



Teaching visual arts at school - Radhika Neelakantan

I write this article asking a few questions and giving some possible answers.

Why do I teach art?

I teach art because light, colour, form, texture, lines and strokes have such an enduring impact on me that I want to share my joy and experiences with the children.

Why should a child do art?

There are many theories about this. Visual and performing arts are believed to improve academic skills. I don't know if this is true but it definitely improves art skills!! Art skills are not measurable. "Art intelligence" may include a wide variety of skills that may be needed to live sanely. It may not be apparent in itself but one does not need statistical evidence to see the importance of art in education. A child must do art because it is a beautiful thing to do.

How do I teach art?

As a practicing artist, I find the constant shift between teaching art and doing my own work very refreshing. The combination of art and children is a wonderful thing. Each feeds the other and there is a seamlessness that exists between the two.

On the practical side, a teacher must multitask (sharpen pencils, at the same time watch the class and also help someone who is "stuck"). Effective communication with all kinds of students is necessary. The teacher has to make this a priority.

The activities may be the usual activities but the ideas behind them have to be fluid. While I have not fixed what I do at each grade, I can say that over their academic career, they are exposed to a variety of ideas so that there is a balance. What works with one group may not work with other groups at that particular time. So, I usually begin from where they are. In the first month, I actually discuss with them what they would like to do. I usually lead them from there to everything else that we do for the rest of the year.

When early in the year, the child draws something very clichéd, I tell them that they can draw something in a particular way only once. We have group discussions at the beginning of the class. This helps each child to hear the ideas of the other children and also to change their own ideas as they listen to the others. After the discussion, the child's creative magic unfolds and moves on its own. There is little the teacher has to do!

We usually begin and end the year drawing portraits.

Each child has a partner who will sit for the other and vice versa. Importance is given to shapes, line and colour and not the "eyes" or the "nose". This, I have found to be an exercise that offers immediate understanding of the kind of observation that is required. I stress the importance of looking at the subject more than the sketch one is doing on the paper. I am satisfied if careful looking is happening.

I do not stock the art room with excessive art material. Things are bought in moderate amounts and used with care. I try to inculcate in the child the need to keep waste to a minimum. We generally do not use a lot of material to make a quick work and then discard the paper.

I do not ask them to finish something in a specified time. I make time an issue only if I find that they are not focusing on their task. If they want to take a break, they may do so but need to always finish a particular task before moving on to something else. Sometimes they can go on to something else but will have to come to finish what they hadn't earlier.

I shall not say that the atmosphere in my art class is "non-judgmental" but rather that it is gently judgmental. It is in this quiet atmosphere that comments are made, with a sense of peace and fun.

The organization of materials and the storing of students' work is also an important aspect. I involve the children in this. When the children know where and how materials are kept, they can also be counted upon to keep the place tidy. Learning and experiencing in the art class includes keen observation, visual and spatial abilities, reflection, self criticism or evaluation and experimenting. All the art work is usually displayed in the art room, where all the walls have display areas. Art work is also displayed in public spaces like the kitchen or the library where more viewership is possible.

Exposure to artists, past and present, is another thing that is important. Visits to galleries and museums are also a vital part of a child's art education.

Finally, one might wonder about how much time should be devoted to art. It should be all the time available. Everything we do should be a work of art!

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