

Making Room for Insignificance

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Try giving a child a broken biscuit. Even if she accepts it, there will be some amount of displeasure about its deformity. I face this everyday with chalk-pieces, sheets of paper, paint-boxes, brushes and even old newspapers.

‘Teacher... This box doesn’t have all the colours!’

‘Teacher... This paper is torn in the corner.’

‘Teacher... This crayon is broken.’

‘Teacher... This chalk-piece is small, I want a big piece.’

‘Teacher... I want a big brush, you gave her one.’

Our lives aren’t perfect paint-boxes with equal cakes of every colour. Are schools meant to give us a taste of utopian equality, or do they prepare us to accept an unequal, imperfect world with compassion and understanding? Art can help us question and alter our existing perceptions in order to share it with others. We attempt making beautiful things with what we have and get our voices heard authentically. I try to create opportunities in the classroom for peer-communication with the hope that it will foster an ability and willingness to work with others as well as work within limitations; to make them encounter arguments and conflicts and find their own ways of transacting and resolving issues. With all this going on, what art do they make? May be a few scribbles, splashes of colour, sometimes a reflection of their surroundings, a little detail of a design, a glimpse of their memories and little sparks of imagination. This doesn’t sound like much when compared to being able to read the

alphabet, learn words and stories, facts and history, write exams that can get them jobs. Spending time arguing about a paint-box for an activity that doesn’t have much scope in terms of ‘a secure job and regular earning’ certainly seems insignificant.

But I wonder if sufficient exposure to different colours, different forms, sounds and cultures can help children see beauty in all skin types, all body types and be willing to work with diversity. I wonder if refraining to teach them ‘how to draw a cat’, might prompt them to find their own ways of drawing not just a generic cat but the cat with a blue collar that roams in our school, or the one they see near their home. When a thousand different representations of a cat from a thousand different cultures and locations can still communicate to one another that they are all images of cats, it’s beautiful. Not just the art, but the understanding it builds and the knowledge it shares is most beautiful. Art emerges out of these attempts at understanding personal experience; when it grows to merge with the universal. Children’s art has this quality of universality that slowly fades as they grow into adults. They help us adults see the world in ways that we have forgotten to see.

Classrooms are only convenient for certain kinds of learning. Children instinctively gravitate outdoors to step away from the classroom structure. For a majority of the duration in school, the classroom operates as a physical container that imposes a feeling of belonging only if they are inside. The simplest technique of managing their movement is to make the space outside the class ‘undesirable’, and so many of us facilitators sometimes tell the children that they will be sent out if they are disrupting the class. Children catch on to this conditioning very early on. The instinct to step outside and break away occurs at random with every child through the duration of the school timings, across subjects and proves to be a major challenge for teachers and facilitators. I struggle with this in every art class but am equally fascinated by it as an artist. In one class, I was earnestly requesting some students to step out and take a walk for 5 minutes and get back in, not as a punishment but simply as



Watercolour on paper by a Class 2 student, 2017

a change of space and the freedom to move around and return; they assumed that I was punishing them. On occasions when there have been children who have been terribly disruptive, beating up

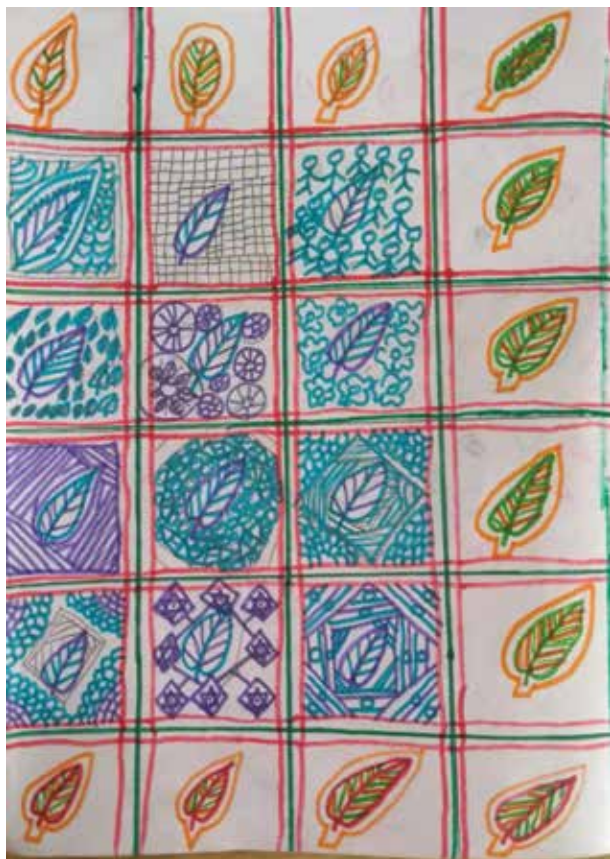


Group work by Class 3, 2017

others, I have tried to send them out but have observed that they come back in on their own after a while and are usually calmer for the rest of the class. On one occasion one child decided to re-enter the class through the window, instead of the door and on another occasion a different child climbed out of the window to go and see a cat. The window isn't particularly high or dangerous for them to use as an exit and on both occasions, I couldn't find in myself a valid reason to object to their actions and was in fact happy to encounter their sense of freedom, adventure and playfulness. I have often wondered if this 'break from the classroom' could be constructed differently. During one particular session, I told a few students who had finished their work and began to bother the others, to step out and look at the plants and return. This was received with enthusiasm, to the extent that many others wanted to finish quickly so that they could also 'step out to look at the plants'! It is precisely this instinct to break away from structured environments, to be playful and take risks that nurtures imagination and creativity.

These experiences have piqued my curiosity in the work done by the more rebellious children, the ones who are 'disruptive' to classroom order. My challenge is to carefully nudge them into channelizing that same energy into working on activities or ideas that truly grab their interest so that they can get self-motivated to further their learning through methods that suit their unique growth patterns. With the students who aren't so rebellious, I play a more provocative role to push them out of an attitude of 'obedience' towards a zone of healthy questioning and discovery. For instance, some students in Class 5 and 6 are particularly quick to grasp ideas, have wider resources of information by virtue of coming from educated families but feel the need to prove their abilities and skills by faithfully copying pictures from a book and neatly colouring them. I appreciate their skills but also discuss with them the value of individual ideas and expression, how we can access it; that each of their perspectives is uniquely potent and beneficial for the growth of their own minds and the cultures they live in. These discussions seem to have a positive effect on their own confidence and their willingness to try new things. This extends to the manner in which they begin to value their own belongings, we discuss why we recycle old newspaper in the art class, how we can use discarded sketch pens for creating other objects and how every conscientious action can

contribute towards the conservation of nature.



Leaf drawing and patterning exercise with pencil and sketchpens on paper by a Class 5 student, 2017

‘Why do you make drawings?’, I asked one day in the Class 5.

‘So that we learn to draw’, said a student.

‘How does it help you in your life?’, I continued.

‘You are asking question over question, teacher!’, complained a boy.

‘We can make money if we learn to draw... I have seen film posters being made and they get money from it’, said another.

‘How large was this film poster you saw? Could you tell me approximately how many feet/metres it might have been?’

‘This big’—he gestured the size with his hands — ‘I don’t know how many feet it was’

‘Was it not as big as this wall? What do you think is the size of your classroom?’

‘50 feet!’, said one.

‘No, 20 feet’, said another.

‘No, 60 feet!’, screamed another.

‘100 feet!’, exclaimed one girl.

‘A hundred feet? Why don’t you measure it and see?’ I said.

She took a ruler and began to measure it. First the length, then the breadth. Then she wrote the values on the board and summed them up.

‘Why are you adding them?’, I asked.

‘To get the whole size – Oh, I should subtract them!’, she responded.

‘No no, we should add them!’ said someone else.

‘Teacher! Have you come to teach us art or maths?’, asked a boy who was clearly getting impatient and wanted to start drawing.

‘One day, we might decide to make a large painting on the wall of this classroom. Right now, you roughly know how much paint you need for one page in your book. How many of those pages would we need to cover a wall of this size?’

‘We need to multiply the values we measured!!’, they exclaimed with a sense of discovering a connection they hadn’t seen before.



Collage on paper by Class 6 students, 2017

Art is an integral part of life and must be seen as an important avenue for learning. Art objects and artefacts are subsidiary outcomes of the larger process. The pursuit of knowledge and an understanding of the world is as much a motivation in art as it is in the sciences or philosophy. Recognising this is crucial for any culture to grow meaningfully.

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