

Gramin Shiksha Kendra<sup>i</sup> (GSK) has been working with children through Uday Community Schools since 2005. We have realised through our work that if children are to learn well, classroom processes, while extremely important, need to be reinforced with other strategies. Teachers need to go beyond textbooks to create opportunities that can help children develop their understanding and explore their world. When children are encouraged to convert an idea into action, they have an opportunity to bring together what they have learnt in different subjects and create linkages between them. Through this process, they are able to internalise and integrate their classroom learning, which may not have been possible through only subject-specific classroom learning.

Through Uday Community Schools, GSK has made it a practice to initiate a variety of activities, as part of the teaching-learning process, that help reinforce learning. We believe that learning needs to be reinforced through multiple strategies and is not limited to learning from textbooks. John Dewey also emphasises the importance of experiences in learning. Our strategies help translate the subject knowledge acquired in the classroom into practical applications that help students assimilate, internalise and apply in new situations. This approach is also influenced by Gardener's theory of multiple intelligence.<sup>ii</sup>

In this article, we are sharing some of the approaches and strategies that we use in Uday Schools.

### Some approaches and strategies

Before we go into the details of these activities, it is important to understand the background of the children studying here. Sawai Madhopur is one of the 100 most backward districts of India. Because of the poor quality of education that existed in the area, the community felt that education was useless as it did not lead to a government job nor made the children capable of farming. School education was characterised by rote learning and

corporal punishment in government schools, and uniforms and English medium in private schools. The joy of learning and the connect between school education and life were missing. GSK was set up to demonstrate an alternative model and help parents see the relevance of education.

- *Music and rhyme:* Music and rhyme help children express themselves and communicate more openly and freely. Repetition to learn music enhances their language skills and helps them appreciate variety in expression and usage.
- *Creative writing:* Creative writing is a key element of learning and practising expression. We create opportunities for children to practise writing so that they develop their imagination, look at the world differently, appreciate the nuances of language and most importantly, learn to enjoy it.
- *Arts:* All children at Uday engage with both visual and performing arts. Playing with colours and creating new colours helps children express themselves more authentically as opposed to copying what is drawn on the blackboard. Theatre is seen as a live form of art wherein children use their bodies to express their thoughts and experiences - through theatre they live the lives of many characters and build their own understanding. Children are encouraged to dramatise the stories they read. Dance is also a part of a regular day at school. Many of these artistic expressions are inspired by the learning in classrooms.
- *Working with hands:* All children in Uday schools have regular engagement with carpentry and pottery. Carpentry exposes them to aesthetic elements and also helps them to apply the principles learned in maths and science to real life. Creating and recreating different forms with clay, students experience impermanence and recreation of newer forms with the same material while doing pottery.
- *Beyond textbooks:*
  - Exposure visits enable students to engage

with issues that they see around them and an opportunity to discuss and debate. These are linked to the topic they are studying and could be to other villages, fields, forest areas, special farms, government offices, industrial units etc.

- Students also work on individual and group projects that help them convert an idea into action. Peer learning, planning, coordination, communication and execution are important aspects of project work that children do.
- Students are encouraged to meet a wide range of people, like labourers, farmers, people's representatives, shopkeepers and government officials, and engage with them to understand their work and their world. Children are encouraged to prepare for this interaction through interviews and analyse the information elicited.
- *Engaging with nature:* Students grow seasonal vegetables and go through the entire growth cycle from seed to seed and understand the process. They learn about nutrients, their benefits and importance in agricultural operations. Growing food helps to strengthen their understanding of the subject and is a joyous experience. A natural progression of this is the Cooking Club where children learn to cook new foods from different parts of the country and learn about the people of other regions.
- *Sports:* A sports period is part of every child's day at Uday Schools. Children join a sport or a game of their choice - individual or group sport; indoor or outdoor. For children who choose to take up a sport more seriously, there is space and possibility for additional time available for practice. Sports for students promote teamwork, leadership, coordination, decision-making, strategy development, implementing strategy and evaluation of their own performance and, most importantly, readiness for receiving feedback from their peers and also giving it. Sports is encouraged also as learning to lose with dignity and to bounce back from failure.
- *Science exhibitions:* Children at Uday attempt to convert what they have learnt in school into models or other forms that can represent their understanding/learning. Annual science exhibitions are a regular feature in every school. Explaining to others helps students understand concepts more deeply. It also helps them articulate

questions that they would want answers to. Exhibitions also facilitate peer learning and help parents stay abreast of their child's learning.

- *School governance:* Annual school panchayat elections are held giving children a flavour of democratic processes.

### **Managing many activities**

The reader may be curious as to how so many activities can be incorporated into the school timetable. Uday Schools run for six hours a day, during which formal education is imparted to the children. The rest of the school day is spent in the reinforcement activities we have described above. Some subjects have classes every day, some are weekly, some monthly and some even annually. Most clubs meet outside of school hours and are often managed by the students themselves. Teachers help when required.

All activities are conducted in mixed-gender groups. Some of these activities reinforce subject knowledge and some focus on developing an attitude that fosters learning. GSK believes that when children are given charge of organising activities (as in clubs), facets of leadership and organisational qualities, as well as their classroom learning, emerge.

One of the key principles that informs our approach is scaffolding where the teacher helps the child learn critical aspects in areas central to their development and this is how the daily learning plan of students is implemented. What is important to appreciate is the approach – GSK sees these co-scholastic activities as integral to the teaching-learning process that significantly impact the quality of education that the school offers to the children. This means that however simple they may be, effort and time are budgeted into the practice, so that they are part of the lesson plan and not appended activities, thereby ensuring that reinforcement takes place at every level.

### **What the approach means**

The significance of our approach lies in the importance placed on making sure that children understand all that is done in the classroom and outside it and derive deeper lessons from these. For instance, explaining a model in the science exhibition to visitors means that the children know and understand the underlying principles. The annual school panchayat reinforces learning in the civics class. The Cooking Club ensures that children back up their experiences of taking care of a vegetable patch by getting recipes from different

parts of the country through which their knowledge of the country is enriched. Sports reinforces the need to challenge oneself to improve despite losing

– an attitude that is essential for all learning. Mixed-gender classes reinforce the ideas of equality and democracy that are so important in today's world.

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#### **Endnotes**

- i Gramin Shiksha Kendra, Rajasthan, works to make the ecosystem of education more conducive to the needs and aspirations of children and their parents in the Sawai Madhopur and Tonk districts of Rajasthan. A reflective and learning journey over the past 18 years has led us to undertake a number of initiatives. The main programme is centred around the Uday Community Schools which were set up and designed to demonstrate to the community and the other schools what quality education could be.
- ii Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner theorizes that people do not have just an intellectual capacity, but have many kinds of intelligence, including musical, interpersonal, spatial-visual, and linguistic intelligences.



**Vishnu Gopal** is the Director of *Gramin Shiksha Kendra*, Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan. He has rich experience in managing schools and educational programmes. He is also a sports enthusiast. He may be reached at [vishnu.gopal@graminshiksha.org.in](mailto:vishnu.gopal@graminshiksha.org.in)