

Art and the Environment

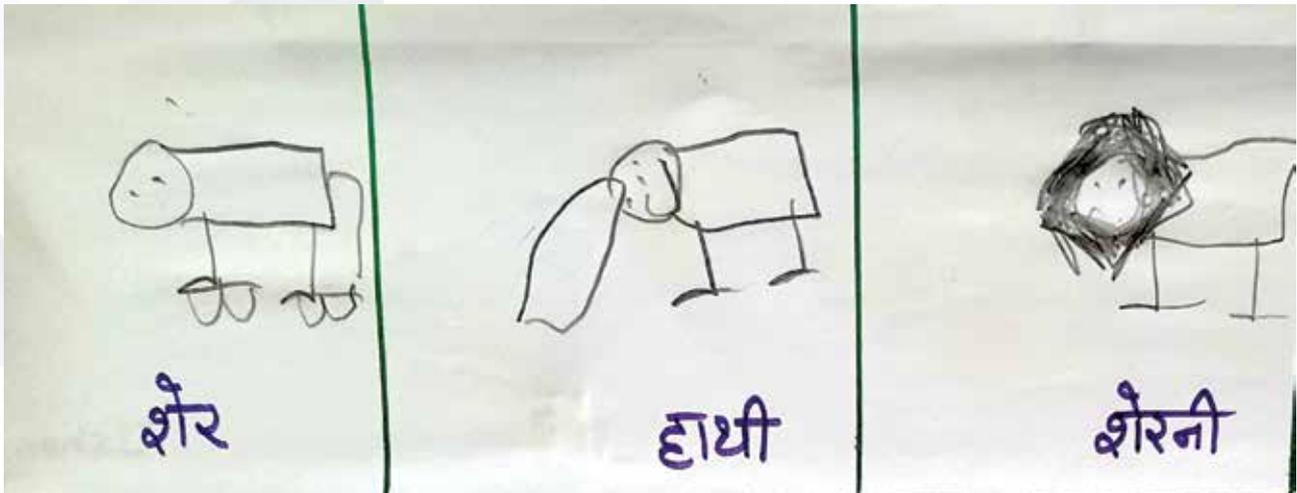
Malavika Rajnarayan

In the Malayalam film *Ottal* (2014, directed by Jayaraj), the lives of two young boys are portrayed. One of them is Kuttapayi, raised by his poor and ageing grandfather who rears ducks in the backwaters; and the other is Tinku who belongs to a wealthy family and attends a local private school. Kuttapayi does not go to school but carries a wealth of knowledge about ducks, plants, trees, birds and butterflies – minor details observed daily from a life shared with these beings and from the innumerable questions patiently answered by his grandfather. Tinku, on the other hand, struggles through boredom and a lack of meaningful connection with his school lessons. His friendship with Kuttapayi opens up a whole new world of

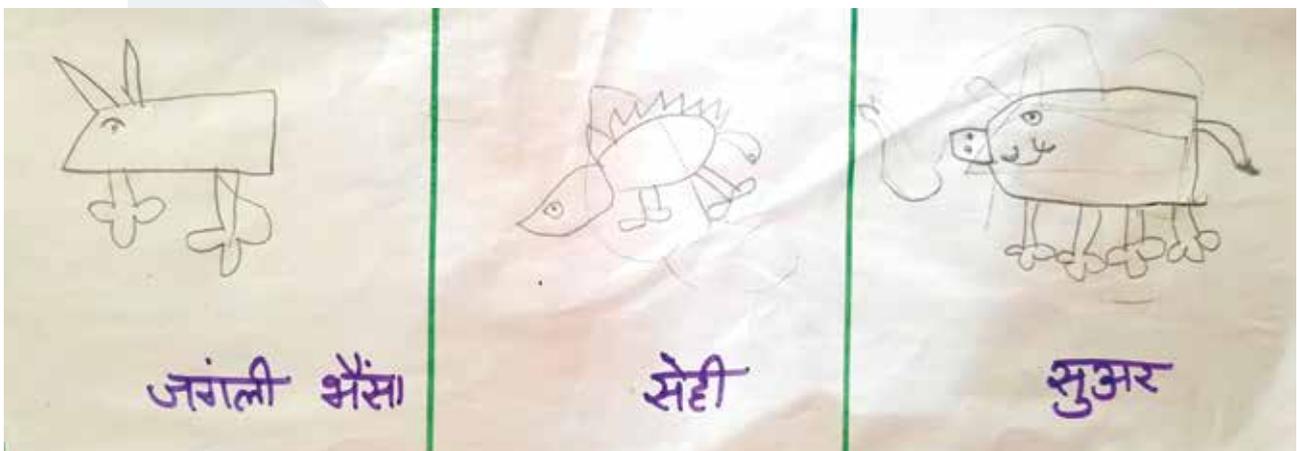
discoveries, enticing him to spend entire days away from the uninteresting routine of school. Although the story turns darker when Kuttapayi is sent away to work in a fireworks manufacturing unit, the essence of the entire film is firmly anchored in the beauty and wonders of nature – each scene allowing us to experience the sounds and sights of the backwaters and persuading us to find a bit of Kuttapayi in ourselves.

Bringing the environment into the classroom

In one of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) classrooms at the Azim Premji School in Uttarkashi, animal drawings made by four-year-old children were displayed (Figures 1 and 2), each labelled



Figures 1 and 2. Animal drawings made by 4-year-old children.



by the teacher. There are several reasons for this being a remarkable example of integrating arts in the classroom. In the early years, all drawings made by children are considered forms of written expression and communication. In this case, it was the role this display played that could be considered as art because of the multiple imaginings it triggers in viewers' minds the question as to how different animals can be perceived by different minds. Let us imagine that the children drew these animals, but they were not displayed and instead of their drawings, a regular animal chart printed in bright colours is permanently displayed. Such a display would gradually condition the children's imagination to be limited to images seen in the chart and at the most a few textbooks, and storybooks. They would gradually begin to model their drawings of horses, cows, dogs, pigs, tigers and mice in the manner these are portrayed in popular imagination. Any representation of animals that deviates from the norm would either make them uncomfortable or confused or even worse, be perceived as 'flawed'.

From a very early age, children need to be exposed to a variety of artistic representations of the natural world, in addition to real-life exposure wherever possible, and video documentaries that capture animal habitats and behaviour in authentic ways. Folk paintings of animals, ink sketches by different artists, unusual angles of animals captured by photographers – all these are invaluable sources of igniting the imagination and emotional responses of children. When such diversity of artistic expression is shared and discussed in the classroom, children get sensitised to also perceive diversity and nuances within their own environment.

Creating opportunities

Schools face many challenges in deciding how to include the arts into learning experiences to create environmental awareness. While one of the problems lies in limiting the arts to providing cultural 'entertainment', the other problem is our dwindling relationship with nature. For thousands of years, art has sprung from a deep engagement with nature. It is, therefore, not surprising that any disengagement with art would also likely cause disengagement with the environment and vice versa. Another challenge lies in how we design school environments and routines – do learners have adequate access to a variety of trees and plants? Are they encouraged to nurture flora and fauna as a part of their everyday learning routines? Are they allowed to spend adequate time outdoors

to explore and discover the wonders of the natural world, and share their discoveries with others in the classroom? Are creative imaginations, ideas and expressions of children appreciated and encouraged?

What teachers can do

While many teachers make an effort to incorporate hands-on learning, learning-by-doing and experiential learning pedagogies, we may need to closely examine whether the chosen activities actually result in the learning/experience that is desired for children. Let us look at some examples of how some environmental themes can be planned with an arts-integrated approach. Here are some possibilities for arts being used as a tool for experiential learning.

1. Let us imagine a class IV classroom where a discussion is on about water as a source of life and a basic need. The teacher leads the discussion and prompts students to talk about the problems caused by pollution. They also discuss measures that could be undertaken to address the problem. As an art activity, children are asked to draw on the theme of pollution from their own imaginations – create posters, poems and stories to raise awareness and display these in their class or school premises. Here, children use their own observations and experiences as the basis for learning and creating artworks. The process of making art also provides an enjoyable and memorable platform to establish concrete connections for the concepts they learn. The teachers would, however, need to ensure that the learning extends beyond the classroom and prompts behavioural change and conscious actions in the everyday lives of children.
2. In class V, children can be assigned group projects where their task is to conduct a survey in their own school, neighbourhood or village to study different aspects of their local environment. Some of these could be:
 - Number of stray animals and their care and wellbeing
 - Natural sources of water in the locality, its storage, distribution and usage
 - Waste collection, management and disposal practices

Following the survey, the groups can be asked to develop creative modes of presenting their learnings from the data gathered. Some children can create decorative charts with pictures and key

highlights; some can create a story and perform it as a play, some others may create a 3D model of an imaginary ideal neighbourhood, and some can make drawings and paintings. The component of experiential learning might be more effective here because learners engage in a deeper examination of their own living environment through a survey and are given the opportunity to re-imagine it and propose solutions and models through a creative/art process.

3. Music and simple voice experiments with sound can be other modes of sensitising children towards the environment and developing an appreciation for nature. Children can be made to listen to the sounds of animals, a variety of bird calls; sounds of rain, water, thunder, and wind. They can then try to reproduce these sounds while also mimicking their movements in role-play activities. This can be a very powerful mode of developing empathy and compassion for other living beings and observing the delicate balance of co-existence in the environment.
4. As much as it is important to create a print-rich environment for learning, creating an aesthetically pleasing ambience that can stimulate all the senses is also very impactful for children. This can be done by making and installing wind chimes by using light pieces of discarded wood, metal, or any other object found in nature. Simple experiments can be carried out with children to explore sounds produced by a variety of materials to make their own instruments that are modelled like

xylophones. Children love to touch different textures, drum on different surfaces and explore rhythm. Special surfaces can be created within the school premises where children can explore sounds that are linked with nature. Sculptural artwork can be created out of dried twigs, pinecones, seed pods, and many other natural forms that have a variety of textures and patterns. If these are lightweight, they can be suspended as kinetic mobiles that sway and move in the wind.

Art as a holistic experience

While these examples given above support experiential learning, they may vary in the intensity, impact and effectiveness of the experience of every child. However, they broaden the opportunities for children with diverse learning abilities (or multiple intelligences), as well as learning outside the classroom. The key objectives of art and arts education are to awaken all our senses, develop compassion for all forms of life around us, and develop the creative capacity to think boldly and imaginatively.

The arts are also a means of creating immersive and enjoyable experiences for children, which can have a long-lasting impact on their learning. Most of today's cutting-edge scientific inventions have had their seeds in science fiction, cinema, and art. This fact must encourage us to expand our ideas of art beyond the mastery of technical skills and aesthetic spectacles to give ourselves a little practice in flights of imagination.



Malavika Rajnarayan is a visual artist based in Vadodara, Gujarat. She joined the Azim Premji Foundation Fellowship Programme in 2017 and currently works as a Resource Person for Art and Music across Azim Premji Schools and is also continuing her own art practice in Vadodara. She likes to write about art and education. She can be contacted at malavika.rajnarayan@azimpremjifoundation.org