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The Paradox of Identity for Art Teachers: Identity, Advocacy, and Transformation

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Abstract

The support for art programmes and undervaluation of art teachers within the primary environment often restrict the subject's transformative potential. Due to limited resources and systemic constraints, art teachers may need help fully tap into their subject's transformative potential. Additionally, they may encounter undervaluation within the school environment, with their role sometimes perceived as primarily inclined to interior and stage decoration rather than encompassing the broader spectrum of artistic exploration and development. Drawing on interviews, classroom observations, and curriculum analysis, the study delves into how art teachers navigate these limitations, advocate for the importance of their subject, and creatively engage students in artistic learning.

This study explores the art educator's complex role in the school education landscape in India. Drawing on the unique perspective of the researcher and an art educator, with first-hand experience navigating the challenges and possibilities within the system, the researcher provides a critical pedagogy lens proposed by Henry Giroux (2015) -through which current practices are evaluated.

The study highlights the need for robust support structures and broader recognition of art education's crucial role in holistic learning by examining the paradox of identity of the artists and

traditional art educators within school education. It aims to contribute to a dialogue that empowers art teachers and fosters a deeper understanding of the multifaceted value of art education in India's evolving education system.

Key Words: *Art Education, Art Teacher, Indian Art Education, Critical Pedagogy, School Education*

I. Introduction

While Art Educators ideally play a critical role in fostering creativity and artistic expression, the reality in India paints a different picture. This discrepancy stems from various factors, including a significant need for policies, norms, and practices related to art education. This deficiency encompasses curriculum formulation and execution, hindering the full potential of art education to serve its purposes.

Art practice enables reflection and provides unique perspectives on the internal and external world, broadening an individual's horizons. It achieves this, arguably, in a more captivating way than most other disciplines (Bube, 2020). A comprehensive art education can significantly broaden a student's perspective by demonstrating the multitude of valid ways to express oneself, the diverse viewpoints that can illuminate the world, and the various routes that can lead to distinct conclusions. Art education can foster crucial skills like curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, experimentation, and self-reflection through play and enjoyment.

However, the current state of art education in India requires a revolutionary change, as evidenced by the historic integrated learning system implemented by the Central Board of Secondary

Education (CBSE) in 2020. To effectively adapt to this new model, the new art education must familiarise itself with its local community and establish a strong foundation from the grassroots level. This transformation also necessitates unlearning some traditional art education practices for teachers who wish to join this transformative journey. The true potential of art education in India can be realised by addressing these challenges and embracing effective practices.

Nevertheless, the reality of an art educator in India presents a stark contrast to the aforementioned ideal. Limited understanding of the subject by administrators coupled with parental expectations solely focused on crafting "beautiful" objects rather than fostering artistic expression significantly alter the role of the art teacher. This situation is further exacerbated by the country's lack of robust art education institutions, leading to a prevalent "identity paradox" among art educators. An ideal art teacher is someone who nurtures creativity, artistic ability, and critical thinking in students (Stokrocki, 1986). Yet, in practice, they are typically seen as decorators tasked with improving the school's visual attractiveness rather than focusing on providing students with substantial art education. This results in a discrepancy between their intended function and their actual experience.

Fresh graduates often find themselves drawn to art teaching due to limited job opportunities, with only 50% securing positions (Mathur, 2022). These individuals frequently find employment in non-government schools, offering a meagre income to support their artistic pursuits. Despite having some exposure to art exhibitions, they lack formal training in pedagogical art education methods, often resorting to "hit-and-try" techniques. This inevitably impacts the quality of art education received by

students. Many art educators in India need more specific training in art education pedagogy and project their beliefs in the students without realising the child's uniqueness. Without theoretical frameworks and methods, they resort to trial and error, experimenting with different activities and approaches to see what resonates with students.

Beyond these challenges, school administrations contribute to the exploitation of art educators. They often appoint fresh graduates at minimal wages without job security, taking advantage of their lack of awareness regarding employment rights. These educational institutions not only burden art teachers with the traditional responsibility of teaching art but also expect them to handle additional tasks like decorating display boards and maintaining the overall aesthetics of the school, often requiring them to work beyond regular hours without additional compensation. Moreover, school management often perceives art teachers as artisans rather than artists or educators, further contributing to their low self-esteem and sense of direction. The absence of exposure to established theoretical frameworks for teaching art adds to the confusion and directionlessness experienced by these educators. This paper seeks to delve deeper into this complex situation, exploring the factors contributing to the paradox faced by art educators in India and proposing potential solutions to bridge the gap between the ideal and the reality. This essay explores the identity paradox of art educators in India, examining how systemic undervaluation and exploitation hinder the transformative power of art education.

Let us understand through a case study.

Archana (42) (name changed) based in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India, is a passionate art teacher. She dedicated 15 years

of her life to nurturing young minds through the vivid world of creativity. However, Archana's journey in the realm of education took an unexpected turn, evolving into a case study of exploitation and unmet promises.

Archana found herself employed at a prestigious CBSE school, where her days were meant to be filled with the joy of teaching art. Unfortunately, the reality was quite different. Instead of inspiring the young learners, Archana spent most of her time maintaining and adorning various corners of the school. The advent of social media had transformed her role, with schools prioritising picturesque decorations to keep their online feeds vibrant.

During her candid recount, Archana unveiled the disheartening truth that some colleagues were even tasked with decorating the management's homes during special events like Karwa Chauth and Diwali. The school's demands escalated during breaks, as Archana was handed the daunting task of producing 25 paintings without receiving any compensation for her efforts.

Despite promises of a monthly remuneration of Rs16000, Archana's account was credited with Rs 30000, a deceptive surplus that she was compelled to return in cash. Failure to comply resulted in a daily fine of Rs 50. This financial entanglement further intensified the strain on Archana, transforming her once-beloved job into a seemingly endless cycle of dissatisfaction.

Even the promise of teaching secondary classes once a week was short-lived, as Archana's creativity was diverted to endless art projects for the school's events. The insistence on grand rangolis at every gathering led to prolonged hours at the school, causing

secondary students to lose interest in art, resulting in absenteeism and diminished output.

Archana's woes were not solitary; her co-teacher, Latha, shared a similar fate. After the management promised a salary increase, Latha sought an appraisal. However, the school's bureaucracy proved unyielding, binding her to an unfulfilled contract. Seeking alternative opportunities, Latha's proactive job search led to an unexpected termination without any prior notice.

The unhealthy environment prevailing in many schools left Archana trapped, unable to escape the clutches of job insecurity and unemployment. The struggle to balance personal life amid exploitative conditions painted a bleak picture for dedicated educators like Archana, caught in the crossfire of unmet promises and a system that seemed to prioritize aesthetics over education.

Archana's story highlights the harsh realities faced by many educators in India, particularly those in the arts. The lack of job security and the prevalence of exploitative practices create a toxic environment that stifles creativity and hinders effective art education between teachers and students.

This case serves as a call to action, urging educational institutions to prioritise the well-being of their educators, foster an environment conducive to learning, and recognise the invaluable role of art in shaping young minds.

Let us take the theoretical framework proposed by Henry Giroux to understand the issue better. Critical pedagogy is an approach to education that emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, but it goes beyond just questioning ideas. It encourages teachers and students to actively work towards creating a more just and equitable society. This approach is particularly relevant in

universities, where the ideas and actions of today shape the world of tomorrow.

Henry Giroux (2015) , a key figure in critical pedagogy, believes that educators are responsible for using their position as intellectuals to reshape education. They shouldn't simply accept the status quo; they should be empowered to challenge traditional ways of thinking and teaching. Giroux argues that everything we use in the classroom, from textbooks to images, carries a history and reflects certain viewpoints. Critical pedagogy encourages us to think deeply about these materials, uncovering the biases they might contain. Additionally, Giroux promotes breaking down the artificial boundaries between subjects in education. True understanding often means connecting different fields of knowledge to get a bigger picture.

Findings

- Archana, a passionate art teacher with 15 years of experience, faced exploitation at a prestigious CBSE school in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India.**
- Instead of teaching art , she was primarily tasked with decorating the school and the management's homes for various events, exceeding her job description.**
- Despite promises of a salary , she received a deceptive surplus that she was forced to return, along with facing financial penalties for non-compliance.**
- The promised secondary classes were replaced with endless art projects for events, leading to student disengagement and absenteeism.**

- Archana's colleague, Latha , faced a similar situation with unfulfilled salary raise promises and unexpected termination after seeking better opportunities.
- The focus on aesthetics over education in schools creates a toxic environment that hinders creativity and harms both teachers and students.

Call to Action:

- Educational institutions need to prioritize the well-being of educators, especially art teachers.
- Schools should foster environments conducive to learning and value the invaluable role of art education in shaping young minds.

Discussion:

Archana, an experienced and dedicated art teacher with 15 years under her belt, unfortunately, faced unfair treatment at a well-regarded CBSE school. Even after dedicating significant years to art education, she is still vulnerable to exploitation from the school administration. She could not enjoy the employment benefits from the employer remains in the constant threat of termination. This reflects various forms of exploitation, such as unfair wages, excessive workload, lack of benefits, or even harassment.

This shifted Archana's professional focus from pedagogy (teaching methods) to aesthetics (visual appeal). This imposed a significant time constraint on her ability to deliver effective art instruction.

The disparity between her designated role and assigned tasks created confusion, leading to feelings of professional inadequacy.

The administration's lack of understanding regarding art education likely prevented them from optimising Archana's pedagogical expertise. Instead, they capitalised on her artistic skills primarily for non-instructional purposes. This misalignment between expectations and utilisation suggests a potential misuse of Archana's professional experience and artistic talent.

This situation could lead to detrimental consequences for various stakeholders. Archana might experience job insecurity and professional dissatisfaction. Students could be deprived of a comprehensive art education, potentially hindering their artistic development. Additionally, the school might miss the opportunity to foster a culture of creativity and aesthetic appreciation within its student body.

The private unaided schools do not receive public money or have public ownership. To be acknowledged, they need to fulfil particular requirements for hiring principals and teachers, uphold an adequate student-teacher ratio, and ensure their financial stability. The school has complete autonomy over hiring processes and teacher salaries. They independently determine their admissions procedures and tuition fees. These schools are growing rapidly, generating additional revenue similar to small or medium-sized enterprises, however they need to compensate teachers more.

Private schools are currently not subject to local political policies or initiatives aimed at addressing teachers' issues. Educators who are perceived as going against private interests can be dismissed

without facing additional repercussions. The government has minimal involvement in regulating the educational policies of individual states (Sindhi, 2012) . There is a significant amount of cultural, political, and social variety among the states. These schools are experiencing growth in student numbers and income similar to small or medium-sized businesses, however they are failing to remunerate their teachers adequately.

To combat teacher exploitation, the government has mandated a minimum wage. However, some educational institutions circumvent this regulation due to a lack of teacher unions and high unemployment. They distribute salaries in accordance with government guidelines, but then demand those funds back from their employees. This unethical practice leaves many teachers vulnerable. These institutions exploit their position of power to manipulate policies in their favour. Additionally, the government's Provident Fund (PF) scheme, intended to provide financial security for employees, is often poorly understood by teachers, making them further susceptible to exploitation.

Teachers typically believe that their pay are lesser compared to other professionals. This impacts teachers' motivation to educate, leading to the departure of competent teachers from the profession and dissuading high-achieving students from pursuing an education major in college. These would result in adverse impacts on pupils' learning. Enhancing the quality of education requires focusing on teachers and enacting policies to attract, inspire, and retain highly skilled persons in the field.

In an era marked by ubiquitous access to information, traditional educational models that prioritize rote memorization and assessment based solely on recall are insufficient. To prepare

students for the dynamic challenges and opportunities of the future, we must cultivate 21st-century skills in our learners. Art education is uniquely positioned to foster these essential competencies.

Art education doesn't just produce beautiful objects; it nurtures the "fresh perspectives and innovative thinking" (Sheridan-Rabideau, 2010) essential for India's future problem-solvers. Yet, when art teachers are constrained to decorative tasks, we rob students of the chance to develop these crucial 21st-century skills through key skills that emphasise problem-solving, flexible thinking, investigation, creative risk-taking, perseverance, close observation, collaboration, and which art education effectively nurtures. While other subjects can contribute to developing these skills, the arts are particularly potent due to their emphasis on divergent thinking, which contrasts with the convergent thinking often demanded in other disciplines.

Neglecting the potential of art education means missing a vital opportunity to develop a generation of competent individuals equipped to secure and create meaningful employment in the evolving job market. A transformative shift within our educational system is crucial. We need a system dedicated to actively nurturing such individuals and providing environments where their 21st-century skills can flourish.

As we can see in the case of Latha, Private schools often operate with recruitment and compensation structures that diverge significantly from those found in government-funded institutions. A common practice involves forcing teachers to sign restrictive bonds or agreements, preventing them from resigning for extended periods. Should they decide to leave, these schools

frequently withhold significant portions of the teachers' earned salaries as a penalty. Unfortunately, such exploitative practices extend to some larger, well-established schools, even in urban centres.

These private schools frequently hire educators who lack formal teaching qualifications and compensate them at rates far below those paid in government schools. However, they often need to maintain smaller class sizes due to the more significant number of teachers hired. School administrators in these private institutions exercise high authority over hiring and firing practices. This allows them to enforce stricter control over the teaching workforce, resulting in higher attendance rates and the retention of only effective instructors.

Fagbasmiye (2012) found that widespread dissatisfaction exists among teachers, and this negatively impacts their attitude towards their profession. He argues that a teacher's happiness and well-being directly correlate with their effectiveness and productivity. This connection stems from the fundamental principles of human psychology: positive mental states and motivation are essential to sustain high performance over an extended period.

Furthermore, Smilansky's (1984) research explored factors contributing to teacher satisfaction and work-related stress within English elementary schools. Interestingly, the study revealed that teachers' overall satisfaction and stress levels were primarily influenced by classroom experiences (including student relationships, teaching dynamics, and student behavior) rather than administrative policies or structural factors such as work autonomy and leadership relationships. Numerous studies

underscore teacher stress's detrimental impact on physical and mental well-being. Common manifestations include lowered morale, negative self-perception, disillusionment with personal values as they relate to the teaching profession, and an increased susceptibility to illness (Bertoch, Nielsen, Curley, & Borg, 1989). In more severe cases, teachers experiencing high levels of burnout report elevated anxiety, depression, decreased sexual drive, and increased occurrence of both psychological and psychosomatic symptoms (Agyapong, Obuobi, Burbach, & Wei, 2022).

Schools striving for a polished image, characterized by pristine facilities, uniforms, and meticulously planned events, can inadvertently create a paradox within their art education programs. While a clean and organized environment is valuable, prioritizing visually appealing and pre-defined artistic outcomes can stifle genuine self-expression and creativity amongst students. This emphasis on external aesthetics can demotivate intrinsically creative students, favoring those skilled in mere imitation.

This prioritisation of mimicry over personal expression contradicts the established value of self-discovery in art education, championed by scholars like Victor Lowenfeld (1957). Notably, this approach presents a significant concern, as it undermines the core purpose of integrating art into the curriculum.

Furthermore, this copy-centric approach to art education fosters detrimental consequences. It cultivates a mindset focused on duplication rather than encouraging original thought and innovative problem-solving, hindering crucial cognitive development (Bartel, 2008). Additionally, it can contribute to

students seeking external validation for their work, hindering the intrinsic motivation and self-confidence necessary for artistic growth.

Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach. While art teachers play a crucial role in fostering creativity through their pedagogy, experience, and empathy, further support is needed. This includes advocating for art education to be taken seriously at all levels, alongside the potential establishment of specialised institutions dedicated to providing effective and empowering art education practices.

Conclusion

The "identity paradox" faced by art educators in India highlights a critical issue in the country's education system. Art teachers, who hold immense potential to nurture creativity and critical thinking in students, often find themselves relegated to the role of mere decorators. This discrepancy between their ideal role and the exploitative reality they face stems from a confluence of factors.

Limited understanding of the true value of art education amongst administrators and parents often reduces art teachers to visual beautifiers. Schools prioritize aesthetics over artistic exploration, focusing on creating an impressive facade rather than fostering genuine artistic development. This not only demotivates students but also diminishes the sense of purpose and professional identity of art educators.

Furthermore, the lack of adequate compensation and job security creates a toxic environment. Exploitative practices by schools, such as demanding excessive non-teaching tasks and

unreasonable working hours without proper compensation, leave art educators feeling undervalued and dissatisfied. This negatively impacts their motivation and well-being, hindering their ability to effectively create a nurturing learning environment for their students.

To bridge this gap and unlock the true potential of art education in India, a multi-pronged approach is necessary. Firstly, empowering art teachers is crucial. This involves providing them with adequate training in effective art education pedagogy, ensuring fair compensation, and offering professional development opportunities. Additionally, raising awareness and appreciation for art education amongst administrators, parents, and society at large is essential. Recognizing the subject's role in fostering holistic development and equipping students with crucial 21st-century skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication will lead to a greater understanding of its importance. Finally, advocating for policy changes that protect art teachers' rights and ensure their well-being is paramount. This may involve implementing regulations mandating fair compensation, reasonable working hours, and job security for art educators.

By addressing the "identity paradox" faced by art educators and implementing these critical measures, India can pave the way for a transformative shift in its education system, one that fosters creativity, empowers individuals, and equips them for the challenges of the future.

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