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# IAC Project

International Association for Counselling



October 2018

## Counsellor Training in Muttom Tamil Nadu India

By Ruth Falzon and Dione Mifsud

For the fourth time, IAC and the Department of Counselling (DoC) within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta has been involved in a project supported by Rotary International La Valette Malta, in Tamil Nadu. The aim of the project is to raise awareness with educators and other helping professionals on how to use communication and helping skills to address students with Specific Learning Difficulties/Learning Disabilities (SpLD/LD). This work directly involves two IAC Executive Council members including the IAC President, Dr. Dione Mifsud.



The co-ordinator himself, Rotarian Mr Edward Fenech, is an adult with dyslexia and his negative school experience has led him to raise awareness of dyslexia in Tamil Nadu for the last seven years on his own; and for the last three years in collaboration with the DoC. In April 2015, the DoC sent its research officer to join Mr Edward Fenech; in April 2016, three academics joined this venture, namely Dr Marlene Cauchi, Dr Ruth Falzon and Dr Dione Mifsud; and in November 2017, Dr Falzon and Dr Mifsud joined Mr Fenech. The team always stays in a boys' residence which had been built by Rotary International La Valette and is run by the local Catholic Church. This boys' residence houses boys, who live far from any school, to enable them to get an education in Muttom. There is also a girls' residence house run by nuns.

When planning the programmes, the DoC wanted to take on a transdisciplinary approach for a number of reasons: its philosophical standpoint; the expertise profile of the DoC; the focus that the project co-ordinator wanted; the parameters of the training; the audiences; and the Faculty for Social Wellbeing's mission on wellbeing and Quality of Life. This translated into addressing SpLD/LD within the context of helping skills.

The training seminars were held with professionals in education or with trainee professionals studying to become teachers. Training sessions were held at post-secondary colleges that focus on teachers' education, at universities or actual schools with professionals. Given that these were one- to two-day conferences, the team was conscious that the content had to focus on the classroom experience rather than teaching literacy, math or any subject specifically.



A Ceremony at the Conference

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The training therefore focused on the importance of communication and understanding and that this would then lead to empathy, appropriate helping skills and inclusive techniques and strategies to access curricula. Training sessions always started with an auto-ethnographic narrative from Mr Edward Fenech and this formed the basis of the rest of the training. Building on knowledge on SpLD/LD and the challenges that such profiles bring along, the team addressed how such knowledge can be used to understand and respect students to ensure a more inclusive learning environment. They also pointed out that one needs to start with the correct attitude and with the appropriate inclusive philosophy, such as the notion suggested by Thomas Jefferson: that the most unjust way to treat people is to treat people who are, by definition of their diversity, unequal, equally.

It was also important for the team to be respectful of the audience culture and school reality. Given that India, like Malta, was once a British colony, there are a lot of similarities between the Indian and Maltese educational systems and experience. The team could tap into these similarities to be able to share experiences rather than advise or prescribe. The team felt very humbled at the way it was received wherever it went and looks forward to future collaboration through Mr Edward Fenech.

The team also had the opportunity to meet counsellors working in schools and universities and of course used the opportunity to promote IAC aims for working together as a global community of counsellors. During training, the important role of helping Professionals work together with teachers was emphasised as well.

The DoC has supported the travelling costs of this project for the last three years. It is now concerned as it would be difficult to continue to support these travelling costs and is presently seeking ways to get have these counselling training visits sponsored.



**Dr Ruth Falzon and Dr Dione Mifsud  
with seminar participants**

