

Art Education as a Tool for Community Building in Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur is a state in the North East of India, rich in history, cultural heritage, and natural beauty. It has a unique blend of cultures, traditions, and history, making it a fascinating region. Despite its rich natural resources, Manipur faces various challenges, including violence, inadequate infrastructure, limited healthcare facilities, and a lack of industrial growth, which consequently affect its population. In order to overcome these challenges, Art Education can be used as a tool. Art education refers to learning, instruction, and programming based upon the visual and tangible arts. Art education includes performing arts like dance, music, theatre, and visual arts like drawing, painting, sculpture, and design works. Art education provides students with the tools and knowledge to understand, create, and appreciate art, while also fostering emotional, intellectual, and social development. The rich cultural aspects of Manipur can be used to build healthy communities and help each other overcome various challenges, which is the need of the hour.

Keywords: Manipur, art education, community development

Introduction

Art education has a significant history that stretches across centuries and cultures, evolving as societies and their values changed. It began as far back as ancient Greece, where art was seen as essential to a well-rounded education, right up there with mathematics, literature, and philosophy. For the Greeks, art was crucial to developing a person's mind and character, setting the groundwork for much of Western culture. During the Renaissance period, there was a revival of classical Greek and Roman art that ignited a renewed passion for art education. This era pushed art to the forefront again, emphasising skill and creativity as a pathway to understanding and beauty. By the 20th century, art education had grown to include not only skill but also theory, concept, and personal expression. Art schools encouraged students to experiment with new styles, materials, and ideas, broadening the definition of what art could be. This expansion also brought about new fields, like art therapy, art criticism, and art history, offering students different ways to engage with and understand art.

In the 1960s and 1970s, art education took on a new role in communities, where art programs were designed to foster social change and bring people together. Today, art education is more diverse than ever, encompassing everything from digital art and animation to graphic design, reflecting the ways technology and creativity continue to shape each other. Art education's journey is still unfolding, constantly adapting to meet the needs of the time.

Art education provides a platform for people to express their creativity and bring their ideas to life through various forms such as painting, drawing, sculpture, dance, theatre and music, in a way that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers.

Importance of Art Education

Art education does more than teach us about creativity—it shapes the way we think and approach challenges. When people interact with different art forms, they're often encouraged to think in new ways, make connections between ideas that might seem unrelated at first, and find creative solutions to artistic problems. This kind of thinking, practised through art, easily transfers into other areas of life.

Beyond creativity, art education sharpens observational skills and attention to detail, which helps people better analyse and interpret information. These abilities are essential for navigating the complex world we live in today, where understanding nuance and seeing things from multiple perspectives can make a huge difference. Art education, in this way, is not just about learning to draw or paint; it's about building a skill set that's valuable in every aspect of life.

The benefits extend to emotional intelligence as well. Art provides a platform for processing feelings and expressing thoughts that might otherwise remain unspoken or unprocessed. This can be particularly helpful in navigating emotions like anxiety or joy. Art education provides a safe environment to explore identity, values, and personal expression, fostering empathy and cultural appreciation. Collaborative art projects enhance social skills, teaching people to share ideas and build relationships, which are skills essential especially in the present context of Manipur.

Art education as a catalyst for community building

The significance of art education in community building cannot be overstated. Art has the power to bring people together, foster creativity, and promote social change. Art education plays a crucial role in promoting social harmony within communities. Through art, individuals from diverse backgrounds can come together to share their experiences, cultures, and perspectives. This exchange of ideas and creative expression helps to break down social barriers, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding among community members. In addition, people from the same community can strengthen their connection among themselves through shared appreciation and preserving their cultural arts and traditions. For instance, community-based art projects, traditional performances of dances and songs, and mural installation can bring together people of different ages, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds, promoting a sense of unity and shared identity. By providing a platform for self-expression and creative collaboration, art education helps to build bridges between individuals and groups, ultimately strengthening community bonds.

Furthermore, art education is essential for preserving and safe-guarding the cultural identity of a community. Art has the power to capture the essence of a community's history, traditions, and values, passing them down to future generations. Through art education, community members can learn about their cultural heritage, appreciate its significance, and pass it on to others. For example, traditional crafts, music, and dance can be taught in art classes, enabling students to appreciate and perpetuate their cultural legacy. By promoting cultural preservation, art education helps to maintain community identity and foster a sense of pride and ownership among community members.

Peggy M. Albers' paper, 'Art Education and the Possibility of Social Change', examines the role of art education in encouraging students to become more socially aware and critically engaged with issues such

as gender, race, and social justice. Based on a two-year ethnographic study in a sixth-grade classroom, Albers highlights two main roles of art education: first, as a medium through which students express their ideologies and social identities, and second, as a platform that can inspire discussions leading to personal transformation and greater understanding of diverse perspectives.

Albers' research shows that as students develop art literacy, they often reveal underlying social beliefs and biases in their work. For example, gender-based assumptions surfaced when students selected colours or subjects for their art, reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Through guided discussions led by their teacher, students began to question these biases and explore broader social issues, potentially reshaping their viewpoints on topics like gender roles and racial identity.

Albers emphasises that art education's impact extends beyond skill development; it can foster social consciousness and critical thinking, empowering students to view themselves as agents of change within society. This approach to art education suggests that integrating social justice themes can cultivate a more inclusive and reflective learning environment, prompting students to reconsider and expand their beliefs (ERIC, 1999; ResearchGate, 1999).

Albers concludes that art education holds significant potential for initiating social change by helping students confront their ideological beliefs and engage in critical conversations. Art offers a unique, immediate way of exploring and challenging power structures and stereotypes. For art education to fulfil this transformative potential, educators must embrace critical pedagogy, foster inclusive dialogues, and create democratic spaces where students can question the social norms that shape their lives.

Gilbert Clark and Enid Zimmerman's study 'Greater Understanding of the Local Community: A Community-Based Art Education Program for Rural Schools' focuses on Project ARTS, a community-based art program designed for rural school students. It examines how art education tailored to local cultures can improve engagement and self-esteem in students by highlighting and validating their unique cultural backgrounds. The study emphasises the benefits of incorporating local community resources, such as local artists, historical sites, and cultural traditions, into the art curriculum.

Through Project ARTS, students in various rural areas such as Indiana, New Mexico, and South Carolina, participated in diverse activities, such as exploring local architecture, creating crafts with indigenous techniques, and documenting their heritage through multimedia projects. The program aimed to address the needs of economically disadvantaged and ethnically diverse students by fostering connections between art education and their cultural environments. Findings showed increased community involvement, student engagement, and appreciation for their cultural heritage. The authors suggest that this model could inspire similar programs in other rural areas to support culturally relevant education and community involvement in learning.

The study concluded that Project ARTS could serve as a model for other rural areas looking to integrate community-based art education. By highlighting local culture and involving the community, rural schools can foster students' cultural pride, understanding, and a sense of belonging, contributing to a more holistic educational experience.

Kim's study, 'Community and art: creative education fostering resilience through art' focuses on applying community-based education through art to elementary school students in an effort to enable the learners to experience the cultural facilities of their community and to cultivate their creativity and personality, thus fostering resilience in the face of the trauma of school violence. The objective of the study is to investigate the role and significance of community based art education for the prevention and reduction in school violence as well as for healing of both the victims and the perpetrators of the school violence.

Initially, an investigation on school violence and trauma was done based on the literature review. From the review of multiple papers, it has been found that despite the active efforts of countries such as the USA and Norway starting two or three decades ago to deal with school violence and develop a programme such as establishing Police-School Liaison Programme (PSLP) as a solution to school violence and to form the direction of education as well as economic cooperation, such a school violence prevention and response programme is lacking in South Korea along with the effort and determination to develop such a programme. Studies found that problems resulting from exposure to school violence include those related with conduct and emotions, school life maladjustment and suicidal thoughts (Yang and Chung 1999; Yoon and Cho 2008; Kim and Lee 2010; Park 2010).

By collaborating with the regional community, local government office, police station, middle school students, and graduate school art education programme students, the community-based art project was conducted in this study for the reduction and prevention of school violence. It was composed of three periods: The first period of the art project was “self-seeking travel: A treasure map within me.” In which students reflect on a difficult time, and then they list all of the things they did to cope. Also, students made collage visual images on a board that reflected the future self they aspire to. The second period was “I am _____” style. In which students created and edited a video of messages about how they felt during their experience of school violence. The third period was “I am a tree.” In which students were asked to artistically elevate their personal story about their experiences of school violence. Students were able to express their stories through book art, monoprint and stencil technique.

The study resulted in the following effects. The first effect of the three community-based art projects was the opportunity to experience enjoyment, interest, and aesthetic sensibility. The second effect was that the process of creating art allows students to have flexible and creative thoughts. The third effect is the cultivation of problem recognition and problem-solving skills. The fourth effect is the cultivation of community spirit and sociability as a result of engaging in flexible, cooperative activity through the second and third art projects. The fifth effect is to help students reframe adversity in order to see within its content possibility instead of despair. It helps transform their thinking from that of a victim to that of a survivor, using art to celebrate and encourage strength and positive emotion that may benefit them in future challenges. Finally, these three community-based art projects helped students to recognise human dignity through self-exploration. Overall, this study showed that community-based art education provided character training to adolescents so that they can ultimately grow into well-rounded individuals.

The Power of Arts Education in Manipur

Art education serves as a vital tool for community building, particularly in regions such as Manipur, India, where socio-economic challenges and political unrest have historically hindered educational development. Manipur has a significant number of art performances, such as Thang-Ta, Khamba-Thoibi dance, and Lai-Haraoba dance, that require cohesion and collaboration among its performers. Teaching and integrating these forms of art can aid in learning different kinds of skills and create an affinity towards one's culture. Art education is essential for fostering social cohesion in Manipur. Art has the power to bring people together, regardless of their cultural background, religion, or socioeconomic status. In Manipur, where tensions and conflicts are prevalent, art education can serve as a powerful tool for promoting unity and reconciliation by utilising the rich cultural threads that are available.

Art education in Manipur also provides vital economic opportunities. By equipping individuals with skills in traditional crafts, textiles, and performing arts, art education supports local industries and creates

employment. This economic potential, coupled with Manipur's unique cultural heritage, could drive a thriving tourism industry.

Furthermore, art education can also play a role in promoting social change and addressing social issues in Manipur. Through art, individuals can express their thoughts and feelings about social issues, such as gender inequality, conflicts, environmental degradation, and poverty. Art education can empower individuals to become active citizens, using their creativity to raise awareness about social issues and promote positive change. In Manipur, where social issues are prevalent, art education can serve as a powerful tool for promoting social justice and human rights.

In addition, art education can also have a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of individuals in Manipur and the state as a whole. Research has shown that engaging in creative activities can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, leading to improved mental health and well-being. In Manipur, where mental health issues are often stigmatised, art education can provide a safe and creative outlet for individuals to express their emotions and thoughts without judgements.

Thangjam, R. (2015) explores the role of art in shaping cultural identity and its potential as a tool for conflict resolution in the context of Manipur, a region with a history of ethnic and cultural conflicts. In this study, Thangjam highlights how art can serve as both a reflection of cultural heritage and a mechanism for social healing and unity amid conflict. Art forms such as visual arts, dance, and traditional storytelling play essential roles in preserving cultural identity while promoting dialogue and understanding among different ethnic groups.

The study suggests that by bringing people together through shared artistic expressions, art can bridge divides and offer alternative perspectives in conflict zones. Art activities not only preserve culture but also foster a sense of collective identity, helping to reduce tensions and improve relationships among conflicting groups. Thangjam's research advocates for community-centered arts initiatives, which could empower locals and provide avenues for mutual respect and empathy, crucial steps toward sustainable peace and conflict resolution in Manipur.

Singh, H.R. and Devi, L.S. (2021) studies the history of dance education in Manipur and its role in developing social values, psychomotor domain and creativity of students in Manipur. The objectives of the study are: (1) to study the effect of Manipuri Dance on the social value in the teaching-learning process, (2) to examine the benefits of Manipuri dance on the performance of psychomotor domains in the teaching-learning process and (3) to find out the creative development of Manipuri dance in the teaching-learning process.

Findings show the effect of Manipuri Dance Education on the social value in the teaching-learning process of school students. Results also show the benefits of Manipuri dance education on the performance of the psychomotor domain of students in schools. There is creative development of Manipuri dance education in the teaching-learning process.

Conclusion

History as well as numerous studies has shown the power and significance that art education has. Its importance and significance cannot be overlooked especially in a state like Manipur. Prioritising art education in Manipur can lead to a vibrant, cohesive, and forward-looking community. By investing in and nurturing the arts, Manipur not only preserves its unique cultural legacy but also equips its people with the tools to build a future that is both economically sustainable and socially harmonious. Art education, therefore, stands as a foundational pillar for both personal growth and community development,

bridging the past with the future while fostering a society where every individual's creative potential can contribute to the greater good.

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