

Keeping things real

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As individuals working with children, one of the things that we are constantly doing is to look out for interesting things to share in class.

So while one day, it could be different kinds of pine cones, on another, it could be coins and currencies from across the world. A child might bring in different kinds of bird feathers or seashells or flowers, and even fish or snails or snake skins!

Sometimes, these experiences help us strengthen our understanding of a particular curricular concept, and at other times, they enable us to extend our learning beyond the stated curriculum. Most importantly, they are just a lot of fun, and a constant reminder of the fact that there are many, many wonderfully interesting things scattered all around us!

Sometime ago, I happened to read about how the daily newspaper could be turned into a very effective learning tool. Till that moment, we (the children and I) had used the newspaper mostly as a means of keeping ourselves abreast of the recent happenings around the world and sharing interesting news articles on different topics. I had never really thought deeply about how else the newspaper could be used.

So earlier this year, I decided to devote some of my summer vacation to the 'study of newspapers'! While I did not have any fixed agenda in mind, I was interested in exploring how the news reports could be linked to various curricular topics included in the upper primary curriculum (Std. V – VII) of the Maharashtra State Board.

Here's what I found...

Newspaper reports can make the curriculum come alive

Environmental pollution as a topic of study, often finds place in science and geography textbooks. A newspaper report on land and air pollution caused by the improper handling



and storage of coal by the Mumbai Port Trust and the resulting health issues faced by the residents of the area, brings many of the curricular topics under the umbrella of 'Environmental Pollution', to the forefront.

Similarly, a report on the heat waves searing across our country during the summer months, allows for an engaging and meaningful discussion on various topics which are often part of the geography curriculum, for instance isotherms, humidity, temperature zones, and local winds.

Again, a news report on the first-ever survey of the bird population of the 'Sanjay Gandhi National Park' in Mumbai, highlights the importance of sanctuaries and national parks and their role in the protection of plant and animal life, something which finds resonance with different chapters of science and geography textbooks at the upper primary levels.

Each of these news reports, accompanied by appropriate exploratory exercises, which encourage children to use the information provided in their textbooks in combination with the news reports, can help children relate 'textbook concepts' with 'real-world happenings', thus making the curriculum more meaningful, real, and relevant.

Integrate different 'subjects'

Knowledge, as we are all aware, cannot really be divided into those neat little compartments of history, civics, geography, science, math, and language. These compartments have been created by us, for our convenience. One could argue therefore, that we are also responsible to do all that we can to help children see the interconnections between these 'subjects', and understand things in the holistic manner they





For instance, while going over a news report about the 'Gangaikonda Cholapuram Temple' built during the Chola period, the children

can be asked to write a letter to a friend describing the key architectural features of the temple. Again, while working on a news report about the Nepal earthquake, children can be encouraged to explain how the various rescue and relief measures will help improve the ground situation.

The news report on the profiles of various undergraduate colleges of Mumbai can prompt children to take on the role of a Principal of a fictitious college and make a presentation to the Board of Trustees, seeking their approval for some new infrastructural facilities for the college. Using the news report on the citizens' protest against the construction of a Metro car shed within one of the last few green-lungs of the city the 'Aarey Milk Colony', the children can be asked to play Chief Minister, and take a decision based on their analysis of the situation.

After reading about the brave acts of our Param Vir Chakra awardees, children can be encouraged to put together a skit on the lives and sacrifices of our defence personnel. A report which talks about 'Vanashakti', a non-profit organization working on environmental issues, can be used to evaluate if citizen's participation through 'voluntary organizations' is an essential and useful characteristic of the Indian Democracy.

Build sensitivity towards responsible citizenship, ethics, and human values

News reports can sometime serve as effective triggers for initiating a discussion on complex and sensitive issues affecting our everyday life. For instance, the news report about the citizens' role in the fight for the preservation of the green cover provided by the

Aarey Milk Colony, can lead to a class discussion on the role of ordinary citizens in local governance.

A reading of the news report on the smuggling of antique temple art from India can trigger a discussion on the ethics of human behaviour and our collective responsibility towards the preservation of our ancient heritage. After reading a report on the Nepal earthquake, thinking about what to write to an imaginary friend in Nepal, as she tries to overcome her fears and resume school once again can help our children experience empathy and compassion in powerful ways.

The fact that newspaper reports talk about real events and issues, make them that much more effective. Not only do they enable children to relate their curricular learning with real world events, but they also help them develop a deeper understanding of the world around them. That they can be accessed at practically no extra cost, is an added advantage.



How I wish I could remember where I had read about that idea of using newspaper reports in class! That one thought has opened up a whole new area of exploration and learning for me.

To that unknown author, of that unknown piece, my most sincere and heartfelt thanks!

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