



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

Complete Education

Addressing Social Issues using the Visual Language as the Medium

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Abstract: Our Indian educational system at the school level is dominated by left-brain subjects - like language, mathematics and science. Right-brain subjects like music, theatre, dance, the visual arts, craft etc. are all considered extra-curricular and sometimes optional. Education that concentrates mainly on half the brain is absurd and it makes no sense to function with only 50% of the brain.

The educational system trains the students to become workers with tunnel vision, rather than creative thinkers. Students with restless minds and bodies - far from being cultivated for their energy and curiosity - are ignored or even stigmatized. Is the educational system educating the student out of their creativity?

Introducing design education in schools helps students to develop a vocabulary for visual language. It would sensitize them to their environment. It would encourage them to think out the box and develop a thinking process for problem solving. If design were included in mainstream education - the student would have the option of being innovative in their respective careers. They would be better problem solvers irrespective of the profession they decide to pursue.

Key words: Visual Language, Analog Drawing, Abstract Drawing, Visual Thinking

Introduction

A visual language is a set of practices by which images can be used to communicate concepts. Creation of an image to communicate an idea presupposes the use of a visual language. Just as people can 'verbalize' their thinking, they can 'visualize' it.

The elements in an image represent concepts in a spatial context, rather than the linear form used for words. Speech and visual communication are parallel and usually interdependent means by which humans exchange information.

An illustration, a drawing, a photograph are all examples of uses of visual language. Its structural units include dot, line, shape/form, space, color, texture, pattern, direction, orientation, motion, scale, proportion, balance, order, contrast, harmony, etc.

Abstract art has shown that the qualities of line and shape, proportion and colour convey meaning directly without the use of words. Drawn lines and marks can be expressive without any association with a representational image. Throughout history and especially in ancient cultures visual language has been used to encode meaning " The Bronze Age Badger Stone on Ilkly Moor is covered in circles, lines, hollow cups, winged figures, a spread hand, an ancient swastika, an embryo, a shooting star? ... It's a story-telling rock, a message from a world before (written) words."

Vision gives us inexhaustibly rich information about the objects and events of the outside world. The language we use to record these phenomena is, because of the simplicity of line, shape and colour, infinitely adaptable to the needs of communication.

Thought processes are diffused and interconnected and are cognitive at a sensory level. The mind thinks at its deepest level in sense material, and the two hemispheres of the brain deal with different kinds of thought.

The brain is divided into two hemispheres and a thick bundle of nerve fibres enable these two halves to communicate with each other. In most people the ability to organize and produce speech is predominantly located in the left side. Appreciating spatial perceptions depends more on the right hemisphere, although there is a left hemisphere contribution. In an attempt to understand how this works, everybody form images in their mind's eye, manipulating and evaluating ideas before, during and after externalising them, constitutes a cognitive system comparable with but different from, the verbal language system.

Children have always enjoyed working with colours and drawings. The visual language can very effectively be used to address, understand and interpret an issue, topic, subject or concern through the medium of art (art being the medium that touches the heart and minds of society at large). Psychologists and counsellors have creatively and successfully used art in their therapy session with children. It has thus become the medium of expression, understanding and even healing. Social issues are more effectively addressed using the visual language.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of using the visual language as a medium to address and understand a social issue, a workshop was conducted. An attempt to use the visual language as a medium and as a method for children to address and understand Child Rights

as an issue was made. The workshop conducted was to 'Promote Awareness of Child Rights through the Visual Language'.

WORKSHOP TO PROMOTE AWARENESS OF CHILD RIGHTS THROUGH THE VISUAL LANGUAGE

The workshop to promote awareness of child rights through the visual language as the medium was conducted in partnership with HAQ: Centre for Child Rights. The opportunity to first try this module and refine on it came when British Council asked HAQ to conduct art competitions with children on the theme of child rights. However, after some discussions it was mutually agreed that it would be more empowering for the children to discover themselves and their rights using art as the medium rather than a one-time art competition. The proposed module has been designed, developed and subsequently tested. The module has been successfully tested and used with children from the age group 9-18 years from all classes and ethnic background including those in distress situations.

Using the visual language as the medium was an incredible learning experience for everyone - both children and adult. Most often, children have been filled with ideas on 'good' drawing and 'bad' drawing; 'good' artist and 'lousy' artist very early in their lives. When one works with children from schools, who come accompanied by their school art teacher, the mental blocks are even more intense. Some of the children have been chosen because they draw well; but there may be others who may have already been told by the teacher that they are not artists and therefore cannot draw! Both these 'blocks' need to be addressed - the teacher and the children.

The challenge was to empower all children to believe in themselves and their ability to express themselves through the language of art. After all we were using the visual language as the medium of learning, and here, there was no good art, bad art - just expressions that tell a story, express a thought and build connections with others.

The children were introduced to a variety of art forms and styles - from realistic art, to abstract art. From free style to traditional Indian folk styles like Madhubani painting from Bihar and Warli drawing from Maharashtra. They were also introduced a wide range of medium like colour pencils, oil pastels, water colour, poster colour, acrylic paints, inks, etc. Besides these, children were encouraged to experiment with a wide variety of materials like leaves, flowers, vegetables, wax candle, cotton wool, sand paper, rope, waste fabric, paper, sawdust, glue etc. Children were encouraged to use these as tools and use techniques of cutting, pasting, sticking together, crumpling, stamping, rubbing, manipulating etc, to create images or visuals. In order to work on larger surfaces,

canvases could be used and if unavailable, any wall surface could be used. It is important that children see that the visual language went beyond just drawing a realistic visual

The drawing exercises along with the discussions that follow, take the children from their own self; to themselves in the family and society where they have to face the adults; to how they see violations of rights of children - themselves and others.

The workshop module has been divided into three parts.

1. The first part was to establish the existence of a visual language, which is universally understood. The visual language is an effective medium of communication across the world. It breaks all barriers - social, cultural and geographical. This has been demonstrated through a series of quick exercises illustrating emotions that children experienced. Exercises conducted here, has been adapted from Betty Edward's 'Drawing on the Artist Within: How to realize your Hidden Creativity'.
2. The second part explores the child's perceptions of his or her immediate family or environment and encourages the child to put their thoughts down on paper.
3. The third and last part involves teamwork. It facilitates children to work with each other as they envision a community for themselves.

Each exercise is followed by intense discussions on needs, rights, responsibilities, violations, who to hold accountable, state accountability, role of adults and the children themselves.

Preparation Before The Workshop

Before inviting children to the workshop, especially if it is through schools, it is useful to orient the adults - the teachers.

1. THE CONCEPT OF CHILD RIGHTS, THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD. Sharing copies of the Convention is useful. (A suggested information kit on *Why Child Rights* is attached as Annexure 1)
2. THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND SUCH A WORKSHOP. It needs to be stressed that children will be participating in a facilitative, learning process and not an art competition. Therefore, if they are choosing children to come for it, they must not concentrate only on those children who they think draw well.
3. THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCOMPANYING ADULTS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ACTIVITIES.
4. THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCOMPANYING ADULTS TO REFRAIN FROM INSTRUCTING, DIRECTING OR GUIDING THEIR WARDS.

Basic understanding in the Workshop

- Drawing is a medium of expression and communication. Every person can do so.
- Visual language is universal and therefore everyone can perceive and understand the emotions and concepts presented either by dots, lines, forms, textures, patterns and colours.
- There is no right or wrong
- It is not an art COMPETITION but an art WORKSHOP on child rights through the visual language as a medium.
- Encourage children to explore their needs, rights and responsibilities.
- Help them identify the issue they are addressing - in this case Child Rights (the violations that they face personally and as children in general as well as the obstacles faced by them in the realisation of their rights, individually and collectively).
- Encourage them to express themselves.
- Make the children aware of the facts and legalities - in this case the Convention of the Rights of the Child and what is available to them as a right under the existing national laws and policies.
- Develop a methodology on how to interact with children and discuss the issue (in this case again - on child rights) through the visual language as a medium.
- The journey from self to family and society is critical.
- Understand responsibilities.

Planning The Workshop

It is very important to plan the available time well. A two-day residential workshop is advised though one-day workshops can also be undertaken by carefully managing the time. The facilitators can modify the activities according to the time available.

Following instructions should be kept in mind while planning the Workshop:

- Children should be the focus; therefore effort has to be made that each activity does not exceed the time limit and children enjoy all activities.
- Each creative activity must be followed by a discussion or a role-play so that children do not loose their focus.
- It is advised that the venue for the workshop should not be congested in a small room but a place where children can spread themselves.
- A list of materials should be made according to the budget and the number of participants.

- The idea is to encourage children to shed their inhibitions and open up their minds and feelings without any support or criticisms from either colleagues or teachers; to introspect and to share thoughts with world.

PART 1

1.0 DRAWING OUT INSIGHTS.

Establish the Existence of a Visual Language, which is Universally Understood.

In his essay "New Words" George Orwell¹ suggested that each of us has an outer and an inner mental life: the former expressed in the ordinary language we use in everyday life and the latter in another form of thought that rarely surfaces because ordinary words cannot express its complexity.

The goal is to help every child dredge up the inner life of his or her mind by using an alternative, visual language (drawings in this case) to give it a tangible form - in short to make inner thoughts visible. These inner thoughts, which are a reflection of a person's life's experiences, will be linked up to the 'Issue' framework.

1.1 Drawing Analogs From Deep Within

Analog drawings are series of drawings that are made by individuals to express themselves. It is important that no recognizable forms (realistic drawings, illustrations, symbols, signs, alphabets etc) are used. Only dots, lines, squiggles, scribble, abstract forms etc are to be used.

The following two exercises are designed to demonstrate the following:

- To illustrate the existence of the visual language.
- To establish the fact that the visual language is universal.
- To understand that the visual language goes beyond realistic drawings and paintings.
- To help children identify and experience their inner thoughts, feelings and emotions and subsequently express them.

These exercises are to help participants relate to their 'self' and express their emotions. These are quick exercises and it is vital that they are done within the time span. The objective behind the exercise is to recognise that the visual language is universal, even if it is in abstract form.

1.2 Role of Facilitator

- Insist children to do the exercise independently and within the stipulated time by helping them to concentrate.
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- Help children to concentrate on each emotion by encouraging them to try and experience the emotion or relive the moment associated with the emotion.
- Help the children by keeping tabs on the time and telling them when to start drawing.

1.3 Analog Drawing Using Pencil

Materials required: A4 size plain bond paper and pencils. (any grade - HB, 2B, 4B, 6B etc).

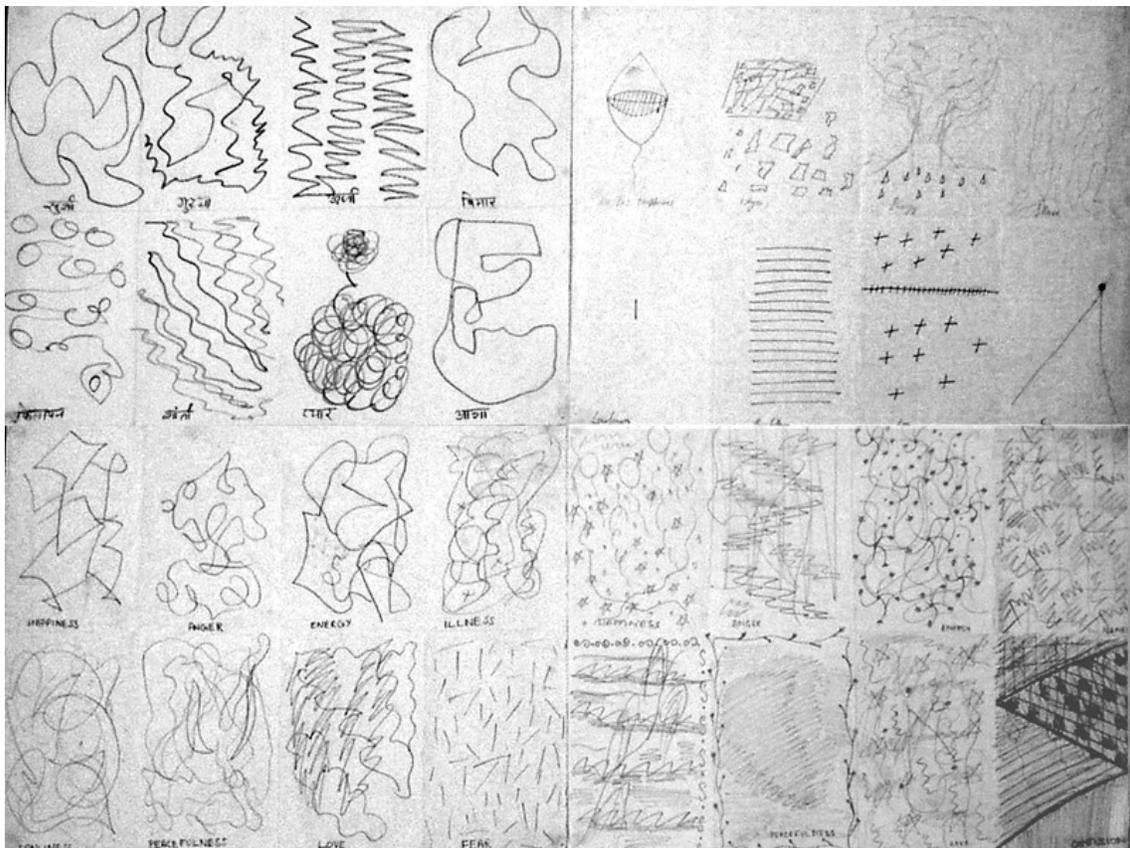
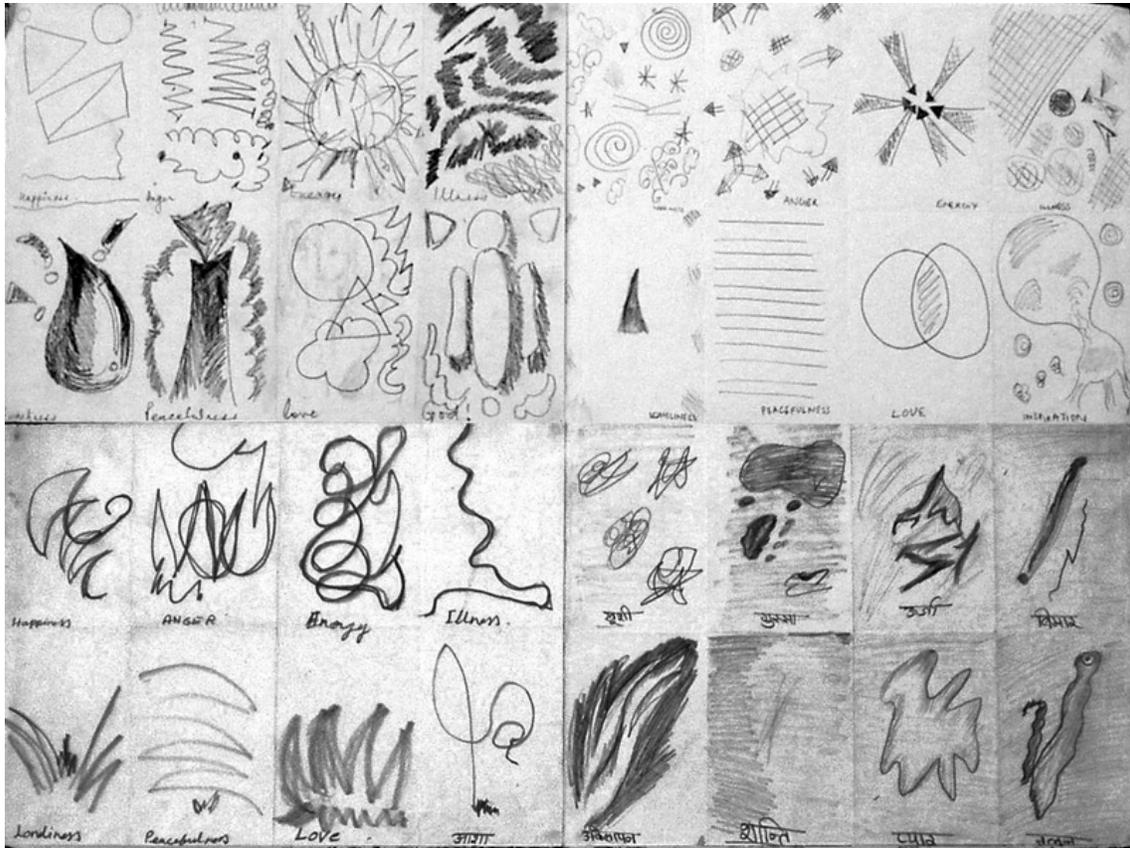
Method:

- Fold a sheet of typing paper into eight sections by folding it in half, then in half again, then in half a third time. The fold marks are an indication of the space allotted for each word.
- Do not draw a boundary unless the illustration requires it.
- It is important to remain within the space allotted for each word and not spillover to the space adjacent.
- Label each section with the following words that stand for human characteristics or emotional states such as 1.Happiness, 2.Anger, 3.Energy, 4.Illness, 5. Love, 6. Peacefulness, 7. Loneliness. These are some suggested words. These can be replaced depending on where the workshop is being held. For. E.g. in areas where the children are growing up in conflict areas, words such as Security, Protection, Fear also has a lot of relevance.
- and 8.....(this one has to be your choice - any human trait, quality, condition or emotion. For e.g.- Fear, Evil, Anxiety, Guilt, Hopefulness, Hatred, Adoration, etc)
- For the drawings, use a pencil. Each drawing will be made of marks, lines, scribbles, shapes and etc in each section. One may want to use one line, many lines, or fill a whole section with lines if that seems right. One may use point of a pencil, the side of the lead, to make wide marks, heavy pressure or light, short marks or long.
- Each child should shut his or her eyes for about 60 seconds and try to relive or experience the emotion after which not more than 2 to 3 minutes should be given to illustrate each word. The child should allow and trust their hands to draw whatever flows out intuitively or instinctively.
- It is important that no recognizable forms (realistic drawings, symbols, signs, alphabets etc) are used. Only lines, squiggles, scribble, abstract forms etc are to be used.

Happiness	Anger	Energy	Illness
Love	Peacefulness	Loneliness	Word of Own Choice

1.3 Observation:

- Drawings in each of the separate categories have general characteristics that are similar-something like “family” resemblances.
- In rectangular space marked **ANGER** the lines are often dark, heavy, jagged.
- In contrast, the lines used for the emotion **JOY**, are light, curved, spiraling, circular and rising.
- The word **PEACEFULNESS** on the other hand, was most often represented through straight or softly curved horizontal lines and often covering the whole space.
- **DEPRESSION** often elicits an image that is low within its allocated space. The link of “depression” and “lowness” is in the language - in such expression, as “I’m feeling low today.”
- The concept of **ILLNESS** generally shows a form of one type superimposed on a form of another character.
- The analogs of **EXCITEMENT**, **BLISS** and **HAPPINESS** show agitated lines placed high in the format demonstrating motion.
- **PLAYFULNESS** elicits circular forms spotted through the format..... and so on.



1.4 Analog Drawing Using Colours

Material Required: A4 size bond paper, pencils, different colours like oil pastels, crayons, colour pencils.

Method:

- First provide the children with A4 size plain paper and colours.
- Ask them to fold the paper first lengthwise and then widthwise twice as done in the previous exercise. The paper must have 8 blocks in all.
- The words that were given in the earlier exercise (happiness, anger, isolation, illness, loneliness, peacefulness, love and one emotion of their own choice) are given again.
- Repeat the exercise as the previous one and ask the children to shut their eyes for a minute and relive or experience the emotion and try and see the colours they can relate or associate with.
- Each child should shut his or her eyes for about 60 seconds and try to relive or experience the emotion after which not more than 2 to 3 minutes should be given to illustrate each word. The child should allow and trust their hands to draw whatever flows out intuitively or instinctively.
- Use only patches of colours. The child can use as many colours as she or he can associate with the given emotion.
- It is important to remain within the space allotted for each word and not spillover to the space adjacent.

1.5 Observations:

- Drawings in each of the separate categories have general characteristics that are similar-something like "family" resemblances.
- In rectangular space marked **ANGER** the colours generally used are often dark and warm like red and black.
- In contrast, the colours used for the emotion **JOY**, are saturated and bright.
- The word **PEACEFULNESS** on the other hand, was most often represented through soft and light colours. In general it covered the whole space.
- **DEPRESSION** often elicits an image that is low within its allocated space. The link of "depression" and "lowness" is in the language - in such expression, as "I'm feeling low today." In general, dark shades of colours are used.
- The concept of **ILLNESS** generally had similar dark shades as 'Depression'.
- The analogs of **EXCITEMENT**, **BLISS** and **HAPPINESS** show high energy warm, bright colours.
- The objective behind these exercises is to establish that the visual language is universal even if it is an abstract form.

After both the analog drawing exercises, all the drawings are displayed collectively. Once they are pinned together, it is explained to the children that there is a pattern that emerge in all drawings even when they were working independently. Abstract drawings can be read easily and that a visual language exists - which is universally understood.



PART 2

2.0 'ME', 'MY FAMILY' and 'MY IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENT'

Using Abstract Forms to Introspect and Understand

2.1 What Others Want Me To Be

In every child's life, there is an adult who plays a role model who the child looks up to or admires. The adult could be a parent, an uncle or aunt, an older sibling or a teacher. This exercise illustrates the aspirations of an adult for a child.

Material Required: A4 size paper, pencils, different colours like oil pastels, crayons, colour pencils.

Method:

- Provide the children with A4 size cartridge paper.
- Ask children to close their eyes, concentrate and think of feelings when adults try and control their lives.
- After they get their focus ask them to project their feelings on the paper again using line, form, texture, colours etc
- Approximate time for this exercise is about 20 minutes.

2.2 What I Want To Be

Every child has a dream. Most dreams are kept a secret - probably because they seem unrealistic. Most children probably don't understand that, that is precisely why it is called a dream. Most often it is kept a secret because it defers from what an adult who is important in the child's life aspires for the child. Encourage the child to imagine a life without adult supervision - where there is nobody to tell them what to think or do. Imagine that there was no school or institutional authority. Imagine a society with no religious, social, economic, racial, educational, rules, norms and constraints.

Material Required: A4 size paper, pencils, different colours like oil pastels, crayons, colour pencils.

Method:

- Provide the children with A4 size paper.
- Encourage the child to dream without any inhibitions.
- Ask children to close their eyes, concentrate and project their feelings when they are allowed to do what they want to be.
- After they get their focus ask them to project their feelings on the paper again using line, form, texture, colours etc.
- Approximate time for this exercise is about 20 minutes.

After the activity all the drawings are displayed collectively. Make sure that both the drawings have the same orientation - both 'portrait' and both 'landscape'. Explain to children the importance of choosing one orientation over the other. Once the drawings are displayed, it will be interesting to compare the two drawings.

2.3 It can be observed in the visuals below:

- When children demonstrate control by adults, they tend to use sharp, spiky and jagged lines and forms.
- While on the other hand, when children projected their feelings and visualize they can do want they what to (without any control from elders), they tend to use curved lines and forms with soft, curved edges.
- When children demonstrate control by adults, they tend to use colours of frustration, anger, unhappiness, dissatisfaction or depression.
- While on the other hand, when children projected their feelings and visualize they can do want they what to (without any control from elders), they tend to use bright and soothing colours.

2.4 General Observations:

Despite broad similarities within categories, no two drawings are alike, just as no two individuals are alike. Each individual experiences emotions in a way that is broadly similar to but specifically different in quality, intensity, duration, focus and so on.

A drawing makes ones emotions visible. Another person looking at it would be able to read the visible manifestation of ones emotion and would intuitively know what it is like.

Analog drawings prove to be a very valuable exercise, for they demonstrate that there is a "vocabulary" of the visual language of drawing vocabulary that includes line, form, and structure - all of which can be "read" for meaning.



2.5 Discussion on the Issue - Child Rights:

Material Required: White board, Markers or Blackboard, Chalk and Duster.

Method: Role play, discussion, one act play, song, dance, can be used to undertake this session. Also children can be asked to narrate their own story if they feel comfortable.

- Through a discussion list out what are the needs of children
- Distinguish between needs and rights - are all needs rights? When do needs become rights?
- Implication of a right
- Obligation of the state
- Corresponding responsibility
- Discuss about the role and responsibilities that each of us can take in order to achieve rights of all children in our neighbourhood, community and country
- Introduce the Convention on the Rights of Children.
- Put the rights listed by the children within the framework of the Convention in its 4 broad heads of Survival, Development, Protection, Participation

2.6 Drawing One Child Right

Understanding and Addressing One Social Issue.

We all have hidden feelings that we tend to block. These feelings can be demonstrated or expressed through abstract drawings. All children have needs and needs and rights are interlinked. Responsibilities of children need to be addressed. Every child can identify with at least one right.

Material Required: Cartridge sheet (half imperial size), pencil, colours.

Method:

- Ask the children to draw a child who could be either a girl or a boy.
- Help the children to identify with the child and to project and focus on one right that he or she is being denied.
- The objective of this exercise is to help children introspect and express visually, a right that is denied to them or a right they identify with.



Exploring Various Medium, Material and Techniques:

In this session, we have introduced to the children, a variety of art forms and styles - from realistic art, to abstract art. From free style to traditional Indian folk styles like Madhubani painting from Bihar and Warli drawing from Maharashtra. We have also introduced a wide range of medium like colour pencils, oil pastles, water colour, poster colour, acrylic paints, inks, etc. besides these, we have encouraged children to experiment with a wide variety of materials like leaves, flowers, vegetables, wax candle, cotton wool, sand paper, rope, waste fabric, paper, sawdust, glue etc. Children were encouraged to use these as tools and use techniques of cutting, pasting, sticking together, crumpling, stamping, rubbing, manipulating, etc, to create images or visuals. It is important that children see that the visual language went beyond just drawing a realistic painting or picture.



2.8 Childrights And Responsibilities

Address or Express any Thoughts, Introspection or Questions in Form of a Message

Material Required:

Cartridge sheet (full imperial size), colour pencils, oil pastels, water colour, poster colour, acrylic paints, inks, etc. A wide variety of materials like leaves, flowers, vegetables, wax candle, cotton wool, sand paper, rope, waste fabric, paper, sawdust, glue etc.

Method:

- o The children are asked to address or express any thoughts, introspection or questions in form of a message with text and visual using the poster as the medium.

- They are then asked to first make a dummy poster in form of small thumbnail sketches and write what they are trying to project through that poster.
- Final poster is made after taking tips and suggestions from the facilitator so that message is more communicative.

2.9 Communication through the Medium of the Poster

A discussion on how to communicate through poster is undertaken. Children are given an orientation on the qualities of a good poster.

Defining Poster

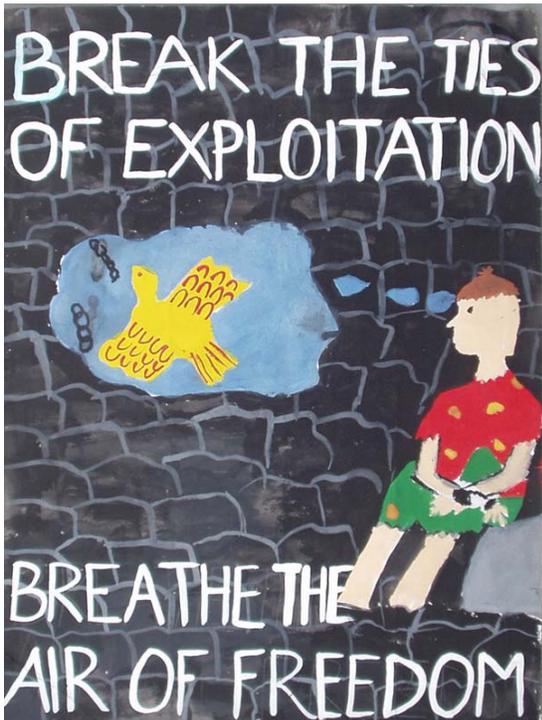
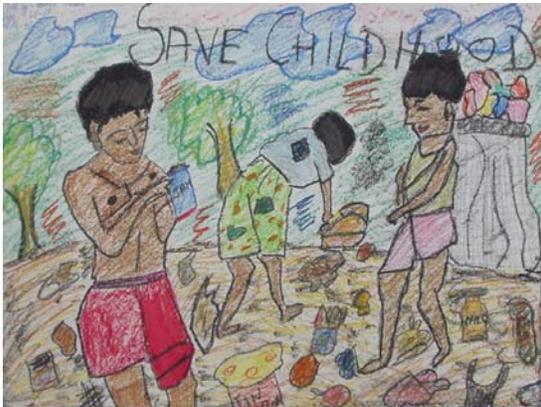
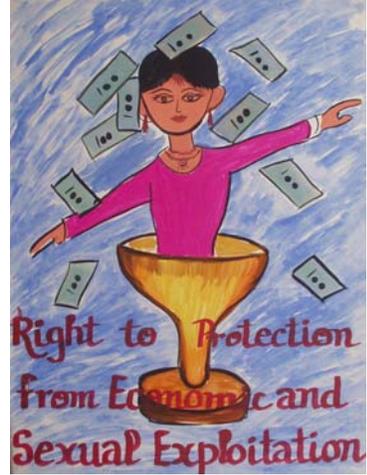
What makes a poster a poster? How does it differ from a painting or a work of graphic art? A poster is typically a printed-paper announcement that is displayed publicly and functions as a tool for the promotion of a product, an event, or a sentiment or cause through image and/or text. A poster's principal task is to be noticed: it must attract attention and influence the passerby.

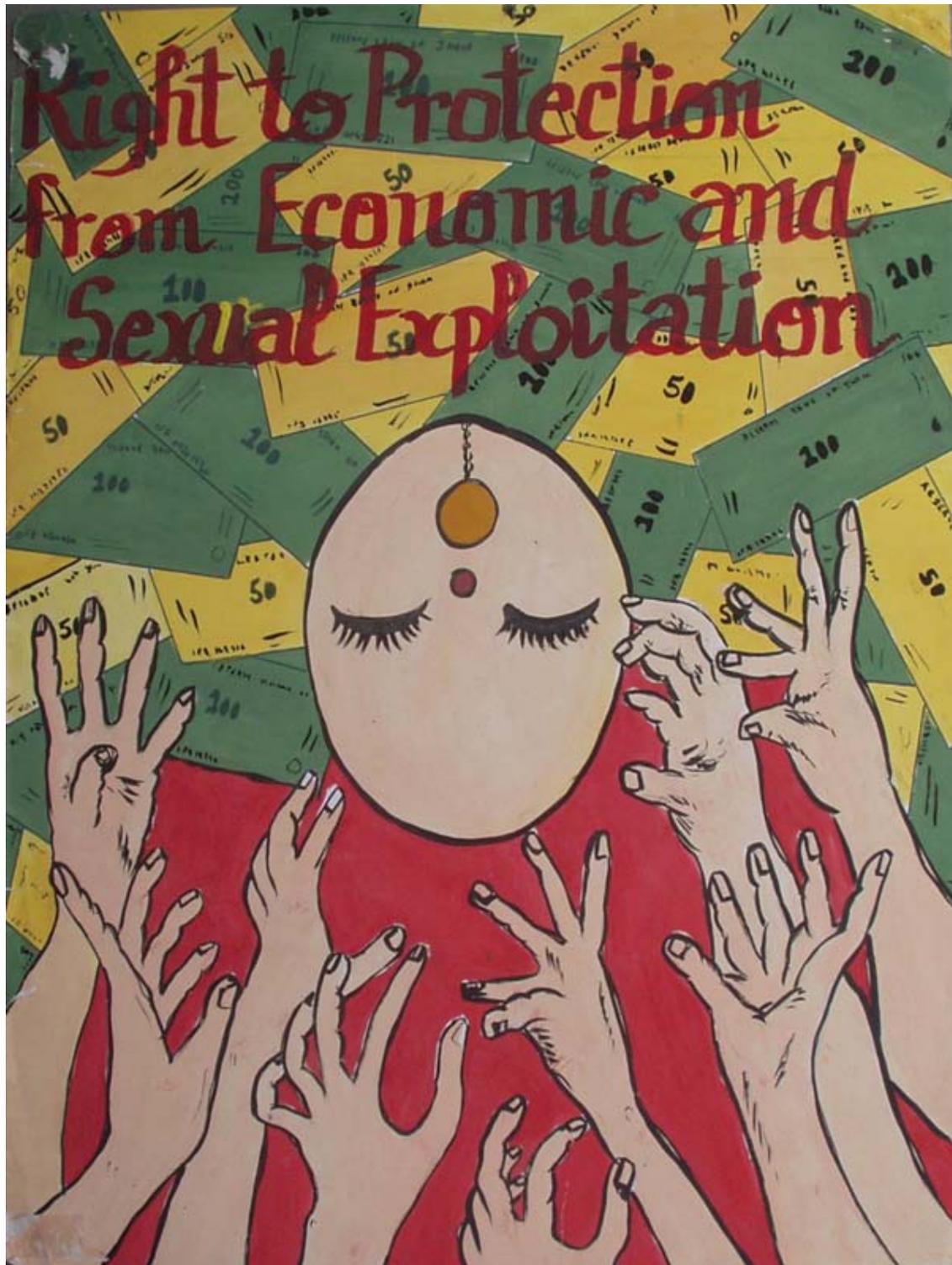
This visual medium comes from the ancient practice of "posting" messages in public places. Used for advertising or other communication needs, posters were designed to communicate quickly and graphically. Posters are still used for that purpose today-- movies, concerts, plays, and other public events, are all promoted with posters

Developing a Poster

- Posters could be placed both indoors and outdoors.
- Posters have to fight for attention among other visuals and notices in enclosed spaces.
- Posters have to fight to be noticed in crowded streets where people are on the move.
- A dramatic visual helps to grab the attention of the targeted audience and draw them towards the poster.
- Once the audience is involved, the poster has just a few seconds to convey the message.
- The visual has to be emphatic and clear.
- Background is as important as the main subject.
- Poster headlines tend to be short and set in bold typeface.
- Legibility, comprehensibility and style are critical.
- Posters should be visible from a distance.
- Posters are established as successful, persuasive communication tool.
- Posters carry a single message
- Objective is to create awareness and to motivate people.
- The poster should try to guide or facilitate the audience or viewer's eye accurately.







3.0 'ME' AND 'MY SOCIETY'

Using a Large Format and Team Work to Exchange Ideas and Discuss

Material Required: A 5 metre long canvas. If unavailable, large mounted canvas (eg 3' x 5', 4' x 6') can be procured. Any wall surface could be used as an alternative.

Method:

- Collective projection of child rights on a 5 metre long canvas
- About 15 to 20 children can work on a 5 metre long canvas.
- If working on large mounted canvas (eg 3' x 5', 4' x 6'), children could then be divided into smaller groups, accordingly.
- In this canvas the trainer can either make an incomplete drawing or ask the children to complete it or give children complete freedom to illustrate/ draw/ paint what they want.
- Encourage the children to work as a team, plan out the layout and divide the execution.
- The children enjoy painting the canvas and display their combined voice on children's rights using the visual language

Conclusions

The visual language was very effectively used to address, understand and interpret an issue, topic, subject or concern through the medium of art (art being the medium that touches the heart and minds of society at large). The effectiveness of using the visual language as a medium to address and understand a social issue was successfully demonstrated during the workshop that was conducted.

The issue of Child Rights was successfully addressed through the visual language. Children were able to express their thoughts more effectively through the visual language than the written language. The medium allowed them to include a lot more details in their description. This method also encouraged children of various ages to interact. It also encouraged them to work in a team and share their experiences, knowledge and skills.

On the whole the visual language allows the children not only to understand and address issues but also make it an enjoyable activity and experience.

Acknowledgement

HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, New Delhi

British Council, New Delhi

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