



Creativity: Role of arts in Early Childhood Education

Asha Singh

“Arts is the very basis of education”

Devi Prasad

Sculptor and Peace Activist

Young children provide a range of dialogues that reflect a deep affinity for making associations, compare and draw their own inferences for making meaning of the world around them. Their dialogues can range from ‘it rains because teacher throws buckets of water up up up’. An irate three-year old having to leave her playschool a bit early complained “Mama why do you come early?” A four year old is exasperated when haphazardly placed cushions are fixed by the mother and howls “you ruined the cave of the lion, the deer will now be caught!” Such childhood narratives convey the vibrancy of children’s thought and processes of thinking. They convey their ability to think in novel ways and make meaning of physical-social reality. Their statements point to fresh perspectives from their experiences and explorations rather than shaped by adult interventions. Children reflect creative minds and multiple visions.

What is creativity?

Dictionary defines creativity as novel and innovative thinking. Creativity is the process of forming original ideas through exploration and discovery. In the teaching learning process its important to comprehend the notion that creativity develops from experiences with process, rather than concern for the finished product. Creativity is more than talent, skill, or intelligence. Creativity is above competition or doing something better than others, it is about thinking, exploring, discovering, and imagining. How do we foster this active engaging in children such that they can savour the unique possibilities and develop innovative thinking? It is often believed that artists are creative and that excellence in arts is creativity.

While it is true that business houses can be creative in selling products such as the humourous and topical advertisements by Amul. A farmer can be creative in how the planting of saplings form intricate designs, a mother may be house proud and create interesting spaces. Similarly many parents create fabulous stories for their children which amuse and generate bonds of attachment. Yet it is also true that the arts are especially useful in encouraging divergent thought and promoting innovative thinking, yet creativity is an approach, ways of thinking that can energise many chores of everyday rhythms. Experiences to think independently, explore, experiment and experience are essential 3E’s in building strong foundations in young children for moving towards becoming creative adults. Totochan is a book written by a Japanese television anchor who acknowledges her dynamic success to opportunity and experience of adventure as a young child in her school. Freedom to do, freedom to express and above all freedom to make mistakes and be guided to think for alternatives allows skills for problem solving, confidence and independent thought. Creativity is embedded amidst a complex web of simple everyday tasks done as playful experiments.

Nurturing creativity

Schooling does tend to be led by methods that address a collective with little focus on the individual variations in ability and interests. The genesis of schooling is embedded in print rich knowledge acquisition which does not necessarily provide impetus to the learner who may have visual memory or spatial expertise. Art as the basis for learning unfolds many magical surprises breaking the monolithic tenor of classrooms with methods inclusive of learners with kinesthetic and visual memory.



Arts seem to address a diverse set of learners as they open more communication pathways. Children who are text unfriendly and low on sequential memory lean more towards medium that allows for some unstructured expression. The arts have little set definitions and appreciate both a tree with roots below the soil and as well as trees that have roots that hang. Overtime school systems have to comprehend the full magnitude and positive contribution of arts in education.

Twentieth century Indian philosophers Rabindra Nath Tagore and Sri. Aurobindo have proposed integrated education basing it with primacy on the arts. They emphasized sensitivity in education that nurtures emotion and spirituality through culturally rooted classroom techniques. The arts are languages that most people speak across cultures, languages, geographical locations, variations in educational background and even range of abilities. Music and movement is basic to life rhythms which is why even a distraught baby finds momentary comfort in the rhythm of repetitive sounds. It has been seen through many studies that the arts contribute in the growth and development of children with disabilities. It is also equally important to note that arts also serve as adhesives among communities with diverse skill sets.

In western academic world the “integrated approach resonates in Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences which suggests that our school systems reflect our culture, teach, test, reinforce, and reward primarily two kinds of intelligence - verbal and logical-mathematical. These are often considered as foundations of the basic skills. He suggests, however, that there are at least five other kinds of intelligences that are equally important. They are “languages” with their own symbol systems that most people speak and that reach a wide spectrum of individual differences. They include visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intra-personal intelligences. These intelligences provide the foundations for the visual arts, music, dance, and drama, and through these art forms most students will not only find the means for communication and self-expression, but the tools to construct meaning and learn almost any subject effectively. This is especially true when the arts are not only taught as separate subjects but integrated throughout the curriculum at every level.

The arts comprising music, movement, painting and drama can bring many subjects to life and allow for abstractions to become experienced reality.

Drawings serve as significant insights into children’s thinking. It is important to treat children’s drawings as basis for dialogue. When children create what may appear as collection of curves, lines or squiggles there is a whole set of connections created through the child’s ‘eye’ of the mind. Art in the classroom allows the child to explore and express. The skill to represent with accuracy will follow, the ECE classroom needs to open opportunities for experience not focus on expertise.

Arts as experience can be part of early childhood programmes in three ways. One is the way described as performances during annual events. The other is using arts in everyday classroom interactions. Most teachers are familiar specially in the more progressive settings with organising annual celebrations and attempt to use art in daily rhythms. There is yet another third perspective of meeting the artist who spends a day with the children.

Art in everyday rhythms: playful interactions

In recent years, ‘child oriented learning’ advocates have generated a discourse around plurality in children’s learning styles. There is a growing awareness of diversity in children’s social, cognitive, and emotional competence as also presence of linguistic variability. As ECE teacher our minds need to be alert to classroom diversity and search for ways in which children can find a personal space within formal learning settings. A simple dolls corner provides vast openings for role play, dialogues that convey feelings and perceptions. Painting with vegetables, arranging leaves collected while on a nature walk is fun and fosters connections between nature, class and learning. Music, storytelling, watching puppet shows and movement involve multiple skills and create multi domain learning. Creativity lies in most activities that form part of the ECE curriculum, it is the playfulness and nurturing the child’s agency and engagement that allows for expression.

Art as annual events: creating connections

Often annual events are much abused as they create a calendar of haste and rush of schedules. However, each one of us does remember the hustle and bustle

of school celebrations with different memories. Schools are transformed from quiet disciplined spaces to buzzing areas of painting, craft work or rehearsals of dance or music. The school corridors are dotted with children's work of art; annual events have the spotlight on performances. Essentially these performances also mark links with learning embedded in the arts.

Children dressed as mythological characters understand cultural symbols, being in a Naga costume or adorning a Santhali sari become memorable experiences. Dressing up in unfamiliar costumes from different states brings momentary transformation situating children in worlds beyond geographical proximity. It stokes the imagination compelling children to think of diversity of people's lives through sartorial experiences. When children dress as something different or participate in a dance of any kind they think and act as something other than themselves. Art as performance inculcates ability to connect with socio-cultural plurality. Children are able to experience novelty, make associations about possibility of new perspectives.

The music and lyrics unfold cadences and sounds of languages. Experience of the art forms through movement or creating sets sensitizes to colours or hues significant in various social geographies besides also kindling a sense of curiosity for related stories, customs and traditions.

Art through the masters

Some schools have other ways of creating opportunities for arts in the life of children at school. They attempt camps with professionals, working with celebrity artistes as experiences beyond encounters with glamour only bringing forth awe for expertise and skill. Certain schools have attempted such measures to the delight of children.

Spic Macay is a step in this direction as well. Permitting art activities to be centre stage has many hidden treasures such as being

- Inspirational
- Fostering value for multiple talents
- Creating regard for varied professions (playing musical instruments, potter, mathematician - all share the same stage)
- Understanding the role of practice for perfection

- Opening opportunities for children with different talents to communicate and express

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey wrote of this unique ability of the arts to "break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness." Artists, he felt, "have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation". When we begin to create and respond to the arts ourselves, we kindle the fires of emotion, perception and appreciation. We look underneath the surface realities of the world. We release our imagination.

Why are the Arts important?

1. They are languages that all people speak that cut across racial, cultural, social, educational, and economic barriers and enhance cultural appreciation and awareness.
2. They are symbol systems as important as letters and numbers.
3. They integrate mind, body and spirit.
4. They provide opportunities for self expression, bringing the inner world into the outer world of concrete reality.
5. They offer the avenue to "flow states" and peak experiences.
6. They create a seamless connection between motivation, instruction, assessment, and practical application leading to deep understanding.
7. They are an opportunity to experience processes from beginning to end.
8. They develop both independence and collaboration.
9. They provide immediate feedback and opportunities for reflection.
10. They make it possible to use personal strengths in meaningful ways and to bridge into understanding sometimes difficult abstractions through these strengths.
11. They merge the learning of process and content.
12. They improve academic achievement enhancing test scores, attitudes, social skills, critical and creative thinking.
13. They exercise and develop higher order thinking skills including analysis, synthesis, evaluation and "problem-finding."

14. They are essential components of any alternative assessment program.
15. They provide the means for every student to learn.

Conclusions and simple classroom strategies:

In our schools we have some minimal provisions for the arts in place, however it would be movement towards creativity and education for Human Development if more thought went in making varied choices taking into account the diversity of students. Children with disability also tend to get an optimal environment in the expression friendly and non-singular format of the arts. Schools need to focus on being

- being more inclusive of plural forms: variety rather than one singular typing of responses
- explore best practices from different school settings: music for the day
- Regional days: use museum of drums, masks, costumes
- Regional arts & celebrations : linkages with different artistes
- Link with artistes for children-oriented projects



Ideas for Classroom dynamics

- Read stories, laugh together, encourage children to enact characters, use voice modulations
- Join in the tea parties in the housekeeping or doll corner during imaginative play.
- Modify the housekeeping/dress-up corner into the home with different number of children or make it for story characters of the three bears. Transform that same housekeeping corner into a rocket, ship or a doctor's clinic.
- Play with children to build towers and bridges with wooden blocks. Add little leaves or old cardboard boxes to create different landscapes.
- Invite puppets to talk with children and help them learn new songs and finger plays.
- Change the classroom furniture arrangement to encourage spaces with new purposes and functions.
- Use the floor instead of the usual table for eating together or listening to stories.
- Have small corners for children to spend time reading or doing a puzzle.
- Use common everyday objects for new uses. For example, paint with a rubber ball dipped in paint, change a book into a talking puppet, or turn a table over and make it a boat.



Asha is a professor with Lady Irwin College, Delhi where she teaches Human Development. Her primary interests are in using the arts in education. She has worked in theatre in education. Besides teaching, she works with teachers and children using theatre as a teaching tool as well as to generate self-reflection. Her interests in the theatre and training in dance has prompted innovative classroom teaching techniques. She also devotes time for issues in Early Childhood Education. She works closely with teachers at the early childhood level up to the elementary level. She can be contacted at asha.singh903@gmail.com