

## A Place to Be: The Library as Agent of Arts in Education

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In Nikki Giovanni's poem, A Library (For Kelli Martin), a library is a place -

*to surf the rainbow  
to sail the dreams  
to be blue  
to be jazz  
to be wonderful  
to be you  
a place to be  
yeah... to be*

Those lines could well be about art. Doesn't art help us to surf rainbows and sail dreams? Doesn't art allow us to express both joy and sorrow? Doesn't art make it possible for us to – be? Being is both about the head and the heart, a complex web of feeling and thinking. Art is able to tap into both through our senses – what we see and hear makes us feel, and through that feeling it provokes us to think. One area to see this in process is the use of picture books with children.

Library educator, Jo Anne Saldanha, has written about using Jamlo Walks (Mishra and Aziz, 2021), a picture book about children's experiences in the lockdown of 2020, with middle-school children. In the blogpost, Saldanha explains how she first set the context for difficult conversations around inequality and loss by talking to the children about their experiences of the lockdown before reading the book (Saldanha, 2021). She then spent time on each page of the book, reading not just the text but encouraging them to read and interpret the visual. This brought multiple perspectives, not always in consensus. While the conversations may remain open-ended, what is evident in the children's responses is the interplay between feeling and thinking:

*The image is making me feel like I'm walking on the same street. It is very hot.*

*Why is Jamlo working? Isn't it illegal, Aunty?*

*I was wondering if my parents made the lockdown up Aunty... like Rahul, I would stand at the window and stare to see what was happening outside.*

*Aunty, this book is making me upset... I feel like I'm a spoilt child.*

*I've never thought about this before but now I'm thinking that we all have a connection, don't we? Everyone has something in common with others, even if they are not like us.*

When a child (or adult) responds with feeling – pleasure, sadness, fear, joy... any feeling – it allows for an understanding to begin. Just as there is always an element of mystery about

where creative ideas come from, the process of evoking an exact response is also difficult to determine. However, the children's responses above indicate that seeing the image of a child at the window can create a link with the reader's own experience of staring out at a locked-down world, the narrative of a child facing hardships can make the reader see the difference between lives and feel like 'a spoilt child', the images and text together can provoke questions and thinking about what connects us as humanity. It is this inherent ability of art to engage with our senses, create resonance and provoke reflection that underlines why the library should be an agent of the arts in education. When a library – or any learning space – opens up to the arts, it creates an opportunity for sensory and emotional perceptions that lead to critical thinking. It also extends the meaning and value of the artwork, forging an interconnected relationship, between those who create and those who engage with the work, that builds community.

Perspective is integral to the relationship between the arts and the library. The art historian, EH Gombrich, said – “There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.” Giving primacy to the creators of art means acknowledging a multiplicity of voices and experiences, and allowing our understanding of the world to be shaped by this fundamentally. A library's shelves hold the possibility of multiplicity – if a critical and self-reflexive practice guides its collection. It is this same approach that needs to widen and allow the library to also become a repository of art in its myriad forms. Books are art – they emerge from similar creative processes and questions as other forms of art. So it is simply one more step to include more than books in the library. Adding film collections, displaying art on the walls, organising activities around these, bringing in artists and performers to engage with members – these are all ways to broaden the idea of art in the library. What is needed is the perspective that steers the actions, the same perspective that will grow in those who enter and engage with the library and its collection.

When we speak of the arts in education, it is important to remember that the goal is not to turn everybody into an artist but rather to turn their gaze into an artistic one. Exposure to the arts and engaging with creative practice encourages the perspective of a *rasik* - an ability to appreciate art, to be enriched by the arts.

The arts allow the viewer/listener/seeker to realign the gaze, find connections between the experience of the self and of others, and remain aware of the beauty that lies in living, even if it is a dark or sad kind of beauty. The library space can be one that curates these possibilities by focussing on what is the art that is shared and what are the ways in which it is discovered.

My work with children focusses a lot on this aspect of the arts as window and mirror, and seeks to engage with them as equals who experience all kinds of emotions, even dark ones. In both non-formal and formal spaces, I work with children using language, image and sound to encourage a process of self-reflection as well as dialogue. I run an online space on arts and education, The Magic Key Centre for the Arts and Childhood, and while this is not a library, I like to think that it is guided by library practice. For me, two key aspects of that are exploration and curation.

When the COVID19 lockdown was announced in March 2020, I began an online art project in which I shared one art exercise each day that the enrolled participants would complete in the next 24 hours. The exercises ranged from writing poetry, drawing, taking photographs, recording sound and video. Sometimes they would have to read or watch something before

doing the exercise. Each exercise was linked to the idea of the lockdown, urging the children to observe and reflect on their experiences and of those around them. Through the exercises, the children explored different ways of expressing their experiences that I believe led to an incremental understanding of what they and the world was going through. In an exercise that was about writing about the sounds of the lockdown, a 12-year old evoked the sense of loss:

*In the lockdown I heard the clock's tick tock,  
In the lockdown I heard the chirps of birds.  
In the lockdown I heard the hushed silence of afternoons,  
In the lockdown nights I heard the hoots of owls.*

*How I hope to hear the door-bell going ding-dong!*

The children who were part of the Lockdown Art Project were of course those with the privilege of internet-access and devices, as well as English-medium education. So it was important for the project to not just focus on the self but also nudge the participating children to look at the wider world, albeit from their locked down perspective. This meant a careful curation of the resources – articles, poetry, film - that would sometimes aid the prompt. The same 12-year old, in response to an exercise asking them to write a letter to themselves from the point of view of another, wrote:

*Dear Riddho,*

*I work in a tea stall outside the building where you live. You may not know me, but I see you going to school every day and playing in the park.  
Because of the coronavirus outbreak, my salary has been cut into half. My parents work in Uttar Pradesh and I am unable to contact them. I have a shortage of food in my home, where I live with my brother.*

*I am writing to you because I want you to know what the outside world is facing during the lockdown. You may be happy during the lockdown but everybody is not as happy as you are.  
- Arjun*

The Magic Key Centre's work has in the last year been restricted to a weekly sharing of resources online through our social media handles, and reflecting on ideas provoked by those. In thinking of what we need to post every week, I have discovered books, films, children's responses, poetry, paintings, podcast conversations, archival interviews. The year's collection of posts is varied but tied together by a spirit of curiosity and discovery. There is a meandering exploration of how different people – adult and children – have interacted with the arts in different roles. The posts have included the work of artists like Eric Carle, KG Subramanyam and Maya Angelou as well as the work created by children as articles, online plays, or even simply as conversations about missing the school playground, their wishes for the new year and what makes them happy. This is life as seen through the lens of art, a collage of content and form, that reminds us that to live is to be curious and observant and reflective. Art does that. The library does that.

Vincent van Gogh said, “Art is to console those who are broken by life.” And we know countless stories of how libraries have rescued those who were broken by life. What better space then, than the library, to experience the plurality of beauty and truth that art conveys.

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