

Teaching-Learning in Summer Camps and Vacations

Shobhan Singh Negi

Before coming to a higher class, it is important for students to be able to revisit some of the experiences of their previous year. These experiences help strengthen the foundations for the year to come. In summer camps and summer vacations, engaging and creative teaching-learning methods can be adopted in a joyful environment while understanding the challenges of the children's new classes.

Entering a new class is an important experience in students' lives. It is common knowledge that most children get promoted to the next class, even as the challenges of the previous year persist. It has often been observed that in government schools, new books for children are available only in July. Consequently, April-May and the summer vacation provide an opportunity for teachers to offer learning experiences that students may otherwise miss out on for various reasons. This essay describes two such experiences and observations.

Summer vacation: Teaching-learning experiences

Before the vacations start, during the initial months of the new academic session (April and May), time should be spent revising class lessons taught in the previous year. Teachers have a solid foundation to conduct revision classes since they have conducted the previous annual examinations and are aware of each student's academic level. Teachers can create study groups based on the learning levels of students and design teaching plans according to the academic levels of specific groups.



Figure 1: Students participating in a summer camp.

I have observed that discussing pictures and picture stories can be a good and comfortable starting point with children. This activity is efficient for the expression, imagination and spoken language abilities of children. Pictures and picture stories are an effective medium for developing written as well as oral language skills of students of up to class V. I have witnessed several teachers talking about picture stories to students and the latter imagining and creating stories based on pictures. Students have gone a step further and narrated new picture-based stories in primary classes.

This is an interesting and brilliant way to develop the oral language skills of students in the younger classes. Various organisations, such as *Ektara*, *Eklavya*, *Room to Read*, and the *National Book Trust*, are publishing picture books and some great children's literature. These are available in most of the schools of Uttarakhand. All of these organisations have also published many decent picture stories. Thus, on the whole, understanding the minds and linguistic backgrounds of students, instilling in them an interest in learning, and giving wings to their imagination are things that can be worked on during the vacations.

Another thing that I understood is that currently, students up to class VIII are also struggling to acquire even basic literacy and numeracy, which was aggravated during COVID-19 and has continued since. Hence, making efforts towards the development of basic language and maths skills in students is critical. We also know that libraries can be utilised better for most students to reach the learning levels expected of them in the previous academic year. Providing students with books suited to their level could be beneficial in this regard. Teaching-learning materials (TLMs) need to be chosen for students every day at a level appropriate for them, and discussions need to be held on all that they have read each day. Special attention should be paid towards understanding the relationship of students with the characters in the story and the relationships among the characters in the story. Such conversations help develop the students' interest in reading while also developing their reading habits.

“ In every school where teachers read stories together with students, an atmosphere and culture of reading and writing is organically built. ”

It is important to note is that merely providing study materials to students is not sufficient. It is necessary that teachers themselves read children's literature. Mentioning one incident could perhaps be relevant in this context. A few years ago, the Barmer team of the Azim Premji Foundation arrived at the decision that extensive work should be undertaken on the topic of learning in

some schools on the occasion of National Reading Day, 20 June, which is the death anniversary of Late P N Panicker, the Father of the Library Movement. Three members of the Foundation and four teachers were involved in one primary school with approximately 70 students. We chose books based on the ages and interests of the students. Students were put into small groups, and they read three to four stories for two hours on the first day.



Figure 2: A student's creation during a summer camp.

We observed that they liked stories about forests and animals the most. When asked what they would do if they were in the position of the crow or the tortoise (from the stories they had read), their answers were interesting and pointed to rather fundamental concerns. This question lifted the spirits not only of the students but also of the teachers. One noteworthy point here is that there was a teacher who usually visited different classes but showed absolutely no interest in their reading. Even we were unable to inspire any interest in him. However, it pleased us to see him around students and intently listening to their answers this time. A child even asked him, 'Sir, what would you do if you were the tortoise in the story?' He said, 'I have not read the story.' Here, we could see a change of expression on his face. He realised that when students see their teachers reading the story, it captures the interest of students. This was something I observed everywhere I saw students reading stories. In every school where teachers read stories together with students, an atmosphere and culture of reading and writing is organically built.

The method of repeating lessons or revision as adopted by teachers during April and May in schools was rather remarkable. The teachers asked every student about their favourite and most difficult chapter in their last year's Hindi textbook. All of the students were given ample time to think about the answer.

In one week, the teachers were engaging in classwork with students in the following manner:

First, every student would think of an easy chapter and a difficult chapter and tell the group about the same. Then, they would share the same information in writing. All the students were doing this one by one. This was the lesson plan for a few days. This plan was not limited to language; it was applied to maths and Environmental Studies (EVS) as well. The students were asked to narrate a good experience and a bad experience from the previous year as well. After some days, when I went to the school again, I saw that the teacher had put up these experiences of the students on a wall magazine. Although this was a simple activity, it was an effective means for the students to revisit all they had learnt in the previous year. In this activity:

- Every student 'repeated' the previous class in essence.
- The students explained why certain chapters were easy, whereas others were difficult.

- Each student was encouraged and received an opportunity to speak in a large group.
- Opportunities were provided to students for writing why certain chapters seemed easy and why some were difficult.
- The teacher learnt which concepts students found difficult and created a plan to work on them.
- The good and the bad experiences of students served as feedback for the school.

This was a brilliant method to bridge the gap between the new academic year and the previous one. This process simplified the challenges of the new academic year since the teachers worked with students on those areas and concepts that they had found difficult.

Summer camp: Teaching-learning experiences

The second experience is associated with summer classes in all the summer camps that I have seen in Rajasthan and Uttarakhand during the past 10 years. There was one thing they shared in common – the overflowing joy, passion and enthusiasm of students. They did not get bored; they seemed to learn everything sincerely. Even the teachers appeared to be stress-free. Their willingness



Figure 3: Children enjoying a play activity in a summer camp.

to do something new and creative with the students was clear. Guardians could also be seen participating enthusiastically in summer camps.

Here, positive reactions from government officials are a big source of encouragement to the teachers. It was remarkable to note that even the literate youth of the village could be seen sharing their talents and skills with the children in the summer camp. The atmosphere of summer camps appeared colourful and festive. It seemed as though students wanted to learn more and more. They were so delighted to learn that they did not even want to return to their homes. It is the teachers who had to remind them, 'Children, go home now!' On the final day of the summer camp, the students would not get tired of telling all that they had learned.

Witnessing all this, I wondered about the reason why these summer camps were so effective. I have found certain things that are common to all summer camps.

Both students as well as teachers seem to be enthusiastic and happy in summer camps, which is rarely the case during regular school days. The credit goes to how the summer camps are designed. Being rid of the stress of coursework, teachers are free to do as they please in the camps. The focus is not only on academics but also on life skills. Classes are based on interactive learning through practical activities. Even teachers can be found learning something along with children in summer camps. Teachers want to provide those experiences to students, which are not usually possible in the school or regular classrooms. This very desire of theirs fills them with joy. The encouragement received from guardians also makes them happy. This creates a flow of positive energy. Children are also free in summer camps. They have several options – from reading stories and learning how to paint to playing games.

Experiences from these camps assure us that such camps should certainly be held and more frequently. The foremost task in these camps is the familiarisation of teachers and students with each other, including the family background of students, their interests, and the reasons behind their good and not-so-good habits, to establish a friendly relationship between them. Generally, such opportunities are rare during the school session. Since the environment is informal in such camps, students find it easier to express themselves.



Figure 4: Students explain what they have made on the chart.

Second, there should be ample learning opportunities for students. There should be sports activities and enough material for arts and crafts, along with interesting books for students to read. Students should be given every opportunity for artistic expression. I have also observed that they are very attracted to theatre and puppetry. The fundamental thing about camps is that students should be free to learn.

Third, summer camps are a suitable opportunity for nurturing an interest in learning in students. When students have already entered their new academic year, it is time for them to be familiarised with their new textbooks. Post-COVID-19, most students in primary and secondary schools are still struggling with basic literacy and numeracy. Hence, in summer camps, opportunities should be provided to students for independent writing and expression based on interesting discussions around storybooks to develop their interest in learning. Efforts should be made to take them a step forward in terms of their natural pace and level. The main objective of our efforts should be to get students excited about learning and encourage them.

To conclude, the more we utilise the months of April and May for teaching students joyfully and creatively, the easier it will be for them to keep pace with the new class curriculum. This is the time for students to learn sincerely, without stress, and for teachers to develop their understanding of the aspects that need to be taken into consideration while making decisions about teaching processes and identifying techniques that prove to be effective.

Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal



Shobhan Singh Negi has been working on literacy and social causes for over three decades. He has been with the Azim Premji Foundation since 2010 and has been actively involved in the work of the Foundation in Barmer, Rajasthan, for eight years. He is currently leading the Foundation's work in Uttarakhand.

Contact: shobhan@azimpremjifoundation.org