Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poet, once said that "the highest education is that which does not merely give us information, but makes our life in harmony with all existence." After my time at Puvidham, I have been able to truly understand this. Being myself a product of ‘mainstream’ education, it was very interesting to see and to compare my own experience of primary school with what I was a part of at Puvidham. When I first wrote to Meenakshi to intern at the school and began reading and researching what it was all about, I was very curious and excited. I had never experienced this sort of education myself, but after doing some reading, it made sense to me and I agreed with its basic aims and approaches.

I went to a small, very multi-cultural, catholic primary school in the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. I have nothing but fond memories of my time at school and I’m very grateful for spending these important years of my life in a positive and nurturing environment. Although I think it’s possible to come out of mainstream schooling unaffected, I can see that there are many faults within the current system of education. What Puvidham represents, for me, is a part in the education revolution in working towards a healthier, happier and more peaceful world. Since children are the future, it’s vital that the community supports their growth and learning towards the right direction and teaches them to love themselves, each other, and the world around them.

When we question what education is for, we can see that the current mainstream system is primarily based around teaching skills to children which will prove most valuable to a capitalist and industrialist society. Now with the state of our world today, increasing inequality, environmental degradation and the loss of our sense of community, it is evident that this current, dominant system needs to be changed. From children, we are taught in schools how to become useful and productive tools within the capitalist machine and to ensure economic growth through working our way towards ‘good’ jobs with respectable salaries. The common teaching methods used in mainstream education can be likened to the rigidness and repetitiveness of modern industrialization. Rote learning or simply memorizing and regurgitating information, leaves no room for explanation or imagination or the ability to understand a concept in its whole and analyse it from one’s own perspective. Being constantly tested and ranked among the rest of the class, being compared against other children and therefore pressured to perform better and be better than them, is the same sort of competitive survival attitude prevalent in capitalist societies. Lesson plans which are structured into time blocs and require efficient switching from subject to subject at the same time each day can be likened to the 9 to 5
workplace - clock in, clock out. And the authoritative structure of the classroom in that the teacher is always right and those who do wrong are disciplined and shamed, no one may question or oppose and the teachers saying is final, is much like the hierarchy imposed in capitalist society. When the contrast between the system of mainstream schooling and the capitalist system are made, it is both obvious and alarming that this is how we as a society are raising the future generations. How can there be an effective change in the system if its traits and habits are already being enforced on the next generation, through schooling, as children?

If this is the sort of education that the majority of society has been under and we look to the conditions of our current society, it is clear that something needs to change. There is something wrong with mainstream education when it graduates a population who have lost their connection with the earth and with each other. There is a misunderstanding between what is being taught and encouraged, and what is needed for the health of the community and the environment. Schools have the power to be a facilitator for change to the wider culture and society, the curriculum must therefore be transformed to reflect ecological and societal realities. It is our responsibility to ensure that we make the right choice in how to bring our children up into a relationship with nature and with society. The education at Puvidham breaks away from the old structures, providing the children with a holistic, balanced, environmental education, which takes into regard the child as their own person. It seems that the first basic steps in order to create and nourish a peaceful world, is to ensure that the people within it are able to grow and learn about what is most important, ecological imagination, critical thinking, awareness of connections, independent thought and knowing and having a good heart.

At Puvidham, the means are more important than the ends. To begin with the school itself from the ground up promotes sustainable energy and food, so the children learn the worth and value of the earth’s finite resources. The emphasis is on loving the earth and the children do so through being conscious of what they take from it and what they put back into it. The school itself is not simply a place where they come and go to learn, it is their space to have pride in and be responsible for. The children clean and maintain their school every day, which I think is a lesson in itself, to be active and to have pride in taking care of your communal space. It is also a part of what Gandhiji envisioned for children’s education, learning through touching, feeling and constructing, through materials and tasks that are a part of everyday life. The method of education differs from the mainstream system in that it is experiential and nature based learning. Here, learning is encouraged to flow naturally and be driven by the child instead of drilled into them. In class, the students draw pictures, tell stories, act out
dramas, go for walks, play games and be in nature - a multi-dimensional dynamic way of learning. The class flowed naturally from activity to activity and it would start off with a discussion between the class and I with what they wanted to do. Of course in life you can’t always have your own way – as I had to let my class learn, we can’t just play games on the computer all day, every day, as much as a few of them would have liked to. The children therefore learn to understand the needs and wants of both sides and that sometimes you need to compromise. This sort of democratic decision making, was also seen amongst and between the students themselves. So many times watching the children playing and learning together, I could see that if ever a conflict had arisen, someone wasn’t sharing or didn’t clean up their area – the children would most of the time have the initiative and sense of justice to somehow resolve the situation between themselves. Through being given the freedom to speak their mind, express their thoughts and feelings and learn to discuss and listen to everyone’s point of view, from a young age, the children learn to be peaceful with one another. This is something important that I think flows from the relationships that the students have with the Puvidham teachers, and what they learn from the way that the teachers interact with them.

In mainstream schooling the teacher is the utmost authority, at Puvidham the teacher is an akka or an anna, a mentor and guide through the learning process and someone to laugh and play with. The structure of the classrooms themselves confirms this, being circle shaped, there is not front or back of the room, everyone is equal. The school wouldn’t be what it is without its teachers and there is a great team of teachers at Puvidham. Lakshmi and Gunavati, the LKG/UKG and 1st and 2nd teachers create a nice balance with the small children being more like the big sisters. Being the two young teachers, you can always find them together! Senbagam has a great energy with the 3rd and 4th standard and can beat all the girls in skipping rope races. I like to watch her teach because she gets right into it! Kupusamy was not teaching so much during my time there but was very busy doing a lot of other work for the school and for the organisation. He was always there to give a helping hand. Rameshwari and Madhavaraj were away on a tour to Darjeeling with the 7th and 8th standard for most of my time at the school. Rameshwari is always smiling and Madhavaraj is always making jokes! And then theres kind hearted Jothi who drives the children safely to and from school every day. It is more like a family then a group of people who happen to work together.

When not with the teachers, the children were able to complete their work without constant supervision, to work independently and to work together and help each other. This I think comes from the schools emphasis on cooperation rather than competition. One morning I was with two boys
who were taking turns to ride one of the schools bikes up, around and back down to the front entrance as fast as they could. Without thinking, I started to count out allowed to time each of them. I really noticed my own ‘mainstream’ schooling conditioning when one of the boys turned and said with a smile, “Lyla ka, it’s not a race!” Of course you can both just ride as fast as you can for the sake of riding as fast as you can without having to see who is fastest and compete against one another! And this is what the world needs, children who grow into adults who know what it is to be a part of a community that works together and supports one another.

During my time at Puvidham I was a part of many examples of how children can be the catalyst for change in the community. I went along with the children to record a survey of the farms around the village to try and promote the planting of millet in the area. This crop grows well in poor soil and with little water, improves the condition of the soil over time and does not need herbicides, pesticides or chemical fertilizers to grow. Instead of forcing this on the community, the children simply asked them questions like what they were growing 10 years ago, how were the crops back then and what is working now? This reflection would allow the farmers to see and understand for themselves. The children also spent part of their mornings collecting all the seeds from the trees of the school which had fallen on the ground. It was a fun atmosphere, with all of us, like a game, collecting seeds together especially when one of the older children would climb a tree to shake the old seed pods out and everyone would run to collect them. The seeds were to be planted in plastic bags, filled and prepared by the children, and the tree seedlings were to be given out to the community to be planted to prevent desertification of the area. The older children were a part of the push to clean up the village, we picked up the plastic rubbish in the afternoons and went to the local stores to hang rubbish bags with signs asking to put plastic in the bag instead of on the side of the road. Going rubbish collecting with the children was actually fun because they really put themselves into the task of making their village clean and beautiful. They also performed at a local college while I was there, with dramas teaching the audience about the importance of taking care of the environment. I felt very proud of them, after watching them rehearse again and again and finally to perform in front of all of these people and I felt that the audience was also proud that these children are aware and spreading this important message. These activities teach the children to be aware and concerned with their surroundings and to have a deep sense of community. They are not isolated within the school, they are out there making a difference.

Whilst I had never taught in a school before, to have my very first experience at Puvidham was a blessing. The children taught me so much without even knowing it. I felt very humbled at times to see how they were
with each other and with me and I was welcomed very openly by the school. If the goal is to nurture children to become open, kind hearted and aware of themselves, each other and the world around them, than in my opinion it has been achieved at Puvidham.