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Education and the Arts

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Movement arts could be the single most important tool for nurturing the multiple intelligences of the child.

Over the last twenty years of my career as a choreographer, dancer and teacher, I have had the opportunity to work in diverse contexts in several countries across the globe. Some of the most rewarding ones I remember were in the field of arts education where the movement arts played a vital role in the development of the individual. This is true of students ranging from nursery to post-graduation. Whether they came from a grammar school in East Anglia in the UK or a school for slum children in Chennai; a school in the idyllic setting near Alice Spring in Australia; tough inner-city schools in London where you had to deal with social disaffection, behavioral problems and lack of discipline; schools for children with learning and physical difficulties, Down's syndrome, autism etc; tertiary or post graduate courses in Arizona University in America or Brunel, Surrey and Middlesex Universities in the UK or arts & science colleges or design schools in India - in all these places I have noticed the immense positive impact movement arts sessions had on the lives of the students and their education. I have witnessed huge positive changes taking place in participants whether they were the inmates of a high security prison in Wandsworth (London) or primary teachers and students of several districts in Kerala as part of District Primary Education Programme (DPEP).

What is it that the movement arts can offer to an individual in the context of education? We experience the world through our sensory organs and make sense of it through our intellectual faculties. The movement arts play a vital role in sensitizing and fine tuning one's body and sensory organs resulting in the connection of mind, body and spirit. This complicated process of wiring the body and its diverse functions makes it an efficient and fine-tuned instrument. In our traditional educational practices, there was an emphasis on giving the student an insight into the life forces and structures that govern them as well as the workings of physical and metaphysical spaces through the practices of martial arts, dance and body care systems such as yoga. Music and visual arts also featured in this equation. You can see that some of the best schools in the world today attach a lot of importance to including arts education and physical activity in their educational practices.

If implemented properly in our education system, contemporary movement arts have the capacity to provide the student with a deeper understanding of all academic subjects and the capacity to contextualize and connect that information with their own identity and culture. Information without this context loses its meaning and relevance and can even be alienating. Besides the obvious benefits such as physical exercise, body awareness and co-ordination, the movement arts also enhance awareness about space and structure, ability to work with other art forms such as music, plastic arts and digital arts as well as interpersonal skills and self esteem. But above all, the one thing it nurtures most is creativity. In other words, the movement arts could be the single most important tool for nurturing the multiple intelligences of the child.

Socio-cultural context

As change is inevitable and an ongoing process, one could aspire to steer that change towards creating a better life for oneself and society by taking control of one's own destiny in whatever little way



and wherever possible. The key to play any role in that process, one could argue, is to have an awareness of the forces that are in operation and an understanding of the structures of the systems that are already in place. The ability to perceive and connect with histories on one hand, and the openness to imagine the possibilities for the future on the other, will contextualize experiences and enrich our understanding of the world. This is crucial to realize the potential each one of us has as individuals and as a society.

A large section of Indians are kept away from fully participating in the system, let alone shaping it in any meaningful way. This is a shortsighted view considering that our destinies are interlinked and we share a lot of spaces - physical and otherwise - within the system. The unethical yet perversely convenient answer we chose as a society was to deny admission into several spheres of life for a large portion of our population or at least disable them by not providing basic living conditions, health care and education. This willful act by people wielding power and resources of making people invisible from several spheres of our life has to change if we have to progress as an effective democracy.

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Nurturing creativity

Nurturing creativity through arts education is of paramount importance in addressing this situation. Access to the arts helps to equip a child with the tools, devices and skills to engage with a given situation creatively and process his experiences, memories and imagination, and structure them into a new entity. Through this process he/she will get the skills to imagine and create things which were not there before. This habit of seeking information by asking questions opens up the doors to knowledge. Impositional teaching may or may not have some benefits but it clearly stunts the development of creativity in children. The teacher is one of the many sources of information and should act as a facilitator to encourage the child to seek information from multiple sources resulting in an exponential increase in creation of intellectual property.



Accessing and contemporizing information that is embedded in our traditions and its multiple strands is hugely important in building a relevant homegrown knowledge base and creating a self-assured society. For several rural, folk or tribal communities art practices are at the core of their identities and values. When we think of education for these communities often engaging with these art practices has to come even before literacy or numeracy. We need to go to the real sources rather than merely depending on the invented recent traditions, which have submerged a lot of sub cultures and taken out creative rough edges. This is only possible by enabling and empowering each citizen to process their histories, experiences and memories.

However, this should not make us insular and close our doors to information generated from other parts of the world or other cultures. We need to be confident in welcoming information and ideas if they help our development - no matter where they come from - and gravitate this to an evolving contemporary Indian aesthetics.

It will be a pity to limit ourselves to being content with our past glories and taking pride in showcasing physical culture such as our architectural monuments, and other material artefacts. Instead of engaging with our traditions in this fashion, we need to work towards generating new ideas and creations that are informed and influenced by these knowledge systems while not being limited by them. Therefore, prescriptive policies will be limiting.

I would instead argue for a facilitating, empowering set of policies where each individual is given the opportunity to process his or her experiences, memories, imagination and thought for self realization, self alteration and self-expression. Creativity and authorship, whether it is individual or collective is enormously enhanced by such empowerment.

Ideas of aesthetics, beauty etc. is not static notions, but results of ever evolving complex relationships between multiple trajectories that are influenced by perceptions, vantage points and value systems. Like many artistic concepts, arts education also needs constant updating. The advancements in neuroscience, cognitive science and digital technology are playing an increasingly important role in the development of artistic practices today. These, along with trans- disciplinary works, are redefining the arts.

Identity

In today's globalized and inclusive world our identities are made of layers of overlapping spaces, inhabited by people of diverse ethnic, socio-economic, linguistic, cultural and other backgrounds as well as persuasions. When we disable sections of society we are indeed disempowering a part of our own identities. When information is increasingly becoming available, it is foolish to think we can perpetuate semi-feudal, unethical and apartheid-like practices of denying people their basic rights including access to education and the arts. The arts are not elitist, as many people make them out to be; they are the very backbone of world-views, lifestyles and livelihoods of many educationally marginalized communities.

Culture is the last frontier, which will ultimately determine the power relations in the emerging world order. Be it the choice of the products we buy, the life we lead, the location we choose to live in, the clothes we wear, the art works and performances we witness, our cultural and aesthetic preferences are going to play a role.

Sensitized individuals and communities are the key to defining that order and arts education is an essential part of that sensitization. Therefore, there is an urgent need to sensitize students, teachers, educational authorities as well as parents and other stake holders about the possibilities of arts education in helping to shape individuals as fully functional entities to play their roles in the community, civil society, nation and the globalized world.

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