EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES FOR UNDERSERVED AND MARGINALISED YOUTH USING FREIRE'S CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF ACTIVE AND REFLECTIVE ARTS PRACTICE: THREE CASE STUDIES FROM BRONX (USA), COVENTRY (UK) AND NEW DELHI (INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

Under-served youth living in lower socio-economic communities and other forms of deprivation are often restricted from a range of formal and informal educational opportunities, including the arts. Their lack of access to natural, cultural, and educational resources not only restrict their intellectual and creative development but also challenge educators to decipher their fuller intellect and abilities. This paper describes three case studies of active and reflective arts practice that draw insight from Freire's critical pedagogy to expand possibilities for such underserved and marginalised youth living in different social contexts. The paper firstly explains the conceptual framework of the projects within the context of Freire's critical pedagogy. Secondly, it defines the problem-domain in relation to the specific under-served communities as the motivating factor for implementing the projects, and their methodologies and outcomes. The paper finally discusses arts potential in transcending isolation, disconnection and stigmatisation of these communities and in understanding fuller capabilities of such marginalised youth.

INTRODUCTION

Under-served youth living in communities of poverty or social marginalisation are often restricted from a range of formal and informal educational experiences that could broaden their world. Often, they live in places they attribute as 'home', but feel detached and isolated from their place of dwelling and even neglected by the society at large. This isolation may lead them to internalise such attitudes to their detriment, and may inhibit their personal and creative growth. As educators, we are not only challenged to abridge these inequities in opportunities, but also to look deeper into their capabilities and processes and products of their works to better understand their abilities, which are often camouflaged by stereotypical biases associated with their immediate surroundings of deprivation.

The arts can act as a catalyst for their voices and, in unravelling their creative abilities, in what they can and want to communicate. Expanding possibilities for under-served youth in engaging with the arts, can not only broaden and enrich their learning experiences, but also give us an expanded vision to see beyond mainstream methodologies for evaluating their capabilities. Often, mainstream evaluation methodologies rely on standardised norms that are developed in localities far removed from their social realities. Using such a standardised lens to understand their capabilities may leave out other ways of knowing what they possess, and instead, may even announce deficit and failure on their part.

Our projects are informed by Freire's concept of critical pedagogy and transformative social action whilst acknowledging that there are multiple approaches to critical pedagogy and that other approaches may also be applied. A significant aspect of critical pedagogy, is to make possible the conditions in which learners, in their interactions with educators and one another, engage in the experience of assuming themselves as 'social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative and creative persons', as 'dreamers of possible utopias…' (2001, p. 45). Freire (1998) sees education as a 'form of intervention in the world' (1998, p. 90), and postulates a vision of empowering marginalised communities from socio-economic or other oppressive mechanisms, and facilitating an agency among the disenfranchised populations. It is this vision of empowering marginalised communities that serves to motivate the very basis of our projects. For the purpose of this paper, we refer to Freire's works (1970, 1985, 1989, 1998) collectively drawn from texts mentioned in the works cited.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECTS

The three case studies discussed in this paper are: (1) *Bringing it Back to the Bronx*, by Altman, in South Bronx, USA, based on the experiences of elementary school students' investigations of natural environments in their urban neighbourhood and the natural history museum, through the creation and exhibition of expedition portfolios. (2) *Of Military Tanks and Barbie Dolls*, by De, in Coventry, UK, based on the experiences of young British Muslim girls in engaging with a video project, which was used to evaluate learning outcomes from a previously engaged visual arts peace project implemented after the London bombings of July 7, 2005. (3) *Art Conversations and the Tree of Wishes* by Altman and De, based on the experiences of engaging children living in slum areas in New Delhi, with creating art works on a theme of 'Tree of wishes' and conversing about their creations.

The conceptual frameworks of the projects broadly follow Freirean ideologies and are modelled differently for different marginalised communities based on their social contexts. Freire states that each educational context

should be approached from the position of a broad goal of liberation with practices that need to be adapted for individual situations. Pedagogy, as Guadiano and de Alba (1994) mention, is grounded in and influenced by ideology and by understanding that there are multiple social systems, there maybe multiple pedagogies, which respond to particular necessities, interests and conditions (1994, p. 128). All these models, although adapted for different social contexts, share key attributes of critical pedagogy that can be summarised as:

(1) A dialogical and interactive approach.
(2) Active and reflective practice.
(3) Assessment within the discourse of critical pedagogy.

A dialogical and interactive approach

Freire's pedagogy is based on an anti-authoritarian, dialogical and interactive approach between learners and educators with a sense of 'openness towards others' and 'open-minded curiosity towards life' (Freire 1998, pp. 120-1). Freire (1984) sees education as a collaborative and a collective production of knowledge grounded in the learners' social reality. Learning is seen as an act of knowing (Freire 1989) that requires the presence of two interrelated contexts – one is authentic dialogue that is 'an existential necessity' (1970, p. 77) for individual and social transformation, and the second is the context of reality, the social reality within which people exist (1989, p. 49). In Freire's view, knowledge involves a constant unity between action and reflection upon reality, which makes it essential for us to take our presence in the world as the focus of our critical analysis (1989, p. 52). This, therefore, makes our role as educators to empower learners to reflect on their own worlds continually and engage in critical consciousness.

Active and reflective practice

Freire (1970) sees reflection not as a consumption of ideas, but a product of *action*. Freire's pedagogy emphasises reflection and action learning, drawing upon participants' personal lived experiences to empower them to affect change. It encourages learners *and* educators to critically think about conditions of their social realities for constructing and creating solutions, which Freire refers to as *action*. Freire suggests that reflection and action can be achieved through collaboration and dialogue, which are interdependent and concurrent processes needed to enact praxis.   A key attribute of this praxis is the ongoing partnership between action, reflection and dialogue, which forms the basis of Freire's concept of 'problem-posing education'. In this form of education, knowledge is constructed 'through invention and re-invention'. It recognises the relationship between people and the world, the social context within which they exist, encourages enquiry and hence leads to transformation. This is in contrast to an approach ascribed as 'banking education', which assumes that knowledge is a possession which educators need to give to the students, that they should accept the world as it is and fit into it, refraining them from any inquiry and transformation (Freire1970, 2000, p. 58). In essence, reflective practice within the context of our projects is seen as thinking that shapes and re-shapes one's view of the self in relationship with the world, in which all communities are considered equitable.

The project *Bringing it Back to the Bronx* encourages students to look beyond the layers of isolation into their neighbourhood environment, and critically reflect upon the socio-historical and develop a dialogical relationship between their neighbourhoods, the natural history museum, and themselves as important members of the community that transcends its borders into the larger city of New York. Similarly, *Of Military Tanks and Barbie Dolls* encourages its participants to look beyond the pre-conceived notions of stigmatisation of ethnic minorities

and tensions between the British Muslim and British non-Muslim communities, and critically reflect upon a pro-peace socio-dialogical relationship with the community as active participants of the larger British society. *Art Conversations and The Tree of Wishes* encourages its participants to imagine beyond the limitations of socio-economic deprivation and their marginalised worlds, and to critically analyse any utopian possibilities of what is possible to wish for. In doing this, they can re-position themselves in society beyond the peripherals of their deprived community.

Critical assessment within the discourse of Freirean pedagogy

Assessment forms an important component in any learning activity that allows educators to assess and understand the learning achieved by learners. Arts based activities have an additional component of assessing the social and other non-academic impact of the arts. Whilst there are multiple approaches to assessment, our projects focus on applying a critical approach to assessment within the discourse of Freirean pedagogy. Applying an institutionally imposed standard assessment may run the risk of reflecting the 'social, political, cultural and ideological conditions' of societies and hence, may generate divisions that make it difficult to construct our 'ideals of change and transformation' (Freire 1998, p. 55). Further, standardised tests are often developed in assumed ideological conditions far removed from the social realities of the marginalised communities. Hence, these may not only highlight these divisions, but may also declare inadequacies on the part of these marginalised children when compared to other privileged children and least of all reveal what these children know and their other ways of learning.

A critical approach to assessment, like critical learning, is intrinsically linked with the learners' realities within which they live. Keesing-Styles (2003) summarises a critical pedagogical approach to assessment as that which embraces key attributes of critical pedagogy. Such an assessment approach is centred on dialogical interactions and fosters Freire's notion of praxis-theory in action. This approach values the experiences of the learners, sees learners as active participants in the assessment process, and in generating assessment criteria, and hence, considers their roles and voices as being equal to that of educators. Such an approach, thus, opens up creative possibilities for the reinvention of assessment. As such, it not only becomes a powerful contributor to the learning process but also has the potential to reflect the diversity of learners' realties and multiplicity of learning outcomes (ibid 2003).

In *Bringing It Back to the Bronx,* the assessment process centres on the creation of an expedition portfolio, which houses the learning outcomes of the learners' multifarious experiences in the form of visual illustrations, which are finally exhibited at the end of the project. In *Of Military Tanks and Barbie Dolls*, the video project itself serves as an assessment of the learning outcomes of the previously engaged visual arts peace project. The multiplicity of learning outcomes is captured in video form, which is finally exhibited as a film to the British Muslim and the British non-Muslim communities. In *Art Conversations and the Tree of Wishes*, the assessment is carried out in the form of a dialogue between the educator and the learner. In the dialogue, the learner reflects and talks about the creation of the artwork, which is captured on video. Our intention in these processes was to generate a dialogical approach that incorporates the learners' experiences, social realities, perspectives, and promotes critical reflection and action.

CASE STUDIES

In this article, we describe three cases studies by (a) defining the problem domain of the specific marginalised communities, which served as the motivating factor for implementing the projects, (b) the aim, methodologies and assessment processes, and (c) the outcomes of the project in terms of what was experienced by the participants and what was learnt by the educators from the projects.

BRINGING IT BACK TO THE BRONX

This project is based in the area of South Bronx, in New York City, USA, by Altman, done with K-5 elementary school children in partnership with the American Museum of Natural History's (AMNH) Education Department.

Motivation behind the project

Within several urban communities, there exist many barriers that inhibit them from engaging with museums that are considered as *far* places, as well as their local neighbourhood parks, which are comparatively *near* to their place of dwelling. Storksdieck (2005) identifies several challenges for effective community engagement with cultural resources within and outside such neighbourhoods. These include cultural barriers and lifestyle issues that limit people's engagement with museums and local neighbourhood parks. Often, learning about the benefits of visiting and engaging with museums does not form a priority whilst they struggle with social and other problems. Visiting museums often means *leaving* their neighbourhoods, which they are not accustomed to doing and hence prefer not to do so. They are not readily willing to leave a 'zone of physical or mental comfort' (ibid 2005).

Both museums and local neighbourhood parks serve as rich cultural and educational resources. Museums are ideal for 'individually centred learning', that current school education systems lack (Davis & Gardener 1993, p. 34). Apart from cultural and lifestyle barriers, children lack opportunities to leave their school buildings to visit such places since they spend the bulk of their instructional time engaging in institutionalised curriculum that is often divorced from immediate relevancy to their place of study or dwelling. These barriers and lack of opportunities not only limit their cultural and educational experiences but also contribute to a sense of detachment with the local environment and place of dwelling they call 'home'. This disengagement adds to inadequacies in their participation as active members of their environment and community. Storksdieck (2005) among others, states that there is a need to design urban outreach programs in locations *around* audiences' comfort zones.

In view of these perspectives, the project draws from Freire's pedagogy to design a program that seeks to empower such under-served communities by making it possible for them to visit and critically engage with museums and local parks, as cultural and educational resources, and experience these through the arts and sciences. Additionally, the program hopes to break barriers of isolation that can help children reconnect themselves with their immediate environment and re-position themselves as active participants of the *far* reached museum as well as their *near* local neighbourhood community. The program additionally draws insight from place-based pedagogies and Gruenwald's (2003) concept of 'reinhabitation'. Gruenwald (2003) proposes that to re-establish a sense of value and connection in the local, learning needs to be based on the nexus between neighborhood ecology and culture as a means to reinhabiting the place where one lives and which one knows.

This then becomes the basis for further learning. A place, as Wilson (1997) notes, 'does not refer simply to a geographic location but also to the opportunities that are available to create meaning within a place'. Place-based pedagogies are thus needed to educate people 'which might have some direct bearing on the wellbeing of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit (Gruenwald 2003).

Aim and methodology of the project

The project aimed to provide under-served children in urban neighbourhoods with access to the local community resources, such as parks as well as far reached cultural and educational resources such as museums, for them to learn, engage, interact and connect within and outside of their communities. Through direct investigations of the natural world, museum collections, and engagement with the arts, it was hoped that students could develop multiple layers of understanding, knowledge and depth of meaning in their learning experiences.

The methodology involved sending children to 'an expedition' into the *near* local neighbourhood park, where they engaged in active and investigative learning by exploring, experiencing and interacting with the natural environment around them, such as rocks, birds, plants etc. Through these investigations, they created several visual and textual narratives such as drawings, paintings, group murals, essays, poems and so on. They further brought these experiences from the neighbourhood parks into their classrooms and researched on these themes. This way, the neighbourhood and classroom were integrated into their curriculum.

The students were then sent on another expedition to the *far* museum, which provided other integrative learning experiences through interdisciplinary and museum learning techniques. At the museum, children brought their prior knowledge from the local neighbourhood and classroom, and connected to the museum environment through this knowledge base. They engaged in direct observations and recording in field-based conditions. This expanded their encounters with the arts and sciences, and included ideas learnt from museum professionals, diorama narratives, and conversations with other learners and educators.

After the museum visit, their initial sketches transformed into rich, detailed and vivid drawings reflecting the multiplicity of contexts and kinds of knowledge they formed along their learning experiences in their far and near environments. The progression of their illustrations became a part of their personal stories of learning and recording of their engagement with the environmental resources. They then selected from their pool of notes, drawings, artworks, and essays that served as key learning experiences and assembled them into an expedition portfolio providing evidence of their learning.
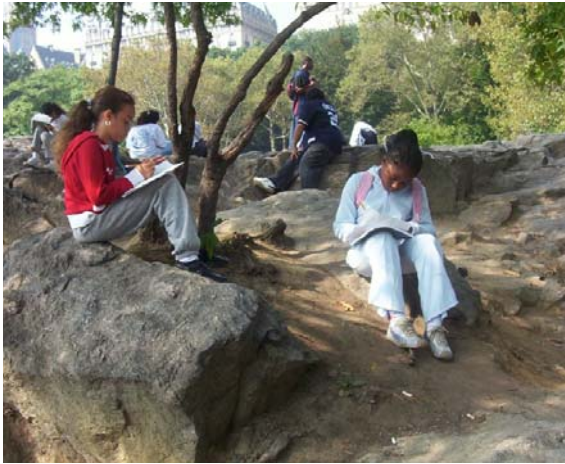
Figure 1: children at the local park   Figure 2: children at the museum

Portfolios were used for easy storage and display of their artifacts in a way that is meaningful to them personally. It also served to give them a sense of professionalism, like artists, who select, display, demonstrate and advocate their work to shed light on their abilities, interests and capacities to a larger audience. The portfolios are finally put for public display on an end-of-year 'Portfolio and Celebration Day'.

Portfolios serve both for assessment and as a celebratory display within the community they inhabit and belong to. By presenting their findings and reflections to a larger audience, their families and friends, they demonstrate their own evaluative process and knowledge. They transform from learners to creators and curators of their experiences. Answering questions posed to them by visitors about their artefacts activates their reflective process in interpreting and explaining their yearlong journey of explorations in the natural environments of their neighbourhood and the museum. These artifacts serve as material for evaluation of their learning and a deeper understanding of their experiences and what they know. It helps in understanding what children have learnt, what is of significance to them and why, in their own means of expression. The creation of these portfolios also served to connect all domains of their life such as self, family, school and the world.

Figure 3: children making murals   Figure 4: children displaying expedition portfolios

Learning outcomes

Engagement with the environment and the arts together are parallel processes that provided an immersive learning experience. Curiosity, imagination, sensory and kinaesthetic systems can be activated when children develop their own pathways and narratives through active investigation and expression through the arts. This program situated learning directly in the community offering new perspectives on the value of place. Apart from increased knowledge of the environment, children also learnt about museum processes of exhibition and curation that they applied when exhibiting their own works. Selection of materials for presentation to the public, i.e. curation, also served as a model to tell their personal stories of their learning, their community, and experiences in their own words and works. One definition of the term *curating* stems from the concept of curing or healing; one of the most surprising and significant learning outcomes observed was that the children became appreciative and experts of the natural and cultural history of their community, thereby mitigating external stigmas attached to their neighborhood. They further became docents of their own neighborhoods and took visitors on a 'natural history tour of the school's neighborhood'. This project thus helped in developing a deeper connection with their localities and transformed them into active participants of their communities.

OF MILITARY TANKS AND BARBIE DOLLS

This project is based in the city of Coventry in UK and is carried out by De, working with young British Muslim girls, (8-15 years) from a Youth club in Coventry. Coventry is a multi-cultural city with a diverse and rich blend of people from different racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. Amongst these, 3.9% are Muslims, forming the second largest ethnic minority population by religion (Census 2001).

Motivation behind the project

Contemporary British society is ethnically, linguistically and racially diverse with Muslims forming the second largest religious group. Of these, 40% are of Pakistani origin, forming the second largest ethnic minority (16.1%) in the UK. Several studies indicate that amongst all ethnic minorities in Britain, Muslim youth and children are most vulnerable to socio-economic marginalisation. A report from Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (OCIS) suggests that they experience high levels of risk factors associated with child poverty, with over one-third (35%) growing up in households with no adults in employment (OCIS 2004, p. 13). These factors, such as low parental employment and low educational levels (amongst others), contribute to low academic achievement levels of these children (Anwar 1996, pp. 47-8). The National Literacy Trust (2002) confirms that this has a strong correlation with social factors such as high levels of poverty, ghettoisation and residence in deprived neighborhoods (National Literacy Trust 2002). The Office of National Statistics (2002) further reports that amongst all ethnic minorities, Muslim youth are the most likely to have no academic qualifications. Such deprivation and marginalisation not only affects their academic and formal educational opportunities but also transcends to other areas such as the arts. The Arts Council England (2005) reports that opportunities for youth and children to engage in the arts are not available consistently across England and that there are areas of significant deprivation with little arts and creative provision. Those young people 'most in need of high-quality provision are often least able to access it' (Arts Council England 2005, p. 9).

Apart from socio-economic deprivation, other factors such as religious restrictions and reduced leisure time also inhibit and limit their access to and engagement with the arts. Within Islam, there exist various interpretations

about engagement with the arts and media. Some Muslims think 'it is an inappropriate subject within the school curriculum and a waste of time; a diversion from other important things in life and at worst, a dangerous enticement for believers to engage in forbidden activities' (Halstead 2005, p. 157). For them, the prevalence of arts in the national curriculum even mean lack of sensitivity to Muslim beliefs and forcing Muslim people to 'undertake activities against their belief in the name of broadening their experience' (ibid, p. 157). Further, a comparatively reduced leisure time for Muslim youth and children also restricts their engagement with the arts. Muslim parents actively encourage their children to receive religious education in their own faith for a deeper understanding of Islamic beliefs and practices (ibid, p. 105). Hence, the dominant pattern that has emerged in contemporary British Muslim society is that children attend community or church schools during the day and mosque or Islamic schools in the evening. This not only places constraints on their leisure time, but also an additional burden in their 'intellectual effort' (ibid, p. 133).

In Coventry especially, a large majority of Muslims are conservative and are hence allowed only limited access to the arts and media. The youth club, therefore, made it their highest priority to expand possibilities for engagement with the arts and media. Following the London bombings of July 7, 2005, this initiative took shape in the form of a visual arts peace project that aimed to engage the girls with the arts and generate a pro-peace dialogue between the British Muslim and British non-Muslim communities. Although this project produced visual illustrations of high intellect, it was important to assess the impact of their engagement with the arts. There is significant evidence that shows the difference the arts can make to individuals. However, it is acknowledged that there is a 'lack of robust evaluation' (Jermyn 2001, p. 6) and that there has been little serious evaluation, especially because these social impacts are often long term and difficult to quantify (Galloway 1995, p. 2).

In view of these factors, a video project was designed to not only engage them with media, but also to serve as an evaluation for the previously engaged visual arts project. Most significantly, it hoped to create an opportunity for them to critically reflect and express themselves freely and creatively, beyond the barrier of social stigmas attached with 'British Muslims'. Both the visual arts and the video project are grounded in Freire's pedagogy that emphasises reflection and action learning drawing upon their personal experiences to empower them to initiate change. Such an opportunity of expression and empowerment can potentially generate critical consciousness and a wider discourse about their self, their community and their responsibilities as active participants in the larger British society.

Aim and methodology of the project

The project aimed to provide an opportunity for young British Muslim girls to engage with media and enable them to create video content based on their learning experiences of their previously engaged visual arts project. Research suggests that there is considerable potential for media to be used as a means of communication and self-expression. Creative involvement in media production, particularly in the context of education, can make an important contribution towards development of critical understanding (Buckingham 2004, p. 3). The project thus served to enhance their learning and engagement with media as well as foster a dialogue within themselves about the critical issues of their social reality within their community.

For the convenience of the participants, the methodology was kept simple, playful and enjoyable. The duration of the project was four weeks split into four sessions, each ranging from 2-3 hours. The participants were first shown digital images and videos, which had been taken, by the facilitators and themselves during the visual arts project. This was done in order to generate a reflective process of their engagement and learning during the

project. These provided a multi-modal learning approach allowing them to detect, register and recall information. Reflective practice is essentially structured around enquiry driven by questions, dialogue and stories that are narrative accounts of experience. Stories and dialogue provide culturally powerful systems for conveying the way we think, feel, and make connections in our experiences; hence they serve as powerful 'technologies' for examining experience (Amulya 2003, p. 2). In view of Freire's pedagogy, education is seen as an act of knowing. From this perspective we advocate a synthesis between the educator's maximally systematised knowing and the learners' minimally systematised knowing – a synthesis achieved in dialogue. 'The educator's role is to propose problems about the codified existential situations in order to help the learners arrive at a more and more critical view of their reality' (Freire 1985, p. 55). Dialogue was thus, the most crucial component of this project.

Figure 5: participants reflecting & narrating experiences

Figure 6: participant interviewing facilitator

By reflecting over the images, videos and the project as a whole, the participants narrated and shared their experiences. They were then asked key questions on themes that emerged from their narratives and that related to their experiences before engaging with the project, during their participation and after their participation. These included themes such as their understanding of peace within themselves, in their religion and in the community, both before and after the project. Apart from these thematic understandings, the dialogues fostered discussion

and reflection about critical issues of their realities, such as people's perceptions and stigmatisation of British Muslims, racism, the media and their role as active participants of their community. These dialogues also unraveled other issues, such as their moments of intra- and inter- personal conflicts, which included restrictions of engaging with graphic imagery and media within Islam and working together with other participants in a group.

The dialogues took the shape of interviews between the facilitator and the participants. The participants also interviewed the facilitator, subverting the educator-learner relationship. These interviews were then condensed and edited into a 19-minute video, which, along with their artworks, was exhibited as a film at the Herbert Art Gallery in November 2006 as part of Coventry Peace Month. The audience included the British Muslims and the British non-Muslims.

Figure 7: participants in dialogue with British Non-Muslims

Figure 8: participant expressing their views

Learning outcomes

The project brought about a diverse range of outcomes. It enhanced their self-confidence, self-esteem, thinking skills and appreciation of the arts and media. Their reflections produced a deeper understanding of critical issues surrounding their existence as 'British Muslims', the stigmas attached to them, the tenets of their religion in relation to communal peace and their individual roles in society. An important outcome was their enhanced sense of self-empowerment that allowed them to critically address and express their perceptions on these critical issues that were never discussed at home, in school or in any other social setting. They were able to produce video content that was not only emotionally engaging but also addressed the audience directly with an effective message. The most significant outcome was perhaps their sense of *awakening*. They developed a new meaning of the place they inhabited and re-affirmed their identity as responsible British Muslims in their community. Some participants had been subjected to racists' comments prior to the project and their reflection changed their perception of 'racism'. They realised that racism also resulted from their lack of communication with the 'other' in the community and that it was their responsibility to initiate a 'dialogue' between the two. They further realised it was their responsibility to initiate peace awareness in schools and community, with anti-bullying being the first step to creating peace. This newly developed sense of identity also generated a deeper meaning of their 'place' of dwelling in the city of Coventry – which was not just a place full of ethnic minorities but a 'culture city', with multiple cultures and people from different ethnicities cohabiting and co-existing in harmony. These realisations further decreased their sense of isolation and detachment from their place, community and the larger society.

ART CONVERSATIONS AND TREE OF WISHES

The authors Altman and De together worked on this project with underprivileged children (5-12 years) from five slum areas in New Delhi in partnership with a non-governmental organisation, Pratham. Inspired by the outcomes of the previous projects they were motivated to further Freire's ideologies with these children in an arts project that formed part of a larger project initiative called Photos For Hope by Nishchaya Gera (Pratham USA n.d.; Photos For Hope 2009).

Pratham is a worldwide organisation established by UNICEF and Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, India, that provides underprivileged and out-of-school children the opportunity to read, write and learn at primary level so they can be integrated into Municipal and other mainstream schools and study further onto secondary level education. Pratham's makeshift schools, classrooms and supplementary libraries are established within slum areas that enable greater access and reach to such children.

Motivation behind the project

Pratham nurtures a vision of, *Every child in school and learning well*, which resonates with Freire's praxis of not only creating a better learning environment but also a better world; a 'reading the word and reading the world' (Freire 1970) approach to literacy. Pratham classrooms have scant resources, including poor sunlight; they have a rug spread on the floor, charts with numbers and letters posted on walls and reading materials strung on clotheslines. There are artworks pasted on walls, which children create within and outside their curriculum. These artworks are vivid, detailed and diverse in themes. The vibrancy of the artworks led us to think that these children may already be visual learners and read the world in multiple and complex ways. Their artworks reveal their thoughts, opinions, feelings and connections that they perceive in their world and which as literacy beginners

they are not yet able to convey with such detail in writing. Given the fact that there are only generalists teachers and not specialised art educators, and that these children do not learn art as a specific subject and yet make these vivid drawings, we were led to deduce that these children may bring prior knowledge, skills and capacities into their classroom which are reflected in their artworks. Based on this assumption, these artworks may serve as lenses for us to look deeper into their capacities and abilities that they bring to the classrooms.

Most of these children are either semi-literate or learning to be literate and work at home or outside as child labourers. Some do not even go to Municipal schools but only attend Pratham classes. Being underprivileged, they do no have access to mainstream formal or informal education (including the arts), hence it may not be possible to only rely on institutionalised assessment methods to understand the full range of their knowledge, level of critical thinking and other abilities and capacities.

The question therefore arises as to what alternative methods can be used to understand what and how they know what they know. Often these children are stigmatised as 'hard to reach or work with' because of their impoverished conditions. These attributes of their social realities can be seen within the context of Freire's idea of problematisation of restrictive social order and stereotypical biases and stigmatisations associated with the marginalised. Often we are so consumed by their deprived conditions that we may forget that these children may have as much (if not more) intelligence as other children, who are not as deprived and who have access to formal and mainstream education. Their lack of access to institutionalised formal educational systems does not necessarily imply a deficit of intellect on their part. Rather, it is our inability as educators to find alternate means to decipher what they know and how they know what they know. Our project is thus driven by this quest that in addition to challenging institutionalised assessment methods, what methods can be used by educators to know what and how these children know. Further, by finding their *other* ways of learning we may be able to build upon what they already know.

Figure 9: A paining on Pratham classroom wall   Figure 8: children painting on canvases

Aim and methodology of the project

The project is grounded in Freire's pedagogic approach that highlights the importance of visualisation in engaging marginalised populations to stimulate learning, introspection and empower them. The project aimed to engage these children in creating artworks on a particular theme (Tree of wishes) and then engage them in a reflective dialogue with the educators (Art Conversations) and enable them to express their creative insights about their artworks. By making it possible for these children to create artworks on 'canvases', as opposed to the plain white paper (A4 and A3) that they are accustomed to drawing on, it served to symbolically break the barrier of marginalisation associated with their inability to access canvases as an expensive and unreachable art resource. It was hoped that the project would not only expand opportunity for these children as learners but also for educators in learning about their other ways of learning and in arts' potential to understanding their fuller capacities and intellect.

The project was implemented in collaboration with the teachers of Pratham working within those sites of learning. Children were first provided with art materials such as canvas, crayons, tempera and other paints that they were allowed to take with them after the project. They were then explained the theme of *Kalp Vriksha* (imagined Tree of Wishes) and asked to paint whatever they could possibly wish for. The focus on 'wishes' spells from an Indian traditional thought of Kalp Vriksha that signifies a 'wish-fulfilling divine tree'. Children were encouraged to imagine beyond the limitations of socio-economic deprivation and marginalised worlds, to critically analyse any utopian possibilities of what it is possible to wish for. They were encouraged to express and visually illustrate that which is 'not yet', and therefore re-position themselves in the society at large, beyond the barriers of their deprived community. This concept draws insight from another influential approach to critical pedagogy identified by Roger Simon (1987) as the 'pedagogy of possibility', that aimed at enabling a particular 'not yet' of how we might live our lives together.

Simon contends that proposing a pedagogy is also about proposing a political vision (1987, p. 372). A vision foreseen through our project is that these children break down the walls of social deprivation and imagine the possibility of a world of their social reality as that which is 'not yet', but possible. Simon quotes Henry Giroux, who writes, 'A language of possibility does not have to dissolve into a reified utopianism, instead it can be developed as a precondition for nourishing convictions that summon up the courage to imagine a different and more just world and to struggle for it' (Giroux cited by Simon 1992, p. 13). It may require a form of teaching and learning that is linked to the goal of educating learners to struggle with ongoing relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of a world that is 'not yet', which may allow altering of the grounds upon which life is lived (Simon 1987, p. 375). With this view, children were asked to individually reflect and imagine anything that they could possibly wish for and to visually illustrate it. Individual reflection has the potential to enhance the development of new insights, heighten cognitive awareness, promote critical thinking and engender personal transformation (Andrusyszyn & Davie 1995). It did not matter whether children created beautiful drawings or not, especially considering the fact that they were not used to working with professional art materials; what was important was their personal responses in what they could imagine and wish for.

When children completed their works, they were photographed along with their artworks and asked to share their insights about their creations. This was filmed as a record of their reflection and for us to later reflect back on regarding the learning outcomes of the project. The conversations served as assessments carried out in the form of a dialogue between the educator and the learner. Our intention was to generate a dialogical approach that

incorporates the learners' experiences, social realities, perspectives, and that promotes critical reflection and action. This process of art making and then sharing it in conversation as a dialogical process also has the potential to generate many higher-order and meta-cognitive thinking capacities in them, which can expand their personal awareness of their own capabilities, as well as verbal and critical thinking capacities. The over-all process also contributed to their enjoyment and happiness in having their work honoured.

Figure 11: Child displaying her artwork
Figure 12: artwork: The Bluest Plane

Learning outcomes

It was our hypothesis that when these children visually illustrate their personal wishes, which they articulate from their inner experiences surrounding their social realities, and then interpret these in conversations with us, we may be able to gain a deeper insight into their capabilities and abilities. The artworks produced showed diverse themes, a lot of which existed outside the borders of their social realities. For example, colourful roses, considering the fact that these children live in landfills with garbage all around them with no sign of plants, let alone beautiful flowers. One of the children drew a fairy, wishing that she could be one. Another child drew the insides of a plane, with passengers looking out of their windows on either sides; an imagination extrapolated from the vision of the insides of a car, which they had never been in. The plane showed a double row of windows top and bottom, with passengers on lower row looking out facing the viewer and those on the upper row having their backs towards the viewers. The solution to this problem of perspective is a highly sophisticated one and represents a creative visualisation and critical thinking solution. There are other examples that illustrate their vivid imagination and expressions of their inner and outer worlds. For children who had not engaged extensively with art, it was a new experience as they discovered using these materials for the first time.

Figures13 & 14: Place of dwelling and immediate surrounding of slum children

These artworks collectively illustrate multiplicity of intellect and ability that are learnt outside the children's curriculum; they invite us to look deeper into their *other* ways of learning, which may best be understood by understanding their social realities outside their educational curriculum. Freire (1998) stresses that educators need to respect the existing knowledge and life experiences of the disenfranchised and take up the challenge of working collaboratively with them to explore concrete realities of their lived experiences. Thus, an understanding of their social realities may help to discover what skills, attitudes and abilities these children bring with them to the classroom. Many of these children are child labourers working inside or outside the house; some work in Delhi's largest fruit and vegetable market, which apart from being a workspace is predominantly a colourful multi-textured environment surrounding them. Others are mostly employed as rag pickers, carpet weavers and re-sellers of vegetables. A landfill for rag picking is dominated by colour overshadowing the filth contained in it. All these occupations, in such visual, colourful and multi-textured environments, require powers of fine discrimination, selection, calculation and judgment of the essential qualities of rags, fruits, threads and produce.

The children make many critical judgments throughout the day: which rag or fruit is best to pick; what is the condition, texture, color that makes this a suitable piece to spend precious time on. Small fingers make the best weavers and must be done with great precision, attention to detail, skill and speed. Often, children learn their trade from each other and have experience with social learning. All these skills and abilities, learnt outside the Pratham curriculum, are built in through their work environments and experiences. These may not necessarily be exhibited through institutionalised assessment methods. It is through the lens of their artworks that we were inspired to look deeper into their capacities, into what they know and their *other* ways of learning. Freire insisted on recognising 'the critical capacity, curiosity and autonomy of the learner' in creating new knowledge (1998, p. 33). This project, in essence, also exemplifies Freire's approach that *subverts* the restrictive dichotomies of 'teacher-learner' relationship – in our learning what they know and how they know what they know.

CONCLUSION

All of these projects enabled us as art and cultural educators to look beyond the boundaries of socio-economic and other forms of divides, and stereotypical assumptions that we associate with their divides. To explore new means and lenses for understanding what children know and do, it enhanced our understanding of the multiple capacities these youth and children have in understanding and interpreting the world as they build towards reading and writing skills. A close investigation of children's products and *processes* can give a fuller assessment of what they know and can do. We can gain a deeper insight into the visual, critical and creative capacities these children possess by examining their *creative works*, from children *at work* and *telling* about their work.

These projects further enabled us to see the transformative impact of the arts and arts potential in transcending social isolation, disconnection and the stigmatisation of marginalised communities, as well as in giving them voices and a new meaning of self and place beyond their peripherals of restricted social realities.

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