STEMLAND AND ISAI AMBALAM SITE VISIT REPORT

I visited Auroville on the weekend of 9-12 August, 2019. I visited STEMland in both Udavi as well as Isai Ambalam schools and met all the concerned people. Sanjeev, the project partner for STEMland and SAC projects that are supported by Asha Bangalore, showed me around and arranged meetings with various folks associated with the schools and STEMland. This is an attempt to cover most of the aspects of the eventful weekend. This report is not in chronological order but is about three aspects covered in this site visit:

1) Isai Ambalam School (Supported by SAC)
2) STEM land at Udavi school and Isai Ambalam School (Supported by Asha Bangalore)
3) STEM land scaling (with 3 other centers – Aikiyam School, Tamarai and Auroville ITI) (Supported by Asha central funds.)

1) Isai Ambalam School (STEMLand and SAC)

This is an Auroville outreach school from Creche (3 yrs and above) to 8th grade. It follows the CBSE system. Students graduating from this school move on to NESS (New Era Secondary School), another Auroville school, which is from 9th grade to 12th grade. There are 154 children at Isai Ambalam who are supported through a Support-A-Child program that is organized through Asha Bangalore.

I met Logeshwari and Saranya who have been receiving requests from donors, sending them the information required as well as tracking donations and sending reminders to the donors. Asha had done this program in two phases, Phase 1 with children from 3rd grade to 8th grade and Phase 2 from Creche to 3rd grade. Last year they were able to find support for all 130 children, which made it a successful fundraiser for the school. It was able to support around 60% of the teachers’ salaries and 60% of the food expenses including supporting the Saturday school and sleep overs. The fundraising was done in the US through Asha for Education (around 5.8 lakhs) and in India (5.6 lakhs) the funds were directly sent to Auroville where the receipts were sent to the donors by the school and tracked by the SAC team here.

I saw the 3 children who graduated from Isai Ambalam last year and went to NESS. 11 others had left for various reasons. There are 39 new children out of which an equivalent of 12 have been supported by parents this year. This requires 26 new children who are finding support from July this year. This year the SAC will support around 154 children including those who were supported by their parents. Sandhya (STEM land coordinator at Isai Ambalam school) showed me the various projects that we have been reading about in the newsletters.

I met some of the children in 8th grade who were doing an activity on frequency with the oscilloscope and a signal generator looking at how to see and hear the music at different frequencies. I attended the Inspiration program that is organized on Saturday where teachers, STEM land youths, who volunteer at the school, and children from 6th to 8th grades are split in groups, each working on areas like self-confidence, real-personality, secret of concentration, etc. In the session that I attended, the groups made some powerpoint presentations, summarizing some of the sayings of Swami Vivekananda. I also attended a Judo demonstration that the children put together themselves with the help of their seniors who were visiting the school from NESS. That was pretty impressive!
Inspiration class and judo demonstration at Isai Ambalam school. Dogs are also welcome :)  

2) Udavi school (STEM land)

I met all the youths who are part of the STEM land team at Udavi STEM land. It is a large team of 12 youths who all volunteer at Udavi and Isai Ambalam during the mornings and work on engineering projects in the evenings. I also met Sivaraman, a youth who had completed his engineering and has come to STEM land to learn python.

The center at Udavi is large with sections for electronics, math materials, strategy games as well as classroom space. The proposal to Asha Bangalore this year is for materials and upgrading the existing centers at Udavi and Isai Ambalam schools. There is also a training space where courses for youths and teachers are conducted including one that trained teachers at Aikiyam, Tamarai and AIAT that I will talk about in the next section. I saw all the materials that are used in STEM land with the children as well as children making projects on scratch in their Math classes. I interacted with the 7th graders at Udavi, who asked me questions about the Earth :)

8th graders working in STEMland at Udavi school and materials used at STEMland in Udavi. All schools have their own pets.

3) STEM land scaling (with 3 other centers – Aikiyam School, Tamarai – evening center and Auroville ITI)

I had a series of meetings with principals and teachers of Aikiyam School, Tamarai and Auroville ITI, where we discussed the various STEM centers that are coming up as part of the scaling program of STEM land. Currently, the partners are being encouraged to find the
space and the people to run these programs. The scaling of STEM land was one of the winners of 2018 Asha for Education’s Innovative and Scalable Projects Contest and the grant will support materials for these new STEM centers to come up. All the teams who will run the program at partner sites had been part of an 8-day training program that was organized over the summer at STEM land’s training center at Udavi. These people were paired with youth mentors of STEM land core team.

We went over the visions and expectations from both STEMland as well as the upcoming partner groups. Aikiyam was interested currently in electronics and programming, whereas Tamarai was interested in Mathematics; AIAT was interested in project-based/programming based learning of Mathematics.

Other Developments

STEM land is in a phase of growing actively. I met many other people who may be involved with STEM land going forward including being mentors to more youths who will be joining the program, possibly not just in Engineering, but in English and Art.