

Udaan: wings to the mind

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Written specially for Vikalp Sangam A literal translation of the Hindi word **Udaan** is 'flight', to fly upwards high in the sky. If asked, we all desire to fly, and to soar freely through space, on the infinite highway of ideas. However, drilled through the process of mass-standardised testing and compulsive study environment, our imagination is beaten to death and we are pulled away from becoming free-flowing curious individuals. Udaan— a small pre-school unit based in Kandbari village of Himachal Pradesh - aims to provide space for unabashed curiosity and love for learning in children. The school, a non-profit **initiative of Kumud Bhushan Education Society**, was established four years ago as a learning centre to provide an environment for the overall development of local village children. Currently, Udaan has twelve children of 3-6 years age group in day care. Around 15-20 older children regularly come to the learning centre in the evenings after school hours at the local regular schools, to access the library as well as the small science and math lab, and to play games. The number of children joining the learning centre increases in specific periods like vacations or if volunteers conduct some workshops. The average age of children at the learning centre is 12-17 years; however, during the stitching, dress-making and embroidery sessions, college girls also join in.



Kids trying out an experiment, Photo credit: Fatema Chappalwala

At Udaan, children do not receive formal academic training; rather it is designed as an experiential learning space, where adults work as facilitators rather than teachers. Unlike most of the schools in India, which have quasi-martial requirements like sit-up straight or march in straight lines, kids here spend most of the time in day care, not bodily constrained. Learning happens through play, songs, conversations, games, and storytelling sessions. Since most of the kids are from the village, they - even the youngest - walk up to the school. The school hours are short, from around nine in the morning until 1 pm, with an almost hour-long recess and significant playtime. Unlike in the conventional education system, where play is relegated to a period in the timetable and kids are forced to rote the scripted lessons, at Udaan play flows through entire learning process. Getting fresh air, being with nature, rock climbing, river excursions are some ways adopted to enable and support a child in her/his learning journey. Children in classrooms are encouraged to have fun, to giggle, and to daydream from time to time. Puzzle solving, block making, running, singing songs, and play acting are some of the ways they use to acquaint kids with alphabets and numbers. The usual classroom has 'circle time' every morning during which kids and facilitators sit together in a circle to recite poems, sing songs, and children share their experiences and daily activities. Circle time is followed by physical time during which children free-play. Kids around the age of five to six years have a session of reading and writing as well. However, the initial learning sessions do not have reading, rather clapping out syllables and rhyming so that children build the ability to recognise the sounds without involving the written language. Children at the pre-school create many craft items like pencil stands, lamps, earrings, and other decorative objects out of old newspapers, used plastic cups and worn out threads and wool. Waste recycling and reuse workshops are part of regular learning sessions. Interestingly, in addition to youngsters, women from the outlining village join up in the evening to learn these crafts. The idea is to let the children learn and grow at their own pace, give them challenges to broaden their thought process and skills in a comfortable learning space rather than by inducing stress or competition.



Kids learning to farm, Photo credit: Fatema Chappalwala

Fatema Chappalwala, the facilitator of the school, says, "The engine of learning is the experiential learning that children receive through being outdoors in contact with nature, interacting with adult humans, and doing creative activities in a free flowing learning atmosphere". She believes that children should attempt reading when they are eager for it, rather than by being pushed into it. . In a theme based learning environment, children are exposed to various contextual realities of their local environment. For example, during the monsoons, theme related activities are designed keeping the rain and flowing water and the wind in mind. Children are taken to visit nearby fields, where they are exposed to monsoons crops, monsoon insects, monsoon plants, monsoon-related diseases and are acquainted with the monsoon cycle. Such a learning process nurtures creativity and curiosity and links the learning back to the community and to life. Thus, the pedagogy is catered toward enabling kids to understand their surroundings better and interact with them. This helps in better understanding of concepts and phenomenon such as 'monsoon' from all the dimensions – scientific, social, geographic, agricultural, cultural aspects rather than mindless rote learning. The school attempts to instil a learning skill which is not just based on theory but also practical, hand on training which could be later put to use by the kids Facilitators at Udaan observe children on a daily basis. Apart from these observations, facilitators also use an assessment sheet every six months to note down five broad aspects of children and their behaviour and abilities. These include: 1) social and emotional, 2) language, 3) creativity, 4) cognitive mathematics, and 5) physical. The purpose of the assessment is to identify kids that might need special attention. Being a little averse to pre-designed plans, Udaan has a tentative basic schedule for a year, which is further disaggregated into months, weeks, and days. Play and activities are scheduled according to the children's wishes and re-designed if there is a specific demand from their parents. Facilitators meet the parents once a month to update them about the activities and learning progress of the child. The usual mantras that we hear over and over again at regular schools, like "The work of a child is to play", "let the kid be a kid," are actually put into practice at Udaan. Children's curiosity is nurtured; they learn about their immediate environment, learn to be sensitive about it.



Out for a picnic, Photo credit: Fatema Chappalwala

The cooperative world - where communities live peacefully together and support each other's dreams of individual fulfilment and well-being, is the ideal on which Udaan is modelled. To this dream world and share it with young generation requires a learning space for children, where they can learn these values in the process. However, the current challenge that the school is ideologically grappling with is - the shift of kids from Udaan to regular schools. It is disheartening for the staff to note that the children have no choice but to move to a regular school, where they know that the experiences that the children would have are going to be very different from those at Udaan. Ms. Chappalwala admits that in such a situation the positive effects of most of their efforts are nullified. They perceive an urgent need to transform the mainstream education system that runs like 'ration shops'. Udaan offers space for a free-flowing learning environment, a local

curriculum free of toxic stress and the wasted time and energy that accompanies it; there are daily assessments and an atmosphere of freethinking, creativity, comfort, warmth, and respect for children as cherished individuals. While on a walk around the school early in the morning, I could hear hysterical laughs and children chirping with amusement. 'Do you hear that?'asked Kavitha, a young facilitator brimming with energy at Udaan. "That is the voice of our joyous kids."

*Inputs by Radhika Mulay Contact **the author***