

Socio-Emotional Learning through Project Work

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Children's learning is linked to their emotions; we cannot separate the two. Learning in children can be effective and lasting only when it is connected with their emotions. The closure of schools on account of the COVID-19 pandemic for nearly two years has hampered not only their academic learning but also their social and emotional development. Therefore, it has become imperative today, more than at any other time in the past, to lay emphasis on the social and emotional dimensions of children's learning activity. This aspect of learning should become a part of the activities and the classroom process.

The social and emotional needs of children should be integrated into the concepts and outcomes of learning. Several pedagogical practices can be adopted for promoting this. Important among these are play, drama, arts, group activity, activities with scope for assent and dissent, reading aloud, active listening, open discussions and independent writing. Such activities contribute to the all-around development of children. Here, I am going to present my experience of such an attempt and the insights gained from it. What follows is a narrative of the project I entrusted the children with, the processes involved and the ways in which it helped in supporting the social and emotional needs of the children.

Experience of Yojana Mela

We planned a '*Yojana mela*'. To begin with, we discussed with the teachers the projects on which the children could gather information or data on their own. From the topics that came up, we decided to choose the topic of sources of water in the villages. This topic was chosen because, besides sustaining life, the significance of water extends to social, cultural, and historical domains. The children would need to dig for information pertaining to this topic in their village.

We initiated the project with 30 students of classes V, VI and VII in a unique way by screening a documentary titled *Water Wives*, which deals with the scarcity of water in Rajasthan. The screening followed a discussion on the horrors of water scarcity and the importance of water conservation.

The children were asked to identify the sources of water in their villages. There were children from three different villages namely Jambaladinni, Hirehunakunti and Tarivala and their experiences were different. We then divided the children into ten groups and gave each group a project to work on. The following were the topics for project work:

1. Water sources that existed in your village twenty years ago to the students of Jambaladinni.
2. Water sources that existed in your village twenty years ago to the students of Hirehunakunti.
3. Water sources that existed in your village twenty years ago to the students of Tarivala.
4. The current sources of water in these three villages
5. The misuse of water in your village
6. The quantity of water used by a family or household for drinking in a period of a day, a month, and a year; the possible ways of saving water and the quantity that can be saved
7. The articles published in newspapers on the issue of water and the ideas presented there
8. Toilets and use of water in toilets
9. Water use in agriculture and irrigation
10. Steps taken in your village for rainwater harvesting

The children prepared their reports within a month after the orientation based on their discussions with their parents, elders and leaders of the village and the members of the village *panchayat*. We discussed these reports with various groups consisting of children from various classes several times and gave them suggestions for improving the quality of the reports. The children participated enthusiastically in collecting data and in discussion on the reports

The *mela* day was fixed, and the presentations of the group reports by all the students were scheduled. The villagers were also invited to it. This gathering of the students was different from other such meets of students for several reasons. The information shared at the meeting was gathered by the students themselves. Their knowledge was

a part of their own experience. Hence, they had command over what they presented and discussed. Apart from other things, the children discussed the problems of water conservation and gave valuable suggestions for the proper use of this vital resource. The villagers were delighted and impressed to hear from the children certain things they did not themselves know. They also contributed their ideas to enrich the discourse.

When the children were assigned this project, we had some hesitation. We had our doubts about their competence in performing such a task. But the enthusiasm with which they collected the information and data and presented their ideas made us feel proud of them. The experience also taught us the effectiveness of involving students in what they learn and the importance of including student-centred learning practices in our pedagogy. The teachers who had witnessed the participation of the students in this project are now giving importance to this method of teaching to enlist active participation from the students.

Just before writing this article, I interacted with the students and tried to find out what they had learnt from the project. I was surprised to learn that the students had not forgotten the things they had learnt even after several months. When asked how they could remember the details so well, they replied, 'How can we forget what we ourselves did, sir?' The experience of the students, the responses of the teachers and the insights I got from this have prompted me to infer that the project-based method can be a very good means of facilitating social and emotional learning among children.

Scope for SEL in yojana mela

Students' meetings

Students' meetings were held frequently for assigning project work, sharing responsibilities, and discussing the data and information collected. These meetings gave students a platform for the free expression of ideas without inhibitions and the resultant freedom from the fear of being judged right or wrong. This helped them in developing the capacities of self-expression, leadership, decision-making, self-confidence and in exploring solutions to problems and being committed to a purpose.

Group-work

Children worked in groups of five to six. Each group had children of different learning abilities, but they worked in the spirit of cooperation, participation and responsibility. This was a platform for practising

the principle of mutual learning. Children from class VII guided the students from classes V and VI. The junior students liked interacting with their seniors. It was a great experience for all to mix and learn with students from other classes, transcending their 'grade barriers'. They were exhilarated to work in groups and to witness the success of their group. Their exhilaration remains etched in my memory.

Independent writing

The children were encouraged to write down what they discussed with others and what they observed on their own. This gave them an opportunity to express themselves – their ideas, feelings and insights – on their own and they found this a comfortable and enriching experience.

Reading aloud

The children were asked to read aloud what they wrote to their own groups and in meetings with other groups. This gave them an opportunity not only to read confidently but also to listen to others and to be sensitive in appreciating the ideas, feelings, and perspectives of others.

Interaction with community

Interacting with the community to gather information about the community's experience of issues related to water (the facilities they have and the problems they face, etc.), sensitised the children to the issue of the water crisis and helped them develop an awareness of the world around them. Interacting with members of the community helped the children develop social relationships with them. They also realised the importance of active listening, cooperation, and mutual support.

Appreciation for meeting deadlines

The children were given deadlines to complete tasks, and they were appreciated for completing these on time. They were asked to analyse their performance and think of improvements. Then, they were gradually given tasks of higher complexity and provided with guidance, encouragement, and support in accomplishing those. This achievement of setting a goal, improving their performance, and then setting a higher goal, gave them confidence and stability. The appreciation they received motivated them to do better.

Presentation skills

After completing the project, they were asked to prepare posters on their completed activity and present these before an audience. Listening to the questions of the audience with attention,

responding to them with patience and accepting valid criticism honed their presentation skills.

Water and human values

As mentioned earlier, discussions were held on various aspects relating to water, like its sources, use and misuse; the quantum of water used in a household and village over a day, month and year; water used in toilets; and the possibilities of water conservation. These discussions helped the children develop an awareness of the importance of water for life and appreciate the human values associated with water. There was an improvement in their understanding of several issues as noted below:

- The connection between all living beings and their dependence on water
- The need for learning about cleanliness and hygiene
- The importance of awareness of water-related hygiene, water sources and water distribution systems
- Democratising water distribution so as to enable all classes of people to access water equitably and to reject the systems of privilege in accessing the sources of water
- Proper use of water resources and prevention of misuse
- Conservation, respect for nature and the rights and wrongs of conduct in relation to water
- Wise and legitimate conduct in relation to water, like availing the water facility legally and honouring the social responsibility of paying water bills.

In retrospect

When I look back, I realise how minimal my role in the entire project had been. My task was only to frame some questions, based on which the students themselves went about the project on the sources of water and other water-related issues, brought out significant information and presented their findings. They learnt the skill of asking questions, collecting responses, analysing information and presenting what they had understood before an audience. Their participation in students' meetings and group work, attempts at independent writing, reading aloud and interaction with the community, and learning to meet the deadlines were all commendable. Besides cultivating the art of presentation and decision-making, they also developed self-awareness and a sense of social relationships. They learned to think, explore, infer and critique; thus, they were introduced to what may be considered higher-order learning skills.

Their activities included arithmetic and language skills, environmental awareness; their learning had an emotional and social dimension, and above all, it involved a sense of human values centred on the importance of water and environmental awareness. The class became an ideal place for the all-around development of children. Hence, I consider this collective student-centred project work as a great example of how a well-conceived project can engage students in various aspects of learning.



Figure 1. A student gathering information about water-related issues from a grandparent



Figure 2. Project presentations by students during the Yojana Mela



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