



**Sumanth Sampath**

*All forms of art are important for children to experience, yet a finished clay piece adds a special value for the children*

Though several schools across India have adopted an art curriculum, the art programme is relegated to the realm of extracurricular with little or no understanding on how this affects the overall development of a child. Education needs to be holistic and art programmes are an integral part of achieving the goal of holistic growth and development of children.

As an artist and ceramic teacher I can say that few art mediums facilitate growth and skills in children in the way that clay does. At our pottery studio, where I have taught children for several years, I have witnessed how invaluable the experience of working with clay is for sensory development, motor skills, self esteem, and self expression, problem solving skills, discipline, and pride.

There is no better moment for me than witnessing a child's joy as the kids sit at the potter's wheel for the first time and place their wet hands on slowly spinning clay. As they experience the texture and feel of

the clay, the students express what they are sensing with uninhibited enthusiasm: "It's cold, it's wet and mushy, and it's so heavy!" Clay asks to be poked, pinched, twisted and rolled and as they handle it, children develop both fine and major motor skills and realise that they have an effect on the clay, as it responds to their manipulation. Children visually inspect the clay's surface and colour, they smell it and are amused by the sounds it makes when it's wet. For many, it's perhaps the first time they've been encouraged to get wet and dirty in a classroom environment and there is an instinctive and uplifting response to the freedom they feel. Even when the finished product is ready to take home, the children hold and cradle their work, smoothing their fingers over the now fired surface as they turn it around and around for inspection.

Clay is a unique art medium because it is highly responsive to touch and very forgiving. As soon as children are given clay, they immediately begin to mould and shape it. They become aware that they are in charge and have an influence over the medium as it is quick to respond to their fingers. The feeling that they are in command of the clay gives the students the confidence to attempt any project which opens the door to greater self expression and imagination. Clay also allows a child to learn to repair mistakes and, therefore, not be afraid to make them. Making mistakes is essential for self improvement but can be difficult and even an obstacle for some children. The forgiving quality of clay and, therefore, the ability





to readily fix mistakes gives the child a sense of control over their project's success which improves self esteem and self expression as they realise that mistakes are not going to stop their progress. For example, during a class, a child had been working on his project - a toothbrush holder that looked like a ball player, for over two hours. All of a sudden he accidentally poked a hole right through the side of the article while decorating. He looked up at us devastated. But as I showed him how to take a piece of clay and fill in the damaged area, he suddenly took the clay from my hand and stated, "I can do it myself!" He repaired his piece and went on decorating it with fervor.

Clay is different from other art mediums in that it requires an understanding of the three dimensional world. In our programmes, we often encourage children to work on elevated turntables or to get up from their seats and walk to the other side of the table so they can see their creation from all sides. They begin to understand shape, form and perspective, and therefore get an insight into geometry. The children learn to really look and see the world around them and discover their place in that world. They gain knowledge of planning methods and problem solving as they map out their three dimensional project. Children need only encouragement to think on their own and a little help with the planning. For example, when we make a cylinder we start with a flat rectangular piece of slab clay which the students decorate and design as it lies on the table. As they are working we ask them how we could use this flat rectangle to make a standing vase. It's wonderful to see them understand how to roll it into a cylinder and we always have a few children who forecast the next step by saying, "We need a base!"

While there are rules and procedures that need to be followed when working with clay, children are very good about understanding guidelines and respecting procedures. Through this understanding they learn something that is very important: discipline yields

success. The methods we teach are simple: e.g. don't allow a piece of clay to be too thick, or a skinny tail should be connected to the body for support. I explain why the techniques are important (if the clay is too thick it won't dry properly or if the tail is too skinny and doesn't connect to the body it might snap because it is too weak) and the children grasp the concepts easily learning basic physics.

There are several after school pottery programmes and summer pottery camps being offered in various cities across India as well as at our studio in Bangalore. These two-hour programme sessions have various themes running across the various sessions. During these programmes, I've interacted with several parents who express a concern that their child might not be able to stay on task for that long, but the opposite is always true. Whether it is the sensory response to the clay, the ability to be in charge of the medium or, perhaps, the ability to express and articulate their emotions through their physical prodding or smoothing of the clay, all children, even those with high activity levels, become engaged and engrossed in their work. The children do not experience frustration or disappointment because the clay is flexible and compliant.

At Clay Station, we all teach ceramics with the philosophy that the process is more important than the product. I place emphasis on the discovery and joy of creating. However, children feel excited as they make their mug or pencil holder and announce that it's for their grandmother's coffee or for their dad's desk. The functional and durable nature of the finished stoneware clay gives children a feeling of significance and pride. All forms of art are important for children to experience, yet it does seem that the long-lasting nature of the children's finished clay piece adds a special value for them.

It is always fulfilling for me to introduce clay to children and watch its unique qualities contribute to their development in so many ways. Knowing



how valuable pottery is to children's achievements and because it is discouraging to see limits put on our children's school art programs, Clay Station has helped schools start pottery curriculum; worked with children with special needs, trained teachers to work with clay, assisted in purchasing and setting up equipment, and helped in planning and designing school studios. We encourage schools to start a pottery programme, no matter how small, as we strongly believe that it makes a greater significant impact on the holistic development of children than any after school programme. Towards this, we have shared the clay experience both in outreach programmes in schools and children's workshops within our studio with the belief that clay is an essential element for nurturing children's growth.



SUMANTH SAMPATH is a ceramic artist and director at Clay Station Art Studios Pvt. Ltd. He has taught and conducted workshops at several studios and schools in the U.S.A., Israel and India. Sumanth is part of a collective of enthusiastic artists at Clay Station, whose constant effort is to share the therapeutic and creative joys of clay with everyone. Sumanth can be contacted at [sumanth@claystation.in](mailto:sumanth@claystation.in)