

Visit to Madhi Foundation

I visited Madhi on Friday, January 31, 2025, for approximately five hours. During this visit, I went to a government or corporation school in Villivakkam. I met with the principal and a couple of teachers and spent time in a third-grade classroom. Accompanying me were Merlia Shaukath and Srivathsan Ramaswamy (co-founders of Madhi), along with Diana, who manages interactions with schools in the Chennai area. Below are my observations from the visit.

School Visit Observations

The principal has access to an app developed by Madhi, which provides detailed data on every student and teacher in the school. This app tracks information such as student attendance and academic performance across various subjects, as well as teacher attendance. The principal noted that teachers also have access to an app that provides insights into student performance and allows them to follow up with parents. For instance, if a student has been absent for a while, teachers can directly call the parents. Additionally, several teachers use WhatsApp to communicate with parents, sharing updates on their children's learning progress.

In the classroom, I engaged with the students by asking them questions. Many of the children were proficient in addition, subtraction, and multiplication, though they were somewhat slower with division. Some students were shy and hesitant to answer. I also asked them to read words in English from the blackboard, and many were able to do so successfully. The school is utilizing "Enjoy English," a software developed by Madhi, to support English learning. Each child in the classroom had a tablet to access the software, which employs phonics to enhance conversational English. The interface is game-like and user-friendly, making it easy for students to navigate. While the software appears effective, its impact on English proficiency can only be fully assessed by comparing students using the software with those who are not. Madhi has conducted studies comparing students' baseline English skills before and after using the software, showing substantial improvement. They have also found that students using the software perform significantly better in English compared to those who do not. Currently, the software has been implemented in a few schools, but Madhi is seeking funding to expand its reach.

Visit to the Madhi Office

After the school visit, we proceeded to the Madhi office in Kotturpuram, where I met several members of the team. The office is modest, located in a small, cramped apartment building, with rooms spread across three floors. In addition to Merlia and Srivathsan, the team members present included:

- **Vijayalakshmi Mohan** – Chief Operations Officer and Co-founder
- **Oliver** – Head of field operations for the parent engagement project (CEFL), which CVI is funding
- **Shruti Krishnan** – Manager for Curriculum Design, working closely with the Tamil Nadu government on curriculum development
- **Rebecca** – Manager for teacher training and capacity building

- **Rohit** – who has recently joined as Head of Program Management

Key Observations from Discussions

Team and Work Culture

The managers at Madhi are young (mostly in their 30s, with some in their late 20s) and highly enthusiastic about their work. Many of them hold engineering degrees but have chosen to dedicate their careers to education. They are passionate about their roles at Madhi and the large-scale impact they are making on the state's education system.

Parent Engagement (CEFL Project)

Oliver, who leads the CEFL project, noted that parental involvement in children's education is increasing in areas where Madhi is implementing the initiative (Chennai, Cuddalore, and Tiruvallur). Madhi's community workers regularly meet with parents and local leaders, such as Panchayat heads, to emphasize the importance of education. He believes that most parents are literate enough to support their young children (ages 5-8) in learning and can also supervise homework for older children. Group meetings foster a sense of peer accountability, encouraging more parents to stay engaged in their children's education.

Curriculum Design

Shruti Krishnan shared insights into Madhi's collaboration with the government on curriculum design. While working with government agencies presents challenges, she finds many officials to be cooperative and open to discussion. There is ongoing dialogue about curriculum content and effective teaching methodologies. Given Madhi's long-term involvement in curriculum development, the partnership with the government has strengthened over the years.

Teacher Training and Capacity Building

Rebecca discussed Madhi's efforts in teacher training. Approximately three months ago, they conducted a workshop for 1,300 teachers (grades 1-5) from Greater Chennai, held at eight centers over two weeks. The training focused on various teaching methodologies. Madhi has also developed teacher handbooks and other training materials to support educators.

Challenges in Fundraising and Hiring

Vijayalakshmi, Srivathsan, and Merlia highlighted two primary challenges—fundraising and employee retention. While Madhi has successfully secured funding from foundations (such as the Gates Foundation and several Indian foundations), corporate CSR contributions, and individual donors, they are constantly seeking additional funding for both existing and new initiatives. With their recent FCRA clearance, they hope to attract more international funding and are actively applying to overseas foundations and individual donors.

Employee hiring and retention remain a challenge due to salary constraints. While they strive to recruit high-quality professionals, they cannot offer competitive corporate salaries, making retention difficult.

Final Thoughts

This was my first visit to Madhi Foundation, an organization we began supporting in 2024. Madhi is deeply engaged with schools across Tamil Nadu, focusing on improving foundational learning for elementary school students. The team is young, energetic, and committed to making a significant impact. Many members have prior experience with organizations like Pratham and Teach for India, bringing valuable expertise to their work.

Madhi has recently expanded its reach, partnering with the state of Meghalaya on an initiative similar to Tamil Nadu's *Ennum Ezhuthum*, which aims to enhance literacy and numeracy among elementary students. Given their large-scale impact, I believe Madhi is a worthy organization to support, and we should consider increasing our support in the coming years.

Pictures from the visit

3rd grade girl using the Enjoy English app on her tablet



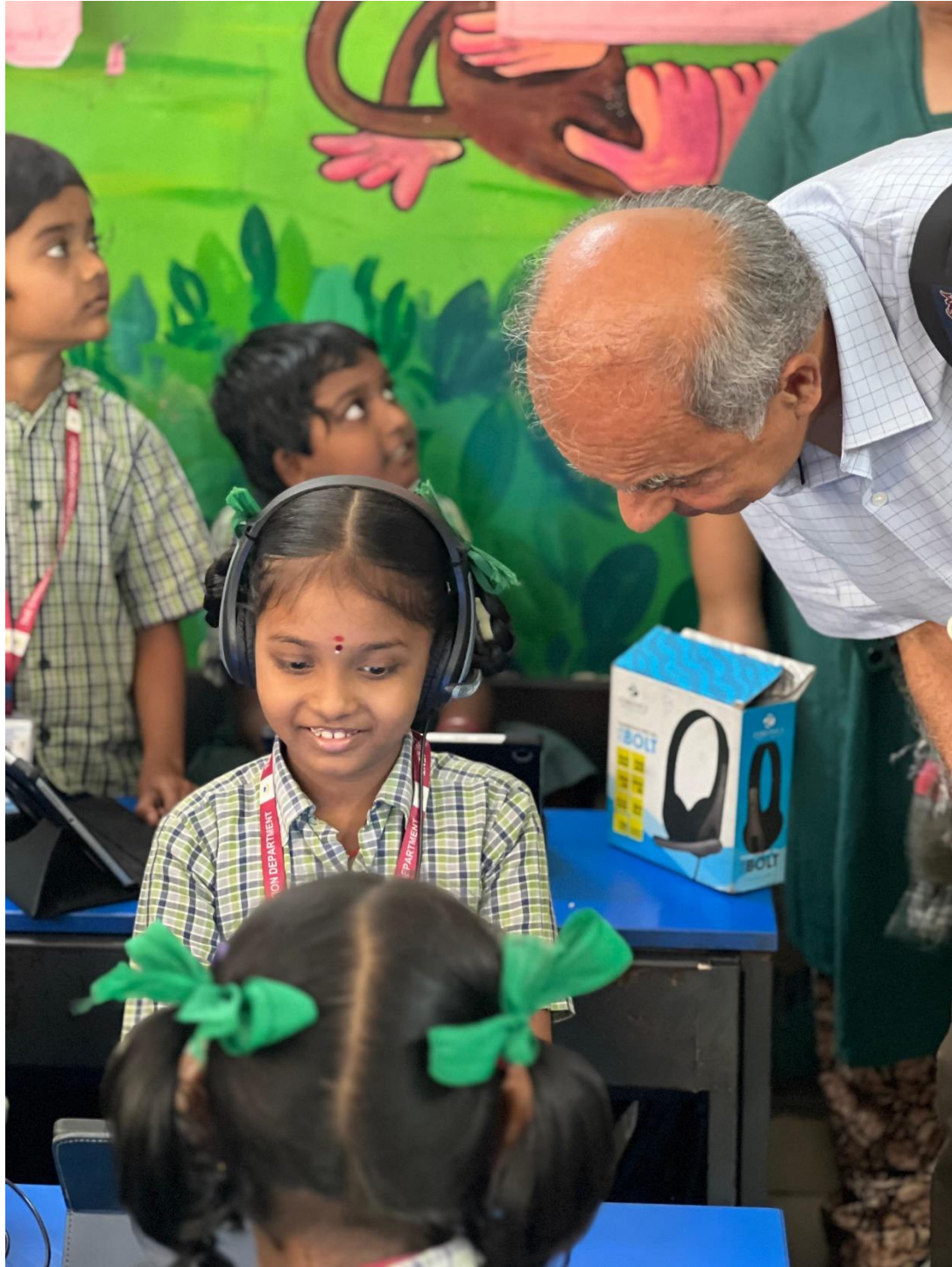


With Srivathsan Ramaswamy who is showing me the Madhi App used by teachers and administrators



Enjoy English is on the TV screen





With Madhi staff and 3rd grade teacher







With Principal who is showing the Madhi app



With Madhi team in their office

