



It Takes a Village

Reviewer: Anita Dhayani

This book is about a mother and her two children living and working during a market day in an African village. The story begins: 'The sun was slowly rising in the sky, but the villagers had been awake for a while.' Reading this, I felt that my assumption of this story being about the lives of villagers struggling with hard work and hardships was right. The story was indeed moving towards this. People in villages have to wake up early. Who knows in what difficult situations the village children might have been portrayed in the story, I wondered. 'Yemi,' mother said, 'Today at the market, you take care of your little brother.' I will be busy selling mangoes.' My assumption became even more certain. The story did seem to be heading towards the hardships of village life. Yemi said, 'Come Koku, today I will take care of you, just me!' 'Just you?' Mother looked at Yemi and questioned, smilingly. Mother knew everything.

Mother knew everything, this sentence suddenly gives rise to many questions and curiosities in mind. What did the mother know? Why did the mother smile at Yemi's words? What is it that Yemi is unaware of, which only the mother knew? Every line of the story holds a mystery.

The story shows glimpses of solidarity and harmony in the village. *It Takes a Village* is a unique story of love and the sense of belonging in a village.

One of the women selling fruit said to the mother, 'Yemi has grown up now. She helps you so much!' 'Yes,' the mother said, 'Today she will take care of Koku'. 'Just me!' Yemi added. At this, the fruit-selling woman smiled because she knew that village children grow up and become adults by the age of 10-12 years. They begin to understand their responsibilities towards the family. Yemi does not yet fully understand the behaviour of the village people, which is why she thinks that she will take care of Koku all by herself. Through her repeatedly saying 'Just me!', the author succeeds in portraying Yemi's awareness of the responsibility assigned to her and her happiness for it.

Beyond this, the pictures speak more than the words in the story. The illustrator has infused such emotions in the characters that they appear lifelike.

Yemi carries Koku on her back and takes him around the market. After a little while, Koku starts getting restless. Yemi feels that he is hungry. She puts Koku down to buy peanuts. In that short time, Koku disappears. Yemi, worried, searches for him here and there. And here unfolds the mystery of 'Just me!'.

Yemi worries that Koku might be hungry. But a woman feeds him, holding him in her lap. Yemi feels that Koku might be thirsty. But another woman happily gives him water to drink. She thinks that Koku might be scared. But he is happily sitting with someone. Yemi searches for Koku at the shops, in baskets, in pots, under the bed, everywhere. She wanders around. She thinks that Koku must be feeling hot. But a village woman bathes him by splashing water on him.

Yemi searches for Koku amongst the chickens, sheep and goats. When Yemi cannot find Koku, she shouts, 'Koku is lost!' But the pictures tell a different story that Koku was not lost at all. He was on the other side of the path where Yemi was. The mat seller asks, 'Is this your Koku?' Yemi, lovingly picking him up, shouts, 'Yes!' Yemi thanks all those who had taken care of Koku.



Author and Illustrator: Jane Cowen-Fletcher

Reading age: 4-8 years

Print length: 32 pages

Language: English (also available in Hindi as *Gaon Ka Bachcha*)

Publisher: Scholastic Inc

Reading this story brings back memories of our childhood, the relationships in the village, uncles and aunts, grandparents, siblings, everyone and how these relationships bring comfort.

It is true that it takes a whole village to raise a child. The village contributes to a lot more, such as when there are weddings. A daughter or son belongs to the village, and every family in the village supports them by giving money for their wedding. At the wedding of a daughter, gifts and household items are presented by the whole village.

The story is filled with limitless emotions. The entire landscape of the village in the story has been etched by the author through words and the illustrator through pictures. It is a remarkable story, woven with human concerns, that introduces us to the soul of rural life steeped in the values of solidarity, care and a sense of belonging.

This story will resonate with all readers who have experienced village life and are now engaged in spreading the fragrance of its values in urban spaces.

Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal

Anita Dhyani is an Assistant Teacher at a Government Inter-college. She teaches Hindi language. She is interested in reading and writing stories, poems, and essays. Her hobbies include writing for children, travelling and listening to music.

Learning Through Art

Reviewer: Vijay Ravikumar

Learning Through Art is a collection of activities that primary school teachers can use to bring art into their classrooms. These activities are beautifully designed and use easily accessible resources, including natural materials like plants and sticks and waste materials like old newspapers. Moreover, the activities are simple for teachers to conduct and seem like a lot of fun!

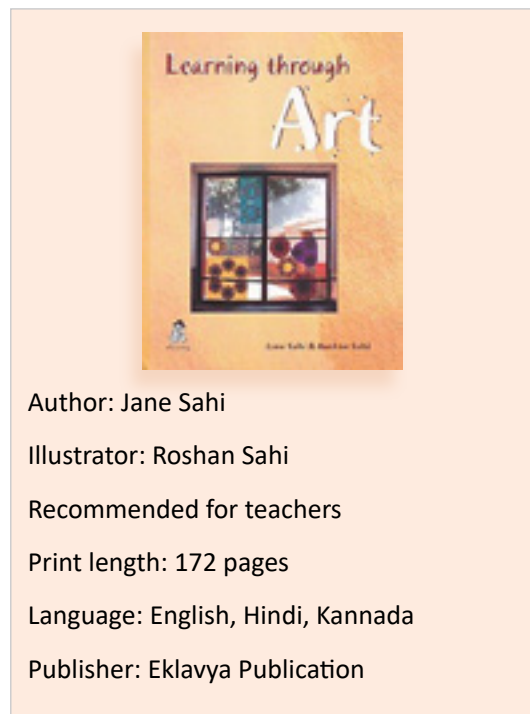
The book employs a wide definition of art, including games, stories and observational exercises, in addition to drawing, painting, and sculpting. Throughout the book, children's sensory experience of the world is emphasised, and art is fundamentally an exploration and expression of this experience. Indeed, our immediate sensory experience is a bridge between the self and the world around us – our family, neighbourhood, and even our society – and by developing our observational skills, we can begin to make sense of it. For example, an early series of activities focuses on understanding the role of water in our lives.

The first activity has children describe their experiences in the rain and then draw something they can think of in connection with the rain. A second activity has them discuss the sources and usages of water in their lives, as well as how it is stored, through both storytelling and drawing.

A third activity introduces water as a material for making art, for example, mixing it with paint and letting it flow over a wax crayon rubbing. The fourth and final activity explores how materials like stones and leaves behave when dropped into a small water body, followed by a challenge: build a boat (with sticks or paper) that can carry a small stone across the water body.

Other units explore concepts like air, space, light, food, and shelter, while also exploring a range of physical materials in highly creative ways.

The final two chapters focus on activities that relate more directly to mathematical and language skills. But even these activities do not view art as an instrument of achieving an end, but rather as a crucial link between a child's inner life



and the outer world. For example, the chapter on mathematical activities is great for developing a sense of pattern and symmetry, through activities that emphasise working with sticks, stones, and leaves, observing patterns around them, and responding with patterns of their own.

The chapter on language focuses on storytelling, with activities aimed at helping students build their own stories, beginning with their experiences in their homes. In addition, there are activities around responding to (and empathising with) other people's stories – whether they are classmates or more distant people. Finally, there are also activities for enacting stories using puppetry and masks.

Although the bulk of the book is a detailed collection of activities for students, there is a final chapter on discussion-based activities for teachers, around questions like 'What is the purpose of art in education?', and 'Are all children good at art?'. There are no simple answers to these questions, but the activities help us, as teachers, to question our own assumptions and stimulate our imaginations about what is possible in a classroom.

Early in the book, the author discusses the phenomenal level of concentration that young children have as they explore the world with their senses, whether it is playing with a cardboard box, reading a picture book, or drawing a picture of their own. The activities in *Learning Through Art* are very useful in harnessing this power of concentration and channelling it into activities that can develop confidence and (perhaps) wisdom in small children. The book would be a valuable resource for anyone working with children.

Vijay Ravikumar is faculty (mathematics) at Azim Premji University. He has worked as a freelance illustrator and theatre artist. Before the pandemic, he used to conduct art classes for children in Urur Olcott Kuppam, a fishing village in Chennai.