



Learning Life-long

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"By education, I mean an all-round drawing of the best in child and man in body, mind and spirit"
- Mahatma Gandhi

The government's flagship programme for universal elementary education across the country, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, has been implemented in 13 districts of Tamilnadu. Its child-centred activity-based learning has expanded the reach and improved the quality of elementary education. A similar programme, based on the principles of constructivism and self-directed learning, has been introduced for the middle school.

However, the government's approach is always top-down and does not always take into account the needs of the children or the community they come from.

But does the bottom-up approach work? Yes it does, as a study of the pedagogy of Vidya Vanam, which serves the children of the Irula community in Anaikatti district of Coimbatore, reveals. This approach integrates learning into the greater ecosystem of the community.

The primary purpose of schooling is to allow the individual to learn attitudes and skills that allow him/her to interact with the environment successfully. A tribal person's life is totally connected to his/her environment; therefore, we needed a pedagogy of teaching that was sensitive to their cultural needs, an awareness of the traditions and learning styles of different children.

Problems of learning arise when the child's environment and cultural context are not the same as that of the teacher. Usually the teacher-training programmes are a uniform package, used across urban and rural settings without any change. So pedagogy should be seen not merely as a scientific tool for instruction but also as a cultural matrix into

which learning is woven and should address different cultural contexts, learning and teaching behaviours, both inside and outside the classroom.

Education is both an organic and a human system; it is about people. Human beings are naturally different and diverse and prosper in a broad curriculum that celebrates that diversity and recognizes various talents. A curriculum that emphasizes maths and science and also gives ample scope for artistic expression provides for diverse learning styles. So the curriculum has to rethink existing methodology and create new systems that encompass the head, heart and hand.

In the early years of school, the primary focus is to build self-confidence and self-learning skills. Subject distinctions do not necessarily make sense to the children. Meaningful learning comes with the ability to understand knowledge as an interconnected pattern seamlessly flowing from one to another to make a cohesive whole. To address this need, Vidya Vanam developed 'theme-based learning'.

Theme-based learning

This involves selecting a theme that can be explored at different levels of the child's development. Children are divided into small groups and assigned to work in groups. The theme is the overarching umbrella under which different subjects are studied and seamlessly connected with each other. It also runs through different levels of learning and is extrapolated to challenge every group. This process goes a long way in reaffirming that knowledge exists as a whole and not as individual, isolated pockets. This also deepens the awareness of the ecosystem and the cultural ethos of which they are a part.

Theme-based units help teach a range of skills and content by integrating curriculum areas around a topic. This capitalizes on children's interests and

creates a sense of purpose and community in the classroom. Inquiry and communication are activated by a desire to know more, resulting in enthusiastic participation. This integrated studies approach, based on collaboration with the learners, is a new organizational model for some teachers. It can be threatening to those accustomed to a more traditional model, because the teacher no longer has control over the curriculum content. The teacher becomes a participant in the learning process.

The teacher thus becomes a coordinator or facilitator. Many teachers have lesson plans but remain flexible and allow students' interests to lead the unit in unexpected directions. Though this gives students a greater voice in the topics they study and the strategies they use, the teacher's role is not diminished. Young people still need teachers to help them reflect on their learning and to make connections between what they knew and what they have just learned. The acquisition of skills needs to be planned and the possibilities for applying them in other situations needs to be illustrated.

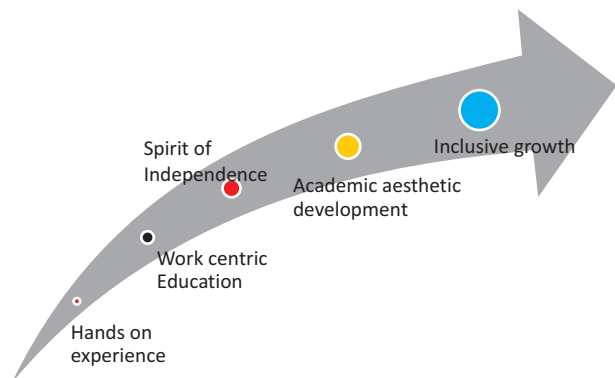
An excellent strategy for teachers is to plan thematic units with a colleague. Sharing ideas, reflecting on activities, developing resources, planning activities affirms the skills of both teachers and provides an opportunity to build on each other's expertise to create something that neither would have accomplished alone.

Vidya Vanam plans school-wide theme studies for multi-age groups created by combining the student population in ways different from the usual grade/class. The structure and duration vary according to the resources available and the objectives. One advantage is that teachers benefit from the interchange of ideas when they work collaboratively. Also, the sense of the school as a community is enhanced when teachers and students from different classes become acquainted and when students work with others of different ages.

There are also the advantages of theme studies being developed by teachers and students together. The students bring innovative ideas, resources and strategies and become committed to the learning

process that is driven by their own interests. Learning becomes more meaningful when learners choose their methods and topics of study; the model of lifelong learning is brought into the school setting. Interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are improved when authority is put aside, and teachers become collaborators and mentors rather than lecturers.

Of course, the teacher retains ultimate control over behaviour and is accountable for ensuring that students are engaged in worthwhile projects that extend skills and result in increased knowledge and positive attitudes. The movement toward student-directed learning is not a movement away from responsibility; instead this responsibility is shared with students.



1. Choose a theme

The first task is to discuss and define a theme that will form the basis of a unit of study. Goal(s) pertaining to the theme (i.e. not specific to curriculum areas) should be agreed upon by the planning team as a whole.

2. Plan ahead

Develop a realistic plan around the chosen theme. Decide who will plan specific curriculum areas, and set a date for completing the plans. Plan the entire unit together and ensure that specific objectives are met. Tasks that should be completed before you begin teaching include:

- Set objectives (for curriculum areas)
- Determine evaluation strategies
- Divide planning responsibilities
- Set deadlines for completion of planning
- Gather/locate resources

- Plan activities: an introductory activity, activities for the whole class, some for small groups, others for individual projects or assignments, and a final activity at the end
- Reach out to the community for assistance
- Map the entire unit using weekly planning templates

3. Put the plan into action

Introduce theme. You will need to be flexible, as student ideas and interests may take you in unexpected directions. Continue to meet with the planning team for inspiration and support as the unit progresses, and adjust the plan according to the situation.

4. Evaluate

Evaluate the students' progress with tools that reflect the objectives in Step 2. When you have completed the activities, evaluate the success of the unit, share information with other classes, parents, and community groups and celebrate your accomplishments.

Example

Theme: Soil

Children love to play with soil and the immediacy of it makes it an interesting subject. The theme lends itself to a detailed study of science, social sciences, math and languages.

We began with the symbol of the pot. Pottery was one work outcome of the study of the theme. A pot is also the symbol of the five elements: Earth is mixed with water to make the clay fired in the kiln (fire) and encompasses air and sustained in space.

We then proceeded to studying the creatures in soil, moved on to the plant and animal kingdom which includes the human being. The full circle connected with ecology, environment and pollution, leading back to soil.

Interdisciplinary approach



Science: Characteristics of soil (colour, texture), nutrients and fertility, process of soil formation, factors responsible for different kinds of soil like climate, rainfall, water etc.

Mathematics: shapes, area and perimeters, fractions via proportion of nutrients, measurements like volume and weight.

Social science: ecosystems, vegetation and wildlife, major landforms, environmental conservation, atmosphere, topography, archaeology

Fine Arts: painting, pottery, modelling, murals, sculpture

Language: stories, literature, essay, poems, slogans, debates

Theme-based learning helps children to make more sense of their lived reality and apply acquired scientific knowledge. This pedagogical concept tests the teachers' resolve, application and resourcefulness. It requires sensitive teachers who also need to educate parents and the community about the desirability of this enlightened and democratic teaching-learning process.

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