

Why it doesn't happen

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THE handyman had taken apart the control panel of the small electric oven which had gone dead just as an apple pie was being put to bake. The repair job was going smoothly and a small rubble of clipped wire ends, old charred toast crumbs and other oddments was strewn along the counter. I picked up the cover of the control panel to clean it before it went back in place and then looked closely at it. Along the bottom lay three small

oblong clusters of compacted dust – spider webs, or maybe insect hulls. I peered at them and amazement bubbled up inside. Holding the tiny objects delicately in my hand I located a good magnifying glass and, calling to the neighbour's children to leave their books for a moment and come outside, I went and sat on the *chabutara* surrounding the neem tree at the back of the house. The boys sat with me and looked, dutiful compli-

ance changing palpably to engaged curiosity as they peered closely at the little things on my hand.

What could they be? Touching the objects gingerly, they found them to be hard and thought, from their oblong shape, that they must be tiny bird skulls. But what were *birds* doing in the very confined space of an electric oven control panel? We examined the objects more carefully. As their eyes focused, they noticed tiny white pinprick double incisors at the front of the jaw – for that’s what the objects were, upper jaws – a gap, and then a row of infinitesimally small molar teeth on each side. There were shreds of soft grey fur clinging to one of the skulls and, when we searched the control panel cover once more, a long tail, minuscule vertebrae clearly visible. Ahh! Mice in the kitchen we have learned to endure, but mice living in the electric oven control panel? Or, tiny as these skulls were, were the mice born in that space and never left it? When and how did they die? Where were the rest of the remains?

There was so much more to think about! I asked the younger boy who studies in an expensive English medium public school to find a match-box and cotton wool. That would be just the right size container to take our treasures to school to show to his Science ma’am. He looked at me, a baffled expression on his face. His older brother who was every bit as interested as I had been prompted helpfully, ‘Don’t you think your ma’am would like to see these?’ Then he and his brother looked at each other silently. They turned back to me and said kindly, that no, ma’am would not be interested. Questions, answers – no, they never handled real things in science class, didn’t have a class or science room collection of anything,

and no, had never been shown anything at all like this.

Despite working in Indian schools for decades now and therefore knowing how ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ happens in most classes, I was still sad and angry on the boys’ behalf, for my own training as a teacher in a different ethos had made me aware just how rich and enriching a class environment could have emerged from these three small skulls prised out of a control panel.

What would I have done in my class with those little skulls? A first step would be to pass the little box around, giving each child a chance to see, feel the weight of the match box, softly run a finger across the little skulls. We would have talked – a lot – about what these objects could be. Younger children might think of a name for each mouse. We might wonder how they got into the stove, and what their mother thought when they didn’t come home. We might consider a better home for a small mouse than a stove with all that dangerous electricity around it. A box? A shoe? A tipped over bucket or a pumpkin? What furniture would a mouse like in its house? Cooking utensils? Food stores?

These considerations could lead us directly, that same day, to a story selected from the school library. Beatrix Potter, Rumer Godden, Rodney Peppe and Edna Millar are four names that spring to mind. These authors have written stories about mice that are of immense appeal to children, dwelling on themes relevant to young children’s deep concerns about getting lost, being rejected or feeling alienated, living in danger and fear and overcoming them, coping with a hostile environment as the seasons change. Some of these stories are quite short, suitable for the younger elementary age children and would be

retold frequently; others – because of content or length – are fine material for upper elementary to be read to the class in instalments at the end of the day.

Certainly we would continue thinking about our little mice for at least a week or two, alongside other classroom considerations. The Oven Mice would be set in a place of honour – a shelf, small table, with neat labels explaining their importance. The library books would be left available for the children to pick up and study, perhaps on a window sill for the time being along with an appropriate toy that someone might have brought. We would invite the children to paint or draw their own experiences of mice from home. The teacher would accept the drawings *as they are* and not ‘improve’, ‘alter’, ‘teach how’ to draw, because her aim is to create language opportunities as the children describe what their mice are doing.

These comments would be printed for the youngest children. In the case of older children the drawing would aim more at a scientific observation. For them, the tiny skulls would be separated and placed so that groups of no more than three children, using a magnifier of any sort, could prepare direct observation drawings for their nature study notebooks. These drawings would be from different angles – from head-on, below and above as well – and pencil notes would be made by the children on what they see, much like any naturalist would in his field notebook.

The children do some form of creative writing at all levels of primary school daily. After oral work to develop appropriate vocabulary resource – exciting verbs, adjectives connected with the appearance, sounds, habits of mice and the feelings that seeing one unexpectedly evokes in us – the words

would be neatly posted where the children can see and refer to them. A grade two class might assemble a class book of mice stories, each child contributing her own, with a nice picture of the mouse/mice illustrating it. Older children might work in small groups, elaborating a plot, adding new characters and situations, but springing from an agreed starting point for the story *or* converging at an agreed climax. These stories, made into small books with a pleasant cover and appropriate title would be read to the class at the end of the week, and then the books would be added to the class library. The older children might be invited to the younger classes to read their stories out to the small ones. This is another excellent, non-threatening way of showcasing a shy child.

The children of whatever age are familiar with the kinds of food that mice steal from the kitchen. A small collection can be readily set up of dals, rice, grains, crumbs of chapatti. Here, as in every other aspect of using this impromptu topic, the children's contributions are of far greater importance and value to us than the teacher's. With middle elementary school children, a comparative chart could be developed indicating which foods the mice like and which the children like. We should investigate why the edible form of the same foods differ for humans and little mice. What has to happen to the food to make it nice for children? How does it happen? This, of course, is chemistry, though we are not going to say so to the class at the time. We wish to make them subtly aware of the process of change, not aim to have them rattle off scientific facts.

Western literature has a plethora of nursery rhymes, songs, poems, and singing games suitable for almost any age about mice and their enemies. We

would select and introduce a few, and the children would learn a couple of them well. The teacher would print out one or two verses of the poems to use as a choral speaking reading chart. Such charts are of great value in helping the less experienced young readers because speaking or singing a well-known poem or song in its correct rhythm and at its proper speed *while reading it* on a chart or on the blackboard offers neuro-linguistic enhancement to the novice reader. We can enrich the poems by inventing finger plays for the words. We can attempt action songs, even in circumscribed classroom spaces.

What wonderful opportunities for drama exist in this material! With a group of children to be the six little mice sitting down to spin, and another to be the scheming cat; with everyone being Hickory Dickory Mouse and everyone also being the indignant clock annoyed by the prancing mouse scampering along on his head; with everyone miming, moving slowly and cautiously, darting sharp eyes now here, now there until, *horror!* the cat appears – the opportunities for shy children to express themselves in a totally different mode are immense and should not be missed. The mouse topic will not last all that long, but the collection of charts – poems, nursery rhymes – that we develop during the phase and the children's storybooks will remain, to be referred to and recalled occasionally as the school year moves on to other interests.

Music is a central component of the primary curriculum in schools in many other countries. Songs about mice and cats have long been appreciated by teachers working with the children to create an awareness of and response to key concepts in music such as tempo (fast/slow), tonality (high notes/low notes) dynamics

(loud/quiet). If we take but one small four line song 'Little Mouse Be Careful', we can look as deeply as the children's level of development permits into any one or even all of these aspects. A classroom teacher would not hesitate to exchange the little song she was going to teach that week for a mouse song, if something like our discovery of the mice in the oven happened in her class.

I wonder whether that last point is not the worst stumbling block for the majority of teachers in Indian schools who routinely, casually, dismiss opportunities which could enrich their teaching and their children's learning. Just because something has been planned for Monday morning, it hasn't been engraved in stone; plans can be changed. Topics can change. The reason they can be changed is that children learn the concepts of science, language, math, music, social studies from the process of studying, not from the facts adhering to, for example, a poem about daffodils or a science lesson about moths.

Education is not about facts, but rather about the connections that are made from what we know, assume, and don't know but are finding out about. Children's learning consists in exploring and making sense, in investing the world with meaning, in changing the world and themselves in the process. These processes are strong and rich where interest is high. Objects that children treasure are stunning resources for learning.

But what usually happens when a child brings a treasure from home? Let us think of an interesting stone she may have picked up, and of her excitement at having 'found a fossil, ma'am.' The possibilities within the curriculum of using that stone as a jump-off point are innumerable – for math, history, science, language

development. But in the schools I've been in recently, the child will immediately be told that she is silly for playing with something dirty – even if she had carefully washed her stone – and, by extension, that she too is a dirty child. Her hands might be smacked, the stone dropped with distaste into the bin, and then she will be sent off to wash her hands.

In a slightly more benign setting, the stone might be viewed askance with a, 'Oh, that's nice, dear; now go to your place.' And not another word would be spoken, even if the class actually was studying stones and rocks in their textbook science lesson. And why wouldn't the stone be used in that case? One impulse I saw over and over again was for the teacher to shrink from any suggestion of differentiating her work from that of other teachers at the same level. A more fundamental reason could be that the teacher is just not interested in what she is teaching. She is not engaged.

An interesting stone in a child's pocket is pretty easy to overlook, but what about the morning when a raucous din from crows, babblers and mynahs revealed the presence, in full view, of a large white owl perched in a corner of a ledge up on the second floor? Any school book collection would have that bird's picture; it was a rarity – a Barn Owl, right there in south Delhi. Teachers were informed, and the administration too. And while they said nicely, 'How interesting', no one brought their class outside to see this beautiful, unusual bird.

The timetable did not specify a slot for viewing rare birds on the window sill; the art curriculum did not mention researching and painting owls; history did not mention the role of owls – and it is quite elaborate – in local history and customs; ornithology was not being visited that term.

There are any number of poems about owls, but they weren't being read that week. Elementary curiosity about why the owl was there, how it got there, where it might otherwise have been – none of these questions was posed. The sense of awe, of wonder, of mystery, right there to be awakened in the hearts of the children by the sight of that owl remained quiescent.

Or is it that a thirty five year old woman has to seek permission to walk her class down the corridor and out into the garden to look up at a ledge on the second floor to see something truly spectacular? Can she not take that tiny step without the administrator's go-ahead? Is the fear of being mocked as 'over-enthusiastic', or of colleagues' taunts that she is showing-off to the head teacher so overwhelming? I believe these fears are very strong.

Just as strong is a basic mistrust of the children in her care. As you walk along school corridors, you hear constant hectoring and chastisement at decibel levels hardly necessary to impress the youngster at their focus. You hear dismissive responses aimed to silence the young. If you teach that way, you are hardly going to wish to take the class outside into public view because of the discipline question. In contrast, children who are addressed with a quiet voice – firm but fair and with humour, with humility – respond with maturity.

Children who are used to seeing and doing interesting things know the value of going out for companionable walks with their teacher. They enjoy learning, learning together. It's exciting. Such learning is not an unreachable ideal; it is there, when we begin to value the children in our care, when we decide to let their experience and interest shape their school experience.