

Visit to SEED PLAN on August 21, 2020

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I have known SEED PLAN since my visit there in 2000. It was started by Ted Adams, a professor from Bowdoin College in Maine who decided to retire early and move to Madurai and work with children in the Karumbalai area by starting after school study centers. The work has grown tremendously since then, building on his many ideas. Chief among his ideas was a way to go beyond rote memorization and textbook learning. With simple activities to encourage discussion, such as watching a movie, visiting a nearby museum, discussing festivals and why they existed, interesting events around the world, and so on, and using these discussions to foster a culture of curiosity, understanding, and learning how to learn Ted was able to in one generation move many children out of poverty. Students at the center went on to have great success in their careers. The investment in each center was not much – the place, some computers and related equipment, a well-stocked library were the main components. The centers were run, under his mentorship, by youth from the area. These were youth Ted was able to bring together as a team to work for education of children in the area.

Building on the success of this model in Karumbalai, Sambakudi and Thathaneri, three areas in and around Madurai, the goal is now to use the funding from the “Innovative and Scalable Projects” initiative in Asha to scale to three other centers. The low cost way to create these centers, engage the youth themselves to run it, and complement rather than replace standard school education has created tremendous change in the lives of young people in these areas.

During my visit, everyone was excited that this project had been one of the selected Innovative and Scalable Projects. The centers are run by S. Vikki, a SEED PLAN student himself, who worked closely with Ted and became the coordinator of the centers after he finished his Social Work degree from Loyola College in Chennai. Vikki is fiercely dedicated to this cause, and spends every waking moment working on the centers or other volunteering opportunities in Madurai. He is full of ideas, determined to transform the world.

We spent a morning at the Karumbalai center going over the budget and making some adjustments. We determined that we needed an extra coordinator to help Vikki as the three new centers were set up, and Sankarapandian was suggested as a suitable person for this role. I had seen him during previous visits and also knew him to be dedicated to social change. I had several discussions with him as well.

The existing SEED centers are functioning well. As always I am surprised at how much they get done with so little. I noticed happily several library books with bookmarks marking places in the books they were reading, reading has one of the strengths of these centers. An alumni Maruthapandian was visiting (he is now a Post Doc at Jadavpur University, a far cry from his childhood in a small village outside of Madurai) and I had a good discussion with him as well. His idea is that we should consider some career counseling activities as part of the study centers. There are plans to raise some funds for that. As always the children are active, curious, and full of questions.



A primary class in progress at the study center.



They do so much with so little. The leaky roof has since been fixed.



Part of the SEED PLAN team in their office.