

02 The Arts as Core Curriculum



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We have typically slotted all the arts taught in schools as “extra-curricular”. The connotation is that it is an addition to a curriculum, something that lies on the fringes - just outside the purview of all that is sacred! And what we really mean, without mincing words, is that it is non-academic. It does not end with that all-absolving Board Examination! So it is all right to accord it the space in the timetable when the children are tired – late afternoon – some dance, music and fine art before they pack their bags and dash for their waiting buses! The ‘important’ subjects like Mathematics and Language (Science is a close contender) occupy the pride of place in a timetable – the early hours of the day, when the children are fresh and eager to learn! Show me one school time table in which the day starts with singing, dancing, acting or painting and I will bow to that school philosophy, and say, “Ah! Now you are getting the essence of education!”

This is not my personal opinion or fancy. I would like to quote from a seminal book by Devi Prasad published by the National Book Trust, titled “Arts: The Basis of Education”. He represents the ideas of Gandhi and Tagore, our leading philosophers, whose ideas on education are of central importance in contemporary India.

Devi Prasad presents two main goals of education,

“Along with an understanding of the values one’s society cherishes and learning to practice them in life, education ought to inculcate a deep sense of discretion and a feeling of self-respect and freedom in the individual to be able to think independently and

make choices for himself or herself.”

He summarises his argument for why arts needs to form the basis of education with:

“In other words, education in general and art education in particular is a way for one to grow and become sensitive to the beauty in nature, of social values and the aesthetic aspects of life as a whole.”

However, with the impact of globalization and in our attempt to make our children ‘market worthy’ in the world economy, we have begun to lose our focus on art education. It is the creative arts that will enable a child to establish her roots and find the deeper meaning of life. This would stand her in good stead to face the sweeping changes that engulf the young adult in every part of the world. Further, creativity is an essential skill in the 21st century, and this is best honed in the realm of the creative arts and then transferred to all other learning as well.

If this is enough reason to move the status of the creative arts in school curricula from ‘extra-curricular’ to ‘core-curricular’, how would we go about building such a curriculum? More importantly, how would we implement such a curriculum in a manner that would address the needs of a child in her own particular context?

I would like to address these questions in the light of my experience as a practising teacher and educationist with some expertise in the professional development of teachers and curriculum development.

Building a curriculum with the arts at its focus

The first process note that I would stress in connection with building a curriculum is that it has to be a collaborative exercise with the teachers. It is only when a teacher recognises that she is a builder of curriculum and not a mere deliverer of a prescribed script, that she will own the curriculum and bring to it her own creative thoughts and input. I realize the time-intensive nature of this process that many schools may not want to apportion, but inherent in the process of collaborative curriculum development (with facilitation by a trained curriculum expert) is professional development opportunity for teachers, that will invariably ensure the quality of a school system.

When teachers articulate their values with respect to their domains of specialisation, and work together to decide what is most important to teach, the chances of there being deep learning for the students is raised a hundredfold.

The next step is to decide what themes to choose, to integrate learning around an arts focus. This requires brainstorming with expert facilitation. The themes that are chosen across the year must necessarily have the following features:

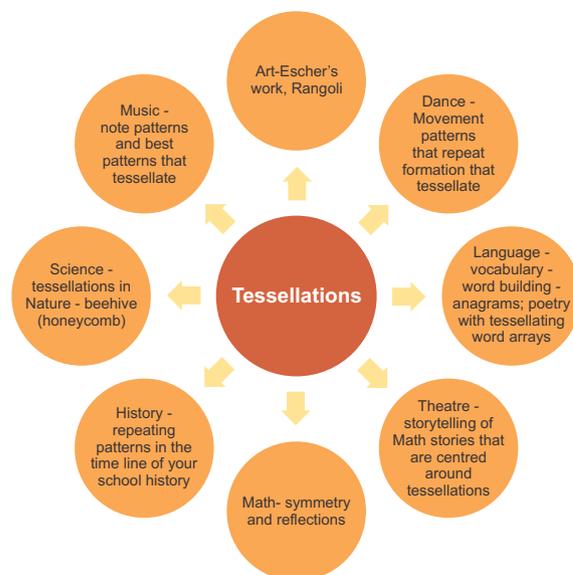
- The topic/ issue should be relevant to the child
- The theme should be of interest to the teacher team
- The theme should be relevant to the social context and values of the institution

To satisfy all these three criteria is a challenge, but brainstorming with the teacher team should be sufficient. Ideally, some discussion with the children is essential. However, given the fact that the curriculum needs to be in place before the start of the academic year, teachers could either brainstorm with their children at the end of the previous academic year, or document the ideas that emerge through the year

with their students, to arrive at issues or topics that would be relevant to their students. Informal discussions with students with this objective in mind would provide a rich incentive to get to know students better and their needs and priorities. That aspect of this process cannot be emphasized enough. Arriving at something that is meaningful to the child and getting to know our students well, is crucial for meaningful learning in the class room.

Web resources abound and ideas for cross curricular themes are available in plenty. Some resources are listed at the end of this article.

Once a topic has been decided upon, it is time for a brainstorm that could be captured in a mind map about how each discipline could approach the topic. Here is an example that I am creating, but with close resonance to actual work that we could achieve in a school - and that I have actively engaged in myself. The suggested content for the different domains in this mind map could be adapted to age appropriate levels for children of different grades. The best way to achieve this is to refer to a set of international standards (eg. McRel www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks) or National standards (eg. NCERT guidelines) and link the learning outcomes for every lesson to a standard that is age appropriate.





You may look at this mind map and wonder where the art focus is. In this layout of integrated learning, the topic of tessellations is one that lends itself to interdisciplinary skills in the creative arts like fine art, music, dance and theatre and in other disciplines too. Another approach would be to use themes like a historical event (World War II, for example) that could be rendered in music, dance, theatre and artwork.

When an integrated approach is used, learning becomes situated in the real world far more effectively than when each discipline is taught in an isolated compartment. When the arts are brought into the main focus of the integration, the sensitivity that Devi Prasad speaks of, the aesthetic aspects of life are highlighted.

Tagore (1922), in his book on Creative Unity, expresses each individual's need for creativity:

The joy of unity within ourselves, seeking expression, becomes creative; whereas our desire for the fulfilment of our needs is constructive. The water vessel, taken as a vessel only, raises the question, "Why does it exist at all?" Through its fitness of construction, it offers the apology for its existence. But where it is a work of beauty it has no question to answer; it has nothing to do, but to be. It reveals in its form a unity to which all that seems various in it is so related that, in a mysterious manner, it strikes sympathetic chords to the music of unity in our own being.

Centering the learning of children on the arts will enable not just deep learning but also create a sense of harmony within each learner. This is a vital need in the 21st century when mind-boggling advances in technology, coupled with an increasingly violent world, threatens to create discord within the human psyche. Not just skills of creativity, but creative unity in individuals and society as a whole can be envisioned with the arts as core curriculum in schools.



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