

Service Learning Accelerator Program-2017

The VMware Foundation kicked off the second Service Learning Accelerator, collaborating with VMware people in India offices and a nonprofit called CARE India. I am one of those fortunate 8 to work for a project in a small village called Tapkan in Mewat district which has the lowest literacy rate in Haryana state of India. I along with Dawn Kawn, Marisa Glasman, Varsha Agarwal, Raghavendra Babu, Amandeep Chugh, Arun Narayanwamy, Saeed Imran, Rashmi Madhusudhan, Ashwin Mehra, Nirjala Reddy, worked together in 3 phases.

1. **Serve:** Prepared for 5 weeks to develop materials and lesson plans to be tested and implemented during the on-site, Learn phase (January – February 2017)
2. **Learn:** Deploy IT assessment & implementation and conduct Teacher Technology Workshop in Mewat, Haryana (February 25 – March 5, 2017)
3. **Inspire:** Share insights and apply the immersive experience to our daily work (March 2017 onwards..)

After our visit to the village on the first day it dawned on me that these kids and teachers come from a marginalized section of the society. Additionally, the socio-cultural status is such where there's a marked discrimination against the girl child. Their education isn't given any importance. The majority population that the Mewat Udaan targets is the marginalized Muslim community, hence the program had to adapt its approach to cater to the needs of this community. The community also had reservations against the program being called "Udaan" (the word in Hindi means "Flight"). And they assumed that the project would enable these young girls to harness their ambition. This, perceptibly, went against the grain of the community.

After learning about these realities and the conditions these people work in, my respect towards the teachers has increased manifold. The driving force of this school are the courageous and generous teachers who stay there with kids. Teachers go out of their way in educating these parents about the evils of gender-based discrimination, but this isn't easy, as girls in this village have never been sent to school. Another challenge is that Udaan is a residential school for girls between 11 and 14 years, and in these communities, girls of this age are not sent out of the house – it is considered inappropriate and unsafe. So the grades in the school are not divided based on the age but is based on the learning ability. The grades are as follows: Gulab, Kamal, Chand Sitare and Suryamukhi. The school has only till



5th standard and there is no age restriction. For example, Any girl with strong learning abilities can learn 5th standard syllabus directly. With Udaan, they get an opportunity to break the vicious cycle of illiteracy and complete Class 5 level primary education in a period of 11 months – a successful example of accelerated learning approach. The Persistent teachers prepare their girls so that they can get admitted in any government school after 5th standard.

An activity-based pedagogy is in place that encourages learning through the use of oral, material, creative, and critical experiences and methodologies. Girls in this school also enjoy social learning program from their "Baajis" (an affectionate term for teachers) to prepare the students for life. Teachers literally play the role of the mothers.

The enthusiasm, love and humble nature of these teachers inspired us to contribute more meaningfully during those teaching hours. Considering the sensitivity of the community, teachers are not allowed to step out of the school (Unless they visit their homes), not use smart phones, no TV. I am simply touched by their love and simplicity. VMware foundation donated Laptops, Tablets, UPS, LCD TV screen tables and chairs to the school. Our team and people from CARE INDIA and SRF foundation conducted a quick 30-min meeting with them to help them understand that TV screen is a substitute for a monitor.

On the day, a teacher had filled the knowledge assessment form on computer literacy and on day 7 when I saw them filling the feedback form, it was so amazing to see that their confidence level has raised from 0 to 2 (on a 5 point rating) in basic knowledge of computers, internet, MS Word, Power-Point and Excel. I could see that there was so much enthusiasm. They strive hard to prepare the kids,

they dream of the kids residing in the school, and want their girls to study well and gain respect in the society.

Well, what should I say about those beautiful kids studying there. They are so talented in singing and drawing, given the opportunity and proper infrastructure, they can definitely scale greater heights.

As we bade farewell, after gifting the kids some stationery, the kids and teachers gave us beautiful greeting cards made by them. I was gifted several drawings with the artist's name boldly written on them, so that I wouldn't forget them.

This is the most impactful service learning I ever had. I really wish I had half the talent and half the courage that these teachers have. I definitely went there to teach but I came back learning a lot! I went soul searching through this service learning, and I left a part of my soul in this school. As I was leaving, I turned back towards the school only to see the moist eyes of teachers. I hope to meet them soon as I hear myself humming the songs that kids used to sing.....

- Sangeetha Bangar (BTA Solutions)

