

Art therapy as a means towards cross-cultural collaboration in Sri Lanka

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In autumn 2018 we joined the ongoing collaboration between the ArtsAction group and a school in Northern Sri Lanka. Visiting in November of that year, we worked closely alongside a Tamil community, which is a minority group in this country that has recently emerged from civil war and is still dealing with the ramifications of the conflict. The goal of the visit was to provide some continuity to the work of previous volunteers, aiming to identify the needs of the community.

Bringing in the insights gained during this experience, in this talk we will look into cross cultural collaboration through the lens of art therapy. We will critically examine the application of essentially western models of mental health support (art therapy) in a non-western environment. We will consider the potential benefits as well as the challenges of such collaborative initiatives, paying attention not only to linguistic barriers and the possibility to communicate through art and creative expression, but also power dynamics and ethical issues. In telling this story, our hope is to better the understanding of art therapy practice as well as to open a conversation about volunteering, which in recent decades seems to have grown into a type of tourism.