

# Samuhik सामूहिक पहल Pahal

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Learning In and Through Art

# CONTENTS

03

## Reflections & Opinions

### Looking into the Future

A Renewed Hope for Vibrant Learning  
*ArtSparks Team*

### The Potential of Visual Arts in Language Development

*Manasi*

### Missing: Paint Stains and Paper Cranes

The Case of Visual Arts in the Village Schools of Sukma  
*Neeraj Naidu*

### Change Starts From Within and Then to the World

A Journey of Exploring Art in An Early Childhood Library Program  
*Rohit Kumar*

16

## Insights

### Voices from Arts Education Practitioners and Thinkers from Across the World

*Collated by the ArtSparks Team,  
illustrated and Designed by Sana Bansal*

18

## Interview

### Learning Life Skills through the Visual Arts

Experiences From A Government School in Karnataka  
*A Conversation with Umadevi L. N.*

24

## Resources & Reviews

### Introducing Nisha Nair's "Art Sparks"

*Marta Cabral*

### Creating a Sculpture of Your Favourite Animal Using Found Materials

*Muankimi Tombing*

### Nature and Art - A Natural Synergy

*Nature Conservation Foundation*

30

## Ground Zero

### Learning In and Through Art

*ArtSparks Team*

# Looking into the Future

## A Renewed Hope for Vibrant Learning

*ArtSparks Team*

**T**hese past two years have been unpredictable and challenging for all of us. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, our lives have been upended by lockdowns, restrictions, working from home, and schools being closed. However, even in the midst of all the pain, grief and loss caused by the pandemic, many of us got a rare opportunity to take a pause and reflect on our lives. As educators, we got a chance to reflect on what and how we teach our children.

Can children apply what they have learned in their classrooms in real-life situations? Have we adequately equipped our children with the necessary skills to manage and cope with difficult situations? Is education catering to the social, emotional, creative and cognitive needs of our children? These were

some of the many questions that seemed to populate our minds, and drive us towards a more shared recognition of the importance of nurturing skills and attitudes beyond just basic reading, writing and numeracy skills. A recognition that children deserve enriching learning opportunities that enable them to understand themselves and manage their feelings more effectively, be empathetic towards others, think critically and creatively, analyze situations, consider multiple points of view, solve problems, exhibit resilience.

As the Covid-19 graph in the country shows a decline these days, many states have decided to reopen schools for children. After two years of isolation and virtual classes, children are finally able to learn and play alongside their friends.

Educators who have been excitedly waiting to welcome children back to the physical school environment, finally have an opportunity to reconnect with them within classrooms. Back at school, with a renewed sense of hope and purpose, these educators are making a concerted effort to think of myriad alternate ways to engage children and develop within them a host of essential skills and attitudes.

In their quest for an effective medium for teaching and learning, the arts have emerged as a powerful tool for children's holistic development. The arts can foster desirable habits of mind such as the ability to observe, explore, engage, persist, envision, express, reflect and more (Project Zero). The arts can also support children's social, emotional and cognitive development (UNICEF).

An important turn of events in the journey of arts education has been the release of the



ArtSparks Foundation

Remote Engagement Through ArtSparks Foundation's Program



A Child Discussing His Artwork with the Facilitator

new National Education Policy 2020 with its emphasis on developing children through the arts. The NEP's recognition of the potential and power of teaching art to children has offered a further glimmer of hope.

For an organization like ArtSparks Foundation that strongly believes in the transformative power of the arts in education, it has propelled us to think about ways to leverage this rare opportunity of policy-level recognition of the arts. It has stirred within us a desire to gather and provide further insights and practices to engage children in meaningful art experiences—experiences that can potentially turn policy recommendations into a reality. As a step towards this end, we are honoured to put together this issue of Samuhik Pahal at this critical juncture of renewed joy and hope.

In this issue, we present organizations from across India that ArtSparks has had the distinct pleasure of partnering with—organizations who are beginning to use the visual arts in a more concerted manner as an

enriching tool to develop a range of skills and attitudes in the children they serve.

Their stories reverberate with the joys of observing children's engagement, the excitement of their discoveries, their reflections on their own teaching practices. Through their voices, we are confident that you will witness the immense learning opportunities that the arts can offer, and the practices and pedagogies in art that can facilitate deeper levels of meaningful student learning.

As we celebrate the efforts of the featured organizations to implement rich art programs, we hope to also offer inspiration and provoke action amongst others like you to usher in the arts into your own spaces—joyful, vibrant spaces for learning where imagination reigns supreme, and all children can thrive!

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# The Potential of Visual Arts in Language Development

*Manasi*

**W**ill art ever be considered a mainstream subject within the school curriculum? What comes to mind when we talk about visual art? What role can art play in language development in children? These are some of the questions I find myself asking in my work at Ayang where we engage with lower primary children through library and school development programs. In our mission to make the world of books accessible to all the children of Majuli, we also seek to find engaging ways—through art, for example—to make reading enjoyable.

As an educator, I believe art is indispensable for learning. I have observed how art helps create inclusive spaces for children's learning, and how it allows children to apply various concepts learned across different subject areas. For instance, I have witnessed children, while closely observing an image of an animal and sketching the same, apply their knowledge of shapes acquired in Math, both geometric and organic. Art can also play an integral role in fostering language development and communication skills in children.

For example, in a collage-making session, it was intriguing for me to observe how my students were communicating with one another, helping peers within their groups while exploring the collage material. In particular, I noticed children within their groups of three, offering suggestions to one another on how they could manipulate the collage material.

In one such instance, A suggested to B, speaking in Assamese, “tumi eikon olop beka ke siga tetiya he ghuronia aas jen lagibo...”

(You tear the paper this way to get a curved line). Here, the children were not only sharing ideas and supporting one another, but, in the process, were also building their vocabulary using comparative words such as big-small, curved-straight, etc.

There are many other ways that art-making extends opportunities to children to communicate and thereby develop their language skills. As children exercise their imagination through art-making processes, they also engage in internal dialogues with themselves as a way to sort through their thoughts.

When children get an opportunity to present their work to others, they use the artistic vocabulary that they have acquired—vocabulary relating to size, colours, textures, emotions, and more—in order to express themselves. Another important aspect of language learning is acquiring listening skills. To learn any language we need to first learn to listen. To this end, I believe art, by providing children with opportunities to hear others' perspectives, reinforces the development of listening skills.



Ayang Trust

## Integrating Art into Library Spaces

For all the reasons mentioned above, art—that is, visual art—has become an integral part of Ayang’s library activities. It has served as an inclusive medium that allows all our children, of varying learning levels, to participate freely, express their thoughts, and exercise their imagination.

For example, children are often asked to create their own stories and represent them visually as part of Ayang’s post-library session activities. These activities involve children within groups sharing their individual ideas for a story with one another, followed by group members incorporating everyone’s ideas into one cohesive story.

Children then go on to sketch the visuals that go along with their story, while writing the script simultaneously. Here, we have found that allowing the use of visual representations significantly supports the development of communication skills, just as much as the written word.

Finally students within each group are provided an opportunity to present their stories to one another, both visually and verbally.

Children creating their own stories and narrating them to others requires clarity of communication. It is important to consider how others comprehend what you are trying to convey. While children discuss with one

another the most appropriate way to convey something, at Ayang, I have noticed that our use of visual storytelling—reading an image, speaking about it, listening intently to others’ perspectives—has greatly enhanced our children’s capacity to create their own stories and articulate these clearly.

Often, as children engage in this activity, we have them organize their thoughts about an artwork that they are viewing, share their often unique and differing thoughts, imagine the characters in the artwork, and write a story based on their observations. The gains that our children have made as a result, in their language and literacy development, is undeniable.

### Where to from Here?

As we, at Ayang, integrate art into our library program, we are becoming more mindful of how we view art. After all, how one chooses to view art determines the fate of art within education. We therefore choose to uphold art just as much as we do the written word, as we believe both have powerful associated learnings.

When introducing art-making, we choose to approach it with seriousness, linking clear objectives to the process. When engaging children with art, we choose to recognize the benefits of offering children numerous opportunities to freely explore and come to their own distinctive solutions. As I close, I wonder, what choices will you make that could help elevate the position of art?

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# Missing: Paint Stains and Paper Cranes

## The Case of Visual Arts in the Village Schools of Sukma

*Neeraj Naidu*

### The Non-existence of Art Class

Come to Sukma, a district in south Chhattisgarh, walk into any government school and find the time-table. Try to locate the word 'ART'. Chances are that you won't find it. And, luckily, if you do, try to quantitatively compare with the number of times Mathematics, English, Hindi, Science or Social science appear on it. I am sure the comparison will illustrate the lamentable state of arts as a subject in schools. And I am convinced, as a student of the Indian education system and as a teacher in the same, the situation would not be different elsewhere in the country, excluding a few exceptions.

In Sukma, I often hear the government officials and teachers saying that it is very difficult to reach many villages due to the rough terrains and violent socio-political history. Nevertheless, I find that nothing stops the hierarchies embedded in formal education from entering the schools in those hard-to-reach villages. In the last 7 years of living and teaching in many different schools in Sukma, ranging from the massive residential schools that host around 500 children to small village-level primary, middle and high schools, never have I ever found an art class.

It is crucial to acknowledge the severity of the absence of the arts from the school classrooms—where children spend at least six important hours of their waking lives daily—in order to understand the contradiction between the kind of

opportunities (as theorized by developmental psychologists) a child needs to learn, develop skills and attitudes, and what our classrooms actually offer. It would be unfair and irresponsible of me not to mention the names of researchers from whom I am going to borrow certain words and findings, and count only on observations I've made of small children. Yet, I recount that children are highly curious and playful within their social and natural environment. They are explorative and investigative in their approach. They are constantly building things and developing projects. They engage with materials deeply, and express their learning. They use their hands and bodies to grasp and make sense of the world and perhaps, at times, just to have fun. Does the space between four walls of the classroom provide children the apparatus to learn in the way children learn the best?

It is heart-wrenching to notice the dire absence of art-mediums, art-materials and art-teachers in the village schools which are terribly underfunded both in terms of money and imagination. Children rarely get access



Neeraj Naidu

to unruled paper, colours (in any form) and other resources that allows one to make art. Sometimes, they don't even have pencils. I have seen children grabbing every little chalk piece fallen on the floor and drawing on the blackboard or the floor because these are large spaces where big drawings can be made. Sadly, there are schools that prohibit children from using chalk and board in the absence of teachers. Materials such as clay and other things from nature and children's houses are available. But using them for art-making and ensuring learning through the process requires pedagogic understanding by teachers.

Now I would like to take a strong position here and claim that the arts offer opportunities to develop not just artistic and aesthetic sensibilities and capabilities but also attitudes that we need outside of the realm of the arts. The arts attend to the process of learning in a manner similar to the way individual blocks in a game of Tetris fit into one another. And while I speak of learning this and developing that, one must not forget the joy that comes out of making art. Pure joy. I have seen it in the eyes of my children and felt it in my own heart.

### What Happens When We Take the Visual Arts to a Classroom?

*"If I paint a wild horse, you might not see the horse...but surely you will see the wildness"*  
– Pablo Picasso

Allow me to limit my use of the word art to only the visual arts in this reflection piece. And, to start, let me first break down some commonly held beliefs associated with art. Often believed to be a hobby, visual art is often reduced to 'drawing' alone. If stretched, I've heard people refer to the visual arts as 'drawing-painting', something that can be practiced as an extracurricular activity and not a career pursuit. Often it is considered only worthwhile for a select few to pursue seriously—only those who are 'miraculously

gifted' to become artists. Based on my experiences, a few educated parents stress the importance of visual art as it helps their children make better diagrams in biology.

Such notions need a sociological examination. Only a radical shift in people's perception might alter the state of arts education. Here I share a few anecdotes from my facilitation notes to illuminate how the process of guided art-making in a classroom can be a rich learning experience filled with opportunities to develop learning and life skills in children.



Neeraj Naidu

"Radha (age 8 years) holds the pencil but hasn't started drawing yet. She deeply observes the black and white picture of a bird. The bird appears enormous, its wings stretched out. She notices the many shapes, hidden in the picture, that form the image of the bird. When she is convinced of her close observation, she starts drawing on paper. Once the lines are done, she looks deeply again. She is looking at the patterns on the body of the bird, how the wings are curved, and seems like she is almost studying the anatomy of the bird. She also notices the lightness and darkness of the shades of grey as guided by the arts facilitator. She attempts to draw the shapes and patterns. Sometimes her face twitches in dissatisfaction. Maybe a line has gone wrong. She doesn't have an eraser. So she thinks how can this problem be solved. She asks a friend and he helps her in overwriting the line with a darker line. When

the drawing looks complete, she takes a deep breath.” [notes 2019]

“Dinesh Baghel (age 14 years) seems to be dissolved in the process of mixing and making new colours. He asks me, ‘How many colours can be made?’ I say, ‘As many as you wish.’ He makes around 30 using 3 primary colours and white and is done for the day. Next day he starts painting his self-portrait. He observes himself using the selfie camera of a smartphone, noticing the shape of his face, the length of his hair, the position of his eyes, nose and lips. He paints his face but is not satisfied with the colour. He tries to change it and then gets sad that he made it worse. He goes around and looks at how others are painting. He talks with others and observes their brush strokes and colour-mixing. He observes that many are non-representational paintings and are using colours very freely. He finds it alright that the colour of his face in the painting is not the same as the actual colour of his face. In fact, he further challenged himself by taking a creative risk, creating a new colour for his face. He explores the paintbrush on another paper to make thin lines for eyebrows. He perseveres for more than one hour and then asks me to take a photo of him with his painting.” [notes 2019]

“Hidme (name changed; age 9 years) presses the oil pastel on both white and then the black paper. She investigates how the pastels behave differently with different amounts of pressure applied, and on different papers. Exploring further, she learns that dark colours can totally cover light colours but the opposite is not possible. She scrapes the colours off to make patterns. With a little guidance, she realizes that her fingers can spread the colours. She makes a yellow circle and spreads the rays using her finger. She spreads blue over the black paper and makes white stars above. She seems to have an image in her mind. Her explorations lead her to self-expression.” [notes 2020]



Neeraj Naidu

“Rural spaces provide rich possibilities of observing nature. My students and I often went outside the school to closely observe and draw. Today, each student picked a tree and observed its shape, colours and checked to see if there are any animals, birds or insects living on them. They then drew it using just pencil and crayons. I wish we had other art mediums to explore. Nonetheless, children were happy when they saw all the trees on paper together. One of the students said, ‘it’s like we’ve drawn a forest.’” [notes 2019]

These examples show how the process of art-making is deeply explorative, engaging and expressive. It allows for children to develop skills like close observation, attention to detail, investigation, problem-solving, creative risk-taking, collaboration, etc.

Through my participation in a professional development program ([EdSparks Collective](#)), I had the opportunity to learn about a robust and new approach to art education. Besides learning skills, it made me see how confidence is instilled in children when they actively create something meaningful instead of sitting passively in the classroom. It made me realize how art promotes creative risk-taking and unfetters children from the fear of failing.

## On Art Integration

Apart from a few enlightened exceptions, the recent surge of attention that art education

has received is in the form of art integration. A group of art-educators advocate that the integration of art with non-art subjects—the practice of using art strategies to build skills and teach classroom subjects across different disciplines—will improve teaching-learning. Having found this idea useful, more and more teachers are subscribing to the many strategies of integrating art. This has resulted in research that studies the transfer of arts learning to other areas of cognition.

Hetland et.al., in a qualitative, ethnographic study of ‘serious’ visual arts classrooms, write, “Art students who become comfortable with making mistakes and being playful may be willing to take creative risks in other areas of the curriculum” (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2013).

My fellow educators have also been utilising visual art to improve reading and language skills in children. In their experience, art integration helps children learn faster.

While practitioners’ beliefs are to be respected, one needs to study the extent of these large claims about the pedagogical significance of art integration. In Burger & Winner’s (2000) meta-analysis, they find no support for the claim that visual art enhances reading skills or even that reading integrated with visual art works better than reading instructions alone.

In my own experience of teaching art to children in Sukma, I find that while art integration can enhance language development, there is deep value in children learning art as a subject in itself.

Also, there seems to be a growing belief that art education will be useful in increasing workforce productivity. Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education writes in the report ‘Reinvesting in Art Education’, “Education in the arts is more important than ever. In the global economy, creativity is essential. Today’s workers need more than just skills and knowledge to be productive and



Neeraj Naidu

innovative participants in the workforce” (President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2011).

In contrast, the report ‘Arts for Arts Sake? The Impact of Arts Education,’ published by OECD argues that, “If learning in the arts has ‘collateral benefits’ in other areas, so much the better. However, we do not believe that the existence of arts education should be justified in terms of skills in other academic subjects: if one seeks first and foremost to develop skills in geometry, studying geometry—rather than music or dance—is always likely to be more effective. The primary justification of arts education should remain the intrinsic value of the arts and the related skills and important habits of mind that they develop. Ultimately, the impact of arts education on other non-arts skills and on innovation in the labour market should not be the primary justification for arts education in today’s curricula.” (Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013)

Keeping in mind the complexities and nature of different subjects, one has to be mindful in their use of pedagogies in the classroom. Blindly using art as a decorative piece, as a catalyst in learning other subjects, might only continue to keep art low in the hierarchy of subjects.

### Visual Arts as Social Justice

*“Putting little white dots on blue-black is not enough to paint a starry sky” – Vincent Van Gogh*

Visual art gives children a chance to engage deeply with materials and mediums and express in ways that are beyond words. In Sukma, the school language—Hindi is not the children’s home language which is often Gondi, Dhurwi, Dorli or Halbi. Writing is rarely taught as a process of expression of one’s own ideas and experiences. Thus, it remains ill-developed and doesn’t naturally take the form of art. If given freedom and the tools, children eagerly want to express about their lives, their communities, their festivals and practices, dreams and fantasies.

Sukma is the *bhum* (earth) of *Adivasis* (original inhabitants) and yet schools have been neglectful in developing and extending children’s cultural expression. As a teacher, I believe, visual art bestows children with possibilities to express, and share with others, their lives, their stories and imagination, their world with all of its richness and complications.

So as teachers, educators or anybody concerned with education, what should we do now? How can we fight the inequity of art education in our country? Will children

studying in our village schools ever get access to art education? How can we advocate for art education in a time when our country is obsessed with STEM, seeing it as the only marker of development? With these questions, I would like to rest my case, because I know, in the vast expanse of Sukma, somewhere, in the villages, or in the forests, children will be making art now. And, nothing can stop them from making it. But I do wonder, when will children make art in the classrooms?

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Neeraj Naidu

# Change Starts From Within and Then to the World

## A Journey of Exploring Art in An Early Childhood Library Program

Rohit Kumar

I remember the first-time I engaged children in a rich and process-oriented art experience. My biggest doubt was, will the children be able to do this? I was working with a group of six children ages 4-6 years old, conducting a collage activity with them. The activity included engaging children in a multi-step process that involved exercising flexible thinking, problem-solving, perseverance and more. I was unsure how things were going to unfold. When my colleague and I began facilitating the sessions, I was soon overwhelmed. For us, it was amazing to witness children of this age group sitting in one place for long durations of time, fully engaged in the task at hand. Thereafter, our journey full of surprise discoveries and myth-breaking began. We went on to conduct many

art sessions with children, young adults, and facilitators. Each time we learned something new. Each time we gained a new perspective.

Since then, we have worked with over 500 children through our other partner non-profit organisations. We have seen, in almost every instance, children are underestimated and doubted. Caregivers and educators often doubt children's capabilities—not unlike how I used to be—assuming they are too young, and that the task at hand would be too difficult for them. A recent instance of this was when we conducted a puppet-making session using recyclable materials. We divided the children into sub-groups, and then conducted a demonstration, facilitating a conversation using a few images





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of handmade puppets. We followed this up by asking children to come up with their own puppets. The moment we said this, the educators associated with the organisation asked us, “Are you not going to show the steps? How are children going to make the puppet on their own? Small children won’t be able to make it!”

These were some of the initial responses we received from them. We assured them that the children would be able to do what we were asking them to; that there was no need to worry; that we should just let them get involved in the process. As the session ended, the educators were amazed to see the puppets made by their children. They also observed that children who earlier struggled to participate in conversations were now talking with more ease.

At LECIN (Let’s Educate Children In Need), we set up pop-up libraries for young children in different communities across Delhi NCR. We include many art activities in our library sessions. Whenever we conduct art sessions, we are always curious and excited to see the new discoveries that children make in our presence. And, to observe children’s interactions as they create. Once such art activity, conducted with children in Sanjay

Colony, Okhla, involved creating library cards. We provided the children with a variety of art materials that they could explore and use to make their cards vibrant. Many of the children were using paint brushes and tempera paints for the first time. We observed that the children particularly loved working with the paints, and that they were able to sit for longer durations of time while painting.

As they painted, they also engaged in imaginative conversations. One such conversation that occurred during this library card-making session involved a little girl of almost five years of age, who painted herself, and decorated her painting with stars and scraps of collage paper. She had never used paints before, and was extremely happy while painting. She told us that she wanted to be a fairy just like the one that she had seen in one of the books within our library. This little conversation was an indicator to us that our work was creating an impact on the children we serve.

The connection between art and a love of books was evident in our interaction with this child. She was able to make connections and express her ideas and thoughts through her artwork. In the same session, another child

who was unable to find a spare brush to paint with, found a solution to her problem. She crumpled paper and made her own brush! And she used her newly-invented brush to paint an animal on her library card. This, to us, was a perfect example of problem-solving and thinking beyond the limitations.

Based on all of what I have observed and experienced, given the right opportunities, children can create wonders. As educators, when we celebrate children's artistic ideas and creative expressions, it can go a long way in helping them boost their confidence, and open up and converse more with others. It is, therefore, our responsibility as educators and caregivers, to provide the space for children to develop their creative confidence and broaden their minds. Most importantly, we need to believe in children; believe in the fact that each child is unique and capable of doing anything! Literally anything!

## Creating Safe Spaces for Young Children at LECIN

It has been more than two years since LECIN has been working with early childhood groups in different locations across Delhi NCR. In this time, we've learned a lot. While at first, we encountered challenges coming up with ideas for activities for the early childhood group, we've since been engaging in a continuous process of brainstorming, testing out, reflecting, as we plan out activities. Art has played an important role in the process. And, after gaining a deeper understanding



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of more impactful methodologies in art, we've come to realise that we need to, ourselves, properly plan out lessons, with clear objectives in mind (what is it that we wish to do and why) and methods in place. The clearer the objective, the more impact we're able to create. With this, we have begun to follow a more structured approach to planning and executing art lessons. And, we've strengthened our focus on adopting developmentally appropriate practices for the young children we engage with.

Furthermore, as educators we've learned to balance out our expectations of children. In other words, we have learned to set aside our unrealistic expectations of our children. At the same time, we don't expect too little of our children either, limiting them to just one or two pre-determined solutions. We have instead begun to embrace the fact that our children are brimming with limitless imagination and possibilities, recognizing that they always seem to bring something fresh and new to the table that needs to be encouraged and celebrated. By providing children with the freedom to explore art materials and express themselves, while valuing and accepting their vivid imagination within our space, we have witnessed how our adoption of these practices have helped our children gain confidence and open up.

## A Story of Change – How Art Can Transform A Child's Life

This is a story about Kapil (name changed) who is now 6+ years old. Kapil was around 4.5 years old when he first came to LECIN's learning centre. His mother works with us as a full-time facilitator. And, they live in the same community that LECIN works within. His family was worried about him since he was unable to keep up with the pace of the other children his age. He always appeared frustrated, and never seemed to leave his mother's side. He had problems sharing with others. And, if not with his mother, he stayed on his own, never interacting with the other



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children. We observed him at the start and assumed that his behaviour was caused by certain developmental delays.

We began to engage him in some play-based activities with a desire to grab his attention and build trust with him. I tried to have lots of conversations with him, hoping to understand the root cause of his issues, and why he behaved differently. But nothing seemed to work until one day when we observed his engagement in a session that involved working with colours. While colouring, his behaviour was significantly altered. And that for us was an AHA moment!

After this incident, I facilitated many art sessions with him and I was amazed to see his response each time. He started having conversations with me while making art, and also upon completing his artwork. And slowly, we were able to build his trust in us. He was not able to form words, identify numbers, or speak clearly. But when it came to art, he was able to express more clearly.

In time, through his engagements with art, he began to reveal to us his daily routine, his parents, brother, what he likes to do, his dislikes, and so on. We were so happy to witness the transformation that was happening in him. Now he eats his lunch

with us. In fact, whenever we meet him, he asks how we are. And, he has made new friends, while earlier he had none. He has even started reading picture books from our library, while telling us stories from the books. And, his love for art increases daily. Most importantly, his parents have stopped worrying about him. They believe that he will grow and learn everything he needs to at his own pace. We are so happy and surprised to witness the role that art has played in Kapil's transformation.

My own journey with art started when I was 2-3 years old when my grandfather gave me natural clay to play with. And then he bought me some paints. That's how my love of art developed. When we started LECIN, I facilitated most of the art sessions in a manner that I was taught in—a more traditional approach where the focus was on creating finished products. An approach that failed to consider children and the process of learning. But, when we started teaching the arts in a more process-oriented approach I witnessed transformations in mindsets and attitudes, not only in our children, but also our team members and myself.

When it comes to myself, I'm still on a journey of exploration and learning. I am continuously evolving as a result of all the discoveries I've encountered while making art with children. And this, I believe, is what will help bring the changes I wish to see in the children's lives. After all, change starts from within!

**Rohit Kumar** is one of the founders of Let's Educate Children In Need (LECIN). With his personal interest in art and his desire to provide joyous learning opportunities for young children, he uses art as an important tool for student engagement.

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# Voices from Arts Education Practitioners and Thinkers from Across the World

Collated by the ArtSparks Team, illustrated and Designed by Sana Bansal

*“The arts, it has been said, cannot change the world, but they may change human beings who might change the world”*

–Maxine Greene

*“When you explore through different art mediums, you in reality are exploring yourself.”*

–Shalaka Deshmukh,  
Art Educator, Mumbai

*“When children engage in art, there are infinite right and unpredictable answers. When children and adults make art together, they are placed on the same level and can explore the unknown together.”*

–Lindsay Erben,  
Director, Arts Institute  
Middlesex County,  
New Jersey

*“As the world continues to draw more closely together through technology, and, at the same time, experiences variations in perspectives and practices—political, economic, ecological—the arts can and do provide a common language and a means of celebrating similarities and bridging differences. Immersion in the arts, guided by practitioners knowledgeable in providing an equitable, inclusive space and championing creative freedom and decision-making, includes, but also goes well beyond the development of art skills. Children can create worlds through art-making and imagine the parameters and possibilities of a better world through their imaginations.”*

–Fran Van Horn,  
Non-Profit Arts Administrator,  
New York

*“The excitement of a child when creating something new, the enjoyment of choosing colors and shapes, the sense of freedom of expressing herself in unconventional ways, the newfound sensitivity to beauty in search for inspiration, the pride of showing her art works to others—art education teaches children to use creativity in problem-solving and makes them aware of their power in making the world a better place.”*

–Eugenia Pietrogrande,  
Program Coordinator,  
IDLO, Africa

*“Art education helps children to connect more deeply with the world around them and open them to new ways of seeing. When kids engage in the arts it improves motivation, concentration, confidence, and teamwork and also gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skills. The process that the children go through in order to produce an artwork is in itself a vehicle which expresses a personal story or journey.”*

–Ridhi,  
Co-Founder, Swatantra Talim,  
Uttar Pradesh

*“Visual arts merged with activism convey, empower, and impact people, and visual arts education is critical to teaching children and young people about one’s place in the world and to forging connections with other human beings and the planet. I love the versatility of visual arts as a medium to explain children’s fundamental human rights to the world at large.”*

*–Dragica Mikavica,  
Senior Advocacy Adviser,  
Save the Children, New York*

*“The present times and the foreseeable future require that educators apply art in the classroom with the same rigor and zeal applied in all the STEM subjects. A robust art program at the K - 12 level helps in developing the soft/ life skills - the 4 Cs of 21st century - such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication in individuals which would help develop a well-balanced person - a “citizen of the world.”*

*–Yasmeen Zahra Salman,  
PhD Scholar, AKU IED, Pakistan*

*“I believe that every individual has an intrinsic and unique capability of art making. All it takes is trust, openness and intention on the part of the facilitator. The arts can provide for the process of exploration, expression and creation. Expression through the arts can be limitless and the process is full of learning.”*

*–Ayushi Agrawal,  
Teacher and Arts-based facilitator,  
Rajghat Besant School, Varanasi*

*“Art education invites children to the world of imagination and possibilities, which are fundamental building blocks to creativity, resilience and social emotional development. Art education empowers children to be agents of change as they embark on a journey of empathy through connection with materials and the world around them.”*

*–Annabelle Tan,  
Museum Education Professional,  
Singapore*

*“Through art one can think differently, imagine, and create new possible realities. Art gives us wings, opens doors, transports us, transforms us. Understanding the power of this tool that we call art, its importance in education—both for children and adults—while putting it into practice, is a task that all educators must be committed to.”*

*–Luisina Figueroa Garro,  
Designer & Educator, Argentina*



# Learning Life Skills through the Visual Arts

## Experiences from a Government School in Karnataka

*ArtSparks Team*

*Dr. Umadevi L. N. has been working at GHPS Thindlu, Bangalore for 20 years. She became the Headmistress in 2011, and as of 2021, continues to serve the school in the same capacity. During this period of time she has won several awards for her exceptional work—the Nation Builder Award from the Rotary Club, Best Teacher Award from the Government of Karnataka (2019), Best Teacher Award from the local Panchayat, and the Kannada Seva Ratna Prashasti, to name a few. In this interview, Dr. Umadevi shares her experiences of bringing in an art program to her school. While the interview was conducted in Kannada, the interview transcript has been transcribed and translated into English.*

**ArtSparks Team:** You are an award-winning school Headmistress at GHPS Thindlu. Please tell us about your journey in education.

**Umadevi L. N.:** When I was young, I wanted to become a doctor. But my mother discouraged me, as she herself worked in the health department. Many of my family members were teachers and teaching became an alternative for me. My brother is a political science professor now, and he used to tutor students at home for years. I used to help teach alongside him and realized that I enjoyed it a lot. Over time, teaching became a passion for me.

To me, teaching is a noble profession, as children put their trust in their teachers, often more than even their own parents.

So I treat every student as my own child, and strive to teach in the best possible way, continuously helping them improve. In these 20 years, students look at me more as their mother, and they have imbibed the values I have tried to inculcate. In my view, education is not just about reading and writing; it is about how students lead their lives.

**ArtSparks Team:** As a school leader and as an educator, in your experience and view, what are some of the key learnings and skills that students must gain to survive and be successful in today's world? Are these being addressed in our government schools?

**Umadevi L. N.:** Today's world is very competitive, and in order to survive and be successful, students need to develop the ability to collaborate and cooperate. Students have to learn to mingle with other students and to keenly observe the world around them. Students also need to create a space for themselves and be able to stand out by thinking differently and creatively.

All students receive similar education in schools, but they have to develop their own unique identity. Problem-solving abilities are also very important. When students face problems, they have to be able to keenly observe, analyze the problem, and come up with creative solutions.

The current curriculum provides very little opportunity for such skills to be developed in students as teaching is mostly focused on exam results.

**ArtSparks Team:** When you interact with teachers, school leaders, administrators, officers, etc., are there discussions around the need for these kinds of skills?

**Umadevi L. N.:** Many teachers are mostly looking at education from an exam point of view, and teaching just for exam results. Teachers are not very aware about the need for other skills. Maybe 5% of the teachers think about wanting to teach anything outside of the curriculum, syllabus, and textbooks. But, most of them just stick to the books. I haven't come across many teachers that try to adopt creative ways of teaching, or even try to develop skills like creative thinking in their students.

Higher-level authorities ask us to proceed like a horse with blinders on and focus solely on the exam results. They encourage us to stick to the tried and tested path and do what is needed to acquire the necessary exam results. Some of them are open to the idea of approaching teaching creatively. They

are okay with however we teach. But they still insist that the exam outcomes cannot be compromised. They insist that we teach for academic competencies in order to get children to perform well in the subsequent standards. This is what they deem to be most important.

For example, when they come to observe a school, they want to see lesson plans, evidence of following methods and processes that they have set. When this happens, teachers stick to only what is expected by the system, and therefore, do not make the effort to think outside of that, or think about approaches to teaching creatively. They just want to do what is expected of them.

**ArtSparks Team:** You have taken up a different approach and embraced different approaches and programs. You have brought in the ArtSparks visual arts program that has been operating out of your school for the past five years. How did you come upon this? And, why did you choose to do this?



**Umadevi L. N.:** I am always looking out for programs that my students can benefit from. I want my students to have access to a variety of opportunities like in private schools. I have brought in many programs and equipment to my school like smart-classrooms, digital tabs, projectors, etc., to enhance the learning experience of my students.

When I came across the visual arts program being offered by ArtSparks Foundation, I was determined to bring it to my students as I was very interested in its skill development aspects. We have been conducting the program for five years and I have seen my students develop holistically through this program.

**ArtSparks Team:** Could you please tell me, in your own words, how you view this visual arts program? What do your students do in, and learn through, this program?

**Umadevi L. N.:** This visual arts program is conducted for classes 1 to 8. Each class gets their own art period every week and there is a dedicated art room for the program. Students engage in a variety of art-making projects across different themes. Each project spans over 8-12 classes where students engage in a sequence of activities that culminate with the creation of an artwork.

Here, students learn how to observe closely, explore and investigate a variety of art materials, discover possibilities on their own, etc. For example, students often discover hundreds of new colors by mixing just three primary colors and white. Students also learn to think in multiple ways, solve problems and come up with their own ideas. Here the children also work together in groups collaboratively and create many wonderful collaborative artworks.

We also hold an annual exhibition where students get to present all their works to parents, teachers and community members. Through this program, our students are developing 21st century learning and life

skills like perseverance, close observation, investigation, flexible thinking, collaboration, creative risk-taking, problem solving, language and communication, etc.

Initially, it was all very new. I did not know much about these 21st century life skills and learning or how visual arts can help develop them. These skills are not being taught through the textbooks, or curriculum, or the syllabus. I see this as a link between daily life and textbook knowledge. I always thought that the arts were all about drawing—drawing various objects using different methods. But when I experienced this visual arts approach for myself during teacher/administrator workshops, I was astonished that there are so many skills involved while engaging in artmaking.

**ArtSparks Team:** You said that the students are developing holistically. What are some of the changes you have observed in your students after their engagement with the visual arts?

**Umadevi L. N.:** I see a lot of improvements in my students' storytelling capacities. I also see growth in their use of imagination. Their writing skills have also improved, and they are writing more imaginatively. All of these skills that they are acquiring through art are also helping with their curricular needs.

For example, improvements in their observation skills are evident in science classes. I notice that students now observe the finer details of a plant more closely than before. And, these students have become better observers both inside and outside the classroom. This is what I mean when I say that they are growing more holistically.

Students are also able to picture things in their minds now. Before, when I explained a concept, I could see from their expressions that they were not really understanding the concept. But now, after their engagements with the visual arts, they are able to use visualization techniques more effectively.

They are able to explain concepts using drawings and figures.

For example, if I ask them to explain photosynthesis, they are able to quickly explain the concept by drawing a plant, sun, water, etc. and clearly explain the concept with understanding. What is happening here is that they are able to convert the words into pictures and vice versa. So, directly and indirectly, they are building language capabilities.

These skills are translating into all the other subjects' classes as well. Furthermore, their communication skills are improving too. Earlier, when we asked students to come on stage to speak, they used to avoid it. But now, after participating in exhibitions, and speaking to groups of people, they have developed confidence and are much more comfortable speaking in public. Even the students who we assumed were not the brightest are displaying confidence and coming forward. This makes me really happy.

**ArtSparks Team:** Have you observed any changes in the students' behavior and attitude?

**Umadevi L. N.:** I am seeing a lot of changes in students' behavior. They are now more inclined to do well in all their tasks, more efficient with their time, take a lot more care and show commitment in whatever they work on. They are more diligent and pay attention

to even small things like placing their shoes in an orderly manner. I see them become more responsible.

In the past, students used to come to class well after the bell had gone off. But, now, they are on time and want to be on time. Our students come to school after doing a lot of chores at home. But now they manage to come on time by planning better. Students, even if they are sick or tired, display higher levels of motivation and want to attend school and not miss the art class. Also, they are more cooperative and share and care for one another. As the students feel successful in art, they display a keenness to participate in various other events. And, all of this contributes to an increase in their self-confidence.

During one of the art projects where students were encouraged to think about what their community will look like in 20 years, I observed that two of my students envisioned their community having electricity in the future. These students have become more aware of their current situation—that they have no access to stable electricity—and were able to think through the steps it would take to change their situation in 20 years.

Students were also, in the process, thinking about what they could do to bring about these changes in their communities. To me, this is important. Through education we need to develop this ability in children to understand their current situation and envision a better future, and the part they can play in making this better future a reality.

**ArtSparks Team:** What about the subject teachers at your school? What were their thoughts about the arts in the past? How have their views changed?

**Umadevi L. N.:** Luckily, my teachers are cooperative and we are like a family. In other schools, teachers often don't cooperate and they are worried about all the processes put in place by the BEO (Block Education Office),



as well as the permissions required, etc. But in my school, they are willing to try. Initially, like me, they thought of the visual arts as simply drawing. But, when they learnt about the skills that are being developed through art-making, they too were very happy about our students accessing such a program.

Teachers also report noticing improvements in children's attendance, and even academic performance. Language teachers in particular are seeing improvement in students' communication skills. All the teachers view these skills—cooperation, collaboration, keen observation, perseverance, problem-solving, etc.—as necessary for life, not just for doing well at school.

**ArtSparks Team:** What about parents? Did they know much about the visual arts? How did they respond at first? How about now, after running the program for five years?

**Umadevi L. N.:** Initially, parents had no idea about the visual arts. They had concerns whether the school would be able to complete the syllabus and if we would end up with extra classes on Saturdays.

After about six months, parents who were members of SDMC (School Development and Monitoring Committee) started to appreciate the program. They shared in the meetings as to how their children talked about their work and didn't want to miss going to school because of the art class. Some parents who came from other feeder schools for these meetings wanted the program in their schools as well.

Almost all the parents are now aware of the benefits, as they have attended workshops to understand the program as well. They may not be able to use words like 'visual arts', but they are able to see that their children are participating in a program that is valuable. Especially during the pandemic, parents have been very happy that their children are able to continue doing meaningful work and stay engaged while stuck indoors.

Some parents have shared with me that, when the children receive new materials, they explain to the parents about what the material is, how it works, and how they have used it to make their artworks. Some parents say that the children have started to advise them on how to do certain things at home and offer suggestions on better or alternate ways to manage things around the house.

Parents have shared many such positive examples and say that the children's behavior is improving as a result. One of the parents told me that earlier her son would not share anything with others, and often stopped his parents from sharing as well. But now he is more open, willing to give the little he has to others. These are the kinds of stories that make parents supportive of the program.

**ArtSparks Team:** What about Block Education Officers (BEOs)? How do they view the visual arts in education? Do they support the program?

**Umadevi L. N.:** Every month we are required to update and share the attendance and progress in the student tracking system. According to the BEO, a school's success is assessed based on good admissions and attendance. I believe that the visual arts program has helped greatly in both these aspects.

We are in a remote small town at the edge of Bangalore city. Our students are mainly from construction labor migrant communities which are a floating population. The most noticeable change after bringing in the visual arts program is that the migrant workers choose to stay back in the area, just so they can send their children to our school to ensure a better future unlike their own. I am very proud of this.

As a part of the education department visits to my school, the officers notice that we have the visual arts program and appreciate the concept behind it. They have commented that it is in line with the NEP 2020 (New Education Policy). I have also read the policy document



and certainly I see that the program is 100% covered in the policy. The officers read the progress reports we submit, and give maximum importance to admissions and attendance. Since our attendance is very good, they are happy.

**ArtSparks Team:** If you were to talk to other school leaders about bringing a visual arts program into their schools, what advice would you give them?

**Umadevi L. N.:** I have seen drastic changes in student's skills and attitudes. To be able to survive in this competitive world and to lead a successful life, all children from all schools need these skills. Visual arts are a boon for the students. First, school leaders have to build awareness among parents and teachers about the importance of visual arts. They have to explain and make teachers understand that these life skills and ways of learning are as important as the syllabus. And, that it is important to develop these skills in students, especially from primary school onwards. The school leaders have to also explain this to the education department officials and gain their support.

**ArtSparks Team:** What must we do if we want to include visual arts in schools all over India?

**Umadevi L. N.:** We have to first make visual arts a part of the curriculum. Timetable has to be allotted for visual arts with at least 4-5 periods per week, just like other subjects. Teacher training is also needed as visual arts are a novel aspect for most teachers.

I am surprised and happy at how our students have developed these wonderful 21st century skills and abilities through the visual arts program. In so many situations, our students are able to think so differently, analytically, critically, and adopt a solution-oriented approach.

I know that 80% of these abilities have developed because of the visual arts program. All of these are needed to lead successful lives in today's world. I have observed tremendous growth and changes in my students over these five years.

I am fully convinced—as I can see the proof—that learning and life skills can be developed in children effectively through the visual arts. Rather than merely reading about it in books, I am able to observe the growth like in a real life research project. I can even call this a revolution in learning.

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# Introducing Nisha Nair’s “Art Sparks”

*Marta Cabral*

**N**isha Nair dedicates time in her art lessons to “enable children to imagine” (p. 44). Through her book “Art Sparks: Ideas. Methods. Process.” she helps us all do the same. Every page prompts me as a reader to imagine and reimagine what an art lesson can be.

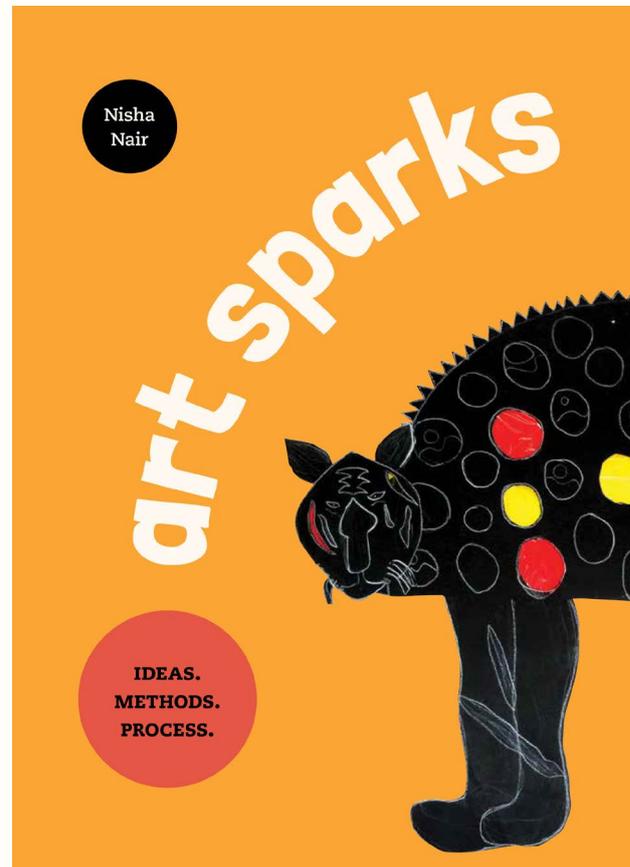
This book guides readers through a 12-lesson puppet-making art unit for children around 11 years of age—children that the author herself taught in a low-fee private school in rural Karnataka, India.

Rather than laying out a sequence of lessons and encouraging teachers to merely replicate the unit out of context, this book is a tour of an experience that invites readers to be inspired and empowered to create their own lessons and units.

Nair achieves this by carefully organizing the book into sections, each dedicated to a specific aspect of her students’ learning. After a brief explanation of each aspect, she presents us with the dialogues she had had with her students, featuring her prompts and questions. She shares many of the children’s ideas, answers and suggestions as well.

Throughout her book, the author provides numerous “useful pedagogical asides” (p. 9) to ground some of the choices she makes in each of the lessons she describes. Clear and specific guidelines for teachers, and notes on the reasoning behind each lesson’s focus, also help the reader to potentially plan their own art lessons and understand and support colleagues as they do so.

Bookending the 12-lesson unit there are two short sections, an introduction and a



Tara Books

conclusion, that offer a solid context for the book. These sections substantiate Nair’s writing by highlighting the importance of enriching art education experiences for children, presenting relevant characteristics of their artistic development, and offering a clear and cogent description of the elements of a strong process-based arts education program. In addition, the author describes common challenges encountered in the implementation of quality arts education programs as well as suggestions to overcome these.

This book is not only a look back onto a workshop conducted in the past. On the contrary, a final ‘Going Forward’ section



provides specific guidelines to “move forward in establishing art as a valuable and necessary part of all children’s education” (p.105).

This is followed by a very helpful appendix that breaks down the objectives and materials for each lesson, provides a clear and precise glossary, and displays a list of illustrations with photo credits.

This book has guided me through the process of helping children think, develop, and create puppets in a way that invited me to imagine myself creating similar lessons. As we ‘see’ the children in the book developing their “ability [...] to make meaning of what they see” throughout their engagements with the lessons, we ourselves are encouraged to consider ways of looking at art education through a process-based approach.

As a professor of art education, I believe this book will help my teachers-in-training understand the importance of the arts in the curriculum, and help them develop tools to bring to their own students—and, in this way, provide access to artistic explorations to even more children.

**Bibliographic Details:** Nisha Nair. 2021. *Art Sparks: Ideas. Methods. Process.* Chennai: Tara Books. Paperback, 112 pages with illustrations. Rs. 500.

**Marta Cabral** serves as an Assistant Professor of Art Education at the City University of New York (CUNY). In her role, she brings her years of experience with artistic explorations and material inquiries to pre-service teachers of young children.

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# Creating a sculpture of your favourite animal using found materials

*Muankimi Tombing*

**O**ftentimes, a quick search online for art-based activities ends up generating an abundance of examples that lack clear objectives or purpose. These activities, often focused on creating ‘cute-looking’ products—a cat out of paper plates; a snowman using pre-cut shapes and cotton; a colouring-within-the-lines activity—are emblematic of the step-by-step procedural format they embody. Such activities are didactic in nature and stifle a child’s creative and artistic development. They can also unintentionally colour children’s conceptions of what art is and looks like. In essence, the purposes and potential of art is diminished through such activities.

The following activity seeks to provide an alternate perspective on how art activities can be designed to foster imagination, problem-solving and divergent thinking in children. Please try out this activity for yourself and/or with children.



ArtSparks Foundation



ArtSparks Foundation

**Age:** 6 years and above

**Materials:** Pots, pans, utensils, bottles, bottle caps, cardboard box, bags, old books, newspapers, dough, etc.

**Objective:** To thrive in a constantly evolving world, children need to be equipped with skills and attitudes that prepare them to tackle the known, and also the unknown. They should be able to push past their limits, think beyond present possibilities, and learn to come up with creative solutions. Divergent thinking skills are critical in enabling children to think flexibly and generate multiple solutions. This activity seeks to facilitate the development of this important skill.

**Activity:**

1. Closely observe an image of your favourite animal. Observe all parts of your chosen animals body, as well as the small details.



2. Look around your house to see if there are everyday materials and objects that you can find which can be used to recreate your favourite animal. You can make your animal sculpture stand on the floor by stacking your objects or by leaning it against the wall for support.
3. Identify at least 5 different materials and objects that you can use to create your animal sculpture.
4. Start with the biggest part of your animals body. Arrange your found materials/objects to create the shape of the body.
5. Then move on to the smaller details like their legs, face, tail, etc. and arrange more materials/objects to make it look more like your favourite animal.

*Send us your finished work, or please share it with us on Facebook or Instagram and tag us at @artsparksfoundation. We'd love to see what you come up with!*

**For more art-based activities, please visit:**  
<http://www.art-sparks.org/activity-resources.html>  
[https://www.partnersforum.in/courses/course-v1:ArtSparks\\_Foundation+ArtEd102+2021/about](https://www.partnersforum.in/courses/course-v1:ArtSparks_Foundation+ArtEd102+2021/about)

# Nature and Art - A Natural Synergy

*Nature Conservation Foundation*

**H**ave you ever considered creating colors from vegetables, fruits, seeds, leaves and flowers? Can twigs, stones, leaves, and other found items from nature be used as art materials? In this section we explore ways to use the abundance found in nature to create art. And, we are joined by Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) as they share some of their ideas for bringing together nature and art.

## 1. Colours in Nature

Colours are an integral part of visual arts. And children can be constantly encouraged to observe and notice colours around them. Going on a colour walk

is a great way to know more about the natural world and notice the colours around. Simple activities like trying to find different shades of the same colour (for example, noticing the different shades of greens around us and trying to describe them), as well as sorting/categorizing different coloured items in different ways, can help children learn new things about their surroundings.

## 2. Patterns in Nature

The natural world is filled with interesting patterns on the surface of almost everything. If we look closely, for example on leaves, bark, seeds, animals, insects,



Nature Conservation Foundation

Students Display the Many Shades of Green Found on a Nature Walk



Paint Brushes Using Natural Materials

and even on rocks, there are different kinds of patterns and marks. A magnifying glass can reveal tiny patterns as well.

Taking a nature walk to find different shapes and patterns is a great activity for children. They can find a variety of patterns like spots and lines on insects, spirals on snail shells, and symmetrical patterns of leaves or flowers. Children can explore endless patterns in nature and discover a whole new exciting and visually interesting world!

### 3. Art Materials from Nature

Many materials in nature can be collected and used to create collages, sculptures, textures, observation drawings and more. Children can find objects like seeds, leaves, bark, feathers, flowers, rocks, sticks for art-making and this can help children stay connected to the natural world as well.

Not only are these a rich source of art material, children can become aware of seasons as they will notice when certain trees bloom, fruit or shed leaves.

Materials like soil, fallen leaves and flowers, vegetable and fruit peels can be crushed and mixed with water to create natural paints. The process of finding and experimenting with natural pigments can be a wonderful way to learn about nature as well as history and local culture.

Not just paints, natural materials like grass and twigs can be used as brushes as well. Using these as brushes or pens can provide a good challenge to children to create different textures and effects that may not be possible with synthetic paint brushes.

**Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF)** was set up in 1996 with a vision of a world where nature and society flourish together. NCF's conservation work spans diverse environments—from coral reefs to tropical rainforests, wetlands to deserts and coasts to high mountains.

Through the Nature Classrooms initiative that began in 2018, NCF has been working closely with schools and educators to connect learning to the natural world. They develop nature learning resources to encourage children of all age-groups to engage with nature through different mediums including the visual arts.

**Resources Link:** <https://www.natureclassrooms.org/>

**Website:** <https://www.ncf-india.org/>



Shapes &amp; Patterns in Nature: A Collection of Seed Pods &amp; Shells of Different Shapes and Sizes

# Learning In and Through Art

ArtSparks Team

Enter a typical art class in progress, and you'll often encounter an art teacher drawing an elaborate scenery on the blackboard, asking students to recreate the same on a sheet of paper. In such instances, you may also notice children trying their best to replicate their teacher's sample drawing. On occasion, judgements are made based on a child's capacity to either replicate the sample drawing with fidelity, or, their inability to capture the likeness of the original. And notions of natural-born-artist versus non-artist begin to take shape in the minds of children and adults alike.

This is one common approach to art instruction that we often witness within schools and other settings. Another common approach to teaching art, that we often come upon, involves the artist-teacher conveying simple step-by-step instructions on how to create an artwork. In such instances, children following along the simple steps with relative ease, end up with predetermined outputs that are indistinguishable from one another—perhaps an origami crane; a replica of Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Nights*; a cat mask.

A critical problem associated with the above-mentioned approaches is that the learning here is teacher-directed rather than child- and learner-centered. And when the teacher becomes the focal point of learning, the children, instead of exercising their knowledge and skills, and honing their unique and diverse perspectives, merely try to imitate what the teacher has done.

These kinds of activities lack rigour and depth in objectives and purpose. Also, these approaches insist that there is only one way to create art, which leaves no room for children's distinct ideas and imaginations

to flourish. In essence, the purpose and potential of the arts is diminished in such classrooms.

So, how then can art transform children's learning and development? If all experiences with the arts do not result in transformational learning and growth, what considerations need to be made in order to affect transformation? What are the contributions of the arts, and how might we leverage the same? Studies indicate that experiences in art making can add tremendous value to children's learning and development.

This piece highlights the efforts taken by three organizations—Kshamtalaya Foundation, Let's Open a Book, and Makkala Jagriti—that are trying to explore the space of art education from within this larger perspective. It chronicles their experiences of adopting and implementing alternative approaches to introducing the visual arts as an integral part of children's learning.

## Developing 21st Century Learning and Life Skills in Children

Kshamtalaya Foundation is a for-purpose not-for-profit organization founded to support children, helping them achieve



Kshamtalaya Foundation

their true potential. Since its inception, Kshamtalaya has worked in three states—Rajasthan, Karnataka, New Delhi—in partnership with the respective governments to build the local/regional leadership to transform the quality of learning, well-being and governance. One of the flagship programs of Kshamtalaya, ‘Learning Festival’, was curated in 2016 with a purpose of introducing children to various mediums and approaches to learning, instilling in them life skills such as, collaboration, peer learning, creative confidence, and self-learning.

In 2020, Kshamtalaya decided to incorporate the visual arts into their learning festival. Soumya, tasked with working with children in Kotra and Gogunda blocks in Rajasthan, based on her experiences and observations, states, “Art embraces children’s curiosity, creativity and imagination. We were excited to integrate art into the festivals. And, in the process we were able to provide joyous learning opportunities to around 2000 children in 26 villages of tribal-rural Rajasthan with the help of our 26 iDiscover fellows.” The theme chosen for the first arts-integrated learning festival was ‘Ajab-Gajab Janwar’ (Imaginary Animals).

According to Soumya, “Kotra and Gogunda blocks are tribal-rural areas in Udaipur district. Being in the midst of a rich natural environment was a boon to make this learning relatable for the children. The curriculum provided an opportunity for children to explore their environment, as well as, dig into their lived experiences that included encounters with a variety of animals. Art helped the children connect with their surroundings and build from there. The nature of the sessions itself allowed children to learn by doing, and collaborate with their peers. Creation, here, did not appear burdensome. Through the process of creating their imaginary animals, children exercised their imagination, creative thinking, problem-solving, and other related skills. Working through the material of collage, they



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also exercised and developed their fine motor skills.”

The sessions were designed in such a way that the children worked within collaborative groups. As Soumya states, “For group work to be effective, it was important for the participating children to set agreements, learn to communicate needs with one another, and also understand the sensibilities of relationships they had formed. In this manner, the art project supported the development of teamwork and collaboration skills. The space offered through the Learning Festival was also made more inviting through the introduction of art, and students felt safe to take initiative, speak openly, and build deeper relationships with the facilitator. Children truly felt like this was a space where their voices were heard.”

Soumya also talks about how art seamlessly integrates various disciplines and enhances the learning experiences for children. She contends, “During the daily debrief sessions, facilitators shared their observations on how integrated learning was occurring naturally among the students. Students were using pre-math and language skills to describe, compare and contrast between two animals, identify patterns, and also share general information about the animal. Students were also seen counting the number of spots on the deer or the feathers of the peacock.”

In the second art-integrated learning festival, Kshamtalaya tested out another art project

that Soumya had encountered in professional development. This time around, children were given an opportunity to create an artwork of an imaginary plant. The session commenced with children being taken for a nature walk and asked to closely observe the plants and trees—the nodes, bark of the tree, patterns and textures that they had observed. After that, they were asked to create a detailed drawing of any one plant or tree that they had observed. Children were then encouraged to think about the problems that they had encountered in their own community, and use their imagination to conceive of a plant that had the capacity to solve their community’s problems that they had identified.

Soumya relays how children brainstormed multiple imaginative solutions, each distinct in their own way. Ideas ranged from, a tree that gives away money, clothes, water and rotis to everyone in need; a tree that fulfils all the wishes of children; a tree which has TV monitors to entertain people. They finally used the medium of shadow puppetry to represent their imaginary plants.

Soumya excitedly talks about the impact and response that she received for the art-integrated learning festivals. “The consolidated impact of both the festivals has been felt across 26 villages reaching more

than 2000 children combined. This learning experience has helped us build stronger relationships with both the community and the school leaders, which we believe will open more doors of collaborative demonstrations on how learning should be designed based on the interests and needs of the children, and rooted in a deep belief in their potential.”

She goes on to say, “The response from the community has always been encouraging and positive. Some community members have gone on to support by contributing resources and time, actively involving themselves in hosting this joyous celebration. Most of the children we work with are first generation school goers. For their parents to witness the children’s creations on the walls of the school, is a source of great pride. It is wonderful to witness their eyes beaming with pride. With the introduction of the art projects this year, on the last day of the Learning Festival, the children even put up a performance using their puppets, while their parents paid avid attention to what the children had to say.”

### Creating Safe Spaces for Children

Ruchi Dhona, is the founder of Let’s Open a Book in Spiti Valley (a remote sub-district of Himachal). Let’s Open a Book helps school-going children in remote schools to gain access to reading books. The organization also helps in setting up libraries in schools in remote areas so that children do not miss out on the joy of reading. With her personal interest in art and her desire to provide diverse joyous learning opportunities for children, she uses art in her library spaces as an important tool for engaging children.

Ruchi says, “As a library educator, one of my biggest goals is to create an inclusive, safe space for children. This is important, so that children can express their views without feeling judged. The library collection plays a huge role in this—a diverse collection helps in starting conversations on different topics. Over a period of time, most children warm



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up to these conversations. However, there are always some who are too shy or those who struggle to vocalize their thoughts. For instance, the children from the community that I work with are temperamentally shy. It gets even more difficult when these children reach puberty. In addition to dealing with biological changes, children at this age navigate the question of self-identity, which can be both complex and confusing.”

Considering the complex characteristics of this age group, and to provide a safe space for every child to express themselves freely, Ruchi decided to introduce a rich art experience to her children—one that would allow them to explore the topic of identity through the creation of painted self-portraits.

Ruchi relays that her group primarily consisted of girls, although there was one boy (Tenzin, name changed). The first session started with a discussion about what constitutes a self-portrait. After that, children created pencil sketches of their faces based on close observation (they had a mirror to help them). They also drew five things that represented them.

The session helped children to think deeply about themselves. At the end of the first session, students displayed their work in the centre of the class for everyone to observe and reflect. During the time allotted for reflection, Ruchi observed that Tenzin was too shy to participate. He however joined the group when she nudged him gently. His pencil sketch was a representation of himself along with the things he liked, which included tea and samosa among other things.

As the sessions progressed, and students began painting their self-portraits on a larger sheet of paper, Ruchi realized that Tenzin’s self-portrait was considerably different from his initial pencil sketch. She says, “Interestingly, the tempera paint outline version resembled a Rajasthani woman—the most distinguishing feature being the three dots on both her cheeks and on the chin.



Let's Open a Book

She was also wearing a nose ring with the string that is attached to the hair. Even the symbols used were different from Tenzin’s original pencil sketch. And, these symbols complemented the woman’s portrait that he had drawn instead. I wasn’t sure how to interpret this. So, after the session I brainstormed with another art practitioner and discussed the different possibilities of why Tenzin could have chosen to draw a female portrait. I wondered, maybe perhaps he had seen a Rajasthani woman’s portrait somewhere and drew it. Or, perhaps he was influenced by the other girls in our group. Maybe it was the result of some other cultural influence. So, before starting the next session, I found a few minutes to chat with Tenzin privately, giving him some space to talk about his self-portrait. Based on my conversation with him, I was convinced that the portrait had been revised deliberately, and Tenzin shyly admitted that he wanted to portray himself that way.”

Ruchi goes on to say, “So, I took this as an opportunity to discuss gender norms with the group in order for the entire group to embrace diverse identities with an open mind and not see Tenzin’s self-portrait differently. At the same time, I wanted Tenzin to also feel proud about his own self-portrait. The discussion also led to us to read Kamla Bhasin’s book ‘Rainbow Girls and Rainbow Boys’ in the class.”

Ruchi further states, “Looking back on the experience, I believe that the visual arts



can provide an alternate language for self-expression, helping children like Tenzin articulate what they may not be able to put into words. But it works only when an art intervention is designed carefully with the intent of creating a space for self-expression, communication and reflection. It does not work in the case of art activities that involve colouring books or copying illustrations from books—all activities that leave no room for children to express themselves. In the case of the self-portrait painting project, the choice of theme and medium were deliberate. Sessions were linked to one another to provide adequate scaffolding and ensure that every child could create a successful, unique, creative, and expressive self-portrait that reflected each child's individuality. The final self-portraits spoke for themselves, each unique and also stylistically different from the other!"

### Fostering Holistic Growth and Development in Children

Makkala Jagriti is an NGO working since 2003 for the holistic development of children from marginalised communities. They set up learning centres in urban poor communities. The SPICE model that Makkala Jagriti follows caters to social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional development in children. To further strengthen the SPICE model, Makkala Jagriti decided to integrate a stronger art methodology into their existing

program. They piloted art projects in three government schools, one community centre and one observation home in Bengaluru.

The children who were part of the program had little to no prior experiences with art. Ramya, content developer and creative facilitator at Makkala Jagriti says, "The pilot study was conducted to understand how can we effectively integrate art into our SPICE model. How can we explore different art mediums, develop skills in children, and address facilitation and curriculum gaps. We designed a series of art activities using a variety of newer art materials such as oil pastels and collage to develop originality, attention to detail, resourcefulness, and more in the children. The curriculum was constructed in such a way that it allowed every child to progress at their own pace, deepen their learning, and succeed."

Ramya adds, "Facilitators play a huge role in children's learning. To effectively implement the project, we first conducted an art workshop for facilitators to experience the new approach to art-making. This workshop helped us and the facilitators strengthen our belief in the power of art. We've come to realise that all of these aspects—material investigations, sequential learning, peer feedback, reflections, and participatory demonstrations—are highly essential in enriching children's learning."



During the process of art-making, according to Ramya, children were given plenty of opportunities to explore and discover new possibilities on their own, test out their ideas, and make their own decisions. Among many other skills and attitudes, the sessions helped children to understand the importance of investigation, time-management, and flexible thinking.

Ramya says, “Whenever they were stuck with a problem, they looked around at their peers work and it motivated them to push themselves to think creatively. In the process, children also started to realize their own inner strengths and capabilities and were extremely happy to create their artworks.”

The sessions also encouraged children to collaborate effectively and help each other. One of the children talks about her experience of giving peer feedback, saying, “Giving feedback is a unique experience. I was a bit scared and worried to give feedback to my friend. I was worried about hurting his feelings. But, after he incorporated the changes that I suggested, I felt very happy.”

Towards the end of the pilot project, Ramya and her team decided to conduct an exhibition to showcase children’s artworks and learnings. Since the children had gained confidence from the art sessions, they took initiative to organise the exhibition. Children came up with their own unique way of showcasing their work.

Ramya says, “Children decided to showcase the entire process of creating their artworks which included investigation of art materials, sketches of ideas, and the final artwork. Children were so confident and proud to present their work. Overall, I could see the skills such as collaboration, communication, flexible thinking, confidence, independent thinking, and attention to details instilled in children through this rich experience.”



Makkala Jagriti

Owing to the success of this pilot project, Makkala Jagriti has applied this art-based approach to their interventions across all the schools that they serve. And, Makkala Jagriti continues to strive for the holistic development of children through this newly infused art-integrated SPICE model.

## In Conclusion

A growing recognition of the power and potential of the arts, particularly the visual arts, to nurture skills of imagination, creative thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, empathy and much more in children, has led many educators and non-profit administrators to actively seek out ways to use the visual arts as a valuable tool for learning.

With the knowledge they’ve gained about arts education through professional development opportunities, these individuals—and the organizations and institutions they represent—are intent on designing art-based curricular solutions that develop various important skills and attitudes in the children they serve.

## You can reach out to the organizations

**featured in this story at** -soumya@kshamtalaya.org (Kshamtalaya Foundation ), dhonaruchi@gmail.com (Let’s Open a Book ), and ramya.mv@gmail.com (Makkala Jagriti).



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