

BLACKBOARDS AND BASIC-SHAPED LANDSCAPES: STATE OF ART EDUCATION IN INDIA

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of **Master of Design** by

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Guide:

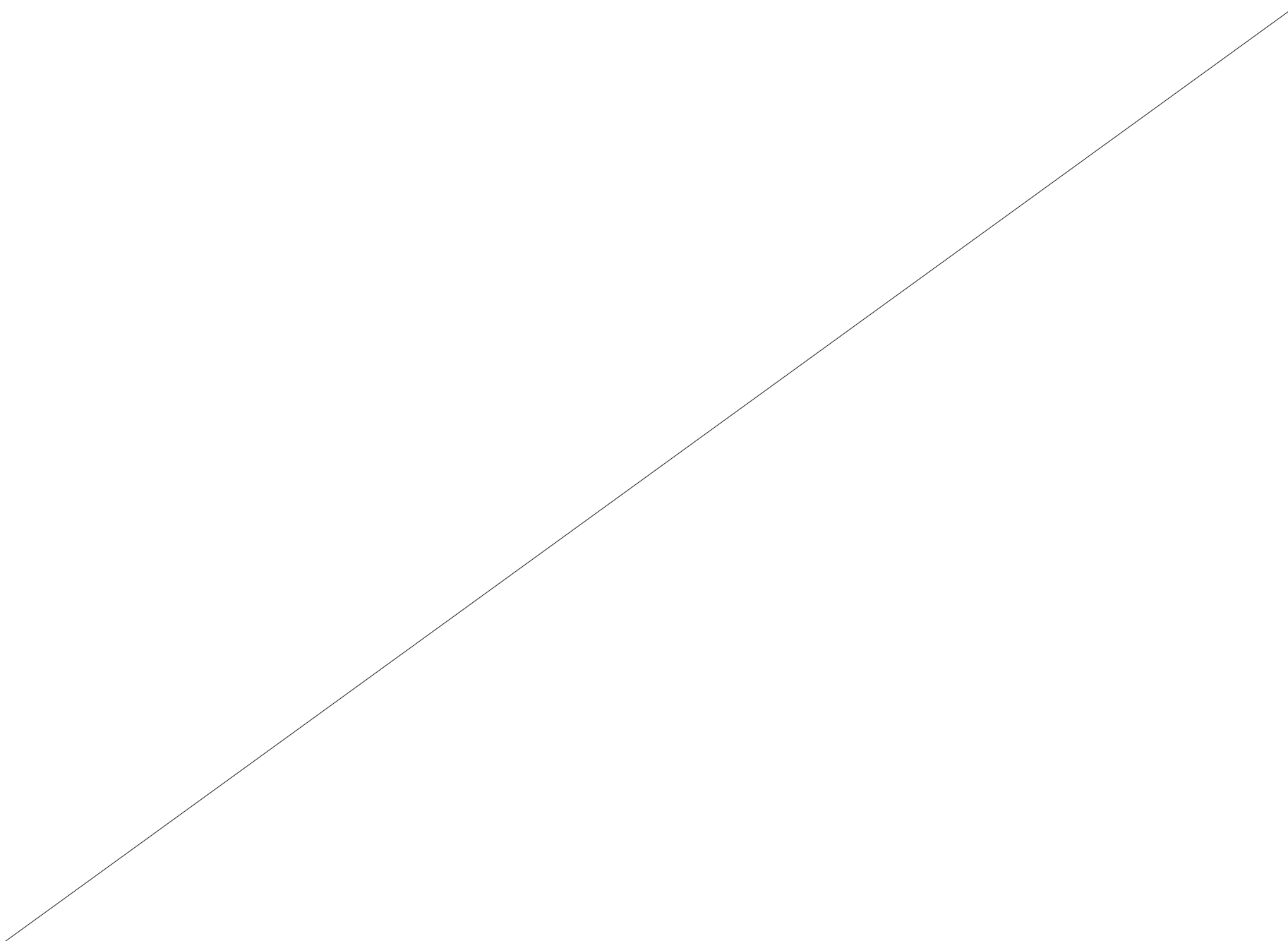
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Approval Sheet

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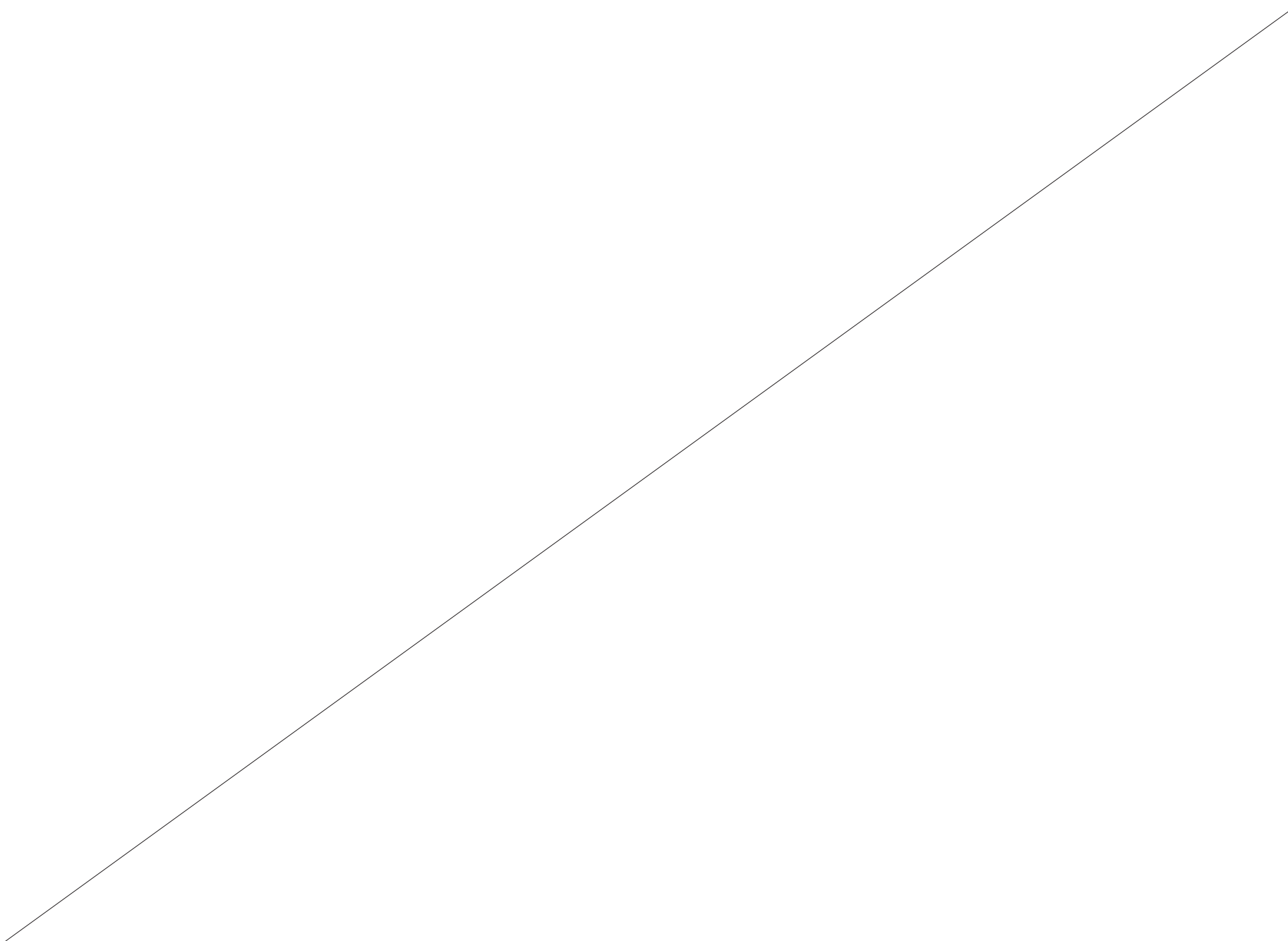
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This is to certify that Abhijith KR of Interaction Design, IDC has completed his internship with Kerala Organic Farmers? Forum (Kerala Jaiva Karshaka Samithi) and our conservation education magazine, One Earth One Life, from 4th June 2016 to 4th July 2016. Please consider this a certificate for the same.

Asoka Kumar v
Editor, One Earth One Life Magazine

on behalf of the Kerala Jaiva Karshaka Samithi
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Internship Completion Letter from KJKS



Declaration

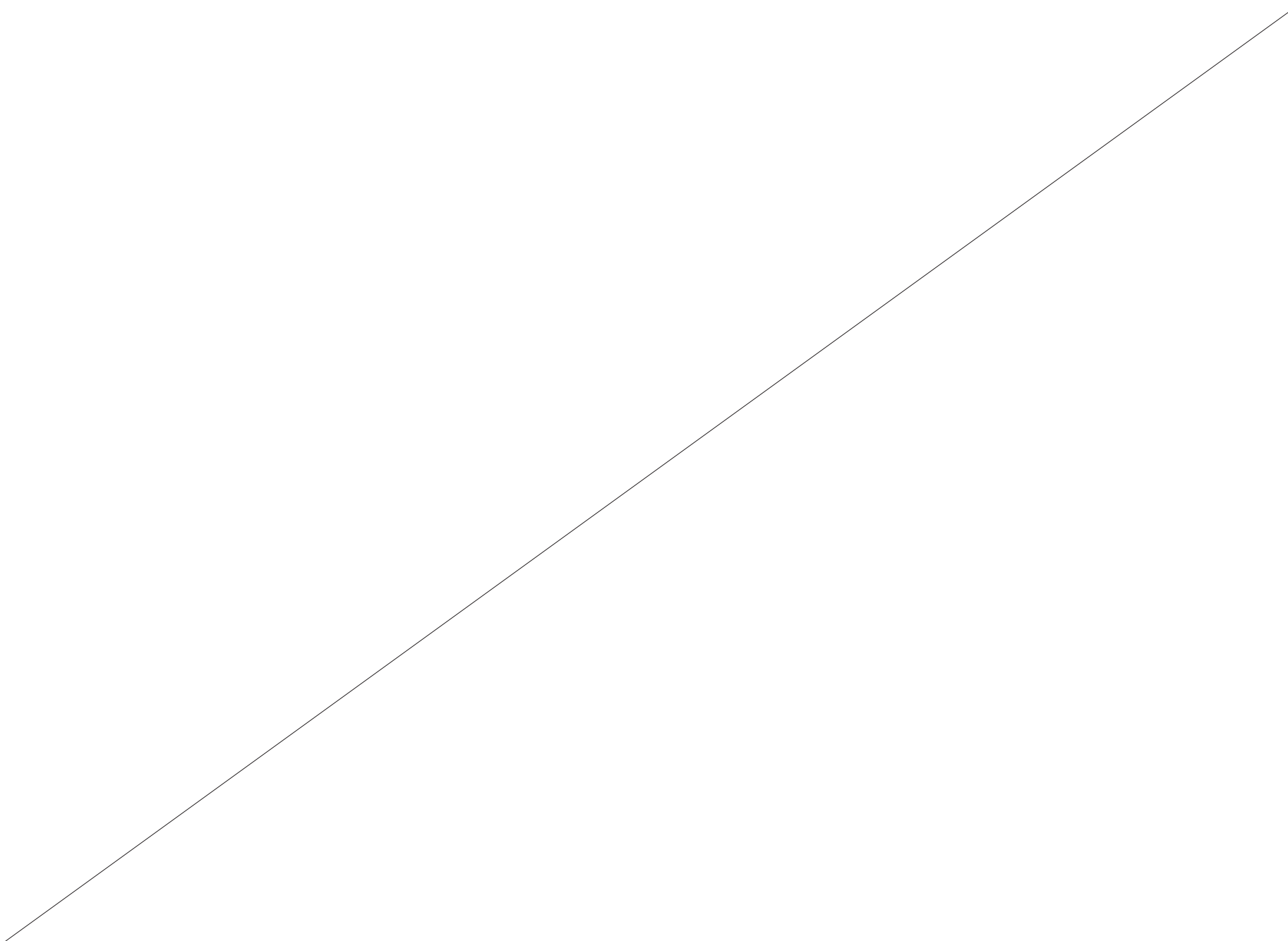
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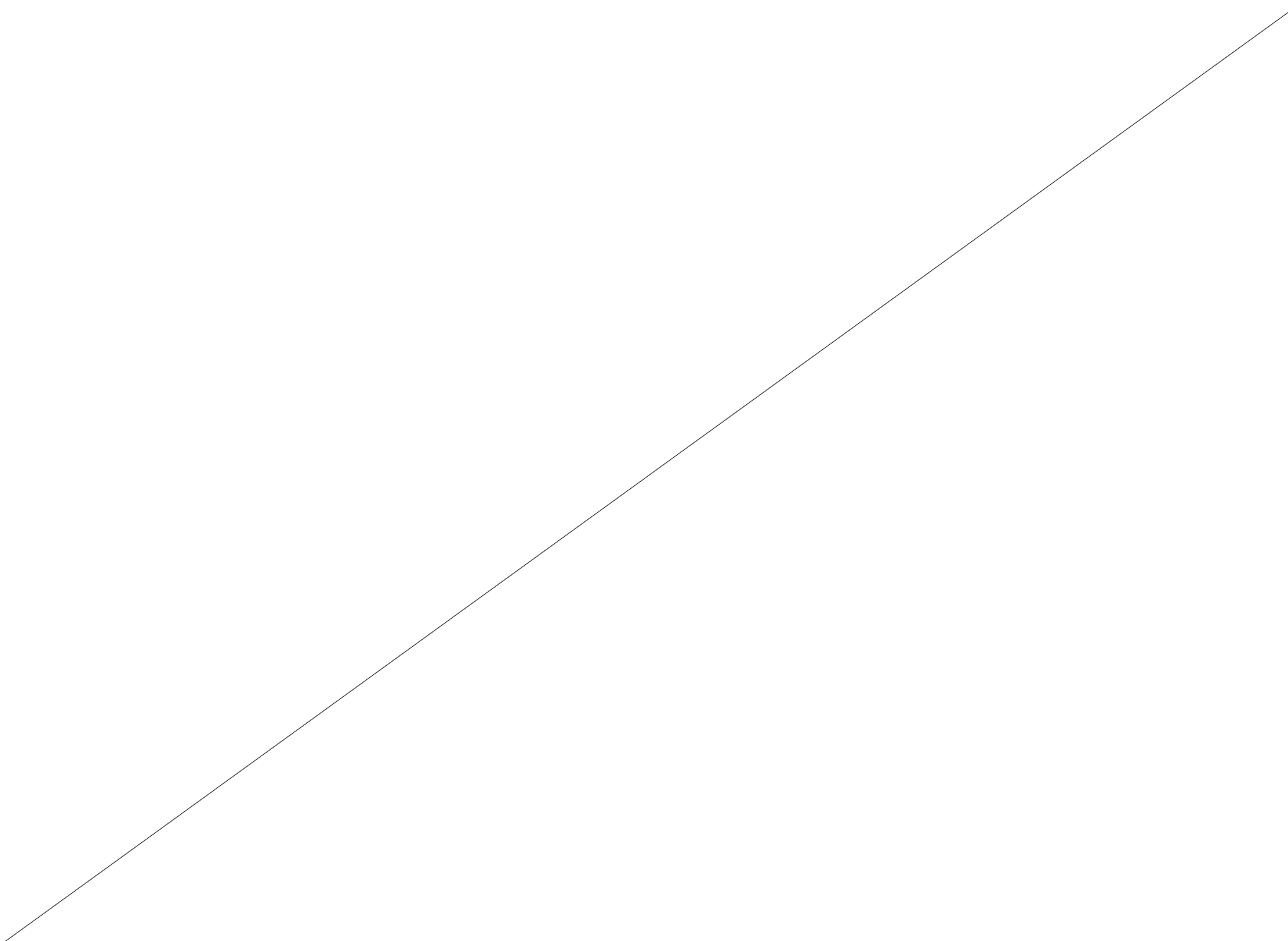
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⁰ Abstract

In most Indian states, primary art education in government schools is troubled by deficient infrastructure and a shortfall of teachers. As a result, students are unable to access technological aids and there is a shortage of contact hours. There also seems to be a disconnect between the government art education syllabus and how it is taught by teachers. To investigate the likely causes of this mismatch, we conducted a series of interviews with six primary and high school art teachers in two cities—Mumbai and Kozhikode. Our analysis indicates that most parents and teachers consider art education as secondary as compared to other subjects such as science and mathematics. Furthermore, we found that this view adds

on to the existing infrastructure problems in the schools. The lower status given to art education manifests itself in the appointment of fewer specialist art teachers, fewer hours dedicated to teaching arts, and the deputation of art teachers to non-teaching activities. This results in even lesser number of contact hours for art classes. The disconnect between syllabus and instruction is evident in the mismatch between what art education source books emphasise as a basis for evaluating the children, versus the teachers' value systems. Our study documented methods and techniques of art instruction and the teachers' outlook towards art and art education. Insights from the study have implications for design intervention, leveraging

the teachers' conceptual models and techniques. We recorded teachers elucidate concepts of 'lower' and 'higher' levels of art being taught, corresponding to what they see as 'real' and 'creative' art. Here the teachers focus on evaluating children based on their skills and the complexity of their artwork, which they see as 'higher' or 'creative,' as opposed to themes and concepts. We also found that despite a well-prepared syllabus and teachers' good intentions, children produce artwork which is very similar to each other. Teaching techniques based on "observe and reproduce" along with exam-focused instruction are possible reasons for this similitude.

¹ Introduction

1.1 **INTRODUCTION**

Over 30 million children in India attend classes 7th and 8th, with 6.7 million teachers teaching in up to secondary (classes five to seven) schools. Of these, art, craft, dance and theatre teachers are called specialist teachers. Many Indian states have cut down on the number of specialist teachers appointed to fill the vacancies of retiring teachers, as well as fresh appointments. For example, in Kerala new appointments hadn't been made since the Right to Education Act in 2009; started fresh art teacher appointments in 2016. The state provides teachers with a comprehensive syllabus, lesson plan and evaluation criteria. The syllabus is outlined in separate source-books for primary (classes 1st to 7th) and high school classes (classes 8th to 10th). A state resource group (SRG) of teachers, aided by artists and content creators curates and prepares this material. The state of Maharashtra instituted Elementary and Intermediate drawing exams in 1880 to help children interested in art take it up professionally. Qualifying these exams helps children pursue careers in art education.

The interviews reveal that art teachers in schools often cater only to syllabus of such examinations; by tailoring class lessons according to the exam syllabus. The well-performing students are advised and coached separately to appear for the exams. Almost all art teachers we interviewed in Maharashtra teach the exam syllabus in classrooms and conduct private tuitions for students preparing for the exams. We realised that the artwork produced by children was a direct consequence of the evaluation focused instruction by teachers; hence, a study of the teachers' perspective on art education was necessary.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

We observed that there was substantial similarity in the children's artwork both in the themes and the drawing techniques. For example, a house is always drawn as a set of polygons. Topped with a triangular roof and a rectangular chimney (a feature not found in Indian homes) set on an independent plot of land, with hills and a river in the vicinity. We were intrigued by the likely cause of this similarity seen across culturally diverse groups. We hypothesised that evaluation practices in lower classes encourage a constrained approach to drawing.

Many studies deal with art education with a focus on student behaviour in the classroom. We found no studies on how teachers perceive and teach the prescribed syllabi within the Indian context. Our study documents the syllabus, how it is translated into methods of instruction, and the teachers' methods of evaluation. We build conceptual and process models from the teachers' responses to understand how this syllabus-to-teaching translation works in practice, and identify areas for intervention. Additionally, we document the educators' outlook to art and art education. How they look at art is an important area of our focus. It helps us understand how their outlook to and appreciation of art and their art practices contribute to classroom instruction.

1.3 Methodology

Our study employed a semi-structured questionnaire, which was administered to elementary and high school teachers in the states of Maharashtra and Kerala. The responses received from these interviews were then analysed using qualitative methods such as content analysis. We chose our participants—four art teachers from Government Schools

in Mumbai and two from Kozhikode—based on whether they taught classes 7th or 8th. The first set of participants also suggested the next interviewees from the art teachers community. The interviewees varied in teaching experience from three to nineteen years, with their ages ranging from 29 to 53 years. We conducted the interviews at the schools during breaks and off-periods. Each interview lasted from around 40 minutes to 1.5 hours. We noted salient parts of the conversation, capturing turns of phrases, indigenous words and gestured references. The interviews were also recorded with permission, and we documented spaces and artefacts during and after the interviews. The teachers were informed of the research objectives a day before the interviews so they could bring artefacts they wished to share. The questionnaire comprises of four sets of questions and associated probes listed below.

- Demography and warm-up questions, such as teaching experience and educational background followed by a recollection of techniques their teachers employed in the past.
- Syllabus and infrastructure-related questions, for example, number of hours they teach and whether those that is enough, and probes into the amount of influence they have in deciding the timetable.
- Questions regarding methods of instruction, where we inquired how a specific topic was taught, and to describe their own unique methods if any.
- Probes to determine the teachers' outlook towards art and art education.

2 **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

In the first stage, we transcribed and examined the interviews for repetitions, indigenous words, metaphors, transitions, similarities and differences based on the method outlined in *Analysing Qualitative Data* (Ryan and Bernard, 2010) . The next stage involved inferring Conceptual and Process Models based on these findings. We chose the methods described by Ryan and Bernard to fully capture the nuances and insights from our non-structured interview format.

2.1 **FINDINGS: WHAT ARE STUDENTS TAUGHT?**

Memory Drawing

A majority of the art teachers make the children draw landscapes and themes of social relevance, in sync with government programs, environmental issues and current affairs. For example, School 3 had a series of wall paintings that the students had created in the premises. T4 walked us through the pieces of wall-art depicting popular government-led programmes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (a cleanliness drive) and a composition illustrating the Smart Cities initiative. We observed that these end up being picked from the limited pool of subjects readily available (through the media and circulars) in the schools and children end up producing artwork along similar, expected lines. Even when comparatively fresher concepts were drawn, the teacher chose to comment on the drawing technique, i.e., the application of colours rather than the content. A drawing where an ice-cream cone stood in for a warmer planet was commented on for its lack of even colouring . We also observed a tendency to look up visual references for memory-drawing exercises. Some teachers depended on online image searches, while others brought printed photographs to class.

Drawing The Human Figure

After training children in memory drawing, teachers move on to human figure drawing. Among the teachers, this is universally accepted as one of the more difficult things to be taught. A majority of the teachers use variations of the $7\frac{1}{2}$ heads system for teaching proportions, where the human body is constructed based on multiples of the head size. T1 and T2 reported using a $5\frac{1}{2}$ heads system to help children of lower classes understand the proportions easier. Except for when sideways-view drawings were made, children had trouble keeping the proportions correct. All teachers reported that children get these proportions wrong when drawing actions (as opposed to a standing figure) and need to be corrected by demonstrating these actions in front of the class. T6 uses a system of matchsticks to teach the $7\frac{1}{2}$ heads system, where he arranges them in a skeletal form, moving the sticks around to mimic actions. Even with traditional and custom methods, human figures are seen to be hard to master within the confines of the classroom. In some cases, figurative representation is discouraged by the parents due to religious beliefs, and the teachers comment that the curriculum is not flexible enough to address such issues.

Incorporating the Human Figure in Landscapes

Drawing people in their environment is a logical next step to basic memory drawing and human proportions. Here again, subjects are picked from a common, limited pool (bus-stop, harvest, fish-market, etc.), and this produces expected, monotonous results. T2, for example, incorporates situations he encounters during his commute to school (traffic jams) and the climate (heavy rain) in his exercises. Interestingly, cultural and social conditions influence the drawing output to some

degree. For example, a student who has not been exposed to a specific mode of transportation (for e.g. trains), attempts to depict the closest one she has encountered (school bus). In one of the pictures where the children drew their homes, the architectural features looked like they belong to a different economic class. It was easy for us to assume that these were aspirational. The teacher explained that the drawing was referenced from a guide-book. This points to more reasons why we encounter homogeneity in these drawings.

Drawing Still Life

The fourth most common drawing exercise, taken from the syllabi for the exams is drawing still life. Children are asked to incorporate their learnings from shading and colouring exercises into still-life compositions of vessels and simple flowers against a drapery. The teacher demonstrates live or refers to an earlier work to guide students through the exercise when there is not enough time for a demonstration. The practice of show and tell is easier in schools which have a dedicated art classroom.

Art Appreciation (Concepts, Schools, People and Themes)

The syllabus mandates that children are introduced to important works of art from different movements and of a local flavour. The Kerala government source book lists a set of sample images and outlines a discussion of different aspects of the images. Our interviews suggest that, teachers lack a conceptual understanding of this subject and do not have access to resources tailored to a young audience. Paintings discussed tend to be inappropriate for school contexts and socio-cultural structures. Those teachers who have active art practices tend

to be better aware of their peers, who work as artists. Even then they fail to bring that exposure into the classroom. This was seen in all teachers with an exception of T5. In many cases, teachers (like T4) consider such subjects and techniques to be more difficult than what the students can comprehend.

These are the major subjects taught most of the teachers. Individual teachers also teach basics of installations, critiquing, emblem making, collages, paper crafts (e.g. paper quilling) and cut-out artwork.

2.2 **FINDINGS: THEMES AND CONCEPTS**

The following themes emerged from the study. These illustrate how art teachers look at art education. We describe their concepts of high and low art and the role of technology. We also discuss how seeing art as a secondary subject in comparison with the sciences contribute to even lesser emphasis on the quality of art classes.

Blackboard Skills and Demonstration

Older, experienced teachers lament that the newer teachers lack blackboard drawing skills. They consider the skill to be essential, even with the introduction of video tutorials and affordable, step-by-step guidebooks on teaching art techniques. The dark-and-light relationship of pencil and paper (which the students work on, eventually) is reversed on a blackboard, where white chalk is applied on its black surface. For instance, shading taught on a blackboard works very differently when one uses pencils on paper. The lighter areas implied by the blackboard surface are a result of not using the chalk in those areas. These have a different character compared to the white areas left behind on paper. As a tool, chalk is different in fidelity compared to various grades of pencils, when it comes to the layers of transparency and control over tones. Since it is thus more than a matter of skill learning alone, effective and appropriate use of the blackboard in classroom instruction is an area of great design opportunity. Such an intervention could help new teachers master

this technique and let the experienced teachers share the techniques they use to overcome the limitations discussed.

'Collage' and 'Design'

The common understanding is that collage and design are subjects of a higher order. Therefore, exercises in collage and design are introduced to classes 7th and 8th after they have completed their basic technical skill courses in the lower classes. T5 approaches collage in three phases:

- Children are unassisted and asked to “just make a collage.”
- A discussion follows, where the overall form of the collage is emphasised, so that it may thematically connect to the pieces used in the collage.
- In the third phase, the overall form is explored in detail.

T4 considers collage to be an exercise in concepts and themes, while the majority of the teachers use a method where multicoloured pieces of paper are used like patches of pigment, devoid of any meaning or context. In those cases, the results are evaluated solely on the use of colour, contrast and other, formal attributes. Each teacher interprets collage and design modules in her own way, and is taught as exercises in technique and skill rather than in conceptualisation. From the teachers' accounts, collage making is one of the exercises popular with students. Its popularity maybe attributed to the fact that the focus shifts from skills required to apply colour evenly, to a relatively easier exercise of arranging pre-coloured pieces.

Concept of 'Lower' and 'Higher'

Teachers consider complex drawings, employing levels of abstraction and stylised depiction as advanced, and desirable. Such drawings are described as 'artistic,' 'creative,' or 'high-level,' as opposed to 'normal,' 'realistic,' or 'basic.' (For example, according to T4, geometric shapes are more creative compared to organic ones.) Number of techniques children use and their application skills determine whether the work merits these classifications. T4 considers cartoons to be creative, while memory drawing or nature drawing exercises are considered 'asli' (literally, real). They are thus seen to require lesser abilities. As an illustration of this divide, shading and tint-swatch exercises (where children paint lighter shades of a colour, from the pure hue to white, by adding white pigment) are considered basic, while complex geometric divisions painted in these tints are looked up at as creative. Complexity is regarded as more valuable than originality and conceptual clarity.

Beyond Paper and Pencil

There is a remarkable shift from the concept of making art as an act of putting pencil to paper (T5) to art as one of building careers out of creating art installations, working in commercial art and design. T5 has a background in advertising and runs a design agency in the city. He talks to his students about the various ways to apply their knowledge of art in real life professions for real life problem-solving. In class, they discuss logos; their constituent parts and what the logos mean when used in their contexts. In a follow-up exercise, the students make emblems for their school based on what the school stands for. The activity can be seen as a proto-branding exercise. The students use updated icons and

other signifiers to convey a meaning similar to that of the original emblem. The focus here is on a descriptive depiction as opposed to the design school version of minimalism, scalability, etc. The shift in focus makes it easier for the students to work on the meaning-making and not get caught up in constraints of real life application.

Art as 'Secondary' to Core Subjects

All interviewees spoke of the secondary status attributed to art education, and in turn, to them. Timetables, for instance, are decided with greatest weightage to science and mathematics, considered to be more important by most parents, and ironically, by the art teachers themselves. The interviewees are aware that a lot of value is placed on how one can make a living out of the things taught under subjects other than art, and not on their real-life applicability. T5 has this notion that art has better practical value as compared to advanced mathematics. He considers it to be the base of everything. According to him, art plays an important role in the 'presentation' of everything; in the way the world eventually comes to see all kinds of advancements. There is a sense of anger (T5 calls it 'injustice') at how art periods are appropriated by the 'serious' subjects towards the end of the year. All of them feel the current number of periods grossly inadequate to teach things in whole. They also remark that without additional special educators appointed, the burden will be impossible to bear.

Art as Collective Effort

There is an effort to present art as a collective activity, through wall paintings carried out by groups of students (T4), and installations on relevant social and cultural events (T5). Students are encouraged to

participate in creating a whole from individual parts. The resulting artwork is then exhibited to the public beyond the school. From an audience approval perspective such a public exhibition elevates the artwork in value, and motivates children to achieve results that would otherwise be impossible within the classroom setting, carried out by individual students. The praise and attention go a long way in keeping them engaged and excited.

The Surprise Element in Instruction

During classroom instruction, some teachers employ a theatrical way of presenting their exercises to the students. For instance, T5 starts the class with students rolling newsprint paper to tubes and crumpling some sheets into spheres. They are not told why they are doing these things. They then paste two of the spheres onto a corner of the classroom wall, followed by the tubes, completing a spider and the web around it. The surprise element sustains interest and contributes to this 'act of making together.' Similar techniques (of completing a drawing from a random scrawl on the blackboard) were used by art teachers in the past. The use of surprise in today's classrooms is an extension of this tried and tested technique.

Affordable Materials, Ingenious Techniques

Many government schools we visited had student population from very low and low-income families from the neighbourhood. Most students can't afford art material, when a decent set of watercolours could be as expensive as a day's earnings of their family. Most teachers work around this problem by buying materials in bulk (T2), suggesting everyday materials (T3 lets the children use twigs from broomsticks

as crafts material), employing a strategy of ‘best from waste’ (T1, T2) and sticking to basic tools. While some of the schools have access to technology (tablets and computers on campus), many rely on very basic infrastructure. It is, therefore, crucial that design interventions work within these constraints and explore other possibilities.

Art Teacher Communities

T4 believes art shows and public presentation of one’s work has their merits, and leads a group of local art teachers in conducting shows and workshops. The groups are local enough to enable meetings and discussions. One could, however, not see similarity in techniques employed in teaching difficult concepts (like the matchstick method for teaching human figures). This suggests that these groups have not grown into places for exchanging teaching methods and practices. T4 does his coordination of local art groups through a WhatsApp group, while T5 publicises his and his student’s art through multiple social media channels. The communities are very active in organising events and work equally well as spaces for promoting the members’ work.

3 **DISCUSSION**

Our study reveals that art education in India continues to suffer from infrastructure and resources-related problems. Prominent among these is insufficient class time and limited exposure to Indian art. The study also revealed teacher-dependent factors which dictate how the syllabus is translated into classroom teaching.

We find that it is essential for children to have more contact hours with the art teachers to be able to satisfactorily complete lessons in the manner specified by the syllabus -books. The existing under forty-five minutes periods are not enough to finish work on a given subject. Teachers are aware of this handicap and hence they divide and prioritise the subjects they teach. Unfortunately, this selective teaching of topics amounts to a half-measure.

The issue of lack of access and exposure to analytic tools to familiarise children with the wider world of art and their immediate environment is ripe for a technology-backed intervention. Existing infrastructure of internet-connected devices could be put to use contributing to and providing access to shared knowledge on local art and its socio-cultural context. Art teachers have active local social media communities, and these can be leveraged for building knowledge sharing tools and repositories.

In addition, despite well made syllabus source books and enthusiastic teachers, a culture of examination-centred instruction (both in classrooms and as tuition), contributes to a sameness in the children's artwork. When children are trained to work towards a generalised, easily grade-able result, they end up producing artwork that sticks to a

prescribed norm. In thematic exercises like illustration and memory-based drawing, where conceptual clarity and thinking ability ought to be worked upon, this inability to think beyond the obvious is a major handicap. Teachers often ask children to work with themes that don't encourage thinking beyond an expected norm, compounding the problem. Some examples of students' work suggest that themes without ready visual references are better at producing a diverse set of results. Further work is required to develop evaluation rubrics for such themes.

Despite the tendency to follow norms, teachers employed ingenious methods of instruction to work around material and space constraints in the classroom. They have an acute awareness of local materials and an eye for presentation—be it in exhibiting the artwork or in the theatrics of teaching. While the older teachers lament the lack of this ability in their younger counterparts, they appreciate the technological expertise that the new crop of teachers brings into the classroom. Their approval of technology as an aid suggests that a marriage of the old and new—where low-cost, local art material and tried-and-tested teaching methods are combined with the ease of access to online resources—is an approach worth considering.

It is crucial that future design interventions should consider the infrastructural and bureaucratic limitations and build on the ingenious, affordable methods the teachers use in their classrooms.

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6

Colophon

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