

Teacher's Role in Making the Arts Truly Inclusive

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Our fear of making art we, knowingly or unknowingly, pass on to the children we engage with. As teachers, our openness and beliefs about art will shape how children in our classes engage with artistic forms. Embracing a positive and open approach to art fosters an inclusive environment where every child feels encouraged to explore and express themselves creatively.

'I cannot sing.'

'I cannot draw.'

'I am not good at acting.'

'I am not an artist.'

How many of us can relate to these statements? As children, we were corrected to sing at a perfect pitch and tone that shaped our understanding of music and singing. Most of us avoided singing in the chorus in *Antakshari* rounds and at best, retreated to being *Indian Idols* in our bathrooms. When given a mic or a platform to sing, we would refuse to participate reinforcing our belief that we cannot sing, which further limited our opportunities to learn music.

For most of us, the fear of making mistakes – whether in

music, dance, drawing, or acting – has shaped our belief that 'the arts' is not our cup of tea. This notion stems from the traditional view of art judged as being right or wrong. For instance, a painting is often considered beautiful only if it accurately represents reality. Yet, some of the most celebrated international artists, like Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso, are renowned precisely because their work defies conventional standards of 'correctness' and perfection. If they too feared the arts like many of us, the world would have been devoid of their masterpieces.

As teachers, our openness and beliefs about art will shape how children in our classes engage with artistic forms. Embracing a positive and open approach to art fosters an inclusive environment where every child feels encouraged to explore and express themselves creatively.



Figure 1. Group collage art.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, supported by a well-structured National Curriculum Framework (NCF), emphasises the importance of 'art integration' in every classroom. This integration can be approached in two ways: as a curriculum component and as a pedagogical tool. Both methods play distinct but complementary roles in enhancing the classroom environment.

Let's dive into the *whys* and *hows* of bringing arts into our teaching. I will share my insights from my experience of working with children and educators in different contexts and learning environments. Hope this gives you some useful tips for your next class.

Art as a curriculum component

By creating space for each child to participate, share their interests and skills, and collaborate on artistic projects, we foster a truly inclusive environment. This approach works across all age groups, provided we encourage individual expression and creative contributions.

How collaboration works

One of my favourite activities is group collage art, which can be adapted for students from K-12. Once displayed, these collaborative artworks, continue to inspire and reassure students of their place in the school community. Peer dynamics shift dramatically in a positive direction when we introduce art-based collaborative projects. In one of the workshops with adolescent children, I observed that some students tended to dominate over others. However, through regular art-based interventions, these students were able to set aside power play, work side-by-side, and collaborate to create and present their group artwork. Another powerful memory I carry is witnessing a group of children, including one with learning difficulties, sing a group song together. The deep sense of unity and shared purpose in their collective activity was profound, something that is rarely achieved in most classroom settings.

Why being non-judgemental is essential

The arts provide a unique, non-judgmental space for children to express themselves freely. Teachers must give non-judgemental responses to each child's work. These should be descriptive and detailed like, 'I see you have added minute details in drawing this part', 'Looks like you drew inspiration from your own life in writing this', rather than a subjective/opinionated response, such as, 'Wow', 'So beautiful!' etc. In this space, nothing is good or bad; correct or incorrect.

Unlike more structured or academic activities, artistic expression invites exploration without the fear of being



Figure 2. Arts must provide a non-judgmental space for children to express themselves.

wrong. Whether through drawing, music, dance, or storytelling, children can communicate their emotions, ideas, and perspectives in ways that are deeply personal and reflective of their individuality. This open-ended approach allows children to feel valued for their efforts rather than judged on the quality or correctness of their work. In the world of art, every contribution holds meaning, fostering a sense of confidence and belonging in the child. The artistic lens creates room for every child who chooses to draw a flat mountain or a pink sky.

Process is important not the result

We need to recognise that the process of creating art holds far more significance than the final artwork itself. The true value of artistic expression lies in the child's involvement, the story behind every stroke, the way a script is shaped by personal experiences, and the originality of each dance step.

As teachers, when we shift our focus to how the art was created – the level of engagement, critical thinking, and the effort poured into shaping the final piece – we begin to truly understand each child's journey. By looking at each one's context, abilities, and growth, we see how art has provided them a space for self-expression.

Let me share an experience as a teacher. The art prompt was simple: draw a landscape. As I walked around, most children had created picturesque scenes - mountains with a stream flowing down the centre, leading to a small hut next to a well. It was familiar and predictable. But one child's drawing stood out: a half-visible tree, an empty sky, and a swing hanging from another tree far in the distance. Curious, I sat with her and asked her to talk about her drawing. I knew she was a recent migrant from another state. She explained that this was the view from her village home. When I asked if she missed it, she nodded. In that moment, her artwork became more than just a drawing—it was a window into her emotions, her memories, and her sense of loss. By creating space for her to share, we

uncovered a story far beyond what first met the eye. This experience reminded me how the act of making art and reflecting on it, can reveal layers of unspoken feelings, especially for children processing change or grief.

Healing through art can benefit anyone at any stage of life – it can be a child dealing with emotional distress, an adolescent navigating identity, or an adult struggling with anxiety. It is not just those with evident wounds or trauma but anyone experiencing stress, uncertainty, or simply the pressures of daily life can benefit from the process of making art. One of the classic art techniques, known as ‘Wet-on-wet painting’ has been a huge inspiration for me in witnessing the healing nature of art.

Wet-on-wet painting

In this method, paper is soaked in water, and while it is still wet, children apply soft, translucent colours. The colours blend and flow into each other creating gentle transitions and subtle effects. This technique emphasises process over precision, encouraging children to experience the fluidity and interplay of colours rather than focusing on achieving a detailed or fixed outcome. The flowing colours promote a sense of calm and relaxation, as the child is drawn into the peaceful rhythm of applying the paint. The technique’s focus on the sensory experience rather than a perfect product supports the development of emotional balance, self-acceptance, and creativity.

Art as pedagogy

Art pedagogy or the use of art-based processes to teach a concept in a classroom, has long been advocated and recommended. However, the challenge of integrating arts often arises due to a lack of resources, limitations of the teacher’s comfort with specific art forms, and the

pressure to meet academic goals on time.

Resources must not be a constraint

The availability of resources is one of the biggest hurdles teachers face. The idea of collecting or requiring a lot of materials to make art discourages them from planning an art-integrated lesson plan. In reality, the most crucial tool for an art-based class session is ‘observation.’ We can find a lot of inspiration from the objects around us. For example, take up a simple poem from the textbook, and create a musical version of this using rhythmic sounds with a pencil, a duster, clapping hands or humming. Next, add singing the poem as an activity to help reinforce the poem and bring cheer into the classroom! These activities can be used in classrooms to foster conceptual understanding through music. Theatre and role play-based activities are also less resource dependent. Even techniques like puppetry are low or no-cost.

We can use these theatre-based methods to tell a story, introduce a concept and facilitate a discussion in the classroom.



Figure 3. Low-cost, easy-to-make puppets that teachers can use in their classrooms.



Figure 4. MA Education students of Azim Premji University learning to make and use masks with Umashanker Perodi.

Why a joyful learning experience is important

Art as pedagogy not only enhances academic learning but also supports the socio-emotional development of children. It creates an atmosphere that makes way for children to express themselves, process their emotions and find joy in the learning process. A happy child is often more engaged, curious, and open to learning. Positive emotions can foster creativity, improve memory retention, and promote social-emotional skills, all of which contribute to better learning outcomes.

One of the easiest ways to introduce art into your daily

classroom sessions is through warm-up activities. These quick, creative exercises can seamlessly integrate art into your routine and infuse a positive mood. Children's responses to the activity can indicate to the teacher whether children are feeling motivated or not. Even a five-minute art-based activity to start the day can help learning and retention. These activities can be linked to the academic concept to deepen students' understanding and build curiosity from the start. Imagine starting your day with 2–3-minute storytelling about a historical figure, using a hand puppet!



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