Learning from the environment - Activities in Social Studies

By Sriparna Tamhane | Jul 25, 2012

Education, especially in the primary school, cannot be far removed from the immediate environment of the learner. Relevant local content should be a part of the teaching-learning process, ideally transacted through activities drawing on local resources. We often forget how much can be learnt by children by interacting with neighbors, friends and family members, by critically observing and exploring the social reality around them while simultaneously enabling them to experience human values like freedom, mutual respect and respect for diversity. Text books should be used to open up avenues for further enquiry based on observation and exploration. The ideas given here demonstrate how the learning of social science can be enjoyable and exploratory and how the social studies class can help in raising the awareness of students about issues related to their daily lives, encouraging them to be instruments of change.

Where do you come from?

In order to make children more familiar with the different states of India, a large map of India can be put up on the wall. Each child can say which state he/she comes from. The teacher can then ask the child to come up to the map and look for the state on the map of India and point it to others. (This works well in a classroom where there are children from different states). Similarly a map of a particular state can be used to identify the district that each child comes from. In this informal manner students can be introduced to some of the states of India and the map of India. The activity can be followed up with a formal introduction to the states of India.

Learning about different cultures

Children learn a lot from interaction with each other, not just from text books. While studying the states of India for example, children can be asked to talk to other children and learn one line in as many Indian languages as they can. While talking to children from different states they can ask about at least one legend or folk-tale, one custom, one famous personality, one song and one recipe from that state. In this way, they learn to relate and interact with people while discovering the culture of different states of India.
They can note down the information in their scrap books. Alternatively, children can be divided into groups and each group can be assigned one state to work on. When they come back to class, each child can share what he/she has learnt. Or each group can do its sharing.

**Celebrating heritage day**

One could allow the children to dress in their traditional costumes and come to school to represent the states of India. The song of any one or more states can be learnt by all. Either the children could bring some typical item of food from home or the teacher, along with the children, could choose to cook one of the recipes collected by the children. Through the activity children are encouraged to learn about and respect each other’s tradition and culture, while taking pride in their own.

**Discovering family history**

One of the ways to get students interested in History is by making them curious about their own family history. Each family has an interesting and unique history of its own. Children can be encouraged to discover their family history by talking to parents, grandparents and other family members. Each child can collect family photographs if possible, write their family history and share it with their classmates. The activity will increase their curiosity, enhance their interest in history and make them proud of their own heritage. Each child can create a booklet with his/her family history and photographs/sketches. Children might even refer to important historical events while narrating family history, the partition of India, for example. It is important for the teacher to be unbiased and objective during the reference to such controversial issues.

**Constructing local history**

Local monuments provide a rich and a very exciting platform for learning history. The students may be asked to explore any local monument and try to construct the history of the place. They will have to read the inscriptions on the monument itself, interview people who know about it and try to find out whether there is any literature available that can throw light on it. The process will help the students in understanding the role of a historian in sifting through information. It will also demonstrate how information from one source might need to be checked with another. Inscriptions, for example, can say something that might also be supported by similar information or contradicted in documents or books. This activity can also sensitize children to the issue of protection of heritage sites. They can be encouraged to play an active role in creating awareness about protecting heritage sites in their town.

**A study of the village/town**
Some of the common concepts taught in the primary classes, like houses, food, transport, water, etc. can be studied through the observation of the immediate environment. A study of the local village or town can be done by the children. A well designed questionnaire will give directions for observation, assist the children in interviewing people (the village head, a postman, a policeman, a farmer, a fisherman, etc) and help them in gathering information. The information can then be processed by the children and shared through discussion in class. This will ensure that students are actively engaged in the process of learning. This will also make the learning experiential instead of being heavily text-book based.

While studying about the transport system or the postal system or houses or food or festivals, for example, the children learn best from the neighborhood, by actually observing the local transport, paying a visit to the local post office, observing the different kinds of houses around, identifying local food patterns in school or at home, discovering the local cultural traditions, etc. This makes the learning meaningful as the child can easily relate to the immediate surroundings for observation and study, thereby making the learning experiential.

**Connecting with the neighbourhood**

Many of the concepts learnt from text books remain mental concepts until children are also encouraged to learn from their environment.

For example, students could be encouraged to look for the amount of garbage in the school premises. They could try to see how much garbage could be picked up in 15 min. They could weigh the amount of garbage collected. The students could even create an awareness programme in the school, informing people about the importance of recycling. This can be done through posters, daily announcements, street-plays or songs. After a month the students could do another survey of the garbage around. They could see how much garbage could be collected in 15 min and weigh it again to see whether the awareness campaign has made a difference.

For topics like water, the children could be actually guided to find out about the amount of water used in the school or in their homes, for example. They could create a questionnaire to capture the details about the ways in which water gets used. A similar awareness campaign like the one mentioned above, could be created by them, about the use of water.

These activities not only give the children a chance to observe and study what is going on around them (the amount of garbage created or the amount of water used/wasted for example) but also encourage them to play an active role in making a positive difference by creating awareness among the people in the neighborhood. This gives them the confidence to be active participants in the creation of the social reality around them, to the extent possible.

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