

THE ARTSPARKS ANGLE



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Welcome Message

We are happy to present the latest edition of **'The ArtSparks Angle'**, Professional Learning Program Newsletter. In this edition, we discuss the problematic art practices in early childhood and explore ways to provide meaningful art experiences that cater to the developmental needs of young children and enrich their learning. We also have Divya Sharma from i-Saksham, a past EdSparks Collective participant, sharing her story of bringing transformative art education experiences to children who are first-generation learners and have no prior art experiences.

Making Learning Visible in the Early Childhood Classroom



*The article is written by Anu Parthasarathy (Education and Training Lead) and Roshni Ramesh (Manager, Professional Learning Program) at ArtSparks Foundation. This article was published in the **National Art Education Association (NAEA)** newsletter (Aug. - Sept., 2021 edition) under the Early Childhood Art Educators category. NAEA, a non-profit professional association headquartered in the United States, is the world's largest professional art education association.*

When you walk into the classroom of a typical preschool in India, you will often see the walls painted with colorful imagery of cartoon characters from storybooks or popular Disney shows. While this mural is intended to create an appealing environment for the child, it can unintentionally color young children's conceptions of what art is and looks like. It can also fuel art education practices that result in creating "cute" cookie-cutter art to fill up wall space to showcase to parents. In essence, the purpose and potential of the arts is diminished in such classrooms.

In this article, we try to shed light on the learning that is taking place through the arts in such spaces. Most often in early childhood art classes, we come across activities that lack clear objectives and purpose. Examples of this include step- by-step procedural art projects that have children making a cat out of paper

plates, a snowman using precut shapes and cotton, or even having children simply color within the lines of an existing illustration. Such activities are didactic in nature and limit a child's early creative and artistic development. Here the teacher abdicates responsibility to mindfully develop meaningful learning experiences for the child.

One of the primary reasons there tends to be a focus on creating finished pieces of art that often look unchildlike is to serve the expectations of parents and school administrators. For example, expectations that children have created something "refined" and "sophisticated". But, these cookie-cutter art projects do not allow for children's individual expression or artistic learning to occur. In such cases, one might wonder, how can we provide meaningful art experiences to children where the focus is more on the process rather than the finished product? Through this process-oriented approach how can we make the learning visible and tangible for the parents? At ArtSparks Foundation, a community arts organisation based in India, our approach rooted in the process of learning, might offer some insights.

At ArtSparks, we believe that there is potential for deep learning embedded in the process of exploring art mediums and we witness this regularly as children

engage within our art spaces. For example, Raju, a 6yr old (name changed) who was fascinated to see how the viscous tempera paint spread as he pushed it around with his brush. He was visibly thrilled and deeply focused in the process of making colorful lines and marks on his large sheet of paper. As he engaged with more colors, he observed the colors mixing and creating new colors. In those moments of discovery, he squealed with excitement, "Look what I found! I made my own color!". Here, Raju amongst other things, was learning that colors can be mixed to create new colors.

Similarly in another session, 5 yr old Fathima (name changed) while engaging with clay, discovered the possibilities of manipulating clay. She tried to squeeze, roll, push, pull, pinch, poke, etc. She shrieked in excitement when she discovered that clay became really sticky when wet and seeped between her fingers while squeezing. She also tried to stack pieces of wet clay really high and announced, "Look at my friend, he is the tallest giraffe in the world!".

We vehemently believe that this type of process-based approach, where the potential of the arts is utilized, is far deeper, caters to the developmental needs of young children, and allows for individual expression. While these artworks may not look

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"impressive" to the adult eye, they are filled with evidences of children's learning. And it is incumbent upon us to make this learning visible. When asked, children can talk endlessly about how they've created their distinctive artworks, what they discovered while making them, and even narrate an entire story bringing to life the blobs of paint and stacks of clay. When these narratives are captured through audio, video, or written notes and shared alongside the children's artworks, the learning embedded becomes clearly visible to the parents and school administrators. Making learning visible allows us to convey the depth of learning, move away from didactic art practices within early childhood classrooms and there is tremendous value in that.



Spotlight: Story From the Field

It gives us great pleasure to showcase Divya Sharma, our EdSparks Collective (2020-21) participant, in this section. This excerpt includes Divya's experience of participating in EdSparks Collective and conducting Action Learning Project (ALP) as part of the program.

I conducted the Action Learning Project (ALP) with the children belonging to families of daily wage workers. Some of them have been to schools while others never got a chance to do so. But the one thing common among all of them, was "no exposure to arts". They have never drawn or created anything over a paper or from a paper before. This convinced me more to do the ALP projects with them as I wanted to understand how art can make a difference among children who didn't have any prior experience with it.

On the first day of the session, children were very curious to know what is going to happen. They were just not able to take their eyes off the materials I have taken with myself to start the project with them. When I explained to them how our journey for the next 1.5 months is going to be, they had a spark in their eyes, thinking they would get something new and exciting to do. When the first day started with observation and then starting with sketching, I saw them beginning to compare themselves with their peers. But as sessions progressed, I encouraged them to support their peers, give positive peer feedback, share resources, and celebrate each others effort. This was new for them but they would try hard to do it. There was an adorable moment when a student Aryan said to one his peer "I don't like your drawing much". But, when his peer told him "but yours is good", he immediately took

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his words back and said "if mine is good, yours is good too". It was amazing to see them understanding each other and being more empathetic during this whole learning process.

Since the children were new to art and this new way of teaching approach, they were hesitant to spend more time on exploration and ideation in the beginning. But with a little bit of nudging and patience, they started pushing themselves and came up with beautiful ideas to create collages, hybrid animals, etc. After EdSparks Collective and conducting the ALP, I gained a new perspective on how art liberate their thoughts and nudges them so interestingly to do better.

I think that art should be one among the major subjects taught in the schools since it allows children to start from scratch, push themselves, get their hands dirty while learning and most importantly doesn't bound them into parameters of thinking, creating, etc. What I experienced doing ALP with children is when you allow children to make mistakes, push themselves and explore their creative self, they gain perspectives, expand their imaginations and start appreciating diversity in their lives.



Upcoming Event

EdSparks Collective 2021-22



"Coming to my understandings of the arts, my own experience with it was extremely limited, but my interest was massive. However, I was unaware of the explorative approach to art. As I explored the paint and paper myself during the EdSparks sessions, I realized its true power. The explorations helped me when I was making something. I was more confident in putting down my ideas because exploration prepared me for the battle. It was also overwhelming for me to understand how much breaking down of art-making into scaffolds could help enrich the process, giving the necessary pause between increasing complexity, allowing children to learn and reflect deeply. I have used scaffolds on a regular basis in my math and language class. Doing it in art was a fascinating act. Apart from all this, the technicality of the process of art-making and the methodology to facilitate meaningful sessions was something I had to equip myself with."

—Neeraj , Co-Founder, Shiksharth
(EdSparks Collective 2019-20 Participant)

EdSparks Collective 2021-22, is a **12-session annual professional development program** offered by ArtSparks Foundation, for all those eager to explore the full potential of visual arts in enriching children's learning, growth, and development.

Each session is carefully designed to gradually build participants capacity to design and implement enriching educational interventions that use visual arts to foster 21st century learning and life skills in children.

Dates: Oct. 4 to Oct. 9, 2021 & Jan. 3 to 8, 2022

Timings: 9:30 am to 12:30 pm & 2:00 pm to 5:30 pm

Location: Virtual (via. Zoom)

To learn more and register for the program, click here: <http://www.art-sparks.org/edsparks-collective.html>

"The main object of teaching is not to give explanations, but to knock at the doors of the mind." —Rabindranath Tagore