Co-creating healing spaces with children: Community-based creative arts therapy in South India

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Abstract

Creative processes can be fertile ground for healing. This article aims to contribute to the movement towards decolonising knowledge systems around community mental health practices. The traditional approach to mental health research and practice has often been based on Western models and perspectives, which may not be relevant or appropriate for communities in India. The article draws on elements of participatory action research to investigate Hasiru Dala's creative arts therapy (CAT) programme, which uses creative processes to nurture healing spaces for children residing in poor urban communities in Bengaluru, India. Qualitative data was collected through enquiry questions, supervision, a questionnaire, a writing workshop, and case studies in collaboration with CAT programme facilitators and participants. Validation by participants assures ethical representation. Emphasising cultural relevance, inclusivity and a community-centred outlook contributes to a more culturally responsive and locally relevant approach to community mental health.

Keywords

Creative arts therapy, community centred, decolonising, community mental health, India

Introduction: Context and rationale

Hasiru Dala, meaning 'green force' in Kannada, is a social impact organisation founded in 2013 that supports waste workers' livelihoods. Hasiru Dala operates eleven community libraries, called Buguri, which means 'spinning top' in Kannada. The after-school programmes in these libraries include reading rooms, art workshops, summer camps and field trips, providing safer spaces for children of waste workers to read, socialise and be creative.

In 2018, the first-named author, Pallavi Chander, started a creative arts therapy (CAT) programme with Buguri to address the psycho-social needs of children. Children in the CAT programme live in poverty and can face adverse childhood experiences, including parental alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, child marriages and dropping out of school. This article presents three programme intentions through case examples:

Creating a nurturing environment of safety and belonging for children using creative processes.

Empowering children to develop healthy coping mechanisms through culturally relevant anti-oppressive practices drawing upon community wisdom.

Nurturing reflective practices for facilitators to decolonise the community mental health field.

The CAT programme was offered to over 200 children in three locations across Bengaluru from 2018 to 2023. The programme has evolved and adapted to the needs of each group of children, being mindful of their cultural backgrounds. The children in the CAT programme are from caste-oppressed backgrounds, while the facilitators have caste-privileged identities. The supervision sessions addressed ways of recognising these dynamics without denying them and enabled moving from shame to awareness. Soundararajan (2022) articulates, "Taboo conversations around caste are surrounded by shame, secrecy, complicity, and pain. These things obscure the harm that is right in front of us. The trauma of those harms, whether known or unknown, gives rise to caste bias" (p.82). The facilitators did not want to unconsciously do harm in their sessions. Soundararajan, in a nod to "white fragility" (DiAngelo, 2018), emphasises the need to engage in ongoing reflection: "I think 'woke' is too limiting – being in the past tense, it implies a process that is concluded, a status of wokeness that's been achieved.… You're actually always in the process of awakening in the present" (p.83).

Each year, the CAT programme reshapes itself to hold emergent themes and support the group's needs and desires. It explores a collectively agreed-upon theme through drama, movement, music and visual art, building spontaneity, enactment, projective play, role play, image work, drama games and playful rituals (Boal, 1995, 2006; Emunah, 1994; Jones, 2007). Some of the themes explored include gender and sexuality, menstruation and coming-of-age rituals, building safety, friendships and supportive networks, building strength through vulnerability, understanding fears and beliefs, and collective histories.

Facilitators who planned and facilitated CAT programme sessions are community arts practitioners, and/or trained expressive art therapists. The internal supervisor, also the founder/director of the CAT programme, offered regular supervision and support. An external supervisor provided regular one-on-one supervision to the internal supervisor and annual training to the entire team, including the authors of this article.

This article emerged from CAT programme sessions, with mutual creative acts leading to knowledge creation. "This kind of knowledge is different from scholarly knowledge because everyday knowledge is embodied in people's actions, long histories in particular positions, and the way they reflect on them" (Greenwood & Levin, 2006, p.103). It is with this ethos that we facilitated our colourful, and at times chaotic, sessions. Working together in this way sometimes requires relinquishing control over the outcome. Figure 1 depicts a parallel process within the sessions where the group worked with crayons, making scribbles and shapes to express their feelings.

Figure 1. Participants from Geet's CAT group creating artwork together, 2022. Photo: Geet (consent was granted by participants).

We are part of a growing number of CAT practitioners working in community settings in India (Gopalakrishna, 2022; Jeyarathnam, 2022) committed to anchoring social justice in our work.

> The legacy of our fields and the nature of our education as creative arts therapists and (in many cases) our social location colludes to perpetuate colonial and oppressive practices. Collaboration with those who have been intentionally engaged in this work longer and deeper than us (members of the community/ other allied practitioners), can help interrupt this tendency and offer a system of meaningful supervision in this expanded paradigm. (Gopalakrishna, 2022, p.7)

We also seek to challenge power imbalances and create a more equitable distribution of power between researching facilitators and children in the CAT programme. We acknowledge that it was not always possible to diminish or negate the power imbalances. It was hard to navigate implicit power structures in a facilitator–participant relationship. For instance, facilitators were invariably addressed as 'Miss' or 'Sir' by children, evoking colonial British education-system norms to indicate respect for the status of the 'teacher'. When facilitators requested to be addressed as 'Akka' or 'Didi' ('Sister' in Kannada and Hindi respectively), the children hesitated and giggled in disbelief, before quickly reverting to 'Miss' – the force of habit and possibly safety. Some shared that they were reprimanded in school for not referring to their teachers as 'Miss'!

Not despite, but within, the context, involving children and facilitators in the enquiry process, we promoted collaboration, co-learning and co-design of the interventions. The process remained flexible to tend to the emerging priorities of children and facilitators. For instance, whilst conducting the initial questionnaire, one of the groups was dealing with floods and

demolition of their homes. This group, most of whose families work as waste pickers, lives on the fringes of the city in makeshift sheds or houses made of tin sheets that flood during monsoons. We needed to adapt instead of rigidly following plans that no longer matched the present and emergent needs of this community. We responded by refocusing to embrace the shift in priorities.

Methodology

As practitioners working in systematically oppressed communities, adopting a decolonising approach to this programme is a must. Decolonising research methodologies challenge Eurocentric research methods that undermine local knowledge and experiences of the marginalised population groups. As Smith (1999) writes, "Methodology is important because it frames the questions being asked, determines the set of instruments and methods to be employed and shapes the analyses" (p.143).

Further, Thambinathan & Kinsella (2021) propose the following four approaches to inform decolonial research practice: "(1) exercising critical reflexivity, (2) enabling reciprocity and respect for self-determination, (3) embracing 'Other(ed)' ways of knowing, and (4) embodying a transformative praxis" (p.6).

The following table maps the practices described in this article onto the four approaches.

Decolonial research approaches	As described in this article
Exercising critical reflexivity	Facilitator inquiry and supervision
Enabling reciprocity and respect for self-determination	Co-design and participant validation
Embracing "Other(ed)" ways of knowing	Contextual case studies with embedded participant worldviews
Embodying a transformative praxis	Creative arts therapies methods with ethics of care

Table 1. A table mapping the practices described in this article onto the four approaches to decolonial research practice proposed by Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021).

We have drawn upon McTaggart's (1994) participatory action research (PAR) in conceptualising this article, because it places the community at the centre of the research process, as

> a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality, justice, coherence and satisfactoriness of (a) their own social practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the institutions, programmes and ultimately the society in which these practices are carried out. (p.317)

The CAT programme is a partnership between the children, facilitators and supervisors, bound by consent and informed by the aspirations of the children. Haritas and Seshadri (2012) argue that participatory research with children

> acknowledges the legitimate right of those studied/researched to claim a stake in the research processes, to decide along with researchers what and how to research, thus opening up areas of research that are important not only to the researcher but also to the group researched. (p.86)

Developing enquiry questions

The process involved discussions between the supervisors and facilitators to develop enquiry questions that explored the following:

- The nature of therapeutic work conducted within the groups participating in the CAT programme.
- Facilitators’ relationship with their work.

The enquiry questions guided the facilitators’ reflective practice with the support of supervision. In the spirit of reflective practice, we reworked the enquiry questions as circumstances changed and children returned to the libraries after the Covid-19 lockdown was lifted.

Questions about caste differences between the facilitators and children immediately surfaced during this process. Reflection on caste privilege, oppression and trauma was an ongoing theme during supervision, and surfaced in the writing process as well. This aspect of the study was autoethnographic. Chang (2008) defines autoethnography as “a qualitative research method that utilizes ethnographic methods to bring cultural interpretation to the autobiographical data of researchers with the intent of understanding self and its connection to others” (p.56).

It was also essential to ask questions that centred on the experiences of the children. The enquiry questions evolved with the CAT programme to anchor it to the needs of the children. Children were encouraged to share their inputs on the enquiry questions that facilitators initially developed, in the same way that they co-created activities during the sessions. Attempts to acknowledge and disrupt power in the gaze of the researcher by acknowledging the children’s and facilitators’ processes were key to developing the enquiry questions. This further allowed the centring of the unique cultural and social context of the communities.

Figure 2. Creative processes in group supervision with CAT facilitators, 2022. Photo: Pallavi Chander (consent was granted by those appearing in the images).

Supervision

Pallavi Chander, the internal supervisor, conducted regular supervision sessions directly with facilitators, during which they discussed and shared their experiences, challenges and breakthroughs. Evan Hastings, the external supervisor, supervised Pallavi in navigating the programme structure and design. He also facilitated annual training workshops with the team. Figures 2 and 3 show examples of creative explorations in training and group supervision sessions. The supervisors offered support, guidance and encouragement. They also documented the insights that emerged in the supervision sessions. Care is at the centre of supervisory relationships, and was present in group supervisions. The supervision process and the creative process are parallel. As Levine explains:

> Grounding in the practical materials at hand, imagination, improvisation, curiosity, an emphasis on resources, the ability to challenge, perturb and open to a fresh perspective, the capacity for nearness and distance, and an opening up to a multiplicity of possibilities – these could all be seen as elements of an artistic as well as of a supervisory process. (Knill et al. 2005, p.242)

The case studies in this article were shaped by the reflective practices cultivated through supervision.

Figure 3. Reflective group art making in group supervision, 2023. Photo: Evan Hastings.

Questionnaire about the impact of the pandemic

To gain insight into the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the children in the CAT programme, a questionnaire was developed. This questionnaire gathered demographic information and insights into the children's experiences, challenges and coping strategies used during the pandemic. Arts-based activities and drama games were used as tools to collect responses from the children. Initially, responses were collected using sociometry. This was followed with visual story-making exercises to gain further details, as shown in Figure 4. The children's responses made it evident that they liked being at home and watching television. They were pleased that their exams were cancelled. However, they had more chores than usual at home and also missed their friends from school.

Similarly, individual and group sculpts on coping strategies children used during that period were documented. There was a range of responses – some were scared to step out, mostly terrified of police harassment, while others preferred to pass time making crafts and kashayam (homemade medicinal drinks). Several children dropped out of school due to financial distress. Others could not attend online classes as they lacked access to smart devices or broadband internet. They feared forgetting what they had learned in school. The responses collected through the questionnaire informed the subsequent plan for the sessions in the given context of the groups in this programme-wide enquiry.

Figure 4. Participants from the CAT programme engaged in a story-making activity, 2022. Photo: Pallavi Chander (consent was granted by participants appearing in the image).

Facilitators as reflective practitioners through creative arts therapy sessions

During the CAT programme sessions, facilitators were reflective practitioners. They observed and documented the sessions, seeking to understand, through an intersectional lens, how creative processes facilitate change. As Sajnani (2013) writes:

> Adopting an intersectional framework in drama therapy expands our understanding of suffering and health in ways that can allow us to be more effective in our efforts to facilitate individual healing and social action. In particular, an intersectional framework provides a language with which we can better highlight complexity when researching and representing lived experience. (p.385)

This allowed for real-time documentation and analysis, ensuring that the perspectives and voices of the children were central to this study. With journal entries, session notes, artwork, photos and videos, the facilitators revisited their enquiry questions. This ongoing reflective practice led to the case studies they developed through the writing workshop.

Writing workshop with facilitators

In the writing workshop, facilitators reflected on their experiences in the CAT programme and the enquiry questions. With supervisors' guidance, they wrote autoethnographic narratives capturing the essence of their work with the children. Chang (2008) frames autoethnographic narratives as "reflected upon, analyzed, and interpreted within their broader sociocultural context" (p.46).

Weaving case studies into an article

Using the insights from enquiry questions, the questionnaire, supervision and the writing workshop, the authors analysed and synthesised the information into case studies. The case studies describe the therapeutic journeys of the children and facilitators, highlighting how the

overarching intentions of the programme are achieved within moments of creative explorations. This was amplified when emergent material was held, witnessed, worked through and potentially transformed within relational encounters in the group.

Nothing about us without us

Each year, before starting a new cycle, Chander hosts consultations with parents and children from the communities who participate in the CAT programme. After gaining insights directly from potential participants and understanding their expectations, the team discusses the intentions for the year and seeks consent from parents. Groups for the CAT programme are formed based on these consultations. This helps facilitators to co-design offerings and activities relevant to the community and ensure ethical practices.

A participant validation process was implemented to ensure ethical integrity and to accurately represent children's voices, a crucial step in the process. Children reviewed and provided feedback on their respective case studies. Identifying information was changed to ensure participant anonymity. The CAT programme team shared this document and images with the children to seek verbal consent before pursuing publication.

Language

The case studies in this article are written in English by a multi-lingual team that conducted CAT programme sessions in Kannada, Tamil, Hindi and Bengali languages. We agree with Ansloos (2018) that "anti-oppressive research must subvert power structures that seek to suppress people's languages and voice" (pp.16–17). So we conducted participant validation sessions in the language of the group, with author-facilitators relaying and translating. This article is written in English to reach a broader audience, with a sprinkling of Indian languages that speak to the context.

Working multi-lingually has allowed for a more collaborative and community-centred approach to mental health interventions. By involving community members in the enquiry process and using arts-based approaches, we could better understand the unique cultural and social contexts of the communities and develop culturally responsive and locally relevant interventions. Examples from regional languages in this article intend to break the flow of comfort and habit, nudging readers to peek into the nuances of working with non-English-speaking communities.

Case studies: Listening with my eyes and seeing with my ears

Story I – Maya and Muthu

Under metro station pillars, there is an arrhythmic sensuous treat of fragrant heaps of flowers, ripened fruits and soppu (leafy greens) where the calls from the rickety vendor carts are overpowered by the reverberating sound play of heavy traffic and loudspeakers chanting bells from the century-old temple. A walk into the lane opposite the metro-station exit reveals a 40-storey housing complex towering over a statue of B.R. Ambedkar. Around the corner,

lined-up coloured plastic water pots eagerly wait to be filled at the community water tap. Children sing “karade beda ge hoyithu” (“the bear went over the mountain”) from behind a brown door ajar at the Buguri Community Library. A young child excitedly narrates a made-up story, pointing at a large picture book. Uttering animal sounds, growling and trumpeting, she asks in Tamil, “Aparo yenna achi, nenngo solungo?” (“Can anyone guess what happens next?”), inviting the giggling children to complete the story.

Maya and Muthu come from the community living in the slum-development quarters where most adults work as waste pickers and waste segregators (associated with Hasiru Dala). The parents usually return home late after a long workday. After school, Maya and Muthu either watch television at home or play outside with their friends. In the library, children from the community can join the CAT programme. Initially, Muthu hardly attended the CAT sessions, because of tuition sessions, and Maya took her time to feel comfortable in the space. Whenever they attended, Muthu enthusiastically took on tasks, and requested to play games or paint. On this particular day, Muthu jumped to request a piece of paper to draw on. Maya, who was then eight years old, shared that she had stopped drawing when her school teacher scolded her for colouring a rose yellow instead of red. The facilitator asked her to hang around and join if she wanted, without forcing her. Maya silently watched the group make shapes and scribbles. She pulled her friend’s hair to ask if she wanted to leave, but her friend refused and continued colouring. She then went across the room to help another friend colour. But the paper accidentally tore and he pushed her away. Maya ran out of the library. A few minutes later, a neighbour disrupted the session complaining of a broken window. The neighbour, an elderly woman, screamed abuse, pointing at Maya, who was now hiding behind a parked car. The facilitator apologetically offered to pay for replacing the broken glass.

Muthu finished drawing and was eager to share his story. The facilitator reminded everyone to watch for the tiny glass pieces on their way out. The next day, as the facilitator walked through the water queue, she saw Maya carrying a pot half her size over her tiny hip and invited her to the library. Maya hesitantly smiled and nodded. Muthu, who was on his friend’s cycle, informed the facilitator that he had to attend tuition sessions, or he would get into trouble with his mother. He promised to return soon to the library.

Three years later, in early 2022, Maya, 11, and Muthu, 13, joined the CAT programme.

Muthu sought permission from his teacher so that he could somehow manage both the CAT programme and tutoring sessions. Shravanthi Ventakesh, the CAT facilitator for that year, found Muthu to be most enthusiastic. He came early and took on the responsibility of gathering other children. He enjoyed painting, drama and playing the tamte (a percussion instrument historically played during funerals and community celebrations by Karnataka’s Dalit communities, who are marginalised caste groups).

This group often played floor-based games exploring animal sounds and movements, mimicking play from an early developmental stage. Shravanthi observed that, in nearly every

session, the group insisted they worked with their hands, making origami forms or painting. These became the regulating vocabulary of the group.

Maya, too, enjoyed taking on roles. She was her most spirited self when the group explored drama exercises. During spontaneous enactments, Maya and Muthu were the first ones to get into characters. The scenes enacted, depicted incidents from the group's realities that have deeply impacted them. Dramatic play created a brave space for them to share, be seen, heard, witnessed, acknowledged and accepted. By sharing the narratives that they would normally protect, children were potentially releasing shame and judgment from these stories. In time, Maya, Muthu and their peers played with suspended realities in an imagined space and time, which allowed the possibility for reauthoring their held narratives.

One evening, Maya shared that the library was her favourite space, where she wished to stay forever. She even wanted to eat and sleep in the library and not go home. That day, in a moment of spontaneous play, to Shravanthi's surprise, Maya gave her a cardboard cut-out of a heart. Maya claimed that it was heavy, filled with pain, and she did not want to carry it. In successive sessions, with dramatic play and reframing, Maya eventually took back her heart. However, that moment felt poignant, where she felt safe enough to be vulnerable, reclaiming safety, acceptance, and a choice to hold on to or to let go of the pain that was entrusted to her.

The group continued to explore body-based games, paint, make crafty forms with materials, bake cookies, and build scenes from spontaneous enactments and dramatic play. The broad themes that emerged in these explorations were the impact of alcohol abuse and domestic violence, gendered socialisation and gender disparities.

While preparing for the showcase, they had the opportunity to watch a Shadow Liberation performance by Evan's students, shown in Figure 5. As most children were watching a performance outside the library for the first time, there was excitement about riding the city metro and going for a trip outside their community space.

Shadow Liberation blends dramatherapy, Theatre of the Oppressed, and shadow theatre to dialogue about gender-based violence (Hastings, 2013). Shadow theatre is employed for its distancing strategies, conducive to representing trauma through metaphors. In the tradition of Forum Theatre, the play is performed once before selected scenes are replayed with the audience having the option to pause the action on stage, replace a character, and try a different way of dealing with the situation (Boal, 2008). Two scenes in the play particularly spoke to the children – a girl being shamed for wearing loose clothing, and two boys claiming that girls do not read books. When the audience was invited to intervene, Muthu and Maya raised their hands. Maya walked into the scene first to compliment the girl on her clothes, confidently responding, "Girls can wear whatever they want, it is their wish." When Muthu went up, he told off the two boys and assured them, "If she [the actor playing the girl] says she has read it, I trust her." To witness Maya and Muthu, who had never watched a performance outside the library, voice their thoughts in a public space with confidence and clarity was to experience the impact of the CAT programme.

Figure 5. Shadow Liberation performance in November 2022 at Cubbon Park metro station, Bengaluru, 2022. Photo: Evan Hastings.

Today, Muthu has joined the library theatre group performing a street play in their community, while Maya continues to attend the CAT programme. Their journey is an example of how children learn to regulate as they engage in creative explorations, experience acceptance within the group, and build a sense of safety at their own pace. Facilitators like Shravanthi bring important anchors to this work by building rapport, being adaptable, and consistently attuning and re-attuning their relational presence with the group. This offers consistency, allowing emergent material for deeper exploration of the group's needs, and expands congruence in the group to build community-based approaches.

Story II – Not another princess rescue story!

Savitri isn't too excited about princess rescue stories. Cinderella is chased with a shoe she left behind, ultimately to marry a prince, to have children and "they live happily ever after"? Her group at the library adapted Cinderella's story. Playing with the 'what-ifs', in their version Cinderella made plans to continue her studies, pursue higher education abroad, and secure a high-paying job. Her aspiration to do more than what is imagined for her became Savitri and her group's mission for their showcase this year.

Savitri, 17, like most girls in her peer group, is determined to continue her studies and hopes to attend college soon. But the usual practice in the community is to get girls married as soon as they turn 18. During one of the sessions, the girls shared that their friend, who had just turned 18, was getting engaged without any say in the decision her parents had made. She had also dropped out of college because her husband was not keen on her studying further.

It is believed that parents marry off their daughters early as a safety measure to protect them from threats like eloping with their lovers. Moreover, a girl is considered a financial burden for parents until she is married off, after which she becomes completely dependent on her husband and his family for all her needs. This also puts pressure on young men to earn and

support the family. A key theme explored in the CAT sessions with this group was gender disparity. Through dramatic play and spontaneous enactments, children identified ways in which gender impacted them and how decisions were thrust upon them.

Savitri constantly feared having to face the marriage dilemma. She, like her namesake Savitribai Phule, [1] understands the importance of education for girls and the effort it takes to manoeuvre through systemic hurdles. She knows that education is the only way to disrupt ancient social systems. Doing well in her exams means getting into a good college, and eventually landing a high-paying job, proving to her parents that she is capable of taking care of them.

In the months leading up to the showcase, Nidhi Khurana, the CAT facilitator, encouraged the group to make stories to contain these emergent themes. Through creative explorations, Savitri chose to write the script and direct the play. The story seemed close to her and was an opportunity to play out the collective aspirations of the group. In the play, where Savitri played Cinderella, relatives talk about Cinderella reaching a marriageable age, and their intention to force her to get married and eventually drop out of school. Concerned by this, the teacher and principal visit her home and encourage her parents to postpone the marriage until after Cinderella's exams. Meanwhile, the fairy godmother grants Cinderella her wish to get top scores in her exams with a state rank, and an invitation for a scholarship. Like most Indian films, the scenes fast-track to a few years later, when Cinderella is in her convocation gown with gold medals and has a job offer with a high-paying salary. Savitri then jumped out of the role and addressed the audience filled with children, parents and onlookers from the community:

> What did we learn from this? When a girl is given opportunities, she will make the best out of it. Trust her to build her life. She will not only uphold her dignity but will carry her family and community with her. Trust her and let her live her life. Do not close her doors. She is capable and if you just give her a chance, she will show you, she will show the world. Tell me [questioning the parents], will you keep your girls inside and close the doors on them just as society tells you to, or will you give them the freedom, tell me?

Figure 6. CAT programme showcase event in the community, 2022, Photo. Pallavi Chander (consent was granted by participants).

The audience clapped and cheered. Savitri continued to question the elders in the audience. An elderly woman, watching all this from her doorstep while peeling garlic, responded, "It is time for our girls to experience their freedom, we will not let what happened to us, happen to them. Our girls will not be kept behind closed doors." The audience again clapped and cheered. With a deep breath and a smile, Savitri thanked everyone and exited the makeshift stage. Figure 6 is a snapshot of the corridor outside the library that was turned into a stage for the annual CAT showcase, with community members seated on a colourful mat.

An opportunity to play with imagination as 'a rehearsal for life' (Jones, 2007) helps children face potential risks involved by naming these fears, and harsh familial and societal judgements that come with swimming against the tide. Children also prepare and build the resources required to face these circumstances when they occur in the real world. Being seen, heard and witnessed by a group that learns to hold shared aspirations and challenges also helps build enduring support structures. Savitri shared that exploring with the CAT programme group helped her feel less alone in managing these issues and has reduced her rumination and worry. Her role as a director and scriptwriter for the play enabled the entire group to reframe their fear of forced marriages. They instead witnessed creative possibilities, breathed life and fueled hope through drama and dramatic play. This year, Savitri has enrolled in an undergraduate course and is looking forward to college.

Story III – Close your eyes and imagine a home

Geet, the CAT facilitator, who works with a group of migrant [2] children, collaborates with an organisation that provides an educational bridge programme to ensure the integration of these children into mainstream schools. The CAT programme sessions are offered as a part of this bridge programme hosted at the local government school. The main focus is to prepare children for the formal school environment, and familiarise them with Kannada (the local language) and English. Geet identified other emergent themes in the group. Some of these themes are finding cohesion and community amongst themselves, exploring gender,

negotiating space, learning to navigate their individual needs with that of the group's, and, as a reflection, their place in their community and the larger world concerning material needs, and choice of religious faith.

The children live in and around a go-down – makeshift sheds made of bamboo and tin sheets. Because the community members are identified as migrants, harassment from police and landowners often force their families to move between cities for their livelihoods, disrupting their lives for months on end. Given this sense of uncertainty, displacement, and lack of familiarity with the space and language of the cities they migrate to, the CAT programme has become a container for respite and an anchoring place for the children.

Figure 7. CAT session facilitated by Geet at the go-down, 2022. Photo: Geet (consent was granted by participants).

Geet uses drama games, storytelling and art-making activities in which children explore themes of fear, doubt, alienation, lack of acceptance and anger, as seen in Figure 7. A common tendency, also prevalent in other groups, is the belief that ghosts exist. Through drawings and stories, children depict ghosts living under their beds, in dark corners, in tamarind trees, on mountain tops, in a dog, or a snake, in narrow alleys and empty buildings. These ghosts sometimes look like a tiger, other times that tiger becomes a friend with whom they can dance. How to tackle these ghosts is often left to a child's imagination. Geet learned that to ward off these ghosts, children resort to religious faith and spirituality, but also a desire to decorate these spaces with balloons, beautifully written words and lines on walls, and lights in dark corners. These liminal characters hold fear, hopelessness, anger and rage. They are also culturally accepted symbols for things that cause distress. Commonly referred to as bhoot (ghost) and chudail (witch), they appear to teach a lesson, fight against injustices inflicted unfairly onto them, and are keepers of shadow elements, especially those considered taboo or evil. But these ghosts can be won over, they gradually transmute in the shadows and emerge into unexpected friendships, seeking a sense of connection and belonging.

More often than expected, these spaces of play and wonder – the go-down or the school – get disrupted. Sometimes the school authorities do not provide a classroom for sessions, but

largely politically spiteful structural challenges demolish their homes and displace their families, forcing them to migrate again and again. In May of 2022, a police crackdown forced the families to go into hiding with many leaving the city. Some had to camp in nearby forests and it was impossible to trace the whereabouts of many others.

The children who stayed back were distressed and unsettled. Fearing police harassment, they refused to go back to school. The sense of displacement and lack of safety also affected the facilitator. In the group supervision, Geet shared how scared and nervous they were about not knowing the whereabouts of the children. Besides the loss and sadness, Geet mostly felt anger and rage over the situation. Unfortunately, in the same week, Geet too was unexpectedly asked to vacate their apartment with a week's notice, and with no explanation from the landowners. Experiencing sudden displacement in parallel with their group was unnerving.

In supervision, the facilitators' group held space for Geet to share and process this challenging phase. Although we know it is the nature of our work, the reality of what some of the children experience is beyond us. Geet shared that in comparison with the children, they recognise their privileges that allow better access to resources, yet they too invariably had fallen prey to systemic injustices. During supervision, we recognised that systemic social injustices are experienced in varying degrees in the intersection of gender, caste, class and economic status, owing to one's social location and privileges. Geet shared that looking for a home almost felt strange. We reflected and shared how each one of us experienced that sense of home and belonging. Creative expression and engaging with the arts not only takes the shape of a response, but are acts of solidarity as a resilient step ahead. These processes unleash those ghosts that yearn to infiltrate, call for and root a collective mass that desires to abolish oppressive systems and re-imagine a collective dream to build systems that befriend communities that have been inherently dismissed.

Figure 8. Painting of a collective story created by participants of Geet's CAT group, 2022. Photo: Pallavi Chander (consent was granted by participants).

Figure 8 depicts a group artwork created during a collective story-making exercise, exhibited at their December 2022 showcase. The group of young creatives continues to build and experience pockets of safety and belonging in the CAT sessions at the go-down. Within this safe container, they make drawings, tell stories, sing songs and play games, to express and witness each other's aspirations and hopes. The supervision creates space for mutual support and connection for facilitators by:

- Aiding reflective processes to use art-making, dialogue and discussions.
- Offering a community to access the transformational power of the work.
- Sharing challenges and staying with complexities that surface in personal exploration.

These processes inform and expand the use of creative arts in community settings.

Conclusion

Creative, culturally responsive and locally relevant approaches to community mental health can offer children a space to find expression, to regulate, and to make meaning within the container of the creative arts. The intention of the CAT programme to build safe regulating spaces for children is met as facilitators attune and re-attune their relational presence to the emerging needs of the groups. Facilitating this in the complex web of the socio-cultural context of waste-picker communities illustrates the need for more such interventions, particularly for children burdened by historical and ongoing oppression. Insights from the material that surfaces in artistic engagements with the children, facilitators' journeys, and learnings from the supervisory process foreground knowledge co-creation. Co-created community spaces have the potential for collective liberation, where communities together can build mycelium connections – growing down and wide to expand our playing fields, where knowledge systems have the potential to re-author our colonised bodies, heal from internalised oppressive systems, and breathe a collective release.

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Acknowledgements

We are thankful to Hasiru Dala for their generous support and constant encouragement towards the programme over the last six years. We would like to thank collaborating funders Saamuhika Shakti for their continued support. Anupama Sundaram was with us through this research process as a facilitator and valuable contributor. Lastly, we are ever grateful to the children, young people and parents for opening their hearts to embrace this journey alongside us.

Endnotes

1. Savitribai Phule is a Maharashtrian poet, educator and social reformer. She and her husband, Jyotirao Phule, started schools for girls and contributed to education and women's empowerment in India during the mid-1800s. She aggressively fought against caste- and gender-based discrimination and advocated against untouchability. Children in the libraries celebrate Savitribai's life through stories and picture books.

2. The term 'migrant' in the article refers to individuals and families that move between cities in search of work as labourers, but also includes those who have migrated for survival, better opportunities and livelihoods.

Published: December 2023

Issue: Vol.18, No.2

Word count: 5,760

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Cite this article
Chander, P., Hastings, E., Geet (Sangeeta Goel), Ventakesh, S., & Khurana, N. (2023).Co-creating healing spaces with children: Community-based creative arts therapy in South India. *JoCAT, 18*(2). https://www.jocat-online.org/a-23-chander