

SEED Site Report 2013:

Summary of 5 month volunteer experience at SEED Mahatma Gandhi Primary School.

Background

This is a summary of my experience whilst a volunteer at SEED Mahatma Gandhi Primary School, Sriperumbudur. I approached the school, via Asha for Education, about the possibility of volunteering at the organization during my 7-month stay in India. After a meeting with the school founder and secretary, Mr A R Palanisamy I commenced my volunteer work in July 2013 and continued until December 2013. This report is based on my experience at the Mahatma Gandhi Primary School (Sriperumbudur) and the occasional visit to the other locations.

During the 5 months I helped teach English and Maths to the primary school students and assisted in various day-to-day activities including office administration. I spent 6 days each week at the school and became fully immersed in all its activities. On a few occasions I visited the boys high school at Utkottai and the boys' Industrial Training Centre (ITC) at Irungattukottai.

SEED Background

The SEED organization provides education and support to children whose parents are unable to provide care. The parents of the children are often life prisoners, impoverished or leprosy sufferers. The school is managed by its secretary and founder Mr A R Palanisamy and is organized across three locations:

SEED Mahatma Gandhi Primary School, Sriperumbudur –

- 1st through 5th standard education for boys and girls. During my stay this averaged 50 students between 4 and 12 years old. Approximately 25% of students were girls.
- Hostel accommodation for approximately 30 high school girls. The girls attend the Girls Government High School in Sriperumbudur, which provides classes from 6th to 10th standard. Many of these girls arrived at SEED as 1st standard students.

SEED Girls Industrial Training Centre (based at the same location as the primary school)

- Industrial training in electronics for girls aged 16 to 18. There is one dedicated teacher for this and currently 3-4 students.
- Buildings and infrastructure for the planned Teacher Training Institute.

SEED Boys High School, Utkottai -

- There are approximately 60 students at this location, which provides 6th through 10th standard education.
- This location is fully contained and has a newly built accommodation block that can accommodate all students.

SEED Boys Industrial Training Centre, Irungattukottai –

- I only visited this location briefly on two occasions and am unable to provide details of its operation other than to say it is operating and providing training to boys aged 16-18 years. It has its own principal and a number of teachers.

Organization

On the whole I was impressed with the level of organization of the school and the level of support from local people and organizations. Mr A R Palanisamy has been very successful in garnering support from local companies (Nokia, Hyundai etc) and local charitable organizations such as Friends Association for Social Service (FASS) and the Lions Club. There were also various local families that provided food donations. Most weeks donors attended lunches at the school and eat with the children.

Healthcare

Mr Palanisamy has developed good relationships with local private health care providers. On numerous occasions during my stay children required urgent and non-urgent medical attention and the school was always prompt in getting the children to either the local clinic in Sriperumbudur or the larger hospital, Ramachandran, in Chennai. I am not a medical practitioner and with the language barrier it was difficult to understand some of the illnesses but the main issues appeared to be fever (caused by malaria / dengue) and scabies. On one occasion health providers came on site and took blood samples from each child. I understood this to be used for testing for Elephantiasis. The school has a dedicated on-site first aid room. It had two beds and some basic medical equipment. I didn't see this facility being used during my stay. On several occasions I bought additional supplies of first aid medicine (paracetamol, band-aids, scabies ointment etc). More could have been done to maintain these supplies at the school. The supplies were freely available in Sriperumbudur at reasonable cost.

Teaching

At the time of my stay the school had 5 teachers including the headmistress. The teaching is based on the Indian government school system with the government providing new books for each child at the start of each term. There are two classrooms at the school. One is large and is dedicated to 1st through 4th standard. A smaller room was dedicated to the 5th standard. During the high temperature months of the summer all classes were conducted in the classrooms. As the temperatures began to decrease from October onwards some classes were held outside. During the summer there were issues with power supply. This wasn't as bad as I had expected but some days the power was off for around 2 hours. The classrooms were furnished with overhead fans which provided adequate cooling in the hottest months, on days when power was interrupted conditions were difficult.

Having spent time at the school my personal feeling is that they would benefit from having another teacher. The headmistress as well as teaching was also responsible for administrative duties. A significant amount of time is involved in other activities including meeting with donors, arranging various government inspections and maintaining contact with children's parents. There are two resident teachers who also perform housemother duties. My impression from being around them is that this is a very difficult role as they are teaching during the day and then performing housemother duties in the evening (assisting with administrative duties, assisting with meal production, taking children to medical clinic etc). The fourth teacher lived locally and was a math specialist. She also provided additional coaching to the 10th standard high school girls at the weekend. The fifth teacher was dedicated solely to the computer teacher lab. Another qualified teacher preferably with English language skills would greatly benefit the children's education.



The headmistress with the 5th standard.

The children woke at 6am and would wash, study and eat breakfast prior to school. The high school girls assisted with the serving of breakfast. The school day commences at 9.15am with prayers and finishes at 4.30pm. There is a morning and afternoon break of 15 minutes and lunch is held at 1pm. After school the children play for an hour (cricket, kho kho, badminton) before study time. Dinner is normally eaten at 8pm.



Primary children singing the national anthem

Social Activities

I was very impressed with the overall happiness and well being of the children. They were very respectful, happy and thankful. Over the months I learned of the sometimes very difficult backgrounds of the children. I became aware of two sets of siblings whose parents (both mother and father) were in prison. I was very heartened by the strong emotional strength of the children in general especially the high school girls who came across as very mature, sensible, hard-working students. Sometimes it was easy to forget the difficult nature of their backgrounds. For the children whose parents were in prison, the school organized for them to visit their parents in prison. On these occasions a teacher would accompany the children. On the first Sunday of each month the school holds a parent's day. For children with families it gives them an opportunity to see their family members. There were other occasions when children would be allowed to attend relatives' weddings. The school appeared to accommodate these situations well.

During my 5 months the children were taken on two school tours. One was on Children's Day to a local temple and another in early October to Kodaikanal. Other major celebrations during my stay included, Deepavali, Gandhi Jayanthi and Independence Day. Each of these events was celebrated to the maximum! At Deepavali employees from the local Nokia factory came to the school where the children put on a cultural program of dancing and singing. Nokia provided each child at SEED with new clothing and snacks.

Food

The food at the school was healthy, plentiful and varied. The children were given three meals a day and often with a snack provided after school. Fresh vegetables were provided each day along with rice. I often ate with the children and they seemed to be very happy with the quality and quantity (as was I!). The only point perhaps worth making is that the children may benefit from more fruit in the diet. I assume this came down to cost.



Fresh vegetables were bought in large quantities each week for all school locations.

Security / Safety

All school locations had a main gate that was generally closed if not locked when not in use. At the Sriperumbudur and Utkottai locations guards were employed to secure the gate.

At the start of my time at SEED the high school girls walked to and from school chaperoned by a housemother. At some point there was an incident with the girls being harassed on their commute to school. It was decided from then on that the girls would be taken to and from school in the SEED school bus.

During my stay at the school I didn't observe / experience any issues with security or safety.

Notes on points raised in previous site visits:

Teacher Training Institute

- the buildings are in place but not in use. I assume that work is still in progress to get it commissioned. Mr. Palanisamy mentioned in passing that he was looking for a principal for the centre.

Boys High School Utkottai

- a new accommodation building, the Leo Correya House, has been opened and provides sleeping accommodation and bathroom facilities for all students. The building was inaugurated in 2013.
- Work was in progress to update the boys' bathroom in the classroom area of the campus. Workers were present finishing off a new tile floor. The area looked good.
- The school now has a science lab (2007 report mentioned absence of lab).

Succession Planning School Management

- I echo the sentiments expressed in the 2011 site visit report regarding the need for succession planning for the role undertaken not only by Mr. Palanisamy but also the headmistress (Mrs. Rajalakshmi) at the Mahatma Gandhi primary school.

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19 January 2014