

e-KALVI: An Equal Footing Through Computer Education

Country of Project Implementation: Chennai, India

Sponsoring College: University of Chicago

Student: Anvita Ramachandran, Luxembourg, University of Chicago

Summary

The e-Kalvi project aims to bridge the divide in technological access in Chennai, India and develop the digital skills of underserved school students. We partnered with the Anjugam Primary School to set up a computer center and implement a digital literacy program for the students. With the support of two private schools and a college in the city, we created an ecosystem of volunteers and teachers to support the project. We are working to equip the school with the necessary infrastructure, design a relevant and appropriate curriculum and later disseminate and scale the program. Through the program, we hope that the students will develop the necessary skills in technology that will improve their education and employment prospects, thus providing greater economic security to their families.

Other fund-raising efforts

With the generous funds from the Davis Projects for Peace, we could purchase good-quality equipment for the computer learning center. However, we recognized that we would eventually lack funds for the repair and maintenance of the equipment. We reached out to organizations in Luxembourg and India, who have expressed a willingness to support the project as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives. We also approached non-profit organizations like the Round Table and Rotary Club in Luxembourg, and the Candles in Chennai for additional support.

Origin of project idea

The project was an outgrowth of my volunteer work at the Anjugam Primary School, where I was confronted with the stark inequalities in the Indian education system. At university, I studied methods to solve such educational inequities. I helped evaluate a preschool intervention and parent training program in Chicago Heights and I found that the students enrolled in the program performed better on most learning metrics. This research experience encouraged me to develop a program that would hone the skills of disadvantaged children in my hometown of Chennai. I recognized that the students at the Anjugam School – and in fact most government schools – were not given sufficient digital skills training, and so I designed the e-Kalvi project to address this specific learning gap.

The problem and why it exists

Currently, half of the Indian population lacks internet access and only 20% of Indians know how to use basic digital services¹. Hence, we face a two-pronged challenge of lack of access and lack of skill-training, both of which the e-Kalvi project attempts to tackle.

The digital divide in India starts at young age – only 13% of Indian government primary schools possess sufficient computer infrastructure². During the pandemic, this divide has further exacerbated existing learning disparities. In government schools, almost 80% of students could not access online learning during the lockdown because they did not possess internet connections and were unable to afford mobile data³. As a result, the e-Kalvi project became even more essential to continue learning at the Anjugam School.

Choice of host site

I chose to base my project at the Anjugam Primary School because of my existing relationship with the school. This enabled me to gain the support and trust of the school management and teachers. I was also better able to liaise with other schools and colleges since the project was based in my hometown. Most importantly, I have family and friends in Chennai who could help me coordinate the project remotely.

Challenges faced and COVID-19

Evidently, the project implementation was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. India faced a devastating second-wave in April 2021, and so many schools – including the Anjugam School – have

¹ [Covid-19 pandemic risks a lost generation in India as digital divide widens](#). Mint. (2021).

² National University of Educational Planning and Administration. 2020. "Present Status Of Infrastructure Facilities In Schools In India: From National And State Level Perspective". New Delhi.

³ Oxfam India. (2021). *Status Report- Government and private schools during COVID-19*.

still not reopened as of September⁴. Moreover, we did not want to put the children, volunteers and their families at risk given that less than 7% of the country was fully vaccinated at the time⁵. As a result, we decided to post-pone implementing the in-person teaching component of the project until December 2021. Hence, we spent the summer laying the groundwork for the project – purchasing the computer equipment and setting up the computer center in the school, designing the curriculum and recruiting volunteers for the program. We had initially envisioned that the program would be led by volunteers from multiple schools, but this model was no longer conducive during the pandemic. We had to limit the number of volunteers involved, and so we are planning to appoint and train a schoolteacher who can help run the program. Thus, we have provisioned some of our budget to meet their initial salary, until we receive approval from the government.

It was challenging to communicate with the schools we had partnered with. These schools had agreed to work with us in December 2019, and they understandably faced difficulties of their own when the pandemic hit. In the past year and a half, it was important to regularly update them about our plans for the project. I was working from Luxembourg during this time, and so I recognized that I did not experience first-hand how the pandemic affected education in India. Since I had grown up in Chennai, I personally knew teachers and students on the ground, and so I solicited their input when designing the program. I approached a computer science teacher from a private school in Chennai and a Teach for India fellow, who guided me through the design of the program and updated me about remote learning in India.

How the project promotes peace

I believe that an egalitarian society is a prerequisite to sustain peace. Here, peace does not simply mean a lack of conflict, but also the existence of harmony between diverse communities. If a society experiences deep socio-economic inequality, this could give rise to social tensions that threaten peace. In India, the income share of the top 10% has grown over the years – from 30% in the 1980s to 56% in 2019.⁶ This inequality has been further exacerbated by the pandemic, where millions of migrant workers were left with no livelihood⁷. This lack of employment opportunities perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty and results in further social exclusion.

The e-Kalvi project aims to equip children from low-income families with the necessary skills in technology that will propel their future education and employment. By targeting the gap in technological access and skill training, we hope to enable the student's social mobility and reduce their vulnerabilities to poverty. Once the project is fully implemented in December, we will have an entire class of students and selected teachers who will have developed a base skill in technology. We would have also trained a small group of volunteers and a teacher who can further continue the program. My grandmother lives in Chennai and has a long connection with the Anjugam School, and so she will help coordinate the implementation and expansion of the program once I have returned to university.

Lessons from the project

Through the years I've volunteered at the school, I have seen first-hand the dedication of the teachers towards the student's learning and the school's improvement. I have also seen the optimism of the students' parents, as they have expressed their hopes for their children's futures. Through the e-Kalvi project, this observation of mine has only been reaffirmed. It has made me realize that the learning gaps the students experience are not because of a lack of effort but because of a lack of resources and opportunity. I have gained a better understanding of the grass-root level issues in education, and I am more resolved to work towards lowering these educational inequalities in India. The e-Kalvi project has greatly informed my plans to further research the causes and consequences of educational inequality when I attend graduate school.

Personal Statement

I recognize that a small project like e-Kalvi cannot entirely eradicate issues like poverty and economic inequality. But by engaging students on the ground and building a community surrounding the project, I hope we can inspire young people to engage with difficult social issues and come up with solutions of their own. We depend on their optimism and drive to promote peace.

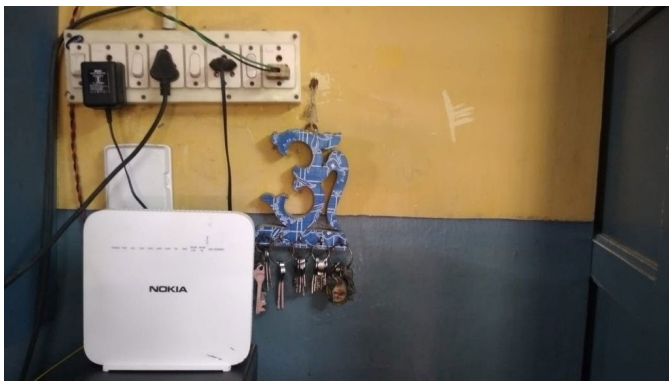
⁴ Das, K. (2021). [Reopen schools or disaster looms, experts tell Indian authorities](#). Reuters.

⁵ [Data | COVID-19 vaccination rate hits record pace in last 10 days of June](#). The Hindu. (2021).

⁶ [Income Inequality in India Continues to Rise: Report](#). The Wire. (2021).

⁷ [Researching the Impact of the Pandemic on Internal Migrant Workers in India](#). United Nations. (2020)

Note: These pictures were taken by Ms. Uma Maheswari, the Anjugam School headmistress, in early September.



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