeks did not feel like long enough. I am also going to Africa in June/July to the Ruben Centre - a school in Nairobi, Kenya that Emmanuel College supports.

What is the best thing about this experience for you personally?

At home if you know you have had an impact on one person in a year you feel like you have had a great year. Over there I felt that there were hundreds of people directly or indirectly impacted by some small thing that I did. You could see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices! In the words of Peter, one of our young trainees, "In the silence of our hearts, we each have a dream. A dream for ourselves, a dream for our family, for our children and our community, for our church and for our country. That dream is education for all. May our country grow to be great through education that has been kept from us for so long." Hearing those words was indescribable and my heart knows that we have changed lives.

Jean Christie - Director of Marketing, Emmanuel College Warrnambool