

The Arts and Socio-Emotional and Ethical Learning

Malavika Rajnarayan

Every month, I spend a few days observing arts classrooms in the Azim Premji Schools. I find this extremely valuable for understanding the arts-learning process and how it is connected to all other aspects of education. Having been an arts facilitator myself, I am familiar with the challenges faced by art teachers on an everyday basis. As a group comprising visual arts and music teachers from all the Azim Premji Schools, we have worked consistently for over five years to develop better classroom practices across the different stages of school education.

There is an assumption that art 'automatically' promotes Socio-Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEEL). Today, we see a growing awareness among teachers and parents about the benefits of learning the arts and how it helps in children's overall development and wellbeing. Teachers and parents also desire that their children learn to draw 'well'. This latter aspiration often narrows down the objective of arts activities to mostly focus on technical skills, which in the Foundational Stage is related to fine-motor development (hand-eye coordination and control of simple materials and tools). While this is also important, we cannot hope to address SEEL without consciously planning for it. Colouring worksheets have become the go-to activity for engaging children, and appreciation is reserved for those who fill the colours 'properly' within the outlines. But do such worksheets allow children to express their own ideas and feelings? Even if children are choosing their own colours for the worksheet, can we be sure that every child's choice of colours corresponds to the emotions and feelings that they consciously wish to express?

In one of my art classes, a child of class II, drew a picture on a slate with chalk. It showed two intersecting roads that divided the slate into four parts. Near the intersection were a bus and a two-wheeler. When I asked him what was happening in the scene, he explained that the two vehicles had crashed into each other, the people were injured, and an ambulance was called, and they were taken to the hospital. He drew this repeatedly a few times over a couple of classes. A little concerned,

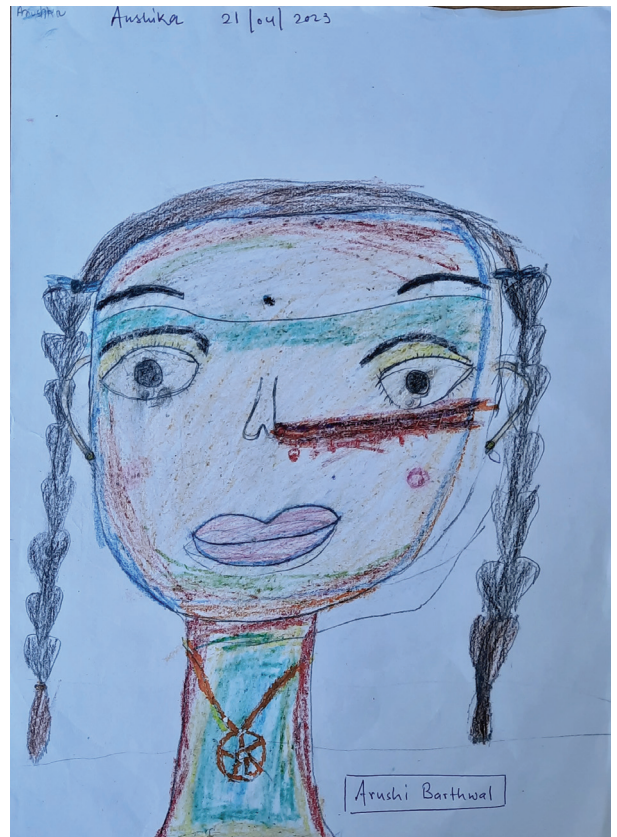
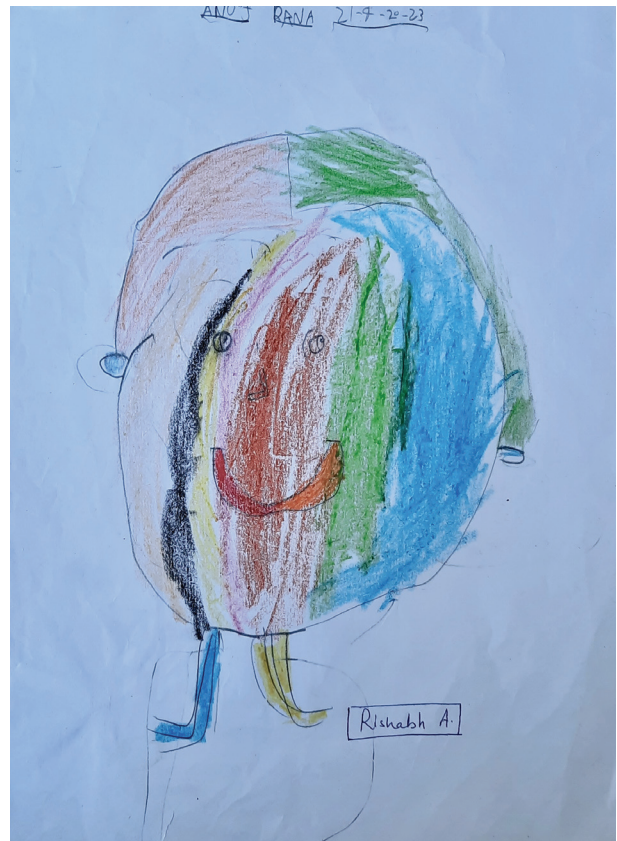
I mentioned it to the class teacher who, in turn, enquired from the child's caregivers if the child had witnessed a road accident and was affected by it. The family assured us that no such incident had occurred, and the child might have got this idea from watching TV! Open-ended art activities allow children to express a multitude of ideas and experiences that they are exposed to. Their emotional expression can be inferred through both their artwork and the conversations we have with them. Colouring worksheets with ready-made fish, flowers or butterflies may not have scope for personal and emotional narratives.

Let us look at a few ideas mentioned in NCF and its classroom implications.

Positive self-concept

When very young children show us their scribbles and receive positive responses, they feel understood. They sometimes construct their own stories around these scribbles. Once they begin to draw faces or stick figures, I ask them: *Who is this person?* In cases where there are more images with people and objects, I ask: *Where are you in this picture? Who are the other people in this picture? Is this your home/dog/object?* These queries usually get them to talk about their families and immediate environment.

I have observed other art teachers talk to children while they are drawing: *What clothes does this person wear? Can you show me? Look at your own clothes... it has a collar, buttons, sleeves... is the person in your drawing wearing something like this? Is it a child or an older person?* After these prompts, the children not only look at their own selves and belongings but also observe little details of their friends sitting next to them. They record these intimate observations in their own way. These may not appear realistic, but a world of details opens up as they point out chappals, bindis, bangles, buttons, hairstyles, bags, teeth and even tears rolling down a face. They feel confident and encouraged to develop their own ideas and expressions when these are discussed, displayed and viewed by all in the classroom.



Artwork portraying self, friends/family created by class II students of Azim Premji School, Uttarkashi.

In the class I music room, I observed a teacher teach children simple sound patterns using claps, finger snaps, tapping on the thigh and tongue-

clicking sounds. This was played in a 'follow the leader' format, where each child got their turn, and each was given the freedom to put these sounds

together in their own way – tempo and pattern – the rest of the children followed this. Here again, children were given the opportunity to develop a positive idea about themselves since each of their ideas was validated and repeated by the whole group.

Emotional awareness and regulation

I was accompanying an art teacher to class I. The children were excited about getting their own sheet of paper to create something. In the meanwhile, two children had got into a scuffle. One of them got really angry and hit the other child. The teacher intervened and asked them to settle back in their places. However, the issue was not settled. The child who got angry was still angry and upset. Carrying on with the day's task did not seem to be a reasonable option for him. Others in the class were also restless to begin their work and the teacher had got busy distributing materials.

I had been watching the child who was upset and decided to talk to him. I asked him to tell me what happened. He complained that the other child had said something mean to him. I asked him 'Did that make you angry?' He nodded. 'Is that why you hit him?' I asked gently and he nodded again. I told him I understood that he felt angry and that I also get very angry and upset when people are rude. He started to cry. He was probably relieved that he was not chided, and that someone else understood his frustration. We talked about the other options he could try when he gets angry instead of resorting to hitting someone. One option was to use words to tell the other person that we feel bad or hurt when they say mean things. Another option was to walk away from that place and sit somewhere else.

I encouraged both the children involved in the scuffle to spend time thinking about what happened as they made their drawings that day. Their pictures did not show anything that had happened but giving them time to draw and colour helped them calm down, refocus, and feel understood. It is a challenge for teachers to single-handedly manage the needs and issues of every child in a

classroom. It helps to have a few strategies handy. Acknowledging children's emotions and helping them find words or pictures to show how they feel could be one such strategy.

Social development

The arts create many opportunities for children to work together and share materials. I was observing a group of class I students as they worked on a large drawing together. A few took the lead and marked out different areas in the drawing sheet and assigned portions to each group member. I noticed one child who sat without participating. When I asked him why he was not doing anything, he said. 'I don't know how to draw.' This was immediately echoed by a couple of others in the group, '*Didi, isko nahi aata hai.*' (Didi, he does not know how to draw.) Perturbed by this, I asked them to keep a little space for him also on the drawing sheet. Then, I asked the student if he knew how to hold a pencil. He said, he did. I asked him if he could touch it to the paper and move his hand; he said, he could. I told him that is how we all draw and if he knew how to do that, he could draw too. I gave him the pencil and asked him to show me how he moves it on the paper. He drew a little house with a door and a window. I asked the others to see his drawing and asked them if he could draw or not. They all smiled and agreed that he could.

Many art teachers regularly make time for presenting and talking about artwork in the classroom. In this process, children listen and pay attention to how others are thinking and feeling. They learn to appreciate a variety of expressions. The teacher's role is crucial in developing positive relationships with all the children, particularly those who are shy, or have low self-esteem. Many of these issues can be resolved if teachers are observant, alert and sensitive to the interpersonal dynamics in the classroom. The key factors that contribute to SEEL development in an arts classroom are pedagogy and classroom facilitation, and not simply any attractive arts activity.



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