

As a young student I would love to bury my nose in a story book that transported me to strange and exotic locations like 'Never, Never Land' where Peter Pan refused to grow up. My imaginary world was filled with castaways and shipwrecks created by Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe. I was equally enchanted by Enid Blyton's *Magic Faraway Tree*. Yes, they were all about places that never existed in my school atlas that I faithfully carried around. Was that the reason why I never enjoyed geography? No.

In retrospect, the teacher and the textbook were to blame for a subject that could and should have fascinated me more than molecules and microbes. But back in those days, we thought well of our teacher and guarded the textbook because it made our life easy. It also kept our memory nimble and quick. It proved to be the best technique for reaching the winning post at quiz competitions and exams. It mattered little that we couldn't tell the climate from weather. Nor did we see the connection between plotting graphs and locating places along those crisscross lines that bound the globe in a grid. At least we knew the earth was round and flat no more! And we did split our sides with laughter when the class comedian described the equator as 'a menagerie lion running around the earth and through Africa.'

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Years later when I found myself with the onerous responsibility of training teachers, my lacunae in geography came home to roost. I had to do something and the best way to begin at the beginning was to ask questions. The first: 'what is geography?' I ran into several definitions. The Wikipedia described it: as an all-encompassing discipline that seeks to understand the world - its human and physical features - through an understanding of place and location. Another

went like this: geography is the study of the earth's landscapes, peoples, places and environments. To put it simply – geography is about the world in which we live.



The next question: what do we expect our students to gain from learning geography that they cannot gather from other areas of the curriculum? The answer is given by GA (1999) which says, "The aim of geography is to develop an informed concern for the world around us, and an ability and willingness to take positive action both locally and globally." Yet another source like Oxfam believes that geography should build on young people's concerns, enabling them to become 'global citizens'. And to elaborate further - 'a global citizen is someone who cares about the wider world, knows how the world works, is outraged by poverty and injustice, and takes action to change things for the better.' (Garlake, 2000).

If the aim of geography is to nurture global citizens then: can we walk students through the labyrinths of knowledge and give them an understanding of the myriad challenges that confront our world today? The effects of global warming and the need to reduce harmful emissions of green house gases, the use of finite resources and energy in more sustainable ways, the need to reduce pollution, the maintenance of social justice and removal of prejudice and inequality. In short, the function of geography in schools is to train future citizens to imagine accurately the conditions of the great world stage and so help them to think sanely about political and social problems in the world around them. Therefore the links between geography and citizenship are natural and obvious. Is it possible to nurture this connection in our schools?

An environmental disaster comes to mind. It was July 26, 2005 when a 24-hour rainfall of 994 mm lashed Mumbai and the economic power of India "died" for two days. There was untold loss of life and property. 'Terrible Tuesday' would go down in history but not before an enthusiastic teacher used the experience in her geography class. Rani was keen to test the waters with her students of class IX. They

were an attentive lot, eager to share their experiences of the downpour. Rani gently nudged them into a discussion with the question: was the flood an act of God? The class was divided on the answer and they failed to come to a consensus. So she asked them to look at causes of flooding and its effects in different places around the world. The class diligently scanned the globe and meandered their way through similar events that took them up the Mississippi and down the Nile. And closer home they learnt of the Mithi river for the very first time. They were surprised to find no mention of it in their textbooks. They pored over journals and waded through archives till they finally decided to absolve God from all catastrophes. But who was to blame for the Mumbai tragedy? Their fingers quickly pointed to the politicians, municipality, slum dwellers, builders, and the migrant population. Almost everybody was guilty. At this stage, Rani coaxed the students to take on the roles of each of the culprits they had listed. The response was dramatic and soon a blame game was in progress. It was easy to see how this environmental issue had aroused strong passions. In the midst of this entire din Rani patiently kept observing the behavior of her students. What was she trying to achieve in this pandemonium?

Rani was making an attempt to teach citizenship alongside geography. The aims of her lesson were: (i) to develop an informed concern for the world around us, and (ii) to inculcate skills of participation in the experience of others. The key elements:

1. Knowledge of floods
2. Understanding the causes of floods
3. Critical thinking
4. Social competencies

Rani had encouraged her class to investigate places, people and issues. They were encouraged to think logically and critically before drawing conclusions. Lastly, she helped them explore their feelings in relation to place, space and the environment. Rani strongly believed that it's not enough to simply fill students' brains with facts. She wanted to help her students develop the skills to manage their emotions, resolve conflicts nonviolently, and make responsible decisions. The role play showcased the social competencies that were important learning outcomes for this geography

teacher. Rani was using an approach called SEL – Social and Emotional Learning.

### What is SEL and why do we Need such Competencies in Today's World?

There are several theories but the best explanation comes from psychologist Daniel Goleman who makes a case for emotional intelligence in his book that became a bestseller in 1995: "Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ". His research proved that people with high emotional intelligence tend to be more successful in life than those with high IQs. Other research studies show that promoting social and emotional skills leads to reduced violence and aggression among children, higher academic achievement, and an improved ability to function in schools and in the workplace. Students who demonstrate respect for others and practice positive interactions, and whose respectful attitudes and productive communication skills are acknowledged and rewarded, are more likely to continue to demonstrate such behavior. Students who feel secure and respected can better apply themselves to learning and find it easier to thrive in educational environments and in the wider world.

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### Can Emotional Intelligence be Taught?

Emotions are a part of our being and geography has a particular place in this endeavor because the study of real

places, real people and real-life issues is at its core. A number of key geographical concepts provide a distinctive edge on how contemporary issues can be confronted. These are place, space, interdependence, environmental interaction, distance, relational perspectives, geographical imaginations, cultural understanding and diversity. According to Karen Stone McCown (1998) "Emotions are our responses to the world around us, and they are created by the combination of our thoughts, feelings and actions." Slater (2001), for example, says that, 'Citizens need geography and

geographical understanding'. She claims that geography is all about our perception of our environment and how we seek to live in it as geographically and politically literate citizens.

The world is shrinking while carbon emissions are growing. Google maps have long replaced my wearied atlas. And I have taken geography to heart. To me it's a subject that cradles the future in the wondrous beauty of its mountains, plains, rivers and seasons.

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