

Closing the Creativity Gap: The Importance of Art in Early Childhood Education

OLIVIA RICHTER (PRODUCER): Hello, and welcome to the Big and Little Podcast, the podcast of Boston Children's Museum.

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): Think back to your grade school days. Do you remember taking art classes? What were some of your favorite projects? Did you paint, sculpt, or collage? Sadly, art classes are not available for many kids in the public school system. That's what inspired today's guest, Sara Mraish Demeter, to found ARCK Boston, the Arts Resource Collaborative for Kids. As an artist, educator, and mom of three, Sara founded ARCK in 2012 to deliver creative programs with social justice themes in Boston's public schools.

Since then, she has forged partnerships with businesses, schools, institutions, and artists to bring youth voices to the broader community. Sara was named 2016 EXTRAOrdinary Woman of Boston by former Mayor Walsh's Office of Women's Advancement and was selected for the Power Launch inaugural Social Change Fellows Cohort, among many other accomplishments. So what does it mean to close the creativity gap in schools? And how can art provide a voice to our children and help them develop as individuals? Let's find out.

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CAROLE: Hello, and welcome to the Big and Little Podcast. I'm Carole Charnow, and I'm thrilled today to have with me Sara Mraish Demeter. Sara, I was so thrilled to learn about your program and I can't wait for our listeners to hear more about it. You came to the United States when you were 15 from the Middle East as a young woman of color and certainly had your share of challenges. And I believe that those challenges are what led you to your program that you've created. So I wonder if you could just say a little bit about yourself and how this background that you had set you on this path.

SARA: Yes. Thank you. Thanks for having me here, Carole. Truly, what inspired me to have found ARCK in 2012 when my oldest son started kindergarten in 2010 at one of the Boston Public Schools local school, and it was to our shocking surprise that they didn't have any arts. So I took it upon myself to mobilize the community and bring local artists to collaborate with classroom teachers and parents to work on art lessons to give to the entire 840 students.

And obviously, they didn't have any arts due to budget cuts. So there's always-- whenever there's always budget cuts, the first thing that goes are the arts. So I took it upon myself to start the initiative. And then I looked around and saw there's so many more schools don't have it. And what I wanted for my son I want for everyone else.

CAROLE: Well, that's so interesting. When we spoke recently, you talked about how this period in your life when you came over to the United States as an immigrant helped you really discover how to use your own voice, how to find your voice and express yourself. So would you also say that that's part of your impetus to found ARCK, was to help these children find their voice?

SARA: Yes, because I felt that I couldn't use my voice and I truly wanted them to use their voice. We all have voices. We truly have an educational equity crisis that has been intensified by the pandemic. And

we must-- and I always say to myself, all the time, we must change the way we teach our children to prioritize creativity, social-emotional learning, and social justice and equity because that's how we can amplify the voices of all children.

And also another thing I realized doing this and throughout my journey when I founded ARCK, I also looked around. There are so many educators want to incorporate these concepts, the social-emotional creativity, social justice and equity, in order to teach their kids in innovative and engaging ways, but they lack the knowledge, administrator support, and time to develop that new curriculum. This is where ARCK plays a critical role in supporting education.

CAROLE: So as you now are getting into the deeper philosophy behind ARCK, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your curriculum and your three core ideologies. I know also you focus on the whole child, but you also have these ideologies of social, emotional, and relational awareness, creative mindset, and, as you mentioned, social justice and equity. So can you just tell us a little bit about ARCK, what it is, what's the philosophy, what you actually do with the kids? I know you're working in seven schools, you mentioned, with several hundred children for many years now. So I know our listeners will be really interested to hear more specifically about the program.

SARA: Yes. Yes. Over 10 years, we have been providing arts education to several schools, like you mentioned. So the framework of the curriculum of the program, the main pedagogy or the main framework for ARCK, it was called-- it's still called Arts with Impact. And the Arts with Impact framework includes our teaching values, pedagogy, and the foundation for our curriculum that is centered around the three core ideologies you mentioned, the social-emotional relational awareness, how to be, integrated creative mindset, how to do, and social justice and equity, how to act.

Our teaching artists teach alongside Boston Public School classroom teachers. They teach a three-model curriculum to meet student and also schools' needs over the course of an academic year. These progressive modules are over three journeys. The first is the journey to self-awareness. Second is journey to community. Third is journey to social action. Each journey addresses fundamental questions, such as, who am I? Who are we? And what do we do?

CAROLE: So Sara, as you're talking, I'm really thinking about this concept of the whole child. When you talk about how to be, how to do, and how to act in the world, we're really looking at all the different dimensions of being a child in the world. So what is your philosophy around this whole child concept? Can you tell us more about how this works?

SARA: Yes. Yes. So the whole child means because we see each student, not only as a recipient of knowledge, but as a complex and multifaceted person, as a thinker, maker, athlete, daughter, and artist, et cetera. We have to go beyond knowledge. Knowledge is everywhere. What we do with that knowledge is the question we address. And also the core subjects that we teach in school are important and they are foundational, but our children are more than those core subjects. And the arts are truly are important to our children's social and emotional well-being.

CAROLE: So how does this actually lead to equity and social justice in education?

SARA: Yes, good question. A big part of our curriculum is grounded in facilitating opportunities for students' leadership and voice. We make sure that our students feel represented in the creative work being asked of them and teach them to use their voice to better both themselves and their community. I think our progressive approach, the three journeys I spoke about earlier, from self to community to action, in the world is an important transformation for students in considering social justice and equity.

CAROLE: This idea that children have agency and you're giving them a sense of their voice and they're being imbued with self-confidence, is this how you encourage the child's social-emotional development through the program?

SARA: Yes. We do because arts education supports students' social-emotional development by providing an outlet for self-expression, particularly for students who struggle to communicate verbally. So ARCK builds students creative skills by giving them a place to create-- to make art, to create art and explore the world. And our lessons are developed to build students' social, emotional, and relational skills. So one example we have students may learn about colors and painting techniques through a creative project that asks them to explore their own personal and cultural identity.

CAROLE: That's fantastic. As an arts teacher, performing arts teacher that I was when I began my career, I was really sold on the fact that you could learn anything through the arts because they're so engaging. And you mentioned earlier how there were no arts available to your son in school. So let me just ask you this about this creativity gap that you talk about. Why is it so important to close this creativity gap for our kids?

SARA: Well, if we want to achieve equity, we have to close the creativity gap first. We must provide access to creative education programs and build students' transferable skills, like technical, social-emotional, and cognitive skills. We also need to prepare students for a world that now values soft skills, or human skills we also say, such as creativity, critical thinking, innovation, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, and more. So if you integrate arts into standard academic curriculum, then it becomes a core component of the school's approach to education. So creativity is the missing ingredient to achieving equity in education and beyond.

CAROLE: I completely agree with you. And that's an awful lot of what we do here at the museum, is trying to spark creativity. So let's talk a little bit about this third part of the journey, which is action. You mentioned in a previous conversation, this building bridges project, mindful art. Can you give us some examples of the activities that you're actually doing that reflect this action theme?

SARA: So far many, many years actually, we started this about 2014 from taking the journey, the third journey, journey to action, and bring in the students' voices out in the community. And that's why we call it building bridges. It's really to bridge the students' voices with the outer community to highlight what they do. And what they do actually-- so our teachers collaborate with local artists. They work together on guiding the students to explore an issue or a concern that they have. They want to take action. They want to take a stand.

Last year, we did a-- we worked with two artists who made a nine-foot wooden sculpture that looks like a live tree with leaves that made out of canvases. And all the kids they made the leaves. They also created the messages and we had a festival. I remember former mayor Kim Janey attended the festival. That was last August.

And this year, we're working with the Red Sox on one of their walls to actually make a mural. So the artists and our teaching artists will work together with the students to work on the project and whatever the outcome or the final project will be the work from the students. So they could come and paint or they paint on something else and then put it on the wall like we did in 2014 with Mark Cooper. They painted on canvases and different messages. Really, really beautiful. If anyone is in the Fenway around like the Fenway Park, you'll see it right there on the side of the 51 Brooklyn Av.

CAROLE: Oh, this is fantastic.

SARA: So we really take their work and present it publicly to share their voices, to share their concern and the issues they're dealing with.

CAROLE: I imagine they're so proud to bring their families to see the work that they've done, which is such a wonderful achievement for them.

SARA: Yeah. Thank you.

CAROLE: So I'm so amazed how you've been able to keep this going, this project, through the pandemic. I know there's not a lot of funding. There's not a lot of teachers at the moment. So how have you been able to keep this going and create access for these programs despite the many challenges along the way?

SARA: Yes. Yes. There are really truly many challenges that we face, but we are always actively working to foster relationships with our partner schools to truly emphasize the role of ARCK and what it plays in building their school community to center creativity and social-emotional learning. So there is a funding challenge for this work. However, we are finding innovative ways to continue expanding access to these programs for our students.

CAROLE: Unfortunately, or only in a few schools, I guess you were saying seven, which is a lot, but still there are many more to go. And I was just wondering what other schools in Boston and elsewhere could really take away from what ARCK is doing and how they could actually implement more art into their curriculums despite the challenges that you were just talking about.

SARA: I think there's something to be said about utilizing the expertise of the art teachers or local artists or arts organizations like us. But it's not always easy to attract diverse teachers who would reflect the student body. And why? We need to hire return and retain diverse teachers who come from different economic backgrounds by ensuring they are paid fair wages.

The schools need to make it a priority to engage that diverse teachers or hiring diverse teachers and making sure they're paid fairly. Teaching kids their work is valued. When you value the work of the adults, when you value the work of teachers. So it's basically modeling equity. And we are really working towards creating the next generation of teachers.

And also, you could-- other schools could build a community, community partnerships, designing their curriculum by integrating some components of creative learning and their community, then bring in the push for system change through advocacy to make it happen long-term. Educators are the ones directly impacting the students and systemic change is reliant on them. So therefore, we do need to make it equitable for educators to gain these tools and to ensure they are paid fairly in jobs they love to do.

CAROLE: Yes. Hear, hear. I agree. So you must have graduates of your program. And I'm wondering how these students have been positively affected by this work that you've been doing in schools. Do you hear from them? Have you got any testimonials from kids who've been through your program?

SARA: Yeah, some. Our program goes K to eighth. So it's-- we sent them up to be organized and responsible and support their social well-being and self-awareness. And that helps them to do very well in ninth grade because you really have to be independent when you're in ninth grade. Most of them actually have-- we heard from our schools, not directly from them, that they have gotten scholarships. They have done really well. And they're leaders. They're basically-- they take on leading projects.

And we particularly see an impact on students with disabilities or those whose primary language is not English as they finally feel they are supported in the classroom and are able to express themselves creatively and authentically. For example, one classroom teacher has shared with us, he said, students

were more willing to speak, including our English language learners, who at times may be reluctant to speak. Students with special needs were able to show their beautiful, creative sides without worrying about spelling and mechanics.

So we want to make this kind of holistic education based on our unique curriculum, which is built on these three core ideologies: the social-emotional relational awareness, how to be, integrated creative mindset, how to do, and the social justice and equity, how to act. So it's an immediate benefit that they're receiving in the classroom.

CAROLE: So this is so fascinating because we've really come full circle from a young immigrant woman of color coming to the United States where you didn't really feel you had a voice to actually building the confidence of these young children, particularly kids with disabilities, helping them find their voice and actually become leaders. It must be so gratifying for you that your experience has been able to impact so many lives of young children. And I just want to ask you, what is next for ARCK? What are your goals? What are your dreams and your vision for the next steps and where you're going in the future?

SARA: Yeah. Yes. Yes. And like you said, it's truly gratifying and you have no idea the feeling I have. Because of what happened to me through art and the teachers I had that told me, you are creative. You can do this, that I know I can help other children. So I know I was helped once and I want other kids to be helped and supported so that they can be socially conscious individuals, and especially creative socially conscious individuals.

So what's next for ARCK? Our goal is to expand access to arts education in Boston and beyond. We are actively working to build our capacity and raise funding to ensure our organization and programs are sustainable. We're actively working on advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging to also ensure that teachers are able to earn a living wage.

We are also currently working with Lesley University to offer graduate credit for all educators to learn how to teach our programs. We are working towards a model to train the trainer so that teachers can support one another and achieve equitable educational outcomes. And finally, I would say we must support educators in order to effect change by bringing creativity, social and emotional skills, and social justice and equity into all schools.

CAROLE: This is so fantastic, Sara. And I just want to thank you on behalf of all the students that you've helped. And what a tremendous contribution you've made to the Boston School community. How can we and the people listening to the podcast support ARCK? I'm sure you have a website. You must have a way that people can donate to you.

SARA: Yes. Yes. They can go to ARCK Boston, A-R-C-K Boston.org. So it's A-R-C-K Boston.org. And really truly, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to share my voice and to share my experience and background. This is an amazing work and I'm passionate about it to keep the movement going in democratizing education to achieve eventually equitable education for all.

CAROLE: Wow. I really can't think of a better goal for our children. And I'm so grateful that you came on the Big and Little Podcast today. Sara, good luck to you and your wonderful teachers in this tremendous project. And I hope you'll stay in touch with us.

OLIVIA (PRODUCER): That's it for today's episode of the Big and Little Podcast. Stay tuned for more. And if you like the show, we hope you'll subscribe and give us a review.

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