Questions and Experiences from an Art Laboratory

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Abstract

If I were to remove the ‘learning’ of core subjects through my schooling, I believe I would still possess all the skills that I actively need, use and continue to develop today. In other words, a large chunk of my important learnings have been through the education I got in various arts and sports, outside formal schooling. The arts are hugely disadvantaged in school education because they are unfortunately not used as valid avenues for developing skills related to science, social science, mathematics and languages. They are also losing their place in everyday life because of the influx of mass-produced products and entertainment. This has given the arts a quasi endangered status because it relies on consistent and progressive engagement and a majority of people do not participate actively in keeping arts practices alive. We rush to ‘protect’ our national identity and cultural heritage. We rue the loss of a past glory without actually beginning a widespread grassroot engagement with current art practices and nurture it for the future. The arts have been reduced to cultural insignia with very little understanding of culture itself.

During the course of my fellowship programme, I have been facilitating the visual arts class for children from grades 1 to 7 at the Azim Premji School in Yadgir. The practice has raised many questions regarding the way in which abstract ideas like nation is introduced and understood. What can our experience of understanding every child in our class teach us about understanding the complexity of our nation and why do we still package it as a homogeneous entity to children? What kind of role does the image of the national flag or map play in understanding the idea of a nation? What might the playfulness of children open for us, when they unknowingly break the sanctity of national symbols like the national flag by changing its colour pattern or format? I have also simultaneously made observations that reveal the naturally occurring diversity of thought and how prevailing pedagogic methods tend to homogenise diversity. I make anecdotal explorations of some of these challenges in education with the subtext that institutionalised methods of teaching need a deeper examination and that an integration of a well-understood holistic arts practice might in fact offer some insights into approaching the subject of nation and nationalism in a more nuanced way.

The Power of a Line

Territorial behaviour is common to both human and animal species. Wild cats scratch trees and mark their territories. Humans draw lines, first in their minds, then on all kinds of surfaces that can capture their imagination. We have drawn maps to guide us but also to create borders, fences and even build walls.

Image 1

30,000 years ago, humans drew images of bison on cave walls. It is speculated that they believed that the drawing cast a magical spell on the beast that was to be hunted for their food.

Throughout history, markings on different surfaces have become phenomenal objects of power because they hold stories, scripts and other evidences that serve as documents. Many of these have been and continue to be used to assert power. This is why our education system places so much importance on writing. To learn to write is to empower oneself. However, writing is also a form of drawing.

Drawing Frees Us
To Know is to be Armed;
Drawing Frees Us

Lines define us
They give us shape and form
They place us within boundaries

Maps guide us
They inform us
They even make or break our home

But Drawing Frees Us.

True Representations

Drawing is a mode of communication at one level. On another level, it serves as a reflective practice, much like writing. It is a space where we project our vision and clarify our perspectives about our worlds.

In the course of my fellowship programme in Yadgir, a few observations have been of recurring intrigue to me in the classrooms of Class 1 to Class 3:

- The popularity of the image of the flag on a pole
- The enthusiasm to repeat this image but in multiple variations of colour and design
- The children's confidence, conviction and satisfaction in every version and their narration of their drawings being representations of the national flag.
- Their inability to get into more details about what this flag might be about (some of them are able to associate it with the words Bharatha or India)
- The rituals around the flag like saluting, unfurling, singing the national anthem are sometimes included in the drawing or narrated.

The vibrancy and variety of their expressions in these flag drawings are remarkable and have always tempted me to build a large archive of flags drawn by children to stand for a developing idea of a nation rather than being a mere symbol of a 'developing nation'.

Image 2

Image 3

As a child, I myself often wondered why the lines of maps are often drawn in a wavy shaky manner. Was it because the earth's surface was undulating? The nature of the lines gave me both a sense of comfort and a sense of freedom to not have to be perfect or absolutely accurate in my drawing. When I grew older I further comforted myself with an assumption that the down-scaling of such a large geographical territory was not likely to have much accuracy. Much later, I read Sadat Hasan Manto's Toba Tek Singh[1]. I looked at maps very differently after that.

The practice of drawing state and nation maps is again something that raises questions:

- A child is only drawing a picture of an already mapped territory in the case of state maps or the map of India. What is the child mapping? What is the purpose of mapping?
- Can children's everyday drawings be treated as maps, not necessarily of geographies but of minds?
- Can the experiences of regions and their borders also be mapped? How can they be represented? For eg. How is conflict on a border indicated?
- If natural forest reserves and a conscientious use of natural resource is a national concern, why are these not mapped on physical maps and political maps at introductory stages?

These questions are also a response to our blind acceptance of neutral static “pictures” of complex situations that in actual fact need multiple representations. A mechanical reproduction of images of already mapped territories instils a passive reception to the idea of our nation as a singular picture rather than a living, growing entity with complexities and challenges that every citizen (including every child) has the right to learn about, study and engage with, in their own capacity.

The Colour of our Skill

Our obsession with territorial boundaries extends to the way we approach colouring in art. A common practice in schools and homes is to 'correct’ children when they colour, by telling them to colour within the outlines of a drawing. This is very similar to patriarchal attitudes towards women in the name of concern and protection: 'choose any colour but stick within the (social) boundaries’.

Image 4

I have slowly learnt from observations that colouring is an entirely independent experience from drawing, especially for children. Unlike adults, children don't necessarily approach picture-making as a two-step process that starts with creating outlines and then filling in colour. Line-drawings are one mode of expression and colouring becomes another mode of expression. Even when the two are layered over one another, viewing them independently offers greater insights into the child's enjoyment of the process. This can in fact be applied even while viewing any kind of art that involves line and colour. Moreover, the need to stick within the lines must be self-motivated as the expression demands and not what the viewer expects in the form of a "recognizable" picture.

The other argument that defends colouring within the lines, places it as an indicator of developing fine motor skills. From the perspective of a child, this would be a cruel trick. The sheer joy and excitement of working with colour would tempt even the most finely skilled child to play with colour without giving much thought to filling it carefully inside defined spaces. Colour and its usage give us insights into the child's emotional, imaginative and expressive abilities. Restricting the activity to motor skill development indicates a tendency to develop children into machines from a very early stage. What we can consider is to develop it as a technical skill in art at the upper primary and high school level, along with a variety of other tool handling skills; and the importance of developing this skill may also correlate to the development of aesthetic appreciation.

Image 5

Image 6

The lack of an educated audience for the arts has given technical skills far more prominence than content and subject. An extremely skilled artist/ musician may not necessarily be imaginative, innovative or conceptually sharp. Some of the greatest artists and musicians have been those who have used their skills to express critical thoughts in their time. Many of them went to the extent of unlearning the skills that they developed. This does not however imply that skills need not be developed in the first place. On the contrary, the emphasis on

rigorous practice of fundamental skills in any of the arts or sports, has been a basis for a serious pursual of these disciplines. The crux lies in determining the necessary skills for a specific discipline and how these skills empower individuals to think, respond, act and innovate sensitively and humanely.

In the lower grades, pedagogic practices include activities that improve both cognitive and motor skills (fine and gross). As children progress to higher grades, a greater emphasis is laid on cognitive skills. The development of creative skills (creating on one's own, hand-crafting, expressing through sound, movement, music, etc) is reduced to self-appeasing activities in the name of arts and sports. Rarely do these activities challenge children to innovate, imagine and build their potential. This is not only detrimental to the overall development and learning experience of the child, it also leads to incompetencies in the professional sector. For e.g., engineers, plumbers, doctors, electricians and carpenters are often not able to perform basic skills expected of them because their focus in higher grades and college was on passing exams regardless of what they were learning and whether their knowledge and competencies had any value in real world application. The objective of education in such cases would have been to get and retain *any* job based on a certificate of qualification and not their actual ability to deliver quality in their work.

Such mediocrity ought to shock us, considering the long history of astounding art, architecture, sculpture and music traditions in our country. What then, from our cultural history are we striving to preserve in the name of national pride if we are unable to imbibe the genius of thought, innovation and artistic beauty?

During my interactions with children who have been exposed to the practice of the arts at the lower primary level, they have often remarked appreciatively about the effort and skills that potters, weavers and other artists possess. The hands-on experience of working with art exponentially increases their sensitivity towards other artworks and an appreciation of the effort invested in creating art. Could this potentially make them more likely to conserve heritage and continue cultural traditions? At the same time, could this develop their ability to be critical of their own work and begin to desire better skills to make better creations?

A Critical Study of our Heads

Clay is a delightful medium and I have seen an exponential increase in enthusiasm amongst children during a clay modelling class. The children of Class 5 have had many opportunities to work with clay and they have created objects like mobile phones, kitchen utensils, bullock carts, oxen, dolls, the variety is quite unending. In one of the drawing classes, we had worked in pairs to draw portraits. So I suggested that they try something similar with clay, except that it didn’t need a reference and could even be an imaginary portrait. The objective however was to focus on three-dimensionality and roundedness of the head and its features. The exercise required paying keen attention to the form from every possible angle.The children were used to modelling a variety of objects in a convincing way. When it came to the human form, it was flattened like a drawing into discs and circles. They hadn’t

consciously explored the roundedness of their own bodies, faces or heads. While I worked on my piece, a few children began to understand that a head was in fact closer to a spherical form than it was to a disc. We explored the surface of our heads and faces as though it were a landscape, gently feeling the curve of our forehead, the bulges of our cheeks and eye balls, the eye sockets, the bones that shaped our jaws, the shape of our nose and how it extended out of the face, the shape of our lips and chin, the softness of our earlobes, the texture of our hair. Every little exploration led to a little rework on their pieces to create heads that were more spherical and not like flat puppets.

The beauty and challenge of working with three-dimensional form is that every angle provides a unique perspective and much like a rubik's cube, while we work on one part we might alter the form as seen from another angle. There are very few activities that can

Image 7

Image 8

Image 9

rigorously engage the mind in multiple perspectives as effectively as sculpting can. The kind of knowledge gained from an experience of building something in one's hands and watching it take form from every angle is both concrete and intimate. The mind also gets used to the coexistence of multiple views of the same subject.

If such a practice can potentially create an understanding of multiple viewpoints, would this knowledge also inculcate compassion towards a view (read opinion) that may be different from one's own? Can we educate our children to not become trolls?

Differentiating School Rules from Pedagogical Methods

For every single attempt of one teacher articulating her understanding of our nation, there can be thirty interpretative possibilities in the average classroom. Is this diversity a good thing? If it is so, how can we nurture it to enrich our existing understanding of our nation? If not, what is the singular ('singular' being different from 'common') understanding that we are striving towards?

I have had the chance to observe the rapidness with which conformist conditioning sets in in our schools. School and classroom rules (meant for facilitating everyday operations) are easily mixed up and confused for learning methods. When the new 1st graders started school, the first few weeks were spent in slowly orienting them to the operations of the school, its timetable, the classroom structures, etc. During this period, there was a lot of free

exploration, play and discovery that was carried out by children at their own individual level and interest. The culture of gathering in the classroom to learn together took time to develop and many children used to leave the room mid-way through a class to explore something outside. During this period, I planned an art class that started with a story and a song about a tiger. This was followed by showing them a picture of a tiger and a discussion about its body its colours and pattern, and eventually a colouring exercise. I took a half-coloured sample with me and thought of working on the rest of it with the children in class. Each child

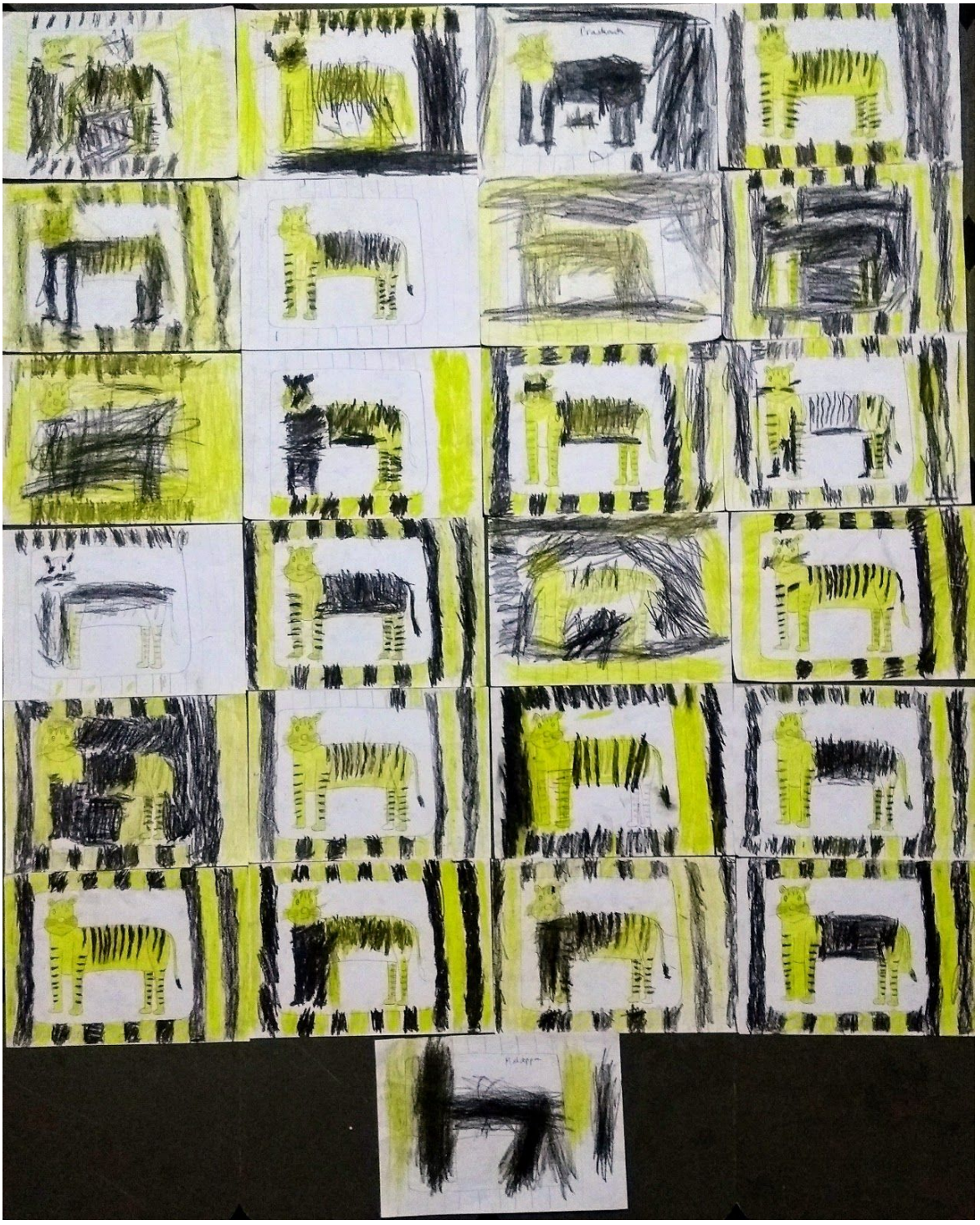

Image 10

had its own worksheet too. The sample hardly influenced the children. I got the most energetic 25 variations of a tiger. Each child worked mostly independently and only a few used peer assistance or my assistance. It was a precious experience for the rarity it held in encountering each individual child's expression of one common idea. The images were stark and bold. They were all tigers, but not one in the way I had imagined.

About a month and some more art classes later, I again narrated another story while simultaneously drawing its illustration on the board. The children were excited and engaged. This time, it was a story about a lake in the blistering summer heat and how it had dried up leaving just a water patch the size of a little finger. The rains brought relief and began to fill this lake little by little and its border began to expand all around. The children were given large sheets of paper and asked to draw this expanding lake, line after line in a concentric fashion. I erased the drawing on the board and heard a collective cry of complaint for rubbing off something that they wanted to look at and draw. One month earlier, this same group was hardly interested in the sample image I was asking them to look at. In barely a month, the dependency on the teacher as source was firmly established. The loss of what the tiger colouring session had was palpable. In just one month, the children had somehow got conditioned into relying on the board and less on themselves. The ratio was dangerously morphing into an equation of 1=30.

Children think independently and exploratively if they are presented with an environment that challenges them to do so. The average classroom environment is still subconsciously playing out unidirectional instructional methods that are teacher centred. Society also reinforces the power hierarchy of teacher over student. This unfortunately plays out both socially and in political administration because our education continues to feed it. On the other hand, nature is designed on principles of delicate and beautiful ratios. Formal learning at the elementary level neither gives importance to an immersion in nature, nor to the examination of these ratios. Our current tendency is to quantify, equate and sum up all kinds of knowledge into a homogenous version that can be easily fit into templates, replicated and multiplied. This is what we are doing with our idea of our nation.

Art and Empowerment

I started noticing that I needed to say less and less to the children during their process of making their artworks. The children in upper primary who either had issues of feeling demotivated and discontented, or those who feared that they don't know how to do something, changed gradually. There could be a few reasons for this:

1. The children were getting more familiar with the art process and learnt that trials led to both errors and positive surprises. They were willing to risk the errors and failures to discover the surprises.
2. I began to dedicate more time for each theme or activity to allow them to immerse themselves over many periods, to explore ideas and techniques, and to complete their work at their own level of satisfaction.
3. I stopped thinking of the activities as “art activities” and used a design approach of sharing a challenge and working on possible solutions. The challenges were not

diluted for the sake of the children's age; instead I prepared resources that could support the children while thinking about the solutions.

A few anecdotal stories would illustrate the above.

1. How to make a Falling-Tree Stand[2]

The children of Class 5 had been introduced to pop-up books through a few videos in one of the art classes. They had never seen books like those before. They were very excited about the idea of making their own pop-up books. I demonstrated the V-fold and the parallel fold and explained how these folds formed the basis of most pop-up mechanics.

The children made their trial experiments with used drawing paper before they sat in groups and worked out their own pop-up books. The basic demonstration triggered many little experiments and some children attempted complex variations of the demonstrated example. They were curious, imaginative and took risks to find something new. Some trials failed and they picked up more paper and started again. They revelled in the magic of opening a folded sheet to watch its insides move as the page opened.

This project extended over almost three weeks; with about four periods of art classes a week. During this time, the children gradually built their pop-ups, returning to their work in each class, modifying some bits, adding and reworking on their pieces. Many found it more exciting to create stand-alone units that were then collaged into the folded page. One boy who used this approach made a tree that had two newspaper pipes as its trunk. This trunk, unfortunately, was too heavy to “pop-up” and stand when the page opened. He always needed to raise it with his fingers and it would flop

Image 11

Image 12

Image 13

onto the opposite side. I pointed out that the problem might be due to the weight of the newspaper pipes but nevertheless was a good attempt and that he could think of its rectification in another piece. The boy was determined and two classes later came back to me with the same piece. The same tree popped up and stood firm. It even had a little bird’s nest with eggs inside, all made of paper. A small strip of paper pasted at the tree’s base had solved his problem. The drive to persist in finding a solution through his own design was remarkable, even when the class expectation did not demand it.

This boy is not considered to have grade-level competencies in academics (reading and writing skills). The ‘core subject’ teachers consider him to be a slow learner. However, what he learnt (rather quickly) with immense persistence and

self-motivation is perhaps something that many engineering graduates struggle with: simple design solutions through trial and error.

2. A Room for More Views

One project was born out of a question raised by one of the children of Class 5 during a general discussion. A child asked why our classrooms are situated one after another and one on top of another in three storeys. The temporary premises that the children were used to before moving into the permanent building, had seven independent cabins, each serving as a classroom. The impact that spatial design in school architecture can have on the minds of both children and teachers can range from the most subtle to the most obvious. The child's question was in fact about the subtler experience of not being able to have the view of another classroom from their own class window.

So we began to think about how our school is designed, why it has so much more space, so much more light and air, the basic shapes of rooms and whether any of this could be done differently. I asked them if they could for instance, imagine how it would be to work in a circular classroom. After a discussion with bubbling ideas and excitement, the children made individual drawings of how they would envision a circular classroom. We then divided our class into groups to further discuss the individual ideas and see if a collective idea could be created from each group by taking the good points from each individual member. A final drawing was made by each group.

Image 14

Image 15

In the next stage, each group created a 3D model in clay, based on their drawing. This is where they began to run into problems because some of the groups ended up with furniture of different sizes, which did not fit the classroom base that their teammates created. Their drawn imaginations showed up flaws in the model that they were shaping.The sizes of doors, desks and chairs, the wall-height, the space around the furniture-- all these changed from what they initially drew, because they began to realise that some things would work and others wouldn't. Some children were happy to just create a big table even if it didn't fit into the classroom model that the group

was building! Some walls broke down, some floors cracked, some groups had arguments and blame-games for their problems; a few did managed to work with good coordination.

A similar theme but with a different objective was designed for Class 7. They were to develop their understanding of paper-modelling and be able to create stable and structurally balanced models of objects or architectural structures with paper. I was also keen that they appreciate architecture for both its science and its aesthetics, from the most basic to the most complex. They were already familiar with many historic buildings of our country, as well as the pyramids of Egypt and the Colosseum in Rome, which don't have box-like structures. So I decided to compile and share some examples of modern 20th century architecture from all around the world to excite their curiosity even further, and included The Bahai Lotus temple in Delhi, the Sydney Opera house, the architecture of Antoni Gaudi in Barcelona, and so on… examples that would show them a variety of shapes and forms that brick, concrete, stone, glass and other materials can be fused into, without compromising on structural quality and functional relevance.

Image 16

After sharing a few simple techniques for folds and joints, the children began constructing basic furniture like chairs and tables out of paper from old drawings. Some children used bottle caps for the base. We kept in mind that the objects were proportionate and stable. One girl felt that desks could be triangular in order to accommodate three students (instead of the rectangular two-seater desks) as she felt that it would facilitate better discussions. She extended the same idea to her classroom too, with three walls and said that the teacher could move from desk to desk rather than be restricted to the space near the board. She eventually attempted a larger model of this idea in paper.

One group seemed more interested in the aesthetics of their construction. Their classroom was a circular stand-alone structure with an overhead water tank and its own ladder. In addition to windows, the room even had a skylight. This group paid a lot of attention to details. The doors and windows could open. The windows had grills and the door had a basic latch. They placed some furniture inside the room too. They

Image 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 (clockwise from top left)

decorated the exterior walls with paper strips. The structure for the skylight was also

improvised from a paper-weave base. It had vertical slits and the boys discovered that when they rolled it cylindrically like a lantern, it developed a spring mechanism which they could incorporate into the skylight. They added a toilet as an afterthought, but it turned out to be too small in proportion to the classroom.

Another girl struggled to make the most basic forms for many periods but she eventually ended up creating a model of a gated playground with a ticket-counter near the entrance, a slide, a swing and other play equipment inside.

All these constructions lie around in the art room and everytime the children visit, they seem to look at it, fiddle with a few things and then get on to other things. More than a month after the paper-modelling activity had been wound up, one of the boys who worked on the sky-lit classroom came up to me and said that it was not yet completed-- that they needed to paint it. “Then it will look good!”, he said.

The desire to see their plan through to completion, even after a month was a remarkable sign of how their minds continued to work, contemplate and innovate on their projects. I personally didn't think it needed to be painted and liked its “recycle” aesthetic. But another part of me was curious to see how they might paint it, if they did. There may be more surprises in store for us!

Concluding thoughts

The importance of all the arts in education is not new and its benefits are clearly being recognised in institutions that have embraced an integrated arts approach both within our country and across the world. The objective of this paper however, is to reiterate illustratively that there is a direct link between pedagogic approach and the development of human values and abilities that any nation would stand for. The key question is whether individual thought and expression are truly given value in learning practices. How are we hoping to nurture self-belief and confidence in children to grow into self-reliant and empowered adults? Are we asking ourselves what we are “skilling” our people to “make” in India? To know that one has the capacity to think, face a challenge and overcome it, is a matter of survival-- intellectual survival is as important as basic survival, for how else can one protect oneself, one’s community or one’s nation from being colonised?

The Azim Premji School has one room dedicated as the Art Laboratory. The experiments however extend far beyond the physicality of the room in the most exciting and yet safe ways. The arts have always been a safe laboratory for ideas and expression. Practicing the arts is only dangerous to the extent that it puts its practitioners in the most vulnerable spaces of a completely naked confrontation with themselves. These practices develop a self-critical eye as well as inculcate mutual respect amongst practitioners and create an environment for healthy critical debates by virtue of expanding one’s own ability to perceive multiple perspectives.

Over the eighteen months that I have been working with the children, I have noticed an increase in their willingness to try things on their own and becoming more self-reliant. Here however, I will point out that showing them a few fundamentals does help in giving them direction and defining a territory for exploration. At the same time, I have had to be very careful about how much I demonstrate lest we end up with twenty-five pieces of a similar mould and lose the diversity.

Image 22

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1. Manṭo, Saʿādat Ḥasan 1912-1955., and Tahira. Naqvi. “Toba Tek Singh.” Manoa, vol. 19, no. 1, 2007, pp. 14–19. Crossref, doi:10.1353/man.2007.0041.

2. This section was published as an article for the Mojarto blog hosted by NDTV
How To Make A Falling-Tree Stand : Classroom Epilogues.
https://www.mojarto.com/blogs/how-to-make-a-falling-tree-stand-classroom-epilogues.

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Image 2 to 22 are photographs of children’s work documented by the author.