



HOME ABOUT RESOURCES EVENTS SUBMIT SUBSCRIBE SEARCH

## Brown Skin, Blue Passport: Reflections on a Trip to Banda Aceh, Indonesia

[Anita Chikkatur](#)

[View the PDF version](#)

Note: You will need [Acrobat Reader](#) to view or print these notes in Portable Document Format (PDF).

It's a hot day in July. I find myself in a university classroom in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, listening as an Achenese elementary school teacher narrates a children's story. As she breaks into song in the middle of the story, the twenty other teachers in the classroom join in. I'm awed by their talents and think about how lucky I feel to be able to experience this.

[Send Page to a Friend](#)

What was I doing in Banda Aceh in the middle of the summer? This is my account of trying to make some sense of two intense weeks I spent in the capital city of Aceh province in July 2005. The presentation is not a theoretical or empirical one. Rather it is a personal account of how I reacted to the various aspects of this experience while I was in Aceh and after I came back to Philadelphia.

[Comment on this article](#)

### First impressions and some background

My first impression of Banda Aceh is that it reminds me of India, particularly Kerala, and of Taiwan, particularly Green Island -- the coconut trees, the mix of cars, scooters, and motorbikes on the streets, the green rice fields, and the brown faces whizzing by. On the ride from the airport to the hotel, I smile at the pleasant memories of these other places until a woman in the car points out a mass grave -- a flat piece of land where the only sign that bodies are buried there is the row of Indonesian flags planted on one side. It is a stark reminder of the primary reason we are in Banda Aceh: the December 26, 2004 earthquake and tsunami that killed over 100,000 people in the region.

My presence in Banda Aceh, along with five other people associated with University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (GSE), is related in part to the dire need for teachers created by the tsunami (around 4,500 new teachers were hired by the government to replace teachers who died in the tsunami). It is also related to a larger goal of reestablishing a teacher-training system that existed in Aceh before the conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian military escalated. We are to teach four workshops: content-area methods courses in literacy, math and science and a theory class covering some of the more prominent Western learning theories. We are working with an international non-governmental agency, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), in collaboration with the local Ministry of Education. The IRC primarily works to provide emergency relief and rehabilitation in post-conflict situations. The IRC has been in Indonesia since 1999, working with people displaced due to ethnic and religious conflict there.

As described in Lesnick & Schultz (this issue), the teacher training program consists of a four-week training program for 100 selected teachers from all over the province Aceh with at least a few years of teaching experience. The classes taught by the GSE team take place during the first two weeks. Professors from two local universities, both of which have teacher training programs, are to teach during the last two weeks. IRC and the Ministry of Education hoped that these teachers would serve as mentors. They are encouraged to work with new teachers at their schools and in their regions. If the teacher training system is revived, these teachers would work at the training centers, providing training and mentoring for new teachers.

The GSE team consisted of two professors (Kathy and Lisa; Lisa, a professor at Swarthmore College, happened to be my advisor when I attended Swarthmore); two instructors who have taught in the GSE teacher certification program (Angie and NancyLee); and two graduate students

[object]

(me and Joy, a student in the educational policy program). All of the team, except me, is White, middle class, and female. Joy is the only other person who has been to Asia before.

I have to confess that I had never heard of Banda Aceh before the December tsunami and the ensuing tragedy. After the tsunami, while I had some vague idea of where this city was located, I did not have any specific information about the place. I knew that the population was Muslim (although I learned later there is a small population of Hindus and Christians) and that there was talk about how mosques were some of the only structures that survived the 50-foot tsunami waves, leading to all sorts of discussions about the role of religion in this tragedy. The other members of the team and I attempt to have some sense of the sociopolitical history of the area, reading as much as we could before we left for Indonesia.

Aceh is located at the northern tip of the island of Sumatra and is a province of the country of Indonesia. Historically, it was a trading post visited frequently by Arab, Indian, and Chinese merchants and pilgrims. In the 6th century, it was a Buddhist state with Hindu influences. Islam was introduced to Aceh in the 8th century and by the 13th century, Aceh was the first Muslim stronghold in Indonesia. There were frequent clashes with Portuguese colonizers as well as Dutch colonizers, including the 25-year "Achenese War." Although Aceh did finally surrender to the Dutch, the area was never peacefully occupied. After the decolonization of Indonesia, Aceh was incorporated into Indonesia, a move that was in contention then and is still an issue of contention in July 2005. While we are in Aceh, military conflict continues between Free Aceh Movement or GAM (Gerakan **Aceh** Merdeka) and TNI (the Indonesian military).<sup>1</sup>

### Security Briefing, Disaster Tourism and the Third World

Our second day in Aceh, we have a "security briefing" with Denise, an Australian woman who is the security coordinator for IRC in Aceh. We discuss appropriate clothing for women. I ask her about the local women we had seen not wearing head scarves or long sleeves. Denise tells us that Aceh is 95% Muslim and the rest are Hindu and Christian. When I ask about whether they are considered or consider themselves as Achenese, she says that they are and they do, and that there is not much inter-religious conflict in Aceh.

Denise stresses the need for all of us to be careful about what we wear and how we act. Since teachers are revered and respected highly in Islam, she tells us, there will be expectations about what it means to be professors. We need to be aware of that and respect the respect we will get because of our perceived positions. Denise tells us, "On the surface, you have happy, open, smiling people. However, many people don't know the written Sha'ria laws. People learn the rules like eating with your right hand through their upbringing, so there are debates about whether it's cultural or religious."

During her formal presentation, Denise tells us we should be careful about what we write about our experiences once we go back to the United States and that we should probably check with IRC before publishing things. She suggests that we not take pictures of "interesting" things such as protests. We are to carry our passports at all times in case she needs to evacuate us out of there. Denise tells us that a lot of the information, particularly about GAM, was to give us a context for what many of the teachers might be experiencing, and not necessarily to "scare" us. We are told to be careful to avoid taking sides in the conflict. She mentions that there is a lot of corruption and that we should be careful about what we promise people we would give to them or do for them.

The issue of taking pictures comes up again when we go on a car tour of some of the areas devastated by the earthquake and tsunami. Donny, an Indonesian IRC staff member from Java, and Ayi, an Achenese IRC staff member, are our guides. As we pass scenes of devastation – the sight of the foundations of houses being one of the most striking visual image of what had happened – they talk about how they wanted us to be sensitive when we took photos and not to engage in "disaster tourism." The four of us refrain from taking any pictures during the tour. It's hard to understand how the earthquake and tsunami must have looked, felt, and been experienced. I could recall the numbers from Denise's presentation – a category 9 earthquake, 50-foot waves, 100,000 people killed in a few minutes, 1000s of homes destroyed – but it is hard to make sense of what we were seeing in front of us because it's mostly just empty space or flooded land. I find it hard to imagine homes, people, or entire communities that used to exist here.

Donny and Ayi tell us about how people are starting to rebuild their homes in areas where the government wanted to plant mangroves in order to prevent damage from future tsunamis. Many of these people were fishermen and they didn't know what they would do if they couldn't do that anymore. Donny and Ayi point out some of the flags planted here and there and inform us that people put those flags there in order to indicate that the owner of that land or a family member was

[object]

still alive. A lot of the times during this conversation, Donny and Ayi would laugh while telling us about the tsunami and the destructive effects it has had. Back at the hotel, Angie speculates that it might be because they didn't want us to feel uncomfortable. Are they worried about how we would perceive such scenes? As I learn in the days to come, there is a definite sense of survival, renewal, and resilience among the Achenese staff at IRC and among the teachers.

The complicated politics of taking pictures comes up again and again. There are many spirited discussions among the six of us from GSE. We hear different advice and sensibilities from people with whom we are working. After a couple of days of workshops, the teachers start bringing their cameras and we are asked to be in pictures with them, which seems a fair bargain since I'm busy taking lots of pictures of them in the four classes, ostensibly as part of the documentation of our trip.

But I worry about how we represent the tragedy of the tsunami without perpetuating stereotypes about the "third world". I cringe as a GSE team member remarks, as we look out of the windows of our air-conditioned, chauffeured mini-van, that she can't tell what's the tsunami and what's the third world. What images do the words "third world" conjure up for my fellow GSE team members? Dirty, crowded streets? Gross bathrooms? Undrinkable water? Scary tropical diseases? I assume that it doesn't conjure up images of thrilling motorcycle rides on smooth, curvy roads, of hot springs where the water's hot enough to cook eggs, or of family and friends, and of delicious food and loud laughter. As they comment over and over again about the number of people who can ride on one motorcycle, their voices betray (to me) concerns about safety, while the same image invokes in me vague, warm memories of getting around the streets of Bangalore, India, on my dad's scooter, nestled safely between my mom and dad.

During the first weekend, we go with the teachers to see one of the "barrack camps" set up for people who have lost their homes. IRC has set up a "child-friendly space" for the young children and we scare many of them as we all swarm to look into a small room, where the children are sitting. Some of the female teachers are crying by the time we get to the barracks after having passed areas of devastation. I wish I could say something to them, desperately wanting to speak Indonesian. Instead I have to be content with giving them looks of sympathy.

As we head out of the barracks and pass homes, I'm very self-conscious about being in a car, looking out at the people. I put my camera away. I'm embarrassed as others in the car take pictures of random people on the street. I feel like we're invading their privacy even though most of them smile at us. The power differential between those of us taking photos and the people in our photos seems particularly stark.

When I come home to Philadelphia, I worry some more about how to represent my experience. I want to capture the sense of hope and resilience expressed so frequently to me and the spirit of creativity and cooperation so clearly evident in our work with the teachers. When I send my family and friends pictures of the trip, I include a long explanation of my experiences there as a way to contextualize the pictures. I'm careful not to include very many pictures of the devastation itself, choosing instead to emphasize the work we did with the teachers.

The issue of representation comes up when we are asked to present briefly at a GSE school meeting in October. The decision is made to show the short movie we had made for the teachers as a good-bye present and it includes pictures of children from the barracks, children whom we didn't work with, children whose names, lives and circumstances we know nothing about. Angie remarks that they look like pictures from a "Save the Children" ad we might see on TV and I agree with her. The pictures are kept in there and I choose not to say anything during the presentation, feeling very uncomfortable about the "show and tell" aspect of the whole thing, which I felt presented an untroubled narrative of our trip, smoothing over the questions and the concerns and the imperfections. However, it is received fairly well by the audience. And I wonder if their stereotypes about "third world" are challenged or supported.

### Stories of the tsunami

Our third day in Aceh, we meet up with Iskandar, another Achenese IRC staff member, because we have a meeting with some of the deans from Syiah Kuala University – the local university hosting the program. On our way to the meeting, we meet the director of the graduate program in language education at the University. He tells us that he was a victim of the tsunami and that he lost almost all of his family in the tsunami – his wife and two of his three sons. When NancyLee asks him how he was, he replies that it had been very hard and that it was slowly getting better. He had just come back from a month in the United Kingdom, where he had been speaking about the tsunami, and he said that was a good break. Iskandar tells us later that the professor was living

[object]

with him because he had lost everything in the tsunami. He says that things didn't really matter because you can always get more but that losing family was horrible. It's hard to know what to say to any of this, so we just listen.

Later that day, Denise does her security briefing again for Kathy and Lisa who arrived later than the rest of us. We tell her about the professor who shared his tsunami story the day before and ask her how we should react to such stories. Denise replies that we needed to view tsunami survivors as survivors, not victims (interestingly, the professor had specifically used the word 'victim' to describe himself). If we thought about survivors as victims, we end up making them victims. We should acknowledge their loss but also spin it positively. We shouldn't show that we're upset because people here don't generally show their grief publicly, she tells us. Later during our visit, Donny, the Indonesian staff member, talks about how the trauma associated with the tsunami is widely viewed as a communal experience, not as an individual experience. He stresses that individualist, clinical psychological approaches to healing are not appropriate in this context.

After classes on another day later that week, we go to see some of the devastated areas and end our trip at an Islamic boarding school where Ayi, the Achenese staff member, teaches English. He also lives there with the students. Ayi is the education officer for the child and youth protection department of IRC. During our first visit to the university classrooms, I had chatted with Ayi as we set up the classrooms. He had shared that he had an Indian friend when he was in Australia for a five-month English course. He told me that Indian movies were very popular in Indonesia and that they watched these movies dubbed in Indonesian. I told him about hearing a Hindi movie song at the markets that morning. We talked about the Hindi movies we had both watched and liked.

Back at the boarding school, as we look out onto a field where a group of boys are playing, Ayi describes fairly matter-of-factly how he had climbed up onto the roofs of several houses in order to escape from the tsunami waves. He tells us that he was very scared. His story catches me off guard—I knew that almost everyone in Banda Aceh had a story to tell about tsunami. Still I have trouble reconciling the fact that this is the same person with whom I had shared easy, amusing chatter about Hindi movies a couple of days ago.

Some of the teachers we work with tell stories of the tsunami in their children's books they are writing in the literacy methods class. Sometimes when teachers were reading their stories, other teachers would get up and walk out of the room. I worry and wonder about these teachers and whether they were okay. And again the limits of my language skills keep me from finding a way to ask them if they are okay. One of the most beautiful books made is written and illustrated by a teacher whose town was devastated by the tsunami. Kathy tells me that he lost over thirty family members. His book starts with the tsunami and narrates what happened since then. He ends with people in the town rebuilding their homes.

### **Being Indian in Aceh**

At a meeting with university administrators, when we meet Nas, the head of the English department, she asks me where I'm from. I tell her that I was born in India but live in the U.S. now. She tells me that Indonesians look very different from each other and that even though she's Achenese, sometimes people think she is Bangladeshi. She adds that unlike what some people might say about people of Aceh, they have always been welcoming of foreigners. When I tell Joy about that comment later, she responds wryly, "Of course, they are welcoming of foreigners, unless you're looking to colonize them."

Before I left for Aceh, I knew that my experiences there would be different than the rest of the GSE team. Still I'm not prepared for the overwhelmingly positive response I get from the teachers and others about my Indian identity. It feels really cool to be Indian in Indonesia. The first day of classes, when Kathy and I share with the teachers the story of our names (before having them share the same with us), I tell the teachers that Chikkatur is the name of a village in India. The teachers react with knowing nods and smiles. Yes, she is Indian. A few times, I am mistaken for being Indonesian; for example, when we're checking in at the hotel, the clerk starts to talk to me in Indonesian! Some of the hotel staff greet me by name as they say good morning.

When we are on our weekend trip to Kleng Meria, where the barracks are, some of the teachers hear my story of immigration to the U.S. from India when I was ten. They ask questions about my experiences and then a teacher declares, "You're family." Some of the teachers call me "younger sister" and another tells me that she would like to adopt me as her daughter—if only she didn't have four daughters already! When I interview one of the teachers with help of one of our translators, she tells me at the end, "She wants to give [you a] message...she hope that this is not the only time that we will meet, maybe someday we will meet again. Even if that's not me, maybe

[object]

my friend. You will come. She called you “young sister” and if you want to come to my country again, maybe not me, but everybody here will be very happy if you want to come again, thank you.”

I’m grateful for their affection and kindness despite the differences in language and religion. It makes me sad to think that they might not get the same welcome, as Muslims, if they came to the U.S. or in many parts of India, including in the homes of some of my Hindu relatives.

### The religion question

All of the female teachers who attend the workshops wear veils. When Joy and I wear our “Aceh” shirts, they joke with us that all we need now is the *jilbab*, the veil. To me, they add that’s all I need to become Indonesian. When we tell this to the GSE group at dinner, one person remarks that she doesn’t understand why women would want other women to go through that. She catches herself and adds that this is probably just her bias.

Religion is ever present in our experiences in Aceh. I can hear the morning prayer call early in the morning as I lay awake in my hotel room. Our classes are scheduled around prayer times so the teachers have time to pray. There’s an arrow in all our hotel rooms, pointing to the direction of Mecca. Many of us have prayer rugs in our rooms as well. We have to wear long sleeved shirts and pants or long skirts. This aspect I start to resent by the end of my trip. Not just because it was so hot but because the men aren’t subject to the same rules. They are allowed to wear short-sleeves. I can’t help but revert back to my beliefs in individual choice. While I have no way to tell how the teachers understand the issue of veiling (although it’s obvious that at least some of them consider it to be crucial parts of their identities and as projecting an image of beauty), it’s hard for me to suspend completely my belief that we should be allowed to wear what we want. Veil or no veil, long sleeves or short sleeves should be a choice. I try to console myself by noting that the long sleeves prevent mosquito bites.

While there are both public schools and Islamic boarding schools in Aceh, the public schools are not secular as we might understand the term in the U.S. In our classes, there are frequent references to the Quran. Many times when the teachers came up to share their stories or something else, they would begin with a “Praise to God” greeting. Some of the teachers tell us that there is prayer in their schools. The opening ceremony for the workshops starts and ends with a prayer. Given my personal ambivalence about religious beliefs, it’s challenging to try and understand how central religion seems to the experiences of the teachers. I always thought that I could be respectful of people’s religious beliefs but still be firm in my belief that (at least in the U.S.) that the public sphere should be separate from religion. The different relationship between religion and the public sphere in Aceh is hard for me to understand as is the fact that people my age are religious enough to pray five times a day. Most of my friends in the U.S. don’t pray once a week, let alone five times a day. I wish that I had more time to get to know individuals and have more conversations about religion.

We learn from Denise that Aceh is in the process of training new police officers to enforce Sha’ria laws. We wonder if we should allow teachers to make their own groups, in case they want to make single-sex groups. However, this does not turn to be an issue at all. Teachers group themselves in both single-sex and mixed-sex groups and there is a lot of interaction and even teasing between the male and female students. While Denise had warned us that the men might not want to touch us, most of the male teachers shake our hands daily and some even put their arms around us when posing for pictures! Like with the veil and the prayers, I want to ask the teachers about what it means to them to live in a place with Sha’ria laws, but I do not get a chance to do so.

### Reactions of the teachers

As frustrating as it is not to be able to talk directly to the teachers, I am grateful that they are generally very cooperative and eager to try out all the activities we proposed to them. Many of them complete assignments with enthusiasm and often do more than we ask for. In the literacy class, when we ask teachers to make small books with children’s stories in them, teachers put a lot of effort into producing books with beautiful, colorful illustrations. A teacher suggests that we make copies of all of the books so that each teacher would have about ninety little books to take back to their classrooms. In order to gauge what the teachers thought about the training and what they might have learned from these workshop, I design a survey which is then translated and distributed to the teachers. Almost all of the teachers return the surveys, some even drawing pictures to show us the physical layout of their schools. However, again, the language barrier looms large. We collect the surveys and give them to the IRC staff. They are too busy to translate them before we leave and we never get them back translated. (In August 2006, Kathy informs me that when she went

[object]

back to Aceh, she found the surveys in a box at the IRC office, untranslated.)

Almost all of the teachers are unfailingly polite and friendly to us and many of them often tease Joy and me, the youngest ones in the group. I often wish that I could sit with the teachers during lunchtime, rather than having lunch in a separate room with the rest of the Penn team. I wish I could understand the conversations they had in their small groups during the workshops and in their dormitories after we left. However, I know that I would only become more frustrated because I wouldn't be able to communicate with the teachers.

I am able to interview one of the teachers with the help of one of our translators and from her answers, it seems like there were concrete things the teachers might be able to take back to their classroom. Azizah, an elementary school teacher in Aceh Besar with fifteen years of experience, tells me that she agreed with the training's stance on having students do hands-on activities. She thinks that if the teacher first teaches them and then they practice, the students "maybe remember it longer and longer. That's much better than just reading the book and do not practice it." She tells me that she did not like teaching science but that she was more excited about teaching it after participating in NancyLee's science workshops. She is particularly excited about having students observe the cycles of the sun and the moon, something the teachers did during the two-week training.

When I ask Azizah about the value of education in general, she tells me, "Education is something that really has great value...to [give] our generation a better life in spiritual and in material. So education is something you [give as] a gift to the [current] generation to make each generation better." She added, once again challenging my stereotypes about Islam, "Based on Islamic rule, education [starts] when we are born [and continues] until we die. The Prophet says that you have to try to get education even if you have to go to China, if it's far away...without education, we can't reach...the after-life. It's more important than money."

Unfortunately, I have no way of gauging if Azizah's enthusiasm and support is the norm among the teachers or the exception.

### **In whose interests are we doing this work?**

When Lisa becomes sick, Joy and I substitute and teach one of the theory classes for her. I make a little speech at the beginning about how we hope to do our best. I'm really uncomfortable about being the expert. Given that most of these teachers have had years of experience, both teaching and just life experiences, who am I to stand up there and teach them about some White, Western guys' theories, theories which might be completely alien to what they know and believe about education, about the world? What right do I have to be standing up there in front of these teachers, spewing out information about American educational theory or the best way to teach writing? It was also partly that I feel wholly underqualified to be teaching any of what I'm teaching. I wish that we had more time built in for them to talk to each other—although there is a lot of small group work where they talk to each other. They have so much they can teach each other and us but most of the teaching (like many other things) seem so one-way.

It also makes me sad and angry when one of the professors (who will be working with the teachers for the two later weeks of their training) asks Lisa if she would talk about a specific theory with the teachers. When Lisa suggests that he could talk to the teachers about it, he replies that it would have more legitimacy coming from her because she's from the U.S. Figuring out how to think about and through such situations is one of the hardest parts about being in Aceh. I often feel like an outsider within the Penn group. The worst part of it has been sitting through conversations where things like "The teachers just can't think" might get said.

After classes one day, there is a discussions about the trouble teachers are having sorting books according to genre. Joy suggests that perhaps they didn't have the same classification schemes as we do. A team member replies that sorting the books was something a 3-year-old White middle class child in the U.S. could do easily. She was careful to add that this doesn't mean the child is smarter than the teachers but that the child had more familiarity with the books. And I think: We have no idea what these teachers are thinking – so much gets lost in translation. I'm frustrated by the way in which this conversation is framed and I walk out of the room. I stand outside, alone, thinking about how one-way the whole trip feels. For the most part, "we," the Americans, lecture and "they," the Achenese, listen. And I can't imagine a world anytime in the near future where it will be any different. I know that part of the problem in this case is the language barrier. It seems hard in practical terms for our translators to tell us every single thing the teachers say in their small group discussions or even when we are having the rare whole class discussion. It is both amazing and disconcerting that the teachers are so willing to sit in these hot classrooms and listen to us and

[object]

do everything that we ask them to do.

Kathy tells us that the question we should be thinking about as we do this work in Aceh is "In whose interests are we doing this work?" The answer isn't so clear to me. On many levels, our presence in Aceh seems completely preposterous. We are there with no knowledge of the teachers' language or of the contexts in which they are teaching and very little knowledge about their cultural beliefs and knowledge.

The attitudes of some of the American IRC staff members also make me uncomfortable. The education advisor, for example, at a meeting with the university professors, insists that the professors attend at least one session a day when the Penn team is teaching. I'm taken aback by his insistence and his tone of voice. This was after a meeting in which one of the professors, who teaches language methodology, seems appropriately skeptical about our ability to teach these teachers how to teach Indonesian, given that we don't speak or understand any Indonesian!

Another day, he tells us about how when he was working in West Africa, he would carry whistles to schools so that he could use them to trade with the teachers and get their canes and whips in return. He had quite a few whips and canes in his collection at the office, he says, and we all laugh. He adds that the UN really liked his idea and decided to buy a whole bunch of whistles to continue the trading. Listening to his story and to the GSE team's responses, I'm suddenly depressed. I think that it's incredible work that he's doing while at the same time, here's this white American guy coming in to save those poor brown and black folk from themselves. Why is that many of the places where there is a huge international-NGO presence are in Asia or Africa? Why is that it is generally black and brown people who need "rescuing" whether it be from natural disasters or human-made disasters?

### **No easy answers: Post-trip reflections**

After reading about my experiences in Aceh, my friend responds that there is an uncomplicated answer to those questions: the history of colonialism. While I agree that it is the root cause, this answer does not provide me with any easy guidelines about what should be done now. What can we do at the present time so the inequalities and injustice caused by that history starts to lessen or at the very least do not continue to increase? While I have my doubts and frustrations about the nature of the kind of work we were doing in Aceh, my response is not that Americans should do nothing. There are the obvious differences in resources that I cannot ignore, particularly as the stories of famine in Niger dominate the front pages of U.S. newspapers when I return from Aceh. I think about the six young people in Aceh we met through our work who are applying for Fulbrights in order to come and study in the U.S. I can't dismiss easily their hopes and aspirations and I admire their sense of purpose and their dedication to going back to Aceh with the knowledge and skills they hope to attain here in the U.S.

In my more optimistic moments, I believe that the teachers had the best deal. They had the opportunity to listen to what we had to offer and to accept, reject or transform the ideas they heard to their own contexts. They made wonderful children's books for their students and are going back to their schools with a hundred books made by their colleagues. Even better, they had the opportunity and were paid to participate in the training, share ideas and stories with each other and learn from one another. As part of the GSE team, on the other hand, I did not have the same opportunity to learn from the collective and individual wisdom of these teachers. I am incredibly grateful for having the opportunity to have met these amazing teachers and have learned from this experience that it is possible to make connections with people across barriers of language and culture.

For now, the most productive thing I can do is to reflect on my experiences there. If I had to do this again, I would like to think about how these two weeks could have been more of a learning opportunity for those of us going from the U.S. While I felt that the teachers assumed that we, the "professors from Penn," were competent and creative, that assumption did not always feel mutual. What could I, we, have done differently so that the learning and teaching opportunities and the assumptions about competence could have been more mutual?

<sup>1</sup>However, partly in response to the earthquake and tsunami, new talks between the two parties did led to a peace treaty and in December 2005, Indonesia finally pulled out military troops from Aceh, a key move in ending 26 years of conflict.