

What is social studies? How can one make this subject contribute to the personal growth of children through experiential learning, skill building and broadening their outlook toward different aspects of life? Finally, how does one as a teacher of social studies ensure that the dynamism and buoyant quality of this subject is strengthened by the pedagogy adopted in class and take it beyond the four walls of the classroom?

There is enormous scope for students in such a subject to ask and pursue questions which seem very real to them, research on concepts they feel deeply connected to, form their own subtle judgements and take away these questions and opinions to delve further as they grow.

As a teacher of social studies it has been a very adventurous and meaningful journey for me personally through a gamut of experiences and experiments with children.

Social studies is incorporated in the curriculum in Rishi Valley for only one year ie in class VI bridging the links and differences between Environmental Studies studied in earlier years and the more focussed disciplines of geography and history in later years. It is by and large a study of ancient civilizations and contemporary cities across the world - Loyang from Ancient China, Athens and Sparta from Greece, London from Great Britain and Benares from India. The children take a journey through each of these cities looking at different cultures and the impact of some of these societies on world culture today.

One realisation I had during the first two years of my teaching this subject was that children tend to forget the facts and most of the theory part of the content. However, what stays in their memory are the rich experiences of co-operative working, field trips, hands on activities, joy of participating in dramas and dances, ideas they take away from the debates and interviews with people, projects they do, putting up exhibitions, countless number of stories they listen to, etc.. In a nutshell what remains with them is the subtle understanding of the depth of the study of man and the workings of any society which then strengthens and nurtures their relationship with subjects like history and geography in higher classes. Therefore, these are the different threads I have always played with to weave and design the colourful and rich tapestry of this fabric called social studies.

Here's a bird' eye view of what's and how's of my exploration of China and Greece in class 6 and Egypt in class 5. I would like to mention here that we have created our own course materials and booklets for all the civilizations and cities that we cover.



China



Chin Shi Huangdi in the play

We began exploring China with an exhibition of photographs - of people, places, paintings of different landscapes, architecture etc. We also displayed a few materials and devices which were first invented and used in China and are still being used all around the world (silk, compass, umbrella, paper, etc..)

China was then introduced in a very dramatic manner through Chin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor of China who unified all the six warring states of the country through military conquests. Photographs of a vast buried army of terracotta soldiers with life size horses near the emperor's tomb and a lot of other information about his life, cruelties, and achievements proved to be a very gripping starter. At this juncture the children themselves initiated a very interesting discussion on the belief of life after death. This led to a spontaneous comparative study of how different cultures including different religions in India deal with death and the rituals that follow it. Children spoke about the rituals

that their families practise and why they do it. This also made them think about the validity of some rituals and some which didn't make any sense at all.

The study of the Han Dynasty brought them face to face with the concepts of dynasty, division into provinces, a hierarchical bureaucracy or civil service, and merit based public examinations. This then extended itself into a very rich discussion about the administrative system of our own country.

The lesson on 'the life and teachings of Confucius' and what he said about the duties and responsibilities of all the members in a family and society lent itself beautifully to the exploration of philosophy at the level of their understanding. This provided a platform to delve for a while on what J.Krishnamurthi, the founder of the school and a great philosopher, had to say about 'freedom and responsibility.'



Dragon Dance

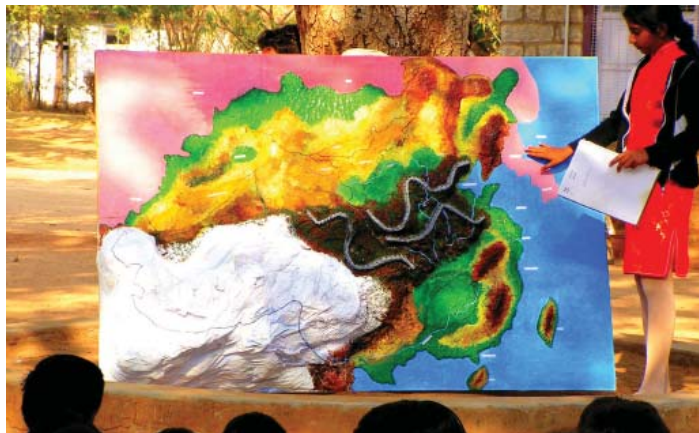
A comparative study of the life of children in those days in China, their upbringing and the life of today's children i.e, the students themselves, the advantages and disadvantages of living in both the worlds proved to be a very debatable and worthwhile venture in class.

Around that time, an ex-student of Rishi Valley who was then a resident of China came visiting. She regaled the students with her knowledge of present day China, Mao - his policies and how they affected the country, important landmarks and places worth visiting, etc. in an eloquent manner. The children had very inspiring and rich sessions with her.

The grand finale of this exploration was a month and a half long project that the entire class embarked upon in preparation for a school assembly to share their learning

with others.

We made a huge colourful 3-D relief map of China to scale, highlighting all the major natural and geographical features, the silk route and the Great Wall of China. With the help of the village potter we made beautiful replicas of the terracotta army. A very ambitious part of the project was the making of two thirty feet long dragons for the traditional Chinese dragon dance.



China Map

Plays depicting a market scene, of how philosophers and teachers met people in public places and talked to them about the truth of life, a court scene of Chin Shi Huangdi followed by an assassination attempt on him were the themes chosen for the final day presentation. Another group of students practised the dragon dance depicting the fight between good and evil over the 'pearl of wisdom'.

The assembly proved to be a huge success with beautiful Chinese music in the background and the much awaited Dragon dance. Thus ended our exploration of one ancient civilization.

Those students are now in class X and it's heartening to see how they still remember this experience with thrill.

Ancient Greece



Greek Mosaic

I followed more or less the same methodology while working on this civilization with the students. The basic tools used were the booklet on Ancient Greece, reference work from a rich resource of library books, maps, pictures, charts, etc. One new skill that I felt would be worth imparting was the making of mind maps. Social studies as a subject calls for remembering many details, facts & figures and other information. I feel that mind maps are one of the easiest ways of putting together details as a cluster. Therefore, I used Tony Buzan's techniques on mind maps and over a few sessions the students seemed quite adept at making beautiful, colour-coded mind maps on different themes related to Greece.

Some of these topics included looking at the geographical features of the land, the structure of a Greek town, daily life and occupations of its people, the two main cities - Sparta and Athens with their very contrasting outlook toward life and their conflicts.



Parthenon

The lesson on the emergence of democracy in Greece under the able leadership of Pericles was an experience worth remembering. This topic extended itself into many activities – a comparative study mainly through sharing of knowledge about the different forms of government, skits to show the difference between Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy and Democracy. To give the children an experience of what democracy is and how it works, I organised debates between teams on different aspects of their life in school. The idea was to convey how decisions on important issues of the state were taken up through discussions and debates.

The concept of 'street theatre' was introduced when we began our exploration of Greek myths and legends. After reading around six to seven stories we decided to write scripts in small groups of four to five students for each story. Then after a few rehearsals we invited other classes and teachers to watch the plays. For each play we chose a natural setting in different parts of the campus and stories were enacted with minimum number of props and costumes. The exciting part of the whole experience was the audience who moved with the actors from one place to another to watch the plays.

We also watched a documentary called Greek – Crucible of Civilization. One very thought-provoking activity for me as a teacher happened when I made the children take charge of a few simple themes related to Greece and prepare themselves in small groups to teach the others in class. The children enjoyed being teachers for some time, but what's worth sharing is the depth with which each group had prepared itself. Not only did they divide the responsibilities among themselves and teach their friends taking cues from the methods followed by their own teachers, but also brought in their own ways of imparting a lesson. In fact in those few sessions I learnt many more creative ways of teaching from my 'student teachers.'

We again took up a month long project in preparation for a school assembly on Greece. This time the students made a model of the Parthenon, mosaics depicting scenes and people (based on their study of Greek Mosaics), lovely cardboard models of Greek pots with exquisite paintings on them and a big 2-D model of Greek map. Themes chosen for plays included how meetings on important issues of the state were discussed in a very democratic manner by the citizens of Greece and three famous Greek myths. A beautiful



Greek Vases

traditional Greek dance was performed by the girls.

Ancient Egypt

Children learn about this civilization towards the fag end of the session in class V – this topic prepares them well to understand what a civilization means, what is archaeology, how cities come into existence, what is a society, what is hierarchy, etc.

I decided to take ahead this entire topic with the children in a two-pronged manner – through classroom learning and a research based project method going hand in hand. Each group was given the task of researching one major topic related to the civilization and and make models, charts and other things based on their research. The topics covered were as follows – The Nile, Pharaohs (their throne, different types of crowns, the traditional beard, etc.), Egyptian gods and goddesses, sarcophagus and mummification, Pyramids, Egyptian houses and kinds of food they ate (we also made the traditional crude Egyptian cookies), occupations of people and societal hierarchy (in the form of a diorama) and Hieroglyphs. We spent around three weeks studying and doing reference work from the library and internet, theory classes with the teacher and making charts. All the children had designed their own Egyptian attire.



A week before the exhibition, each group had to present their work to the whole class. This helped the children learn presentation skills and ways to handle different types of questions based on their work. Once the exhibition was set up inside the classroom, the night before the big day another colleague and I went around posing as visitors asking each group of questions related to their work and giving them feedback and suggestions. Thus the learning was thorough, co-operative and holistic though each group had worked intensely on their own topics.

Three years into the exploration, the journey is on – the journey of finding new approaches to teaching the subject, of finding answers to the questions posed through the most meaningful processes possible, of helping children shape their attitude toward society and culture from their study of the past and present through introspection and observation.



Egyptian attire

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