

Working on an Autobiography with the Help of a Textbook

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I worked with the children of class 6 on a lesson titled *Chambal ki Atmakatha* (Autobiography of the river Chambal) from the SCERT textbook.

In accordance with the title of the text, I started the lesson with a few questions, such as what is an autobiography? Who writes it? What is the intention of the author in writing an autobiography? Discussing these questions with the children brought forth the fact that autobiography is the description of both the pleasant and unpleasant events and conflicts that take place in one's life. The purpose of writing an autobiography is to make future generations understand an individual's life's struggle. Along with it, they should also be able to deliberate on all those aspects and understand them at their own level so that they can learn about how to act in a particular situation, what are the strategies that can result in success or failure. After discussing this with the children, I asked them to talk to their family members about their past experiences and write about it. Nearly two-thirds of the children brought a one page write-up about the experiences of their parents and grandparents. These were then discussed in the class. In this discussion, the focus was on the fact that how to write all the aspects of a person's life in a readable form. At the same time, they also realised that the experience of a particular person can be a means to get inspiration and learn lessons.

After this activity we read the lesson Autobiography of Chambal. This lesson deals mainly with the present condition of the river Chambal, its environment and its contribution to society. There is an especially beautiful description of Chambal after its different tributaries meet. It also tells us about the indiscriminate pollution of Chambal and its side effects on nature, which is a warning for the present generation. It further elaborates the uses of Chambal in irrigation, power generation, enrichment of ground water, and enriching its surroundings and finally there is a special description of how Chambal is struggling now to save its existence.

There are three main aspects that have been highlighted through this lesson. The first aspect is - how a person establishes his/her existence. That is, the story of establishing himself/herself in the world's stage is unique to each person.

The second aspect is – how can a person contribute towards betterment of the world? That is, how can he grow in a way that he is able to live for others also.

The third aspect is about the struggles he faces in his lifespan that arise from his surroundings. In this way, clarity on autobiography writing was created.

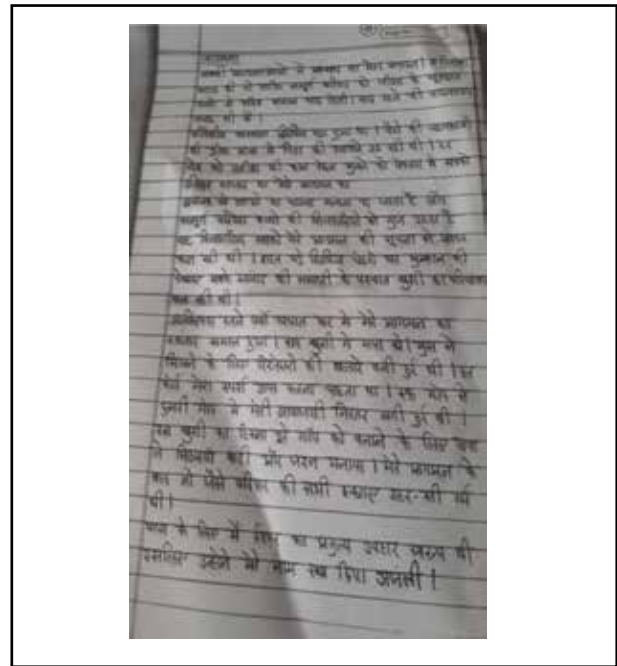
After this the children were asked to think about their past and organise their memories. They were also asked to go to the library and read an autobiography. Some portions of Dr. Harivansh Rai Bachchan's book – *Kya bhulun kya yaad karun* (What shall I remember and what shall I forget?) were shared with children. These kinds of deliberations bring out the fact that a textbook only gives the teacher a basis, or let us say that textbooks can be seen as mere guides. If we teach by focusing only on the lessons in the textbooks then we would be restricting the students to the extent of the descriptions given in the lessons.

Further, in this process, not only is the central idea of the text lost, but the role of the teacher also gets limited. When we teach only by focusing on the content of a subject then we are unable to include examples from outside the content and cannot provide the child with the experiences that he has in his surroundings. In such a situation, we can only give information and as teachers, we are unable to contextualise the understanding of the content with the understanding of child's environment. As a result, the independent process of creating knowledge with children, which is an integral part of the learning process, is blocked. In doing this, the teacher not only limits his/her role, but also deprives students of the experience of supplementary reading material and contemplations, which can complement the textbook.



On the contrary, with this method, we began working on the lesson with the context of children’s life in mind, a method also recommended by the National Curriculum Framework, 2005 (NCF 2005). The children are given an opportunity to peep into their past, because of which the children could recall at their previous experiences. Apart from this, exposure to supplementary reading material also motivates children to get into the habit of self-study which is an important part of this process. The experience of working on autobiography helped children to get connected with themselves and to know about relevant reading material as well.

An example is given on the right. Anjali’s father shared his feelings about how he felt when she was born and she wrote about those memories in the form of autobiography.



[This article was originally written in Hindi. It was translated to English by Nalini Ravel.]

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