

“Art is Limitless”:

How Art For Akanksha’s Approach Embraces Holistic Education

by Aman Jaleel

Ruchika Gupta, Senior Director of Art for Akanksha (AFA), originally joined Akanksha to market AFA’s artwork. Over time, her passion to tell the stories of children has helped propel AFA into a thriving program, active in 26 schools across three cities, reaching over 14000 students.

AFA’s mission statement is “to provide a powerful art education for children within as well as beyond the Akanksha network, supporting and demonstrating the belief that art empowers.” The Art teachers at AFA work with schools to bring art and the creative process front and center, and to give students a safe space for personal growth and self-expression.

Gupta’s journey with meaningful art education began with her own experiences in school, and helped her understand the importance of extracurricular activities for students. “What really defined [our school] and made us who we were is not just academics but all the other things,” Gupta said. “It was the sports, the dramatics, the theater and all of the other things.”



At the beginning of her time at Akanksha, Gupta started a small art class which took place every week. “I spent an entire Saturday for [many years] of my life planning and executing the class,” Gupta said. “That class was the space where I really understood how to teach, and I got a grip on who our kids are and understood what they really wanted.” Through the quality time spent planning and teaching, Gupta and other Art teachers realized that getting to know their students better would help them evaluate and help their students’ wellbeing on a deeper level.

Celebrating Uniqueness and Teaching Collaboration

AFA also celebrates individual perspectives and variety, another outcome of encouraging self-expression. Children have a choice to work on different pieces during class, and the Art teachers acknowledge that different students enjoy different styles of art. They are exposed to various artists, media, and methods. “If I walk into a classroom, and everyone is doing the same art, something very wrong is happening,” Gupta said. “Art class needs to be a space where each of the 35 pieces are different.”

If students have trouble, teachers have created a collaborative space where students can share ideas with each other. “In the collaborative space, the students have five people around them, and they can help each other,” Art teacher at Akanksha Denis D’Souza said. “They can get ideas from their friends who are sitting along with them.”

From the students’ perspective, they learn new skills which they can use both inside and outside of the classroom. Akanksha student Shaurya Jaiswal says that she has learned to let herself be more creative, and she enjoys working together with her peers so they can learn new things, share ideas, and problem-solve together.

“I always personally think how I should make my artwork different from everybody in the class so that it has a unique look,” Jaiswal said. “And, whenever we do artwork, we collaborate with peers, group members, or our partners.”

The Classroom as a Safe Space

The students also learn interpersonal skills with their peers, including fostering a sense of belonging and comfort in their classroom. Art teachers make sure that students know that they and their artwork is always welcome. According to Jaiswal, this safe space that Akanksha has created in their art classes has made art more enjoyable. “Art is very important to express ourselves because as a

student we have a lot of unit tests, exams, or [other] things to do,” Jaiswal said. “Whenever we do art, we get calmed down by it.”

“We will not laugh at what we see, and we will not belittle someone else,” Gupta said. “Everyone has the right to their own ideas, and everyone can interpret something differently.”

Another important skill the students learn is leadership. D’Souza says he also tries to create an environment where students can be leaders, and to work towards this goal, he facilitates a class that is student-led. Every month, one or two students take one topic and teach the topic to the whole class,” explained D’Souza. “[Through this class] I try to help build confidence and student voices.”

With so many art experiences throughout the year, it can be tough to choose a favorite. Jaiswal says one of her most memorable projects was her recreation of “The Starry Night” by Vincent Van Gogh. “I liked that art because it actually took me a whole month to complete it,” Jaiswal said. “I felt that even if I take (sic) a lot of time, when the art was completed, it was worth it.” Along with recreating the piece, Jaiswal also recorded a video that consisted of short clips of her creating the piece. She learned that she loved video editing, which now plays a role in her artwork as well.



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Her class also had the opportunity to visit an art exhibition of Vincent Van Gogh's work, led by D'Souza.. Jaiswal says this experience made her feel more connected to her work. "This was memorable for me because it was not only about his art, but it was even about his story, and his struggles," Jaiswal said.

As the art program has grown, Akanksha has supported other schools that hope to implement art classes into their curriculum. For example, Art teachers from Akanksha have shared their curriculum with teachers from Khoj Community School in Mumbai, of AFA's external partners, and helped with Art teacher training as well.

"It was such a hit that they came back to us the next year saying that they have budgeted for an Art teacher because they knew we were there and would make it happen," Gupta said.

To acknowledge the hard work that students put into their artwork, Akanksha likes to display the artwork; however, one difficulty is finding display space. To ensure that those outside of Akanksha are familiar with what is happening in the school, Akanksha has begun to sell some of the artwork. "People love it," Gupta said. "When you pick up a piece of art, [not only] is it just a beautiful piece of art, but there's also a...story there."



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