



RETHINKING INDIGENOUS
ARTS IN EARLY
CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM
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ABSTRACT

In India, empirical evidence on visual arts pedagogy for early childhood curriculum incorporating an indigenous epistemology is scarce. The national curriculum framework emphasizes a socio-cultural, constructivist framework and advocates integration of visual and performing arts at the early childhood stage. However, in the absence of an indigenous early childhood curricular framework that responds to the diverse social and cultural contexts, for a large majority of early childhood centres the curriculum often borrows heavily on Western models, and reading, writing and arithmetic assume primacy over play/activity-based learning.

This paper highlights the learnings of a research project which aimed to explore the possibility of assimilating indigenous art forms within the early childhood curriculum. The study was carried out through an innovative experiential workshop with 29 mid-career early childhood educators with an effort to help educators re-conceptualise the understanding of 'indigenous arts' and undertake early mathematics, early science, early reading and early writing concepts through basic techniques of selected indigenous art forms of India. Participants reported a renewed sense of wonder and appreciation towards the indigenous art forms, irrespective of their own attitude towards art, personal background and training. The educators further reported an increased understanding of the role of indigenous arts within a broader context of education and its role in preparing children for an increasingly diverse world. Results reveal that developmentally appropriate integration of indigenous art forms in the early childhood curriculum as well as a teacher training component will help not only children but also the teachers as they learn one of the most important skills of life; to be curious about the unfamiliar rather than be afraid of it. Further plans of developing an indigenous art curriculum are discussed.

Keywords: indigenous art forms, indigenous epistemology, socio-cultural theory, early childhood curriculum

WHY 'RE-THINK' INDIGENOUS ARTS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM

As an academic from a human development background, my curiosity in the visual arts was sparked by an amalgamation of past experiences, which included: supervising and training early childhood teachers, teaching curricular and developmentally appropriate practices and

being interested in art as a personal hobby. However, my interest turned towards a more serious academic interest when I attended my first Art in Early Childhood Conference in Paro, Bhutan in 2017. I had finally found my calling in the brilliant community of artists, teachers, researchers, practitioners and educators who were passionate about the cause of art in early childhood education. The deliberations during the conferences opened up a whole new world of possibilities and I felt I had come home.

Moreover, my own PhD research focussed on developing an indigenous early childhood curricular framework for the Indian context. Although the research focussed on the theoretical constructs of childhood in contemporary India and curricular ideologies held by stakeholders, the insights I gained by deliberations with 200 early childhood teachers, educators, mothers and fathers helped me build significant insights on indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies.

I was mindful of the fact that my interest in the topic and what I was about to propose did not guarantee that the community of early childhood practitioners would share my interest. But I was about to be proven wrong.

INTRODUCTION

Art development with young children is not just the development of skills/expertise in use of materials, but it also enhances the development of a sensitive, creative, involved and aware child. Drawing, painting and construction activities lead children to bring together diverse elements of their experience, mix them with the psychological self and put them into a new form. In the process of reforming these elements they give us more than an art work, they give us a part of themselves, and insights into how they think, feel and see. I believe that engagement with the arts enables us to look beyond the surface realities of the world and that the development of self-awareness of both the teacher and student might be much more important in the long run than mere appreciation, reproduction or inspiration sought from any one particular art form.

Research suggests that visual arts practices are strongly influenced by teachers' beliefs and values (Lewin-Benham, 2011; McArdle, 2012; Pohio, 2009). During the early years, teachers help develop aesthetic awareness in children. However, by trying to establish methods, the teacher of art may be viewing art from the narrow perspective of personal background and training. Clark & Grey (2013) assert that teachers' are also strongly influenced by the cultural values of the contexts in which they work, and teacher's attitudes fundamentally influence the way in which the visual arts manifest themselves within early childhood settings. Consequently, this influences the teachers' choices about when children create art, with what materials and how they will engage in this process. (Clark & de Lautour, 2013; Eisner, 1978; McArdle, 2003, 2012). The research thus aimed to address one of the most important elements of art inside a classroom – the teacher.

THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE ON ART

Prasad (1998) reiterates that in the traditional ethos of the country, India has always been a follower of the oral tradition of imparting education under the somewhat unstructured, yet immensely elevating *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition) institution. Followed in the *Vedic* era thousands of years ago, the practice ensured that every aspect of

guru's teachings got passed on *orally* with an emphasis on *memorizing* and *reciting* the teachings since the technique of writing was not yet prevalent. The oral tradition was not just restricted to the sphere of education but was also found virtually in every form of the arts. Across the ages, various Indian philosophers and thinkers envisioned an education that was deeply rooted in one's immediate surroundings but connected to the cultures of the wider world.

Right from the time of the birth of a child the eminence of this Indian ethos was reflected in almost everything that centred around the child's needs. Art flourished in homes in India where the child often learnt domestic practices and functions. From homemade mattresses, duvets, pillows and bed sheets embellished with regional motifs to singing of a soothing lullaby, the child got exposed to the best practiced customs of his/her surroundings (Prasad, 1998). Home-made materials used to stitch clothes for the child were carefully chosen according to the seasonal variations and availability.

Similarly, a child's eating habits were solely dependent on all the nourishing nutrients available as per the recurrent cycles of the seasons (Mago, 2001). People planted what they believed was beneficial for their future generations, and one could find handcrafted utensils, pitchers, wall hangings, decorative pieces or furniture, often made from the crop residue (Awasthi, 2006). The modern idea of sustainable living perhaps has its roots in the 'best out of the waste' ideology that emanated from the ancient practice of making productive and creative use of several disused household products, which would be re-decorated or re-painted to enhance their aesthetic value.

ART IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM - POLICY AND CURRICULUM PERSPECTIVES

The National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT, 2006) considers education in arts as an empirical activity which involves seeing, observing, exploring, expressing, interpreting and discovering. Art education is highly valued for its role in furthering the aesthetic imagination and the ability to express universal themes. The National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework (2014) emphasizes a socio-cultural, constructivist framework and posits play and inter-activity as the child's natural modes of learning, and that living and learning in multiple social and cultural contexts influence children's learning and development. Their basic tenets are that learning is an active and interactive process in which children learn through play and through interaction between children and more experienced others, such as their teachers

The Position Paper of the National Focus Group on Art, Music, Dance and Theatre (2006) advocates that the visual and performing arts should be taught in a fully integrated manner at the pre-primary stage and that children should be taught through drawing, painting, clay modelling, dancing, role play and music. In addition, the report Art Education in India (NCERT, 2010) envisages and builds an intergenerational perspective by stating that art education fosters both cultural awareness and cultural practices and is the means by which knowledge and appreciation of the arts and culture are transmitted from one generation to the next. However, the forward thinking and visionary stance of the policy documents are yet to see a uniform implementation across the country. There exist little pockets of teachers espousing unique early childhood curricular approaches, but for a large majority of early childhood centres, the curriculum often borrows heavily on Western models.

Over the last decade, many early childhood practitioners have endeavoured to implement a play/activity based developmentally appropriate curriculum. Yet, much work needs to be done in the field towards building an indigenous early childhood curriculum framework and ensuring our commitment to the sustainable development goals as a means of supporting the goal of quality education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

Situated broadly within a socio-cultural/constructivist framework, this research posits that learning is not only a process through which children construct knowledge through their relationships with each other and with more knowledgeable others through negotiating shared meanings (Vygotsky, 1962). It also views learning and the visual arts themselves through the lens of indigenous epistemology which is fluid, non-linear, and relational (Kovach, 2005). Indigenous education scholars have discussed that although there is diversity among indigenous peoples and in the ways of knowing, teaching or learning, there are various commonalities among indigenous societies worldwide (Cajete, 1994; Meadows et al., 2003).

The present research is built on some key aspects of indigenous epistemologies as highlighted by Hoffman (2013), namely relationality, the interconnection between sacred and secular, and holism. Relationality is a concept that emphasises that we are all related to each other, to the natural environment, and to the spiritual world, and these relationships bring about interdependencies. Sacred and secular involves indigenous epistemologies that are rooted in worldviews and that are inclusive of both the sacred and the secular. The world exists in one reality composed of an inseparable weave of secular and sacred dimensions. The principle of holism is linked to that of relationality, as indigenous thought focuses on the whole picture where everything is related and cannot be separated. Blackstock (2007), for instance, identifies four interconnected dimensions of knowledge that are common in indigenous epistemologies: emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical. In indigenous epistemologies, these four elements are inseparable and human development and well-being involves attending to and valuing all of these realms.

The present research anchors itself to the ancient Indian epistemology of the *Pancha Mahabhuta*, ~ or the belief in the five basic elements of the universe [i.e. *aakash*(sky), *jal*(water), *vayu*(air), *agni*(fire) and *dharti*(land)]. This theory states that everything in the universe is composed of these five elements, and each form will eventually disintegrate into these elements, including the human body. The theory further states that each of these elements are composed of five *tanmatras*- or subtle essence-shabda (sound), sparsha (touch), roopa (vision), rasa (taste) and gandha (smell) in varying proportions. These five *tanmatras* are related to each sense organ and are considered as portals through which learning takes place.

It is interesting to note that varied expressions of indigenous arts which were popularly practiced for thousands of years typically revolve around the five elements and their manifestations. Consequently, it was only natural that aesthetic expressions manifested themselves through the ages in the form of drawing, painting, sculpture, design in jewellery, pottery, weaving, fabrics, music, dance, theatre. Practiced even today, these indigenous art

forms have stood the test of time and reflect the sacred, secular, relational and intergenerational aspect of the ancient Indian culture and its people.

THE EXPERIENTIAL WORKSHOP

The experiential workshop was conceptualized and facilitated by the author, and was based on the theoretical framework which guided the research. The workshop targeted early childhood teachers from local schools and used both English and vernacular language as the medium of instruction. A group of twenty nine teachers, representing fourteen local pre-schools registered to attend the workshop. Purposive sampling of early childhood educators with a minimum of 5-7 years of experience in working with children was carried out to gain reflective feedback on the themeⁱ.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical session

The day long workshop began with a brainstorming session and focus group discussion on why art is important for early childhood educators and the children within their classrooms. Their responses included: the importance of observing and doing, understanding that art is any form of expression by the child, and that while doing art activities children engage in a process of learning to share, cooperate and interact with others. The participants were further exposed to various art theories existing in the developmental literature with a focus on the visual arts; i.e. Lowenfeld (1982), Piaget (1956), Vygotsky (1978), and Gardner (1980). For instance, participants considered how Lowenfeld and Piaget looked at stages of artistic development according to the child's age and characteristics of drawings and how Vygotsky concentrated on social, interpersonal, and language skills in relation to artistic development. They engaged with Gardner's ideas who studied graphic symbols and expressive qualities of children's drawings.

Participants were further given a brief overview of the developmental stages of art by Lowenfeld (1982) who argues that there are six clearly defined stages of artistic development and that these stages can be witnessed in the artworks of children. For instance, Stage 1 Scribble Stage (1 – 3 years old) where children at this age are engaged in the physical activity of drawing. There is no connection made between the marks and representation during most of the scribble stage. However, towards the end of this stage children may begin to give marks names. This stage is mostly about the enjoyment of purely making marks. Stage 2 Pre-schematic Stage (3 – 4 years old) highlights how children at this stage of artistic development are beginning to see connections between the shapes that they draw and the physical world around them. Circles and lines may be described as people or objects that are physically present in the child's life. It is in this stage that a child first makes the connection to communicating through their drawings. Stage 3 The Schematic Stage (5 – 6 years old) illustrates how children at this stage have clearly assigned shapes to objects that they are attempting to communicate. They often have developed a schema for creating drawings. Lowenfeld believed that there is a defined order in the development of the drawing. For example, drawings at this stage have a clear separation between the sky and the ground. Often the sky is a strip of blue at the top of the paper, while the ground is a

strip of green at the bottom. Objects are often placed on the ground instead of floating in space and objects of importance are often drawn larger than objects of lesser importance.

The primary objective of taking the participants through these processes was to go towards a gradual immersion into re-thinking of the indigenous art forms, and to change our perceptions towards interpreting art forms around us and especially those created by children. The participants were also shown selected paintings of some of the world famous painters like Pablo Picasso, Edward Monet, Raja Ravi Verma and Edward Hopper. The participants were asked to observe these images and try to understand the different aesthetic expressions contained within them and develop an eye for appreciating the visual art forms.

Experiential session

The workshop held after lunch was the experiential workshop. The facilitator introduced selected indigenous art forms of India through a PowerPoint presentation of the pictures and provided a description of the history and techniques of these art forms. The facilitator further shared her ideas on how one can re-think these techniques and modify them for an early childhood classroom.

Rethinking Indigenous Art Forms

The following is a description of the indigenous art forms selected for the experiential workshop.



Figure 1 - Gond Art: A Tale of Dots and Dashes

History

The Gond art form originated in the tribal region of Madhya Pradesh, in Central India. According to the Gond belief system, everything (whether it is a hill, river, rock or a tree) is inhabited by a spirit and, consequently, is sacred. So the Gond paint them as a form of respect and reverence. Gond paintings are a reflection of people's close connection with

their natural surroundings. Gond art dates back nearly 1400 years, however, the Gond tribe could just be imitating their ancestors as there are cave paintings in the region that go all the way back to the Mesolithic Period. Gond paintings bear a remarkable likeness to aboriginal art from Australia, as both styles use dots to create the painting.

Technique

Gond paintings use bright vivid colours such as white, red, blue and yellow. The paints are usually derived from natural objects such as charcoal, coloured soil, plant sap, leaves and even cow dung. More specifically, yellow is derived from *chui mitti* which is a type of local sand, and brown from *gheru mitti* which is another type of sand; green is procured from leaves while the colour red is obtained from the hibiscus flower. The pictures in Gond Art are filled in by small lines, dashes and circles.

Re-Think

I call this art form *A Tale of Dots and Dashes*. The Gond Art utilises dots, dashes and lines to fill in the pictures. The question posed to the participants was can we carry forward the concept of dots and dashes to early reading and early writing experiences? Instead of giving children worksheets on tracing/repeating alphabets and numerals, can we ask children to 'colour' their favourite drawings/shapes by filling it with symbols, for instance numerals and alphabets instead of dots and dashes?

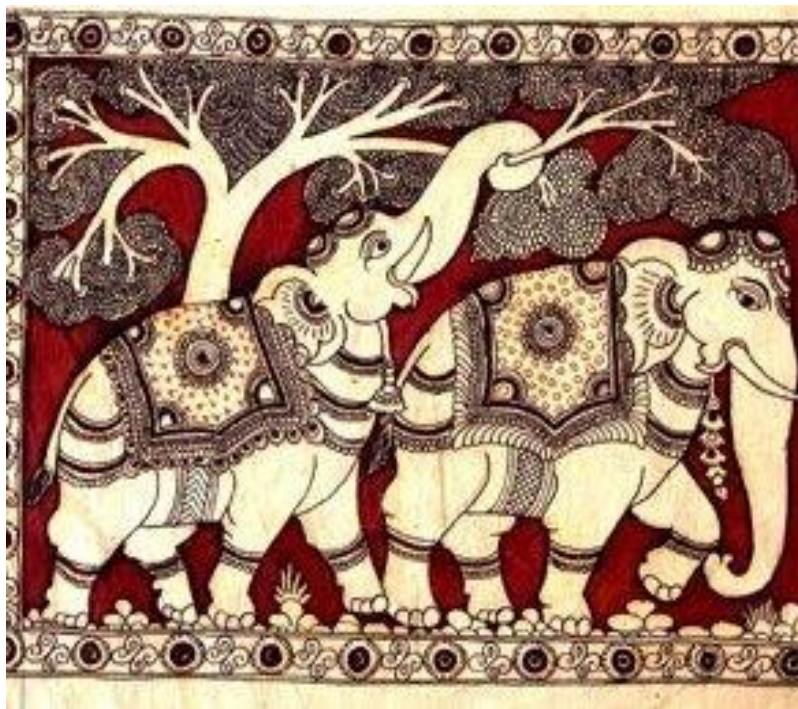


Figure 2 - Kalamkari Art: Sacred Spaces

History

The Kalamkari art dates back to more than 3000 years. Centuries ago, folk singers and painters used to wander from one village of India to another, narrating stories of mythology to the village people. With the course of time, the process of telling tales transformed into

canvas painting. The word Kalamkari is derived from a Persian word where '*kalam*' means pen and '*kari*' refers to craftsmanship.

Technique

Kalamkari artists primarily use earthy colours like indigo, mustard, rust, black and green. Natural dyes used to paint colors in Kalamkari art are extracted from natural sources. Kalamkari art technique was used keeping in mind that all areas of the paper/canvas could be coloured except the design or motif itself.

Re-Think

I call this art form *The Sacred Spaces*. The basic technique behind this is to colour everywhere around the picture except for the design itself. The question posed to the participants *was* can we as early childhood educators, with a penchant for asking children to always colour in the picture- ask them to colour '*outside*' it? Can the letter, number or a shape be left alone and allowed to emerge from the paper as the child colours the background?



Figure 3 - Madhubani Art: A Study in Gestalt

History

The Madhubani art form is considered to be about 3000 years old. It is believed that this art form originated when a king ordered some artists to capture the wedding of his daughter in the form of paintings. Traditionally done by women in the villages of Bihar-a state in eastern India, the designs and aesthetics of Madhubani paintings have long been an inspiration for many fabric designs.

Technique

Madhubani is a folk painting technique. To maintain the creativity and precision, Madhubani paintings are made from the powdered rice paste, using fingers, nib-pens, brushes, match sticks and twigs. Dyes obtained from trees, fruits, flowers and spices are used to add colors.

Re-Think

I call this art form *A Study in Gestalt*. Each part of the painting is a stand-alone art work, yet it is a combination of many such complete works which when put together form part of a larger whole. The question posed to the participants was can we use this concept to teach children concepts of early mathematics and early science? For example, examining parts of something and then the whole thing.

WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

Each participant was given three different A4 size papers which contained outlines of simple designs along with art supplies such as pencils colours, chalks, crayons and sketch pens. As the participants went through understanding each indigenous art form, they were asked to utilise the same techniques to colour the designs on the sheets and while undergoing this process to reflect on their practices with young children in their classrooms and if they could associate this learning with transacting early mathematics, early science and early reading and early writing concepts. The participants were further encouraged to implement the techniques in daily classroom practices with children at their respective early childhood centres. The following photographs highlights some glimpses of work done in the experiential workshop.



Figure 4 - Learning a new art technique



Figure 5 - Pondering the finer points



Figure 6 - Discussions and Deliberations



Figure 7 - The workshop participants

FEEDBACK SESSION

The concluding session of the workshop encouraged the participants to share their reflections and insights from the day long workshop. The following is a summary of their responses:

- Eighteen participants rated the workshop as excellent and eleven participants rated the workshop as very good.
- The workshop was described as a 'new concept' which was enriching, interesting, well presented with audio visuals and both theoretical and practical experiences and had direct links with classroom practice with young children.
- Participants mentioned they gained a better understanding of visual arts, mediums of expression and different elements of art and how visual arts can be used to 'teach' in early childhood classrooms as their major learning's.
- Participants found both the theoretical and experiential workshops equally enjoyable and enjoyed learning about and practicing the techniques of selected indigenous art forms of India.
- Participants mentioned that they would utilise the learning in their respective classrooms by teaching children various concepts like math, science, early reading and early writing through visual arts. They mentioned that they would integrate academic/concept learning through the visual arts as much as possible as it's the natural way children learn.
- The readily available classroom materials present in all schools could be used for the same techniques, and sometimes could be done using wet sand and clay as well. The materials were sustainable and resource friendly.
- No additional costs would be incurred while transacting the techniques with children. Not just in the art sessions, these concepts could be utilised in other sessions as well- for example in group discussion, circle time, readiness worksheets.
- Participants reported an extremely high level of enthusiasm in planning activities based on these concepts

FOLLOW UP WITH PARTICIPANTS

A follow up with the participants two months after the workshop revealed that many teachers were successfully integrating the learning's from the experiential workshop into their classroom practice with children. The teachers reported that the techniques of indigenous art forms were most aptly utilised during the language and art sessions. The following are some of the images shared by the teachers:



Figure 8 - A drawing by a 5 year old child who drew shapes and coloured them with Gujarati numerals and alphabets

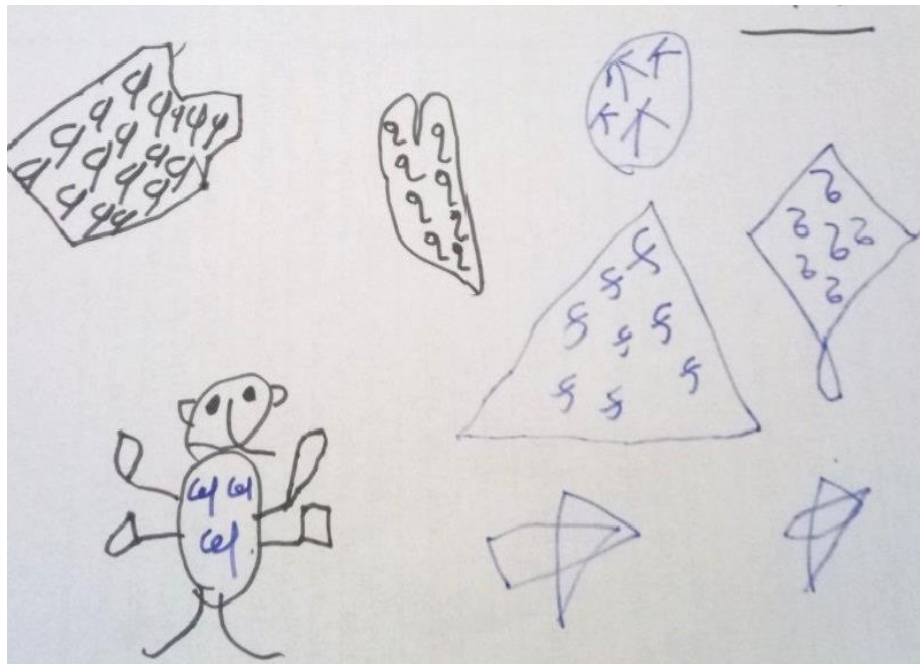


Figure 9 - A drawing by a 4 year old child who drew and painted his favourite idol 'Ganesha'- The Elephant God with his favourite alphabet 'B'. The other shapes depict numerals and alphabet in Gujarati

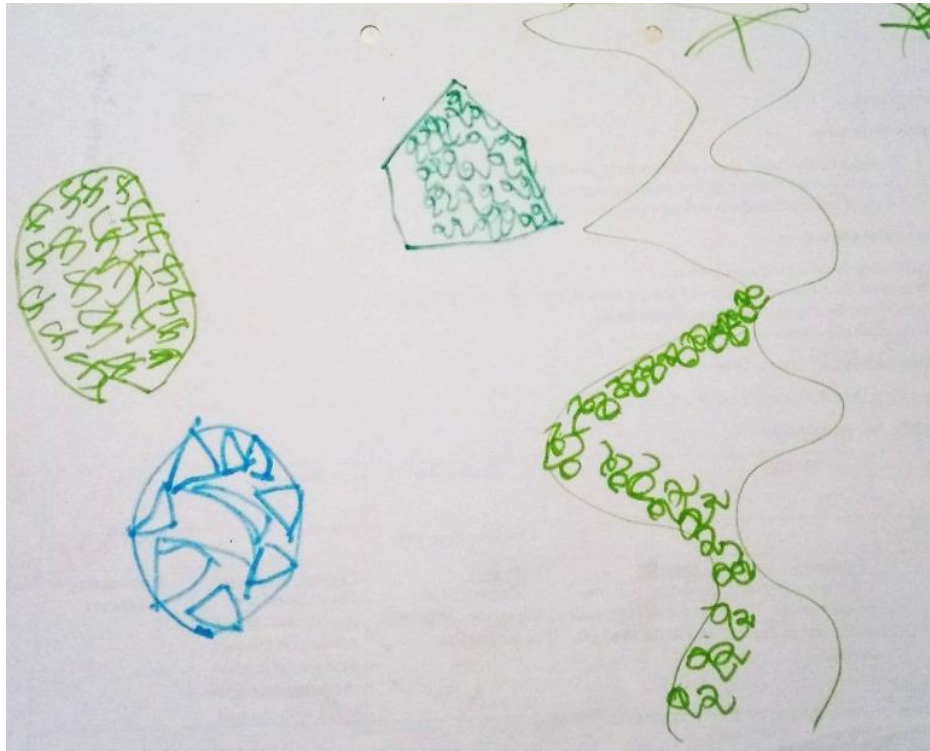


Figure 10 - A drawing by a 6 year old child, depicting a self reported 'river of number 12' and a 'mountain of number 11'. The other shapes depicted indicate a 'roller boat' and a 'stone covered with moss'

CONCLUSION

The conceptualization of this research and the experiential workshop for early childhood educators was a journey of discovery for me. The most important lesson I learnt was that by integrating an indigenous epistemological perspective into the early childhood curriculum this can be situated in a broader purview of a socio-cultural/constructivist perspective. My participants unanimously affirmed this and had a renewed sense of respect for the indigenous art forms that were so familiar to them yet had never been explored in this manner. Back in the classroom, the relational nature of indigenous epistemology motivated collaborative discussion amongst the teachers and with the children in their respective early childhood centres.

It was heartening to note that exposure to the experiential workshop and the indigenous epistemology led the teachers to renegotiate their beliefs about art, about how children learn, about their practices with children, the classroom arrangement and the curriculum. Many participants reflected that as part of their teacher training course they do learn that children should be given the freedom to exercise their choices and that they should be more flexible as educators. It was only after undergoing the experiential session and by trying out the techniques on their own, that they realised what a child might go through when they insist children must complete a given task in a specified time or how challenging it might be

for a young child to be taught in a way which does not respond to the natural ways in which children learn.

I believe integration of indigenous art forms within the early childhood curriculum will strengthen the learning spirit of both the teachers and the children because it effectively engages and interweaves all aspects of learning: emotional (heart), spiritual (spirit), cognitive (mind) and physical (body). Awareness and knowledge of cultural practices through indigenous art forms go on to strengthen personal and collective identities and values, and thus contribute to safeguarding and promoting cultural diversity. Moreover, children's engagement with the indigenous art forms may also serve to encourage and inspire the child to observe, interpret and use existing images to create their own images and to attain agency over their own creativity.

My future aim is to explore other indigenous art forms and utilise the learning and insights gained from this research to develop a contemporary theoretical framework for integrating indigenous arts in early childhood curriculum in the Indian context. Based on participant feedback, these techniques could also be used effectively with children with behavioural issues, learning disabilities and children with special needs. Consequently, efforts will be made to address this component as well.

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Biography

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ⁱ Informed consent of all adults in the images has been obtained. The images of the indigenous art forms were taken from an open source website. Children's artworks have been cropped to exclude their names and have been used with permission of the class teacher and the centre supervisor.