



**NOT JUST AN ART ACTIVITY, BUT A MOVEMENT IN EDUCATION:
How An Experienced Educator Found Meaning
In Her Teaching Practice**



***An Impact Study on Shalaka Deshmukh,
a past EdSparks Collective (2020-2021) Participant.***

Introduction

The NEP 2020 privileges the arts in education by stating, “the arts need to be integrated into classroom practices of all other curriculum areas,” and elsewhere, “there should be no hard separation among ‘curricular’, ‘extracurricular’, or ‘co-curricular’, among ‘arts’, ‘humanities’, and ‘sciences’...”. ArtSparks Foundation has long advocated for greater recognition of the innumerable benefits of art in education. Towards this end, we continue to find pathways to spread awareness and understanding around the value of art in education. This impact study is one such pathway.

Learning in and through art is key not only to the development of students' imagination, expression, and observational skills, but to their cognitive development as well. ArtSparks's **EdSparks Collective is a one-of-a-kind, 12-session professional development program for all those interested in exploring the full potential of art to transform student learning.** Each workshop session is carefully designed to systematically build participants' capacity to design and implement enriching educational interventions that utilize art to foster 21st century learning and life skills in children.

EdSparks Collective cohort members, upon graduating the program, go on to become part of a larger community of practice, and are provided with on-going support throughout the year, post the program. Support is offered to help participants design and implement impactful art interventions in their respective organizations. **This study features Shalaka Deshmukh, a past EdSparks collective participant. It documents the many ways the EdSparks Collective program helped enhance her teaching practice and contribute to enriching the learning spaces she works within.**

Recognizing the gaps in and challenges to the way art is taught in the Indian education context.

Shalaka Deshmukh has been an educator and a teacher-trainer for 30 years in various settings, serving both civil society organisations as well as schools in and around Maharashtra. In particular, she has been affiliated with Door Step School as teacher and teacher-trainer, Unnati ISEC as Honorary Consultant, The Shikshan Mandal, Goregaon as Assistant Secretary and also heads the Centre for Quality Education - P. B.Samant Shikshan Samruddhi Prayas.

Through her long-standing affiliation with the civil society organisation, Door Step School, that works towards educating children from the most marginalized communities, she was given the **freedom and space to test out new approaches, and design educational interventions using art.** Witnessing the active response of the children and their increased engagement with learning, she **realised the immense potential that art offers towards strengthening student learning.** And this led her to look for additional ways to leverage the potential of art.

Over the years, Shalaka gathered valuable insights to implementing effective approaches to art education. She viewed art as a stand-alone curricular subject in and of itself, while also viewing it for its potential to be integrated with other subject areas. However, she found it challenging to develop the capacity of her team members to fully embrace art and get them to understand the depth and breadth of learning embedded within the artistic process. **With the absence of a framework for teaching and learning through art, she was unable to share with them a sustainable, structured approach to art education.**

*Shalaka reflects, “As a teacher I wanted to explore and investigate different ways of teaching children. One day, while teaching the children how to draw a boat, they said, ‘Didi! Boats aise nahi hoti’ (Sister! boats do not look like this). They went on to tell me how boats are and how they look. So, I kept asking them questions to share more and as they kept giving me information, I drew it out. I understood from this experience that **we don’t need to teach children, they know and observe a lot of things from their surroundings, we just need to facilitate and discuss things with them to strengthen their learning and help them enjoy the learning process.** These kinds of experiences have added to my teaching practice over the years, but I **did not have a***

well-rounded understanding of whether these experiences were actual pedagogical concepts and practices and as a result I could not use them on a regular basis or help others understand them.”

She goes on to state, “I kept experimenting and trying out new things in this way. The children at the civil society organisation were more willing to take on these new projects, but there was a scarcity of funds. So, I used to plan to use easily available or natural materials. However, in a formal school setting, I saw that children are more hesitant to explore materials even though they have access to them. I also witnessed how secondary school art teachers teach art which was very different from my approach. And that’s when I recognized that the way art is taught in the Indian education system needs to be changed. But, how to go about doing that was something that I was grappling with.”

The above highlight some of the dilemmas and challenges that Shalaka was confronting when, through Wipro Foundation, Unnati ISEC—another organization that Shalaka has been affiliated with that works towards building functional literacy among tribal communities—was notified about ArtSparks’ EdSparks Collective program. Unnati ISEC felt that Shalaka would be the best candidate from their team to join the 2020 cohort of EdSparks. And, through her participation in the program, gauge how it could add value to the work that they did.

Revelations and pathways to transforming student learning through art education

From the very first session of the EdSparks Collective program, Shalaka describes having felt a deep and profound shift within her. Like something profoundly different was occurring through her experiencing and witnessing the way the sessions were being facilitated. Throughout the program, she shares, she was able to observe and experience first-hand how an inclusive environment was created, one within which everyone, irrespective of their background knowledge, were able to actively participate, using art to activate and showcase their own distinct thought processes. This, according to her, not only helped participants realize the varied potential of art within educational settings, but also helped them identify impactful pedagogical practices that could more effectively support their students’ learning.

In her own words, Shalaka shares some of her most impactful takeaways from the EdSparks Collective program:

i) Valuing the “Process” over the “Product” – *“Whatever a child is doing right now is a part of a long process. In today’s world we want answers immediately. But answers shouldn’t be provided easily to children. The children should search for the answers, explore them and find a solution. This creates rich opportunities for impactful learning. A process-oriented approach like this is one of the most important concepts we gained from EdSparks Collective that strengthened our idea that learning should be a continuous process, rather than focusing on a final result or product.”*

ii) Evoking Individual Creative Capacities – *“The EdSparks program helped us understand how we could get children to bring in their own creativity and original thought in art-based projects, as opposed to facilitators coming up with the ideas and just executing it with the children.”*

iii) Recognizing the Importance of Planning Curriculum in the Arts - *“For me, using the curriculum design process and template for planning lessons, something we learned from the EdSparks Program, has almost become a habit. It gives me immense pleasure when we work on a theme and fill the template discussing each point. These discussions and processes bring clarity not only for that particular theme but also each element of the curriculum. I am also able to help build the capacity of my team of teachers to inculcate these elements in their teaching practice where every nuance is thought through keeping the larger objective in mind while lesson planning.”*

iii) Utilizing the Power of Formative Assessments in the Arts – *“The use of the assessment rubric introduced to us during the program can also help a child assess their own work. This a very strong hands-on*

tool for teachers too where they can develop rubrics for various themes in order to facilitate effective formative assessments. This helps set up every learner on the path to success.”

iv) **Creating a Safe and Brave Space**– *“The EdSparks Collective Program gave me a space where I could lay down all the baggage that I was carrying –questions, concerns, thoughts, assumptions, etc. This was a space where I could explore again, make mistakes, learn new approaches and elements that would add value to my existing teaching practice. The facilitators of the EdSparks Program would keep giving us inputs and guided us to try and think more. This encouraged us to push our limits. The opportunity to experience these things as a learner, helped us get greater insights as to how we could help our own students and children to achieve greater results.”*

v) **Benefiting from Membership into a Community of Educational Practice**– *“Whenever a capacity-building or a training session occurs, if we only keep it to a few sessions and activities it is bound to reach a saturation point. In these cases, it only remains a one-time experience. For it to be impactful, there is a need to make the learning a process. During this process, you should get a chance to brush up each important concept one step at a time. It is impossible to internalize, learn or understand something in one go. Through EdSparks’ Communities of Practice, every participant is given opportunities to regroup on a regular basis ever since we completed the program. Small nuances and aspects of what we covered during the EdSparks program are revisited and discussed upon. Through this our learning builds in a true sense as we share and learn from each other’s experiences.”*

vi) **Experiencing Changes in Mindsets, Attitudes and Practices** – *“The EdSparks program gave me immense clarity on the thought processes regarding art in education. I always knew it does play a great role in education, but how exactly it does that was unclear to me. I had developed practices and approaches using art that happened by chance in the classrooms during my years of teaching. But I could not repeat or use those approaches again. After the EdSparks program, I now know how these approaches have a strong and important educational value. I have been able to identify even more concepts, terminologies and their meaning and importance in education. Due to this, I am able to use these art-based educational approaches more often and also feel more equipped to help others to use it. “*

v) **Trustworthy Research-Based Methodology** - *“Through the methodology that we learn during the EdSparks program, there is an assurance of 100% engagement and the fact that every child feels successful. Using this methodology, you will be able to observe each child’s thought processes and reasonings in a tangible manner. Once the team members at the civil society organisations that I am affiliated with, and the subject teachers at the school were able to see these results, their attitude towards art totally changed. The teachers have now started to integrate these practices in their classrooms and are seeing amazing results!”*



Here is a link to a [video](#) of Shalaka sharing her experience right after participating in the EdSparks Collective program (2020-21)

Transcription of the video in English: *“Hi, I am Shalaka Deshmukh from Mumbai. I attended the EdSparks Collective program offered in two parts - one in Oct. 2020 and the other in Jan. 2021. In the first part we had a lot of hands-on experiences and in the second part the thoughts and concepts behind those experiences became clear. This has been a really amazing experience for me as there were **many important educational concepts introduced during the program. One of the most important concepts was sharing and reflection.** This has also been given an important place in lesson planning. **In the education system, there is very little space given for reflection, sharing of thoughts, verbalization of thoughts and discussions.** Another important aspect for me was the way lesson planning was introduced to us. It was very interesting for me to see **how lesson planning itself can be a creative process.** I am looking forward to using it with my team of teachers and facilitators. I thank ArtSparks Foundation for this amazing experience!”*

Workshop-to-workplace transition

*“I have always believed in having hands-on experiences. During EdSparks Collective we were able to experience, in a hands-on manner, the pedagogical approaches as a learner. **Rather than just getting the children to do it, we should try it out for ourselves first.** This is a habit I try to build among our teachers as well.” –Shalaka Deshmukh*

After completing the EdSparks Collective program Shalaka Deshmukh went back to implement her learnings in the spaces that she works within. This involved **taking it back to the children in the classrooms and integrating it in her teacher capacity-building efforts.** She immediately took steps to provide the staff at Unnati ISEC and teachers at Shikshan Mandal (Pre-Primary, Primary and Secondary) school with the same hands-on experiences that she had been exposed to through the EdSparks program. This was followed by separate discussions regarding the different age-groups they serve.



Shalaka feels that the autonomy she has, and the time she gets to spend with the teachers at Shikshan Mandal, has enabled her to conduct in-depth workshops and provide continuous support to the teachers to see how to facilitate these approaches with children and learn new approaches to teaching using the ArtSparks methodology, tools and resources provided during the EdSparks Collective program. She reflects,

“When the staff got to experience the thought processes and complexities that come with working with art materials, we were able to have follow up discussions on these various aspects. It also helped them feel more equipped to take it back to the children in their classroom.”

“The thought processes that occur during a hands-on experience can be connected to various subject areas. After providing that experience, I had discussions with the math teachers regarding how they could use an art-based intervention to strengthen the understanding of a mathematical concept among their students. And discussions with science teachers on what their experience was as a learner and based on that experience how could they integrate these teaching approaches in their science labs? It is easier for me to have these discussions with them once they have experienced the methodology themselves.” –Shalaka Deshmukh

The Shikshan Mandal, Goregaon

Shikshan Mandal is an 80-year-old educational institution. It aims at providing educational facilities for the children of Goregaon near Mumbai. It is a government-aided institution with a philosophy that every child is equal and every child should get rich learning opportunities, especially children who come from the lower strata of society.

The managing committee members collectively represent a belief that every subject has its own value and that **whatever the children learn they should learn by doing**. Furthermore, they are driven by the belief that the child and his/her needs to learn and progress should be at the centre of all efforts. Towards these ends, they have been working on integrating more child-centric approaches to education alongside a focus on academic knowledge. In this manner, they aim to develop the physical, mental, cognitive and emotional capabilities of a child. Through their efforts, they have brought a lot of changes to their methods of teaching, especially for the pre-primary and primary schools. These efforts have been directed towards providing children with opportunities to think for themselves.

To build on this philosophy and practice, and hone their capacity to think from a child's perspective, the school has constantly sought support from various resource institutions and experts. The management too have always been a part of all training sessions beyond merely supporting their team's participation in different capacity-building sessions. They believe that it is critically important for **the management team to understand concepts in order to support their team members and help them integrate their new learnings**.

Stories of Change

ArtSparks' Professional Learning and Development team visited Shikshan Mandal to study some of the profound changes that were occurring within that space after Shalaka's attendance in the EdSparks Collective program. ArtSparks' team members had the opportunity to meet and interact not only with Shalaka, but also the management team, Principal and the teachers. The stories of change outlined below are a result of conversations and observations made during ArtSparks' visit.

Pre-Primary School Teachers (Age group – 3 to 6 years)

At first, when Shalaka started conducting workshops with the teachers, based on her learnings from the EdSparks Collective program, the teachers did not quite understand the purpose of these activities using a series of art mediums. **Slowly, as they experienced one art medium after another, they began to recognize the embedded possibilities for teaching and learning in a very organic manner**. One teacher really liked working with oil pastels and was very impressed with the discovery of 'cause and effect' while creating different textures using various tools to manipulate and alter the material. Another teacher was surprised by the fact that she had never quite closely observed details while using art materials. All the teachers were of the viewpoint that **the experience of exploring various art mediums did not only build their own interest towards art but also developed curiosity in coming up with new ideas**.

Through these experiences with a variety of art mediums, the teachers were able to discover the possibilities and embedded learning in each art medium. **It became easier for them to understand how they could facilitate such sessions with their students**. They shared that **they themselves started to develop a flexible way of thinking**. For example, finding different shades of one colour through a process of experimentation, allowed them to see more than one way of doing things. They also began to make connections, for example, connecting mathematical concepts to the act of tearing and cutting paper into different shapes while exploring the medium of paper collage.

Soon, they started ideating and designing simple art-based learning interventions for their classrooms as a group. They **implemented their plans with the children and regularly reflected after their sessions**. They collectively shared with one another what worked best, the challenges they faced, the solutions they found, and in this manner planned sessions. This also helped them better understand the needs and developmental goals of the age group they were working with.

The teachers shared that while they had previously done activities that involved pasting pieces of red paper onto a pre-drawn apple, now they have started providing their students with choices. They now encourage their students to choose from a variety of fruits and vegetables, and also encourage them to exercise choice in selecting colours. Rooted in this change to their approach to teaching is a clear

understanding of the value of providing children with numerous opportunities to make their own decisions. ***This has broadened the scope of what children learn while creating opportunities for choice-based learning.***

Additionally, the teachers shared an example of how they used to conduct art and craft sessions in the past where they spoke about how they used to give children a set of step-by-step instructions to follow. For instance, folding paper to make a fish. They spoke about how they now realize that their students were only able to make one type of identical looking fish as a result of such an activity. After imbibing the new research-based methodology introduced in the EdSparks program, the teachers shared that they are using pictures of different kinds of fish and are asking their students to closely observe the various shapes and details they see, in order to establish that fish are of varied shapes, sizes, and surface details. In this manner, children are not only able to learn about a diverse array of fish, but are also ***able to develop their capacity to pay attention to details.*** In addition to these learning outcomes, the teachers shared that ***they find their students to be even more engaged in their classrooms for longer periods of time.***

An important aspect pointed out by the teachers was that there was no pressure from the management that they needed to implement their learnings within a given deadline. Furthermore, they ***appreciated the hand-holding, mentorship and the time given for experiencing and planning out their next steps.*** This has helped them enjoy experiencing the learning process for themselves as they continue to develop their teaching practice.





The Primary School Teachers (Age group – 6 to 10 years)

The Chairman, Principal, Coordinator and Teachers of the primary school shared that **previously, they saw art as a strong medium of expression. However, they did not know how learning, life skills and subject areas could be supported through art.** After Shalaka engaged the primary school teachers in sessions involving exploring different art mediums, as well as sessions that involved reflecting on their teaching practices. The time spent during this period allowed them to **slowly break down their fears related to art and freely explore different art mediums and recognize its educational potential.** The teachers and administrators reflected and shared their thought processes, and began to ask questions like, 'What more can I do?' and 'How can I do it differently to suit the context and my children's needs?'



Fort-Making Project

After some time of receiving mentorship and hand-holding, the teachers started designing their own art-based intervention. Annually, the school conducts an event tied to their celebration of local history, that invites students to construct Shivaji's fort. Students learn about the history of Shivaji during this time. Every year the children make a model of Shivaji's fort using mud. This time, inspired by Shalaka's mentoring and workshops, the teachers planned an alternate approach to the fort-making activity. They decided to give the students a set of guidelines about the various parts to be incorporated when building a fort and let the students find their own materials to build their forts. The intent was to build conceptual understanding of the structure of a fort while students could make their own choices on the material and construction of their unique representation of the fort. The teachers made this into a group project with 6 students assigned to each group.

The teachers shared the story of Vikram (*name changed*), one of the students who usually is not an active participant in classroom discussions. But, during this project, they were surprised to see him take the lead and convince his group that they should use stones to build their fort. Furthermore, the teachers shared that **it was inspiring to see the other groups disagree and agree with each other and eventually come up with solutions as a group.** When the students faced challenges during the

process, they **supported one another to solve the problems encountered**. The teachers also shared that this entire process gave them, as well as their students, a deeper sense of satisfaction and achievement. They noted that their role as teachers was different this time as they only needed to remind the children about the guidelines and requirements, for example, the fort should have certain features like observational posts, it should be at a level above the ground, etc. This experience has enabled the teachers to think even further, and they are now planning to have follow-up sessions where the children will design their own individual present-day forts and futuristic models of forts, taking students learning and imagination to the next level. **The teachers had heard about the concept of scaffolding a lot, but through this project experience of designing and executing an art-based educational intervention, they were able to experience it in a very practical sense of the word, and see the outcomes as well.**



Different groups of children tested the idea of stability and having a support system for a structure to stand. One group placed a tray within the mud below so that the structure could stand strong and in an elevated position. Another group placed objects in certain angles to create a support for the fort.

Shalaka shares, "For one particular teacher, the process of immersing herself in using different art materials has helped her become freer and is actively doing some amazing work with the children. **The effect of this experience has opened up her mind to find new ways of teaching other subjects as well. This is one of the greatest results I've seen.** The teacher who designed the fort-making art-based intervention is so excited with the results she has seen with her students that she is currently working on a case study about the whole fort-making project itself!"



Here is a [Video](#) of the teacher explaining the children's and her experience during the fort-making session.

With these experiences the team of primary school **teachers shared that they have now come to realize and witness how to develop skills and provide meaningful educational experiences by integrating art.** They themselves **enjoyed the independence and opportunity to explore and**

design these experiences to bring about applied learning. With a renewed vigour, they are taking this approach to all other activities they conduct with their students. Even the field visits that are organized by the school are more purposeful and well-planned. Teachers share that they are **more focussed on what exactly they want their students to learn from learning experiences, and, therefore, more thoughtfully plan experiences accordingly.** They shared that **continuous assessments have also become easier** as they are able to observe how children are responding and being involved in each session. Adopting these new approaches have also enabled them to more effectively step into their students' shoes, empathize more with their experiences, and thereby help support students better. Here are some insights gathered from the teachers and Principal:

"Now we are always thinking of giving students the opportunity to transition from 'I can't' to an 'I can' attitude. When any child is not able to do something, we used to constantly think what else can be done to support the child. With the help of the capacity building sessions by Shalaka, I now know what I can do. If a child is struggling, I am not going to do his work. I will see how to get him there."

"Understanding the fact that different children think differently, we decided to let the children make their own standing Ganpathi statues during Ganesh Chaturthi Festival. The children thought about how to make it stand, faced challenges, discussed it amongst themselves and found a solution without giving up. Their thought process revolved around—'If I have to do this, how can I do it' (critical thinking). Their minds were constantly busy. At first, I thought if we leave them to do things on their own, it won't look like an organized class, it will be messy. Now I understand the reason behind and how to facilitate this rich learning experience."

Even the Principal of the Primary School, Sujata shared --***"I myself had no experience with art. But now, after taking part in the sessions Shalaka held for us, I feel so proud to say that I can do art! And if I can do it, my children can do it for sure. Exploration was an amazing concept that I could connect with as even in math, before addition, we need to know the numbers and their values. It was a joy to see the children free to do what they want around the school, but what we need to do while the children are busy, to help them be focussed, we understood. Also, every sentence in the EdSparks resource package provided by ArtSparks Foundation is like a brainstorming activity! Inspired by an article in the resource package, we are currently working on redesigning our worksheets to make them more engaging. After reading that article we realized that in the case of worksheets, if the children don't know the answer, they have no other option but to leave it. On the other hand, during hands-on experiences driven by art, they are problem-solving as they face challenges. We are thinking of how this approach can be integrated into worksheets as well and how we can take out the repetitive content from worksheets and make it more engaging."***



The English Language Teachers (Age group – 11 to 16 years)

The English Language teachers in the Higher Primary and Secondary School needed ideas for a competition that takes place annually. Shalaka guided them to take an art integrated approach wherein they designed and planned for an oral competition called 'Picture Talk' inspired by the EdSparks session on 'Language & Literacy Development through the Arts'. They planned a competition wherein students were asked to describe an image that was shown to them and were encouraged to think beyond the picture. They assessed students based on the sentence structure, vocabulary and grammar.



The English language teachers sharing their experiences with ArtSparks' professional learning and development team

The teachers were **able to witness how differently each student looked at things**. They were amazed to see how **this art-integrated approach helped students to think, elaborate, imagine and express their thoughts through words**. Moving forward they would like to use art regularly in their classrooms to continue to build language and communication skills in their students.

Secondary School Art Teacher (Age group – 11 to 16 years)

The art teacher at the school has also gone through the same process of capacity-building facilitated by Shalaka. Due to these experiences, she too has **started looking at art from a new perspective**. She especially liked the concept of breaking complex shapes into smaller simpler shapes to support all students and help them feel capable in drawing. As she started including these concepts in her teaching practice, **she found her students were able to perform better and each of them were willing to learn more** in the art class. Even the students who had previously expressed a lack of interest in art before have begun to show more interest towards the subject. **The students no longer fear the art class, but actually enjoy it**.

Additionally, the art teacher shared that another concept that she found helpful was the usage of actual physical objects or photographs of actual objects versus referencing an illustration or artistic representation of an object. This helps open up the doors for each student to bring forth their own creative voice and expressions about the things around them. This contributes to **breaking the myth that only a selected talented few students can attend and thrive in an art class**. Now, **everyone is equally successful in their art-making**.



Ranjit Kokate is an educator and artist, and a past EdSparks Collective (2021-22) participant. He has played a major role in carrying out the learnings from the program with the children and teachers in Shikshan Mandal and Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (Phaltan). An impact study on Ranjit Kokate will follow soon.

Conclusion

Shalaka's story as an educator, her experiences and the challenges she faced may strike a chord with many educators in India. ***This impact study aims to provide insights to successfully integrate art in education in meaningful ways that fulfil the aspirations of the NEP 2020. Educators like Shalaka, who strive to find meaning in their teaching practice, found substantial answers through the EdSparks Collective program offered by ArtSparks Foundation.*** Some of the learnings through Shalaka Deshmukh's Journey include:

- Art provides a plethora of teaching and learning opportunities that occur in a very organic manner.
- Having the freedom and space to test out new approaches, and design educational interventions using art is necessary.
- There is great value in having a framework for teaching and learning through art for there to be a sustainable, structured approach to art education.
- There is tremendous value in understanding pedagogical concepts and practices embedded in art.
- Hands-on learning experiences enable teachers to make connections and therefore plan and design learning interventions more effectively. Similarly, these experiences enable management teams to understand the importance of the concepts being introduced and help them provide teachers with the necessary support to execute it in their respective schools and educational spaces.
- Hand-holding, mentorship and the time given to teachers for experiencing and planning out their next steps are important for a workshop-to-workplace transition.
- Finally, and most importantly, ***it is time to look at art from a new perspective!***

If you would like to learn more about EdSparks Collective, please click here - <https://www.art-sparks.org/edsparks-collective.html>

If you are interested to take part in the upcoming EdSparks Collective 2023-24, please click here - <https://forms.gle/zXFqVknXso8v9MheA>