

have been in the Temple, or the Jewish synagogue and helping people know what to do to be right. The priest hurried on his way didn't he?

*Child:* Yeh.

*Teacher:* ...and left the man there.

*Anthony:* Really, if he was – erm – was not on his way to church he would have stopped going and helped him.

These brief extracts from a 20-minute discussion with a group of 8- and 9-year old children offer a flavour of some of the various facets of humanities which can be involved in a discussion of a simple story with which children can identify. Let us now review in a little more systematic way the nature of humanities.

### **What is the nature of primary humanities?**

This account of an assembly and a discussion in a Gloucestershire primary school indicates very well some of the key features of primary humanities. Firstly, we get the sense that humanities are very much part of the culture of a school as well as of timetabled subjects. Secondly, we get a sense of how different 'subjects' within the humanities overlap significantly. Thirdly, we see how cross-curricular elements are served by the humanities. There is a fourth aspect of this which has particular significance in the primary school, that the humanities very often complement a topic-based approach to the curriculum.

Before we proceed any further we do however need to attempt to define what we mean by humanities. Blyth (1990), in his book on assessing learning in humanities, suggests three perspectives constituting the humanities, namely historical, geographical and social-science perspectives. At the level of higher education, the humanities have traditionally been viewed as also involving the fields or areas of English and literature.

An alternative way of approaching humanities is not to list the subjects to be included but to capture its distinctive contribution to thought and knowledge. This is no easy matter, of course, but it is important, if we are to justify the inclusion of the humanities within the primary curriculum. We wish to argue and to demonstrate in this book that the distinctive feature of the humanities as an area of learning is that they enable young children to develop an understanding of their own place and identity within the world in which they are growing up: indeed that they learn what is special about being human. It is not that other areas of learning do nothing of this, rather that this is the central and distinctive contribution

of the humanities.

But such an approach takes us immediately into another dimension, that of values. If we are saying that this subject is about personal and social identity, then questions of values, norms, and of morality, are right at the centre of our discussion. The recent clamour for children to be taught the difference between 'right' and 'wrong' has, in a sense, reminded us that the humanities have an important contribution to make in this domain. To put it bluntly, the humanities have a strong political and moral dimension.

If we were to pursue such a stipulative definition in a pure sense, and were to return to the question of subjects, we would no doubt wish to claim social science and a whole range of cultural and literary studies within the area. But our definition needs to have a pragmatic aspect too, so that the reader might connect with children in classrooms. The National Curriculum, as presently defined, stipulates that English is one of the core subjects and has a clear and separate existence. Thus, for the purpose of this book, we do not include English within our definition. Secondly, social science is not recognised as a subject at all within the National Curriculum, therefore we do not deal with this as such. Nevertheless we will repeatedly see how social science perspectives do contribute in the humanities whether to 'subjects' (e.g. history and geography) or to cross-curricular themes, (e.g. citizenship). The third feature of our definition of humanities is to include the compulsory (yet non-National Curriculum) subject of religious education. As our introductory account indicated, religious and moral elements in the school curriculum can provide a very rich vein for developing children's understanding of themselves as individuals and as social beings.

Our definition therefore incorporates the three subjects: history, geography and religious education. Part of the purpose of the book is to look at the relationship between these subjects in the primary curriculum. However, we are also interested in how the humanities relate to other subjects and indeed how various cross-curricular approaches can not only enhance the humanities curriculum in itself, but can lead on to make a rich contribution to the primary curriculum as a whole. In particular we explore National Curriculum cross-curricular themes of environmental education and education for citizenship.

To summarise and support the discussion so far we will make a brief return to Eastcombe to show how these subjects and themes are exemplified in that account.

The story of the Good Samaritan was used to prompt knowledge and ideas about:

- *History* – chronology, the sequence of events in the story, the setting of events in the story in the Near East nearly 2,000 years ago; the

importance of historical influences upon how people act in a current situation (Samaritans were longstanding enemies of Jews who despised them as members of a minority ethnic group).

- *Geography* – characteristics of people, place and environment; rural and urban landscapes; using maps.
- *Religious education* – who is my neighbour and (why) should it concern me? The role of a priest. Expectations of moral behaviour.
- *Environmental education* – some of the phenomena around us which can fashion and give identity to environments; how can we improve environments to make them more friendly and less threatening?
- *Citizenship* – the Levite who more or less said ‘But I was only following the rules, Guv’; in which sorts of situation should we break the rules? Personal and social responsibility.

Having reviewed the nature of humanities, we conclude this chapter by attempting to answer a third key question – how do children learn humanities? This will enable us to discuss teaching approaches too.

## **How do children learn humanities?**

Underpinning our discussion in the following chapters will be a view about the nature of learning and how it is best supported and fostered. We see learning as an active and continuous process whereby learners adjust and modify their existing understandings as they encounter fresh experiences and information. This occurs not just in school but in many different social situations.

We recognise that learning is not a solitary process, but rather a dynamic activity where social interaction is important in developing children’s understandings. Social and cognitive skills as well as knowledge are acquired through this interaction. But this is not all; values and culture are also transmitted. This background of culture and social history provides a powerful influence on learning; it provides the lenses through which children interpret their experiences and make them meaningful for themselves.

When Mrs Lee and her colleagues were preparing the morning assembly, some account was taken of the children’s culture. The characters introduced in the modern version of the Good Samaritan were recognised by the children. They were able to identify the good neighbour in the mean-no-good-punk-rock-leader and this contemporary account helped children interpret the more traditional bible story.

Throughout the book, we have sought to include children’s