

# An Inter-disciplinary Lesson on Trees

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## Environmental studies - a perspective

As thinkers, and as a society, we have taken some time to discard the thought that children come to school with a *tabula rasa*<sup>i</sup>. Recognising this, multiple guiding documents, like NCF, NEP, and NIPUN Bharat<sup>ii</sup>, have emphasised the need for referring to children's local environment for an inclusively engaging pedagogy. The local environment is always an easier reference point for children to pick and then, imagine that as a larger issue or concept. This gives them a perspective and facilitates understanding.

Even though children are used to seeing the natural environment around them, education is the catalyst that makes them aware of the importance of the various aspects of the environment and creates in them a sensitivity towards it. This is where the role of Environmental Studies (EVS) as a subject comes in. Introduced in class III, the main objective of the subject is to help children gain a deeper understanding of their environment, which includes knowledge about human relationships with it, and natural and man-made resources. In classes IV and V, students are expected to be able to understand the significance of the natural environment around them along with the knowledge of those outside their immediate premises. With an intensive engagement with them on this, the faculties of awareness, establishing correlations, respecting diversity, etc. are expected to be enhanced. Even though the subject holds a wide scope of both practical and language learning along with the development of socio-emotional skills, it is often treated in schools with a limited vision. As with other subjects, the completion of the syllabus is the ultimate goal, which is unfortunate.

During my days as an Associate (of the Azim Premji Foundation) posted in Barmer, Rajasthan, I was teaching classes IV and V in a primary government school. The main area of intervention was in English and children's self-expression. Extending this scope, I attempted to work in a way that an inter-disciplinary session of language learning and

environmental awareness in the shape of a lesson plan could be executed with children. This article shares the plan, execution, and experience of this lesson in the classroom.

## The context

Barmer district is located in the extreme west of India and has an intensely desert terrain. Trees here are revered for providing shade and multiple resources to the inhabitants of this region which has limited natural resources favourable for their existence.

My lesson plan focused mainly on 'trees', and the objective was to initiate a dialogue about trees and to discuss their relevance in our lives. It was also meant to create awareness so children would treat trees with sensitivity and engage in conversations about saving them. I introduced this plan when the children were eventually getting used to my activity-based learning methods in the classroom and in the language class, I had started working with English sentence-making with given keywords. Given this context, learning outcomes of both environmental studies and English were kept in mind while sketching the plan, including the activities. To make it more relatable, we decided to have the class under a tree as the school had several huge *neem* trees and the children were pretty active in watering and caring for them on a daily basis. However, the scorching heat of Barmer refrained us from stepping out of the classroom for this session.

## Execution of plan

As this was my first attempt at an inter-disciplinary session, this session on trees was sketched over a two-day engagement, inclusive of multiple activities and modes of learning.

### Day 1. Talking about trees

My strongest learning as a teacher has been that the more you 'talk' in the classroom, the better. It not only gives children ample space for expressing their thoughts and ideas, but it also lets them connect with the topic in a way that they can acknowledge

the entitlement to the knowledge they have about a topic. So, we began by talking about trees to understand how the children see them as part of their day-to-day life. The children were asked the following questions:

How many of you have trees in or near your house?

Response: Most of the children replied that they have trees in and around their premises.

Which trees are these?

Response: *Neem, Rohida or Khejri* (these are the trees commonly found in Barmer).

Why do we need trees?

Responses: Trees give us shade, oxygen, fuelwood, and medicines; we can play under them.

This small activity helped in context-setting and noting that children did recognise the existence of trees in a manner which is closely related to their immediate lives.

#### *Picture reading*

Reading and talking with pictures is another creative medium of engaging with children. It builds their imagination not only to enhance their powers of interpretation but to also illustrate the

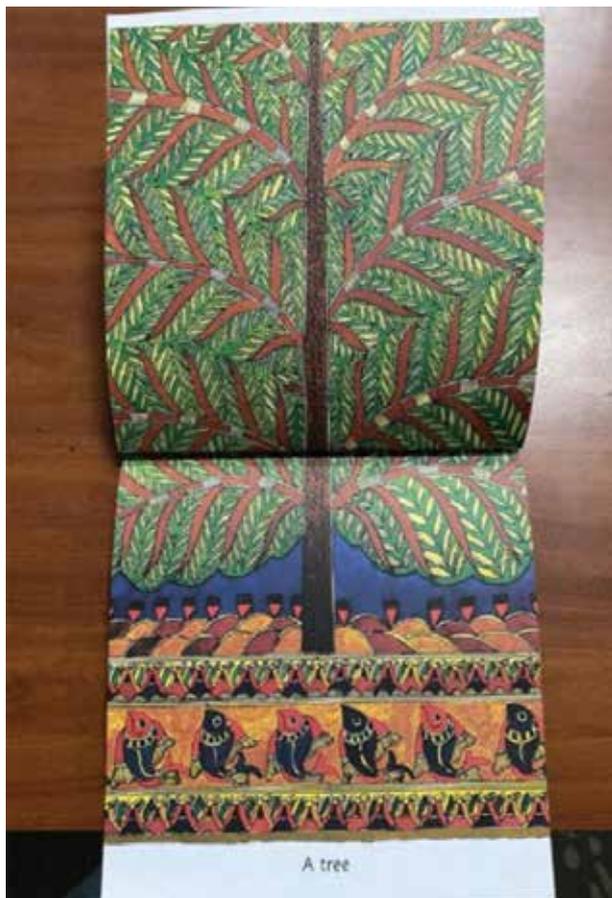


Figure 1. Fish under a tree.

fact that art is limitless. Taking the session ahead after the preliminary conversation, we read the book *A Tree* by K.K Benigni. It is a pictorial book with one-line text on each page. Detailed picture reading was done with children during which the abstract images of trees were interpreted by the children together. This was a particularly interesting exercise to do because they were pretty much used to understanding drawings limited to a single image, for example, a flag, butterfly, fish, flower, etc. This book provided them with new exposure. Some interesting dialogues also emerged, for example, in a picture, there were some fish under a tree, which puzzled the children. In an attempt to understand it, we reached an interpretation that trees play an important role in water conservation and that is how fish survive.



Figure 2. Chipko Movement.

Proceeding further, there was a brief introduction of the *Chipko Movement* in the book. Children were told about the movement, its history, and its relevance.

#### *Putting learnings into words*

As we were already working on the ability to write and not just copy, children were asked to write down whatever they learned about trees in the class that day. It was great to see how the children attempted, even in broken Hindi and wrote down four or five

sentences on why trees are important and why we should not cut them down unnecessarily.

*Day 2. Let's paint*

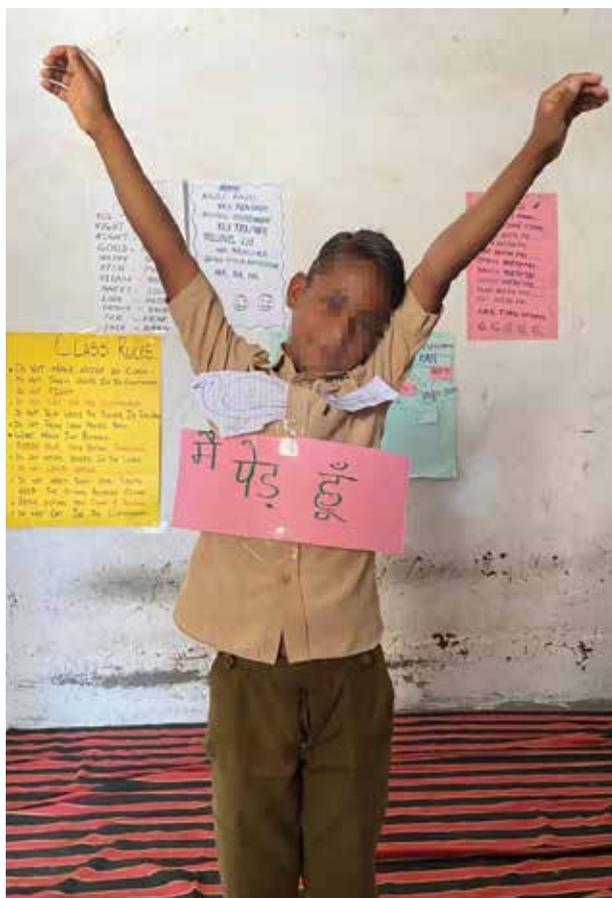
Along with talking and picture reading, painting is another creative activity which enables children to express themselves freely. Continuing with the session the next day, blank sheets of paper and paints were given to the children, and they were asked to thumb-paint trees. After this, the sentences

they wrote were revisited and English keywords, like fruits, vegetables, firewood, etc., from those sentences were written on the blackboard. In the end, the children were told to make sentences with the keywords at the back of their paintings. Some examples of the sentences they made, were that trees give us fruits like mango, banana and apple; trees provide us with firewood to light our earthen stoves; trees give us shade; we get vegetables from trees. This is where we closed for the day.



Picture 3. Thumb paintings by children.

Extending this learning, a small drama was enacted in the class after a week in which the characters included a mango tree and birds. This is where a child in the class personified a tree. This was an added activity to the lesson plan which was done a week later and helped in the continuation of the dialogue on the theme.



Picture 4. A child personifying a tree.

Overall, this was a comprehensive set of activities done as an initiating session on environmental awareness. What I realised was that the inclusion of multiple activities for a single theme kept the lesson interesting and children participated in the activities with full enthusiasm. More than that, space was given to them, at every step, to discuss what they knew and understood. This kept the dialogue relevant. Adding to it, this plan worked on learning outcomes of both language and environmental studies. This one session made me realise that environmental studies can indeed be made fun to learn with creative planning. Had the second wave of COVID-19 not hit, resulting in the closure of schools, I would have taken this plan forward by including more activities around the details of trees and methods of conserving them. Themes like water, pollution, etc. would have been taken up and a strong connection could have been made. This experience gives us ample evidence that all of us practitioners working in primary education must work and plan a subject as important as environment studies in a manner which can stimulate children's sensitivity, creativity, and understanding of the importance of nature.

#### Endnotes

- i *Tabula rasa* is a Latin phrase often translated as 'clean slate' in English. It is the theory that individuals are born without built-in mental content, and therefore, all knowledge comes from experience or perception.
- ii NCF – National Curriculum Framework  
NEP – National Education Policy 2020  
NIPUN Bharat – National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy



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