

Art in the Time of Corona

Transforming learning for 4.7 million children

While performing at the TEDx-GatewaySalon Platform¹ in 2019, Muskan, a young poet involved with Slam Out Loud (SOL), shared how she was often told by her parents and teachers that “the arts are for people who are not hardworking.” Like

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Muskan, most of us are no strangers to the narrative that art has no “real” value and should, at best, only be indulged in as a hobby.

Both research and recent shifts in pedagogical techniques, however, argue otherwise.

Through brain imaging technologies, neuroscientists across the globe are now able to show the physical changes that occur in the brain when one contemplates or participates in art. For instance, a creatively inspired brain depicts lower levels of cortisol, which is the biological indicator for stress. Educators also have noticed how including art into curriculums allows students to develop and foster crucial socio-emotional learning (SEL) skills, which, in turn, reflect positive changes in student behavior and performance.

Research demonstrates that children who received art education showed an 80% increase in creativity and levels of social skills.² Studies also show that students partaking in arts courses had higher grade point averages and were five times more likely to graduate compared to their peers.³

For students in low-income schools, art-based SEL provides a much-needed space in which to foster expression. This, in turn, is essential to ensure that children are empowered to break their cycle of negative outcomes. The perspective that art-based SEL is especially beneficial and vital for low-income students is supported by intensive research.



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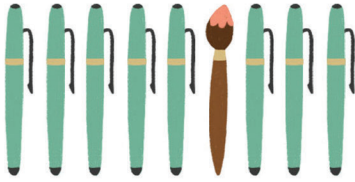
For instance, a study led by the Kennedy Center’s Changing Education Through the Arts (CETA) Program found that integrating the arts had a profound impact on closing achievement gaps.⁴

The Problem and SOL’s Solution

Through art, we experience beauty while also learning important lessons and practicing various skills. Often, however, the benefits of exposure to and participation in the arts are not accessible to the children who need it the most. In the capital city of Delhi, children receive, on average, less than 20 hours of art or art-based learning per year and this number is significantly lower in more remote areas. There is only one art teacher for every 1,400+ students. Nationally, art is deprioritized, with very little to no teacher training, lack of budget allocation, and few quality arts opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in 320 million children in India being unable to access classrooms. The school closures impacted children’s learning levels, which, in turn, translates into higher drop-out rates

The Problem



Children in government schools receive less than 20 hours of art-based learning per academic year



There is 1 art teacher for every 1,400+ children



Art is nationally deprioritized, with very little to no teacher training and lack of budget and quality art colleges

and psychological ill-effects for both children and their parents. A crucial question arose: *Until we attended to children's individual well-being, how could we inspire children to continue learning from home?*

As educators and schools experimented with online modes of education, the massive digital divide in our country also became apparent. Only 36% of Indians have access to the internet and the number is even lower in rural areas. As our organization, Slam Out Loud, was learning to navigate the new normal, what didn't change was our commitment to making children's voices heard. Staying true to our mission of prioritizing students' well-being, our response to COVID-19 simultaneously focused on the mental and physical well-being of students along with the need to employ the lens of "access" in developing solutions.

Seeking to foster students' well-being, creativity, and mental resilience, we developed the Arts for All (AFA) initiative to leverage the power of delivering arts via low-tech platforms. AFA offers localized, need-sensitive, multilingual, and engaging at-home audio, video, text, and print resources for young learners who have limited internet access. These include booklets with art activities for student well-being; SEL-focused Youtube courses on storytelling, theater, visual art, and poetry; and some "byte"-size art-based audio podcasts that deliver activities over IVRS.

The two-fold goal of our intervention was to:

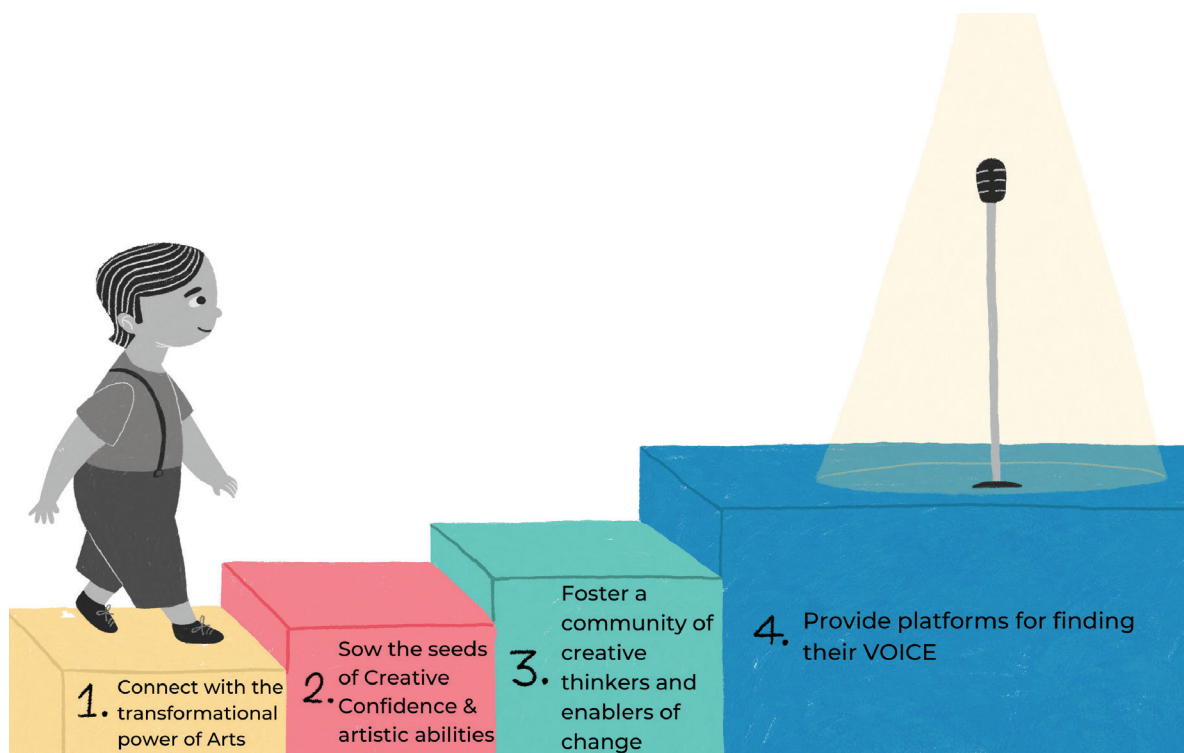
1. **Enhance student well-being and SEL:** By leveraging a network of professional artists and program fellows, we developed a high-quality, context-specific, multilingual, art-based curriculum at a challenging time when learning was constrained to the walls of children's homes. Our resources are aligned with the 21st-century skills framework to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 for quality education. The skills that we aim to develop are creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, communication, self-esteem, and empathy.

2. **Reach students with diverse access to technology:** AFA is designed to be flexible and to be hosted across different platforms to reach children in the most under-resourced spaces. These platforms include:

- **Online Video:** SOL is delivering video-based content through YouTube as well as partner platforms. We reached out to approximately a thousand villages through Pratham's EdTech platform. The courses cover storytelling, theater, visual arts, and poetry—all with an SEL foundation.
- **WhatsApp:** "Byte"-size activities are sent to children, parents, and teachers through daily WhatsApp alerts. These are hands-on activities that children can complete and share with accomplished artists. Some of our most successful activities have been consolidated into a booklet available online.⁵
- **IVRS:** To reach out to the most vulnerable children, who lack access to even low-tech platforms like WhatsApp, we intend to launch localized audio versions of the activities and scale them through IVRS. We're already piloting an IVRS model in Delhi and look forward to scaling it.
- **Radio:** We are exploring local radio as a means to reach rural audiences.

Arts for All: Designing the Curriculum

Children's socio-emotional well-being and accessibility were given center-stage while designing the Arts for All curriculum.



Resourcefulness was also important in the design process, which we defined in terms of not only being able to make use of internet services and art materials but also tapping into the social and emotional resources that children hold within them. Each activity is crafted to support children as they deeply explore this potential.

To create opportunities for children to engage socially, multiple activities were curated that require participation of family members or neighbors. In the *Story Teaming* activity, for example, children weave together a story with four other players. Learning through this activity is joyful, as children interact with people around them and collaborate to create.

To foster students' emotional well-being, our activities encourage them to tap into their own reserves of constructive emotions while expressing themselves. For instance, in one of our visual art activities, called *My Growing Gratitude*, children reflect on all the people, things, and situations they are grateful for and express their thoughts through an illustration. Activities such as these prompt children to pause and create moments of solace and joy by connecting with their internal resources of strength and resilience.

Each activity developed under Arts for All engages children in the following processes:

Centering: The first step in every activity is a short meditative exercise, such as a breathing exercise or a silent observation of the mind, through which children bring themselves to the present moment.

Creation: Once the child feels centered, they move on to step two: the creation. Here, the focus is not merely the medium but also the process of creation. For example, for certain visual arts activities we encourage children to use materials available at home, such as soap and water to create a bubble painting! Certain activities also guide children on using spices instead of using paints to achieve natural colors. In this way, the creation process reinforces to the child that they have the ability to create something independently, from scratch.

Reflection: Once the child has engaged in the process of creation, we encourage them to take a step back and absorb their experience. Every activity has contextualized guiding prompts to help children reflect on the process and make more meaning of it. The reflections that children share with the team also give us insights into their thoughts and feelings, thus allowing us to mold

successive activities in a way that is more relevant to them.

Sharing: After each activity, children are encouraged to share their art with people they feel comfortable around. We also invite children to share their art with us through designated WhatsApp channels so we can feature them in our spaces of encouragement and appreciation.

Before deployment, all learning content is tested across three layers. First, two levels of content creators and experts review the material before it is shared with a sample of 300 children across WhatsApp groups to test engagement. Next, high-frequency oral diagnostics are used to assess the rate of engagement and response, along with text/WhatsApp-based assessments (powered by artificial intelligence tools) to monitor the quality of responses and subsequent growth in creative confidence. Third, qualitative surveys of stakeholders (teachers, parents, government officials) are also conducted to monitor growth in an art-proficiency rubric.

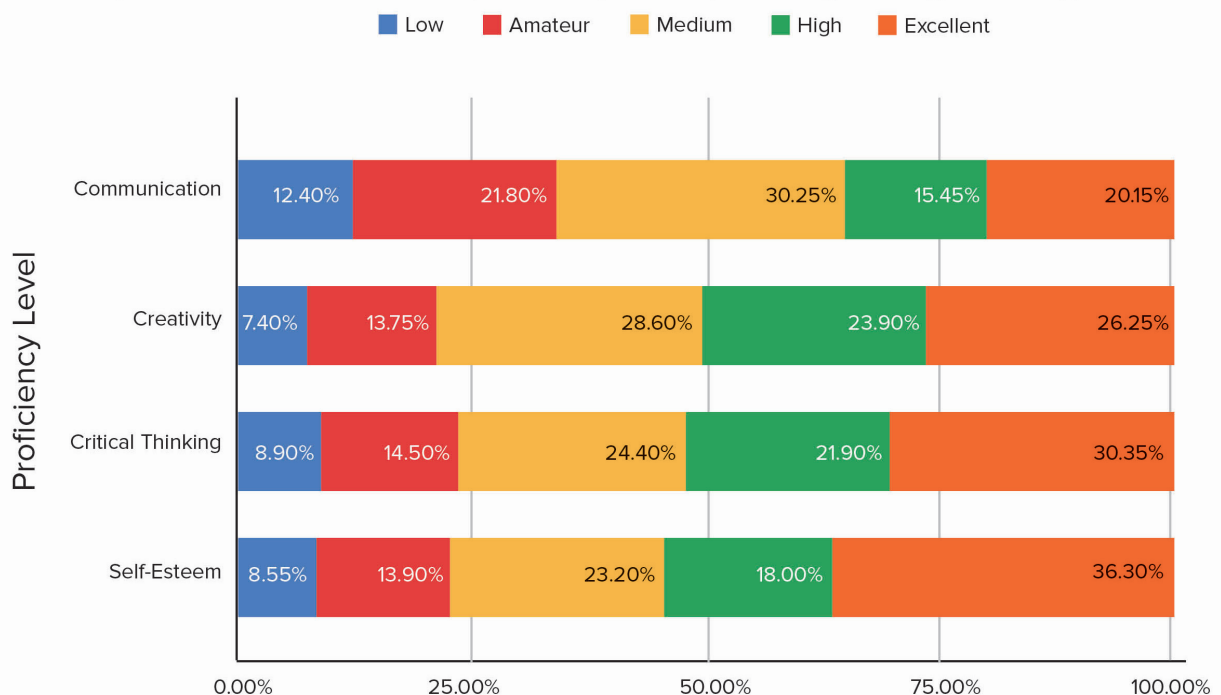
Growth in the organic user base is assessed through tech-generated analytics on usage.

When implemented in the district of Patiala (a short case study follows), some additional features were added to the Arts for All program to further incentivize students. For instance, children were encouraged to attend weekend virtual workshops organized by SOL that were facilitated by talented artists—often those the children admired. To incentivize participation, children were rewarded with titles such as “Artist of the Day/Week” and their artworks were featured in a dedicated weekly newsletter that was circulated among the stakeholders and students in Patiala. Student’s artworks were also regularly featured on SOL’s digital channels. In certain cases, with the child’s consent, their social profiles were also tagged.

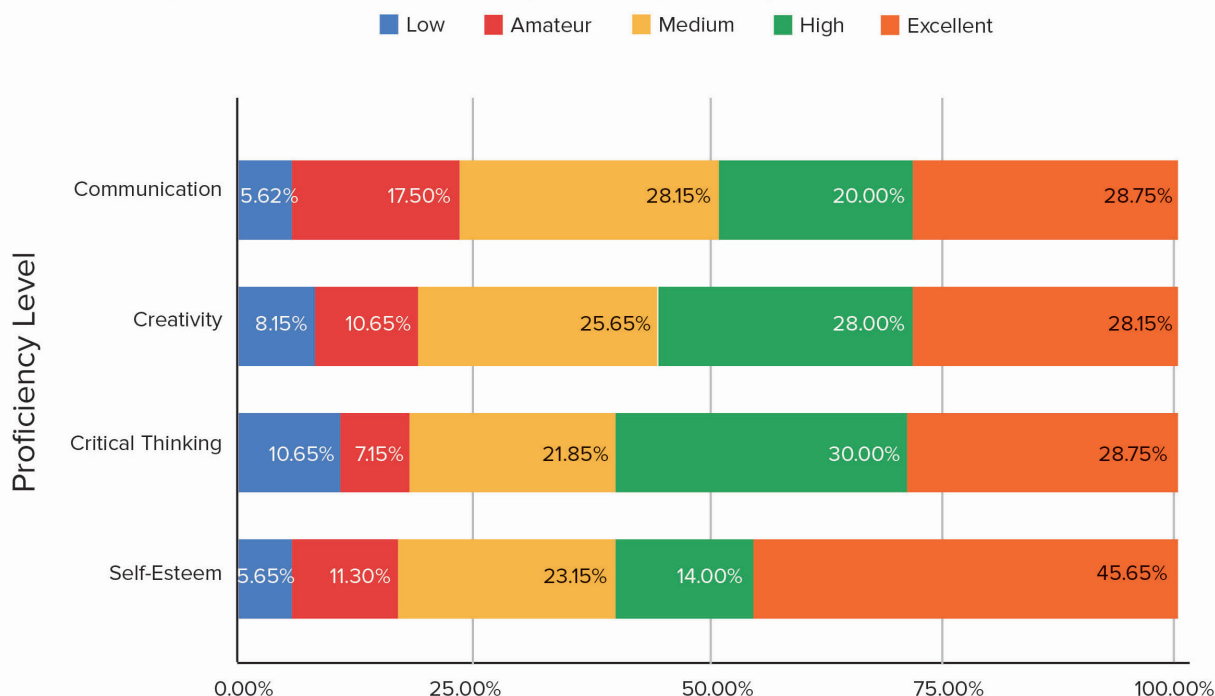
Arts for All in Patiala: A Case Study

Our partnership with the Government of Patiala generated some heartwarming data about the impact of the Arts for All approach. Over the course of an eight-week pilot project that disseminated SEL-focused art activities, we observed a significant increase in students’ creative confidence. Using high-frequency oral diagnostics to assess engagement and growth along with qualitative surveys of stakeholders to monitor growth in our art-proficiency rubric, we saw a profound impact that art had for our students in Punjab.

Comparison of SEL Skills (Self-Reported) at Beginning of Program



Comparison of SEL Skills (Self-Reported) at End of Program



A significant increase in SEL skills in children has occurred (see graphs above and on previous page). Across the four skills of Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking, and Self-Esteem, we observed a notable increase in the number of students falling in the “excellent” category. We observed maximum improvement in the aspects of Self-Esteem and Communication. Engaging with art translated into improved social skills and peer collaboration for our children in Punjab.

Our work has taught us that the addition of art into education has a profound effect on children’s learning, because art never tells them they are wrong. Instead, it provides them with a space where their ideas, feelings, and identity are accepted. And that is exactly what a space for fostering wellness looks like.

Across 23 Indian states and 19 countries globally, approximately 4.7 million children are participating in SOL’s art-based activities for fostering wellness and SEL. Working with our students has shown us how engaging in artistically creative acts develops a better sense of self and wellness. Broadly,

the power of art in SEL translated into three interrelated changes:

1. ***Learning to Grow and Stretch as Artists***, which relates to how students gain a sense of competence through the arts
2. ***Building Supportive and Meaningful Connections***, which concerns the supportive and meaningful relationships that they build with their peers and mentors when participating in art activities
3. ***Letting Go of the Inner Critic and Discovering the Authentic Voice***, which is connected with how the arts provide students with opportunities to garner a sense of autonomy, let go of their self-judgment, and adopt an open attitude.

All three themes were found to be mediated by a sense of mindfulness that enabled the students to remain open to informational feedback and to become less defensive, more able to connect with others, and more likely to choose paths for themselves that they find to be truly engaging.⁶ These multifaceted changes and growth in children result in the steady development of creative confidence (life) skills - the core aim of

our work at SOL. **Through our work, the six key skills that we have seen develop, strengthen, and transform children's experiences and abilities, are:**

- **Communication**
- **Critical Thinking**
- **Empathy**
- **Self-Esteem**
- **Creativity**
- **Collaboration.**

According to the National Endowment for the Arts, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The National Education Association, Michigan State University, and The World Bank, these six skills are crucial for building better life outcomes for children. And we have seen this in action. The process of using art to foster wellness and SEL, and the resulting amplification of creative confidence skills, vivifies children's experience of recognizing and understanding both themselves and the world around them. It is art that allows Anjali, another student poet with SOL, to re-think the norms she was taught and use poetry to ask questions like, "What about boys who love pink?"⁷

Each of the approximately 4.7 million children who access our activities every day are interacting with modalities that foster their wellness and help them find their voice. At SOL, we believe that instead of focusing on the "input" (i.e., fixed curriculum), we must foster safe spaces for children that allow them to bloom in their own way. **If every individual (or child) is different and unique, how can we expect them all to learn in the same way?**

Additional Resources

1. SOL's Poetry Building Game: <https://bit.ly/SOL-TheGiftOfPoetry>
2. Gen eARTh Activity Packs offering creative Climate Action for young learners (By SOL, WLL and UNICEF): <https://bit.ly/Gen-eARTh-Activity-Packs>
3. SOL's DIY Socio-Emotional Learning focused YouTube courses on storytelling, theatre, visual art, and poetry: <https://bit.ly/SOL-ArtsForAllYouTubePlaylist>
4. SOL's Art for All Activity Booklet: <https://bit.ly/SOL-ArtForAll>

To stay updated on all the fun projects, work, and opportunities at SOL, visit <https://slamoutloud.com>, where you will also find links to their social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn).

Slam Out Loud (SOL) is an Indian non-profit that uses the power of performance and visual arts (such as theater, storytelling, visual art, and spoken word poetry) to build creative confidence (life) skills like communication, critical thinking, and empathy in children from disadvantaged communities. In-person programs reach approximately 50,000 children across Maharashtra, UP, Rajasthan, and Delhi. Using low-tech resources, such as WhatsApp and Interactive Voice Response System, during the pandemic, SOL was able to reach more than 4.7 million children across 23 Indian States and 19 countries. Over the past few years, SOL's children have performed at various national and international platforms, and have been featured as TEDx speakers, student revolutionaries, and more. SOL continues to drive programs that can enable every child to realize their voice!

Through the Arts for All program, Slam Out Loud enables free access to quality arts-based learning resources as a contextual solution to prioritizing and delivering mental well-being and socio-emotional learning (SEL) support to the most vulnerable children. The resources are free of cost, interactive, need-sensitive, and accessible in English, Hindi, and Punjabi (and translated in more regional languages). They are made available through low-tech distribution channels like WhatsApp, Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS), radio, and TV, for use by organizations, teachers, parents, and children.

Notes:

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2oDp7gyRQ0>

² LaMore, R., Root-Bernstein, R., Root-Bernstein, M., Schweitzer, J. H., Lawton, J. L., Roraback, E., Peruski, A., VanDyke, M., & Fernandez, L. (2013). Arts and crafts: Critical to economic innovation. *Economic Development Quarterly*, 27(3), 221-229.

³ Cratsley, L. (2017). *Access to arts education: An overlooked tool for social-emotional learning and positive school climate*. Alliance For Excellent Education. <https://all4ed.org/access-to-arts-education-an-overlooked-tool-for-social-emotional-learning-and-positive-school-climate/>

⁴ Cratsley, L. (2017). *Access to arts education: An overlooked tool for social-emotional learning and positive school climate*. Alliance For Excellent Education.

⁵ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TaxUtDhEm3xNrSU2kUzgz_0IwXahMjsd/view

⁶ Hilburn-Arnold, M. (2020). *Turning to creativity: A grounded theory approach towards understanding the relationship between wellness and the arts for adolescents*. ProQuest. <https://search.proquest.com/openview/a2c686f1b643603a1a937a3aa60d8b96/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=51922&diss=y>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8P1JWJ6oH0>