

Environmental Studies on Conference Calls

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VOICES

The teachers of our school planned that each teacher would take up a subject of their choice and would teach it to 15 students of a class. Although I am a teacher of Physical Education, I chose to take up the responsibility to teach Environmental Studies for a month because of my interest in the subject. I was assigned 15 students from grade IV, though, after a week, I got the opportunity to interact with all 30 children of grade IV.

I spent the first two days wondering how it would be possible to study via a conference call. Questions such as these kept coming to mind:

- Would all the children have mobile phones in their homes?
- Will the network cause problems?
- Would the children be able to answer calls on time?
- What if the weather is bad?
- Would each side be able to hear the other clearly?
- Even if the network is fine, will children and their guardians be at home?
- Will parents and children be willing to study and learn over a conference call?
- Will they be able to understand the subject?
- Will children be interested? Will it be too unnatural to them?
- Will we be able to sustain this process?

I felt the answers to these questions could only be sought through action and so I started. The first day began with enquiries about everyone's health and wellbeing, how the children were spending their days at home, what they were doing for entertainment, what the situation in their homes was like. Although we continued to have these conversations on calls later as well, but to start with this built a cordial feeling between us – parents-children and teachers.

The first three days were spent reading, understanding and writing about *Relations*, a poem that is the first lesson of the grade IV textbook. When we were studying the poem, all the parents and the children were reciting it together on the call. I could even hear the voices of other children

around them. This made the lesson more fun. The animated participation of the children and their parents during the discussions is a mark of the friendly relationship among teachers, parents and children. The children and I discussed the meaning of the poem and continued.

The PDF file of the Environmental Studies textbook had already been shared with the children. They used it to answer the questions in the exercises at the end. They noted down their answers in their notebooks and this was confirmed by their parents. Children took turns to narrate their grandparents' tales and stories over the conference call. They talked about *akti tihaar* which is a Chattisgarhi festival. Post the celebration of this festival, farmers begin to till their fields for the monsoon season. In this manner, parents and children recollected the memories of their relatives through the lesson.

For homework, children were asked to read the poem on *Teeth* from their textbook. They were told to try and arrive at the meaning of each line by placing the line in the context of their daily lives. Each child was asked to answer the questions related to the chapter by turns on the call and to write their answers and send them to me. Many children sent their responses. Most parents confirmed that their children had written the answers. Some children assured me that they would send their responses later and they did.

In the beginning, teaching all students of grade IV was not included in my lesson plans. Later, I discussed the first chapter with the ones who I had not contacted earlier and asked them to complete the exercises. I asked them to attempt to finish the exercises on their own, taking help from their parents and to contact me if they had any difficulty. So, now I was interacting with all the children in grade IV. Fifteen students had been attending my calls regularly since the beginning, which proves that they were taking an interest in their studies, though it was a challenge to explain the importance of the conference calls to the children and parents who could not be reached regularly.

Sometimes, connecting on calls would pose such a challenge that the entire day would be spent

trying to make contact with just five children. Sometimes, I could connect with only four children, and sometimes only with a single child. But I tried to maintain the continuity and moved forward. It was decided that one topic would be transacted daily with five children. When they could not be contacted on the appointed day and time, the work was moved to a different day and time. Hence, I was able to contact each one of the 30 children in the class within a week's time.

Although all the children live in the nine villages nearby, some of them had gone away to their maternal grandparents' homes in other villages during this time. With the weather worsening and the network being constantly busy, difficulty in making contact persisted. But, being teachers, we sustained our efforts to provide education to our students despite the pandemic and the complete lockdown. There was no reason to stop because we are all very fond of our students. For example, one day, when we were not able to contact five children from the village Dondhki, we had to seek the help of an acquaintance who lives in the same village. On average, we spent around five-six hours every day of the week working hard to make contact with every child. Besides this, we also had to prepare lesson plans.

It was an achievement for us just to be connected with the children during the lockdown. We were also receiving immense support from most of the parents. For instance, when we could not reach two children over the phone for a few days, two older children from grade X helped us out. But in another instance, for three weeks, we attempted to reach a particular child, but our efforts were in vain. We could not get any support from her parents. Still, we continued our efforts and towards the end, we could contact her on the conference call.

We read the poem on *Water* in lesson 3. Each line was understood in the context of values and attributes such as friendship, lies and truth, the importance of rules in sports, and the importance of places. The meaning of the entire chapter was understood by relating it to children's play activities.

The discussion on the chapter proceeded further with talks on an article in the newspaper and on rainwater harvesting. As I was reading the chapter aloud, children were also reading along with me. After reading, the chapter was narrated as a story. The story also incorporated the local problems and solutions related to water. The chapter had an image of a house with a rooftop where water would be collected during the rainy season and the water would flow down a pipe into a sump. Children were told to observe that image for a minute. Then, each child was asked to build a story around that image. Simultaneously, a few questions were asked, such as:

- Which methods are used to save water in your village?
- Which methods can be used in your house to save water?
- Which methods are employed in your school to save water?
- What can be done with the collected rainwater?
- How can we use water that has seeped into the ground?

I was able to contact most of the children regularly during the lockdown. However, many parents were very busy with their work, which caused many difficulties. To teach the students of grade IV, I was taking the help of Lokendra, a child in the same class studying in our school. As the lockdown lifted, Lokendra had to start going to work with his parents, who are agricultural labours, in order to help out with the economic situation at home. He would return from work late in the evenings and it was difficult for him to continue his studies. Also, there had been constant network problems at his end. But one evening, on a conference call between 7 and 8, he went to his neighbour's rooftop with his parents and studied for an hour in the light of a torch. I only got to know about this towards the end of our study session. It left me completely stunned.

Many such incidents have taken place. All the children have been participating in my class enthusiastically. It has been a joyful experience to tackle the challenges and keep the process of teaching-learning going.



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