

Dibba: Artreach-KNMA Teaching Fellowship with Rainbow Homes

Final Report by Aruna Manjunath

My proposal to Artreach+KNMA was a puppetry based applied arts project with an aim to explore the possibility of new and fun ways of sharing myths created by the children themselves. Dibba is designed to facilitate an experiential learning of the arts. The work involved visual arts, puppet-making, songs, storytelling and theater games.

Participants were encouraged to re-look at illustrated folktales from across the world through the lenses of inquiry and critical thinking. As a response to their observations, they wrote a short story, created puppets from found and upcycled materials. Games played a crucial role in shaping this entire project. They served as deeper engagement

strategies with a more personally rewarding relationship with the puppets and folktales. Such an engagement, I believe, did not only foster a deeper awareness of the world and its people - it also offered the children the rich experience of the arts.

The name for the project came from the idea of having a decorated Dibba (box) to hold all the puppets in it. This box would not only serve as storage for the artworks but also serve as a pop-up stage with background for when they wanted to put up a show. I hoped to leave behind a more accessible and tangible outcome from the programme that the participants may cherish, pass-on and possibly even inspire other children to make. Unfortunately, given the logistics of getting each child a box turned out to outweigh the work itself and the dibba needed to be let go of.

The rest of the work however continued more or less without going off track. In this project, the children were asked to respond to what they would like to learn. I was swarmed by patterns, paintings, stitching, scenery, nature etc. And as much as possible, I tried to incorporate them all within the work of Dibba. I also added an element of language to this work. I began my first session speaking about the obvious- that I wasn't a native Hindi speaker. To my relief, my speaking proficiency was not only understandable by the children, they were also good in English. We all shared the languages we were most comfortable with and ones we wish to learn. The response was an enthusiastic list of national and international languages. To make this work more diverse, especially as someone who comes from the South with fluency in five different languages, I learned one word before class from each of the languages the children hoped to speak one day and shared it with them. In return, I asked them to teach me words in Hindi I did not know. The response was not only overwhelming but also an increased acceptance for diversity that this sub-continent has to offer its people.

The invitation was for the children to create mythical characters of themselves based on their virtues, memories, reminiscence, personality traits and skills. As societal beings, we structure our lives around understood, unwritten rules especially if there is a long standing association with an institution, politics or religion. And here is why the introduction of myth becomes an interesting addition. At this juncture, I would like to bring to fore my past experiences with similar programmes for children and young adults. I have noted that more often than not, children and young people tend to associate their mythical creature with super humans such as Wonder Woman, Batman and such or with mythical animals such as Dragons and Unicorns. Such themes for me resonate on how they may relate to myth, making it highly personalized to them while simultaneously relying on metaphors than on facts. And therefore I chose to attempt to explore joy, ailment, memories and reminiscences as just another narrative that will serve to enhance an alternative perspective into the mystery of life.

The children were then introduced to the shadow puppetry tradition in India and illustrations from children's books. This provided them with a range of references for drawing up the mythical character they had created. It was in some ways a creative

foundation in articulating the children's experiences. To further enhance the aesthetics of the story, the children were taken through a series of exercises to create the background for these characters based on the stories written up by them. I wanted to look deeper into the embodiment and sensory aspects of these mythological characters and a verbal recall to the narrative constructed by the children. I hence began an exercise exploring our initial memories of a song and with an introduction to a gibberish song. Each of the children then wrote and shared their own gibberish songs. By acknowledging these memories as sites of knowledge and imagination, was how I was able to build on the process with my participants. The final presentation was a showcase of these puppets that were shared across the care homes.

This has in turn made way for a new ground of thinking and criticism. Additionally, puppets were chosen as a medium of expression as they are fun, engaging and a more three dimensional representation of the characters that the children may design. Moreover, within the structure and expression of a puppet, diverse voices and ideas may be explored resulting in an active reflection of the self. I began working with puppets in 2012, as a shy first time actor on stage. Puppets allowed me a good cover on stage while also being a medium through which I expressed my character. I hoped to re-visit that magic through others in this project. In the words of one of my earlier participants speaking of puppets- It is real in a way and it also isn't.

The children involved in this project were one of the most independent bunch I have worked with. They did a beautiful job with building the stories and making the puppets. I barely found myself over-explaining instructions or pushing them to do anything. As teenagers working from various spaces with glitchy internet access, I never saw them flinch to retry a process, some even re-try connecting their zoom call multiple times over the same session. I have a special place for this entire process and for the children making it a memorable one.

Naturally, like many arts practice, this project too involved me identifying and addressing some challenges. The primary challenge for me was running a project online from the other end of the country. The usual suspects of technical glitches aside, both the children and I had to highly rely on the various care workers and Artreach coordinators to set up the meeting. Ideally, I would have liked to meet with the participants in the same physical space. This would've allowed me to run more games and better engage with them. Usually in care settings, the challenge is to negotiate the various deliverables between the participants, care homes and the facilitator. Over and above, the process itself is driven by the children's abilities and interests. While on one hand, the care home needed an arts engagement project, I also needed to be cautious and take into account the children's needs. It was also a rare multi-arts based engagement for me, as for the first time I created work without the use of any active physical games.

Some photos from the project





