My wife and I arrived at Isai Ambalam school at around 2:30 pm. We first met the Stemland team and Anita. Sanjeev was out of town unfortunately. The team seems a very motivated team with most folks born and bought up in Auroville and having a strong desire to give back to society. Isai Ambalam school has kids from 1st - 6th grade. The Stemland concept is based on ‘Education by Design’. It being Saturday a few kids who were waiting for the bus at 3 were present in the premises. The children seemed very confident, cheerful and enthusiastic. Stemland has many visitors so the children seemed comfortable with us. The children I met were between 3rd and 5th grade. After the 6th grade they go to another local school and am told children from this school generally do better as compared to other students.
The children first took me to the Stemland center and very keen to show me their skills with the rubik’s cube. I disorganized the cube and asked the children to complete it. Couple of children could complete in under 3 minutes. They insist it is not their best timing. We also saw the math puzzles, games and learning toolkit which are used so they can grasp the concepts better as compared to books. I checked how they used the math’s table tool for multiplication and the children seem quite comfortable learning based on the tools. (More information on these tools can be got the Stemland newsletter.) They also showed me the honey bee and Taj Mahal replica they had built as part of ‘Education by Design’. I was also shown the bamboo torches built by them. I asked a few questions and they replied in Tamil. They understand English but prefer communication in Tamil. The entire Stemland area here and in Udavi were conceptualized and developed by the children with the help of the Stemland team. We next went and saw the water tank used to water the garden the children are maintaining. The children built a water level meter to know when the tank is empty (basically when to turn on the motor) and the water is recycled here from the kitchen. The children were hence taught the significance of re-cycling from this exercise. We next went to see the small pond built completely by the children. The children also redeveloped an unused hut for clay, art and craftwork. An oven is currently being built for children to bake their clay artwork. We also saw the garden being maintained by the children. The children have sleep over once a week or so to execute on some of the projects they have conceived. This started when they were working on the pond.
Figure 2 Pond built by the children

Figure 3 Torch made from bamboo and coconut shell

Figure 4 Claywork center - unused room completely revamped by the children
We next went to the Udavi center. The children were busy getting ready for the Christmas celebration later in the day, but 3 children accompanied us to show us the Stemland. These are older children between 7th and 10th grade (don’t know if the school has children for 11th and 12th grade). The children come here during the Math period everyday. Every week the children develop and record a plan for what they will study during the week. The software was developed by Stemland volunteer Pratap. The StemLand team will print it out, publish it and then grade the children on how they fared in the task.
A volunteer formerly a google employee, taught the children to develop Mobile Apps using a software. Couple of kids showed me the apps they had developed. I must say it was very impressive seeing the apps developed by the children. The children here also are solving the rubik’s cube and asked me to disorganize it so they can solve it. One child did it in under 1.5 mins. This place has a lot of math games and puzzles to enable the children to learn better. Again, most of this place was organized by the children themselves.

All the electric and electronic kits were moved to the new iSMART room which was developed as a part of a grant. More details on the project can be understood from their newsletter. Here we were shown a lot of Lego robots built by the children. Couple of children developed a computer mouse circuit. We culminated the visit at around 6.
No doubt that the children are benefitting a lot from this project. The exposure to ‘education by design’ concept is definitely teaching the children in a better way than just formal schooling. The team also seem motivated to make a difference in the lives of these children. I guess such resources should be scaled across other Asha projects.