A case study in applying arts and community-integrated approaches in less privileged communities: the story of the Alwan wa Awtar's approach

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The objectives of this case study are to document the main contributing factors to the practice, the key challenges that faced the organization, and the key lessons learned that could enlighten the organization itself and other organizations working in a similar field.

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What is inside?

«**Art for Development**» was the chosen approach by Alwan wa Awtar (AWA) since they started in 2003. According to Yasmine El Rifai, a member of the AWA leadership cycle, «Art is an easy entry point for kids; it is fun and a space for expression.»

Throughout the years, this understanding evolved from the «arts for development» approach, where the arts are used as a tool for community development, to a more holistic approach that integrates a variety of «community-based interventions» that provide service to children, young people, and mothers. The newly evolved approach still places art at the center, yet it also responds to the variety of needs of the wide range of the community.

> AWA has gained the trust of its served communities across the years. Its approach is evolving towards more community-based interventions while remaining art-centric.

What are the main pillars of the AWA approach?

At first sight of AWA spaces, the visitor can assume that arts, play, and fun are the main pillars of the AWA approach to dealing with children. Yet a closer and deeper look at how interactions happen in the space show that the visitor can sense a smooth and comfortable environment, which makes the person wonder what factors contribute to this sense of comfort.

Space as the primary focus

Reflecting on this comfort feeling, you start to realize that it starts from the space itself; it's a «**barrier-less**» space. According to the «physical space guide» of AWA[1], they explicitly articulated that the space should be nice-looking, enable participants to communicate, create, and imagine, and ultimately, make visitors feel free.

The space is deliberately designed to be **learner-centric**, not facilitator-centric, as articulated in the guide: «**the participant is the starting point and is the objective.**»

Additionally, the guide highlights the importance of adaptation, considering that this is just a guide, not a rule book. Thus, each space has to have its own identity that responds to the served community.

> " The welcoming and supportive space at the physical space is important for us. As we see this space as a safe, welcoming haven /oasis in contrast with the external environment. Yet, it is in the community, so not totally out of it. Safety is both physical and psychological. The «beauty» of space is also important. Also, the overall environment (no violence, no shouting, no humiliation, total respect for everyone…), said Yasmine El Rifai. "

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(1) https://alwan-awtar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/دليل-المساحة.pdf

Arts as an approach... Cross-cutting skills comprehensive framework

Arts is a tool for expressing emotions, imagination, social development, building trust with others and academic development; even arts are used as a therapy for children/youth who have gone through emotional trauma (Rowe, K., 2018). In addition, the arts positively impact connecting people and enriching community life to increase social identity by promoting a feeling of belonging and a connection among community members and having an effect on children and youth in civic engagement, such as high levels of volunteering (Sung, H., 2016).

For AWA to provide such an environment, they have developed **two brilliant handbooks titled "Educational Model" and "Educational Frameworks."** In these two handbooks, AWA explains their philosophy, adopted theories, the environment specifications, and the role and characteristics of the space facilitators thoroughly.

The AWA approach mainly employs art and learner-centric practices as the basis for its core philosophy and the central methodology in designing its activities and programs. Along the years, AWA developed a **cross-cutting skills framework** based on its accumulative real-life experiences, which has four main dimensions: (1) **identity development** (identity, character, and how to describe myself); (2) **thinking skills** (analysis, criticizing, and, thinking); (3) **social skills** (how to deal with people and changes); and (4) **self-directed learning** (how to identify one's personal skills, how to be focused, and how to accept the failures as a path to success). To ensure that any designed activity is aligned with this framework, each activity has to go through these stages: (1) align the curriculum with the philosophy and framework; (2) evaluate the activity or program using the framework; and (3) collect feedback and amend the activity or program accordingly.

> **"**
> When applying arts, our approach is to focus on process not results, Yasmine El Rifai.
> **"**

Play as an approach... towards skills' development

Mostly play in its different forms (i.e., Physical play, play with objects, symbolic play, games with rules and pretend play) is considered by adults as a spare time activity and not an essential learning activity for children within their schools and homes. And the importance of play is typically related to early childhood disregarding other children's ages. However, it was proven that play promotes the development of children in different aspects, such as social-emotional, cognitive, motor and language skills (Dowd A. J. and Thomsen B. S.).

In AWA, interactive and engaging learning methodologies are centric in all learning activities conducted, whether with children or young people or even mothers.

> **"**
> In the children's program, beneficiaries became more cooperative, they became responsible for cleaning up after their activities, and they helped the teachers organize exhibitions. Children started to have more confidence, and their thoughts have changed. The parents saw the change that happened to the children, and they were grateful for this experience, insight from one of the consultancy team members.
> **"**

> For example, a certain boy had problems in talking, then in the final show, he was the best one performing in the theater. In the beginning, he was shy dealing with children and yet he has confidence, said one of AWA team members.

Accumulative experience that resulted in solid customization abilities

AWA has more than 15 years of experience in using "arts for development", especially in marginalized communities. This accumulative experience resulted in exceptional customization of the design abilities and delivery format depending on the needs of the participant, organization and community. Additionally AWA team members are able to pose real cases that participants can relate to, learn from and implement.

According to Ana Masry and Nahdet El-Mansourya[2], they reported «AWA team members were able to ask the right questions and give meaningful examples that our employees could relate to. In addition, AWA team members were able to simplify sophisticated concepts and convey them in a daily situations format that our employees could experience with children or their mothers which allowed a discussion of what exactly needs to be done in such situations.»

What are the main enablers/ contributing factors to the AWA approach?

The second thing that a visitor will feel in AWA space is that as if there is a «symphony» that is being played, though you can't hear but obviously you can sense, this is vividly visible in how team members act with each other and act with community members, whether children, young people or mothers.

This sense of harmony resonates with one of the main findings of the assessment process of the «Youth in Action- YiA» project that concluded that **AWA team members are the real assets of the organization and are the main enabling factor for having a distinguished approach.**

This is due to the **shared values among AWA team members** which is manifested in their behaviors and decisions.

Respect is one of the main values that directs how AWA deals with children, young people and community members. Specifically, AWA exerts deliberate efforts in involving all of its beneficiaries in their program design and delivery. Most importantly, the attitude of AWA team members while doing this participatory designing workshops/ meetings show genuine interest in listening to what beneficiaries need, prefer, desire and taking decisions based on their interests and **evolving interests**. Casual conversations are also an important method to sense required changes in the program design or delivery. Additionally, the beneficiaries' active involvement in the implementation process.

This resulted in Young people and Mothers reported on different occasions throughout the assessment process of the YiA project that «In AWA, I feel respected, I feel that my voice is heard, I feel valued».

Safety is manifested in different ways in AWA. Starting with an effortless act, **«speaking softly».** This simple act has a significant impact on children who usually don't live in spaces, i.e. schools and families, where they have reasonable levels of tolerance.

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(2) Two organizations that got a consulting service from Alwan wa Awtar , the services were; curriculum design, space management, and capacity development to their employees.

One young person shared a story saying, «the first time I came to AWA when I was a child, I broke a toy, I expected that they would come and shout at me and would deprive me of coming again. I was surprised that the lady in charge came to me, spoke to me very gently, and asked me to try to take care next time. I was puzzled; no one treated me like this before. After this incident, and lots of other incidents, AWA really became my safe space, where I know that here I will find people that really respect me and allow me to be.»

Safety and Respect come together in some of AWA simple behaviors. The team makes a point to make **«eye contact»** with whoever they are talking to, irrespective of their age. They are keen to **«ask questions and give choices»** whenever possible starting with determining a suitable time to deliver a workshop or choosing among different available colors.

According to Yasmine El Rifai, «We focus on the pedagogical relationship; kindness, trust, authenticity, modeling, the psychological safety depends on this relation between adults and children. We listen, respond, look in the eyes, talk softly, even if sometimes firmly, give choices, ask questions, and do not promise things we do not intend to do. We try to do and be what we preach.»

Reflection, experimentation, and learning. The cumulative experience of AWA contributed to a **well-established** belief within the organization that is shared across all levels: the importance of reflection, experimentation, and ultimately learning. Throughout the assessment process, documenting and capturing the main lessons learnt from the YiA project, all team members across all levels and in different spaces showed **exceptional reflective abilities**. The remarkable observation was the ability of team members to question their current practice and exchange comments and suggestions openly and smoothly without hesitation, which showed that this is a common practice within the organization that team members are used to, appreciate, and believe in.

According to Yasmien El- Rifai, «It's a learning space for all. We believe that learning is a natural act that we all need to live on a daily basis, so we trust people to try new things and experiment, whether they are children, youth, or part of the team.» She adds, «Adaptation is crucial for the organization and the people. It guarantees that we are constantly evolving and adapting to community needs, new trends, and other factors that help us grow resilient.»

How did the approach of AWA evolve across the years? And why?

The AWA approach evolved across the years based on the accumulative experiences that made the team realize what contributes to their approach and what the community needs other than art. According to Yasmine El Rifai, these are the main evolvements of AWA approach;

Space is a primary contributing factor to AWA approach; «Since we started, it was clear that the use of arts and interactive learning is our main approach, there were other factors, but we didn't name them. Now, we are aware of the importance of the space and overall environmental impact; so we clearly name it»,

Accessible space is AWA priority; «The new realization of how important to have an accessible space made us somehow switch the way we view our priorities; for example, if we have to choose between having an art program or to keep the access to the space, we will choose the space.»

A diversified portfolio of programs & services, not only arts; «The evolution from «arts» to more diverse programs came in response to what beneficiaries express as different interests and needs; i.e. learning, writing, psychological support.»

Community focus; «This is a slow progression, working with children in 2006, with mothers in 2011, and with youth in 2013. Now with those three different target groups, we are aware of the importance of working with diversified groups within the community.»

From participatory designing to participatory leadership; «The participatory approach was from day one, it evolved with youth because as they are older, they can do more. So it's a new level of depth, we are talking about «participatory leadership.»

Further the expansion of AWA in 2016& 2017 which resulted in having three different spaces was a primary factor to start dedicating resources to document and mainstream AWA approach and position it as a priority;

Documentation and mainstreaming;

> " At first, the whole team was working in the same location, so alignment and synergies were easier to be ensured. Then, as the team was in three different locations, there was a need to develop tools and processes to enable smaller teams to organize themselves in alignment with the methodology of AWA. More effort was put into setting up a consistent flow of information between different circles, and building on different experiences within different teams and/or communities, said Lamiaa Serag El Din, member of AWA leadership circle. "

Knowledge sharing became a priority; «We became conscious of the importance of documenting our experience and reflecting on it further to share it with relevant parties», said Ines Khedira, member of AWA leadership circle.

Sustainability as criteria for decision making; «We have added sustainability as a criteria when making decisions, including deciding to invest in educator programs (internally and externally),» said Ines Khedira.

Based on AWA team members' insights, several factors stimulated the evolvement of their approach; i.e challenges they faced, the research they had to make to advance their practice, exposure to new concepts and practices, their own accumulated experience and learning, their willingness to experiment new modalities and the motivation to have a better impact. For example, the new addition of the mother component which responded to the newly evolved understanding of the team that AWA needed to have direct interventions with mothers if they wanted a better and more sustained impact on the children.

Another example is the addition of the youth program, which AWA started slightly in 2013 as a response for a new age segment that they didn't serve before; their beneficiaries who began to grow and their needs began to differ. Then the program got more sharpened across the years and started to work on different fronts that weren't the usual focus of AWA; i.e. employability skills.

A third example that reflects how AWA dealt with a challenging situation then turned out to be one of their core services; when AWA had to adopt a new modality of having free space as a way to maximize access to learning while minimizing the need to staff as a way to cut costs; which proved to be an effective way to engage with the community and resulted in a new articulated service which is the "free space".

What are the main challenges that faced the AWA approach? And how did they overcome them?

AWA challenges are sometimes the other side of their strengths; they are the other side of the coin.

Experimentation is crucial when working in challenging communities. It has to be combined with trust & fast-paced changes; AWA function in challenging situations requires constant questioning of what works and what doesn't. Their communities have very challenging circumstances; i.e. lack of basic services, inaccessibility to open spaces, high levels of violence within families and schools, and sometimes not feeling secure being on the streets. Accordingly, experimentation is an integral approach to test if what they are offering to the community meets their needs. Therefore, this requires trusting the people on the ground when they flag that certain things don't work or highlight that this specific intervention is really working and needs to be expanded.

Additionally, interventions have to respond quickly to the community's emerging needs; otherwise, the whole intervention might lose its essence if delayed. Above all, the organization needs to allocate needed resources and deal with experimentation as a priority.

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> The time and energy required to try, fail, evaluate, debate, adjust, repeat is tremendous when it is being implemented on the ground, so it usually does at the expense of overworked staff, said Lamiaa Serag El Din.
> "

Also, it is essential to have **realistic expectations** towards experimentation; part of it isn't knowing exactly how the reaction towards new approaches and ideas; so from one side, the leadership team has to deal with community members' expectations and, most notably, with the team members, especially those who are not comfortable with uncertainty.

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> There weren't always clear outlines for the way we experiment (what and how many variables to play with simultaneously, for how long, criteria and method for evaluation... etc.) which wasted some time and energy and caused a lot of an avoidable turmoil, said Lamiaa Serag El Din.
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The cost of participation; the leadership in AWA is eager to sustain participation, which requires high maintenance; in terms of the exerted efforts to allow all concerned stakeholders in the organization, further the efforts needed for alignment, especially in strategic decisions, which sometimes affects the work pace negatively.

> "
> Because we use the participatory approach, the process was often hectic and time-consuming, said Ines Khedira.
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The constant needed efforts for alignment; based on AWA practice, there are two levels of alignments; the alignment that you do concerning a particular decision and, indeed, the related back and forth discussions of the pros and cons of each decision till the decision or the direction is finally made. And then the other level of alignment on the practical level and the implications of this decision on the ground and how each person interprets this decision. For example,

> The move to the «free-space» (Self-directed) approach was quite tense, as different teams had a different understanding of what it is and what it could be. Is the free space a program, an approach, or an activity?. When we realized the confusion, we started putting criteria for defining each, and then it became overly complicated and frustrating for people on the ground who wanted to work. Words are important for alignment, said Yasmine El Rifai.

New realizations need time to be grounded; based on AWA experience, art and children were the main focus of AWA approach, yet after years of practice, there was a new realization that art is an entry point and shouldn't be the entire focus. Children are also the primary target group, yet AWA needs to tackle the rest of the community members: youth and mother.

> We sometimes realize our approach after practice, like the sudden realization that we are working through «space» and for «community» rather than through «arts» for «children». It is not easy to let go of the previous identity, said Yasmine El Rifai.

What are the main lessons learnt from the AWA journey and the key tips for other organizations?

AWA team members shared **10 main lessons learnt** out of their journey;

Experimentation is key to evolvement and learning what works, yet too much experimentation can do more damage than good,

Change & purpose; there is no easy path to change, yet having clear direction and investing proper time to onboard team members on purpose worth every minute and saves a lot of time and effort throughout the journey,

Failures & challenging decisions; were the most significant moments of rebirth and genuine opportunities for evolution, when the team trust each other and take the time to analyze and learn,

Patience & Celebration; it takes time for something new to work, for time for the team to be aligned, for the innovation to become rooted and everyday practice, So be patient and celebrate progress along the way,

Framing& Naming: look at what you are already doing, and give it a name. Make sure the words mean the same thing for everyone,

Experimentation cycles: develop the approach through cycles of action /experimentation and then evaluation. Make sure you use the input of everyone involved,

Communications & knowledge transfer: make sure that throughout your experimentation cycle; to set up a clear and well-integrated system of communication and knowledge transfer among different locations/ departments where experimentation happens,

Alignment & Participation: Make sure to align your practices and approaches with children/beneficiaries and your practices and approaches as a team. Make sure to involve as many people as possible, even if they don't all contribute on the same level,

Reality check: always make sure that you are not theorizing far from what is happening in reality,

Shared values: You can't do any of this if you don't have solid values that you truly believe in.

AWA impact… It is much more than a space

AWA provides a space where children are respected, a space where they can express their feelings and continuously learn something new. **Arts and play might be viewed by some people as a luxury and not a necessity. Yet, research shows that arts and play are considered one of children's basic needs, as engagement in arts activities develops skills and knowledge (Cho, C. & Vitale, J, 2019).**

> AWA helps a lot in changing behaviors of children positively and acquiring skills, such as cooperation and ethics. Also, it is a safe environment for children to play and learn without violence. Children love the environment and show curiosity to learn when they are in AWA. They are encouraged to learn their lessons at school to be awarded then to go to AWA. It helps them also manage their time, said a community member.

> Since art in AWA is the only space they have to express their feelings, it helps many children feel free. AWA provides a safe environment for the children, acting as an alternative family, said one of the psychologists.

When considering AWA's methodology, it is evident that they place a great value on learner-centric practices. Their philosophy is shown in their belief that the development of individuals is the first step towards community development, with a particular focus on the arts.

As a result of the AWA approach, YiA outcomes' assessment report highlights that providing children space to play, learn, and practice different art activities promotes their emotional expression, social interactivity, and responsibility towards themselves, their houses, and their communities. Also, AWA spaces provide them with a space to discharge their energy and support them in their academic progress.

Noticeably, most children had remarkable abilities to express their dreams in a way that might not be expected given the several forms of marginalization they are affected by.

> "
> I love drawing; I spent most of my time doing that. I dream of having my exhibition, and maybe one day I will have my museum, said one of the children . "

For the **young people**, they felt oriented. They had the chance to think about their future and plan for it while being empowered by each other. Also, through the youth program, they practiced **self-efficacy**, where they could engage with their communities and start initiatives as per their abilities and interests.

> "
> …. We used to engage in arts, writing and contemporary dance to learn how to express ourselves. We also used theater to learn about values, we also had a facilitator who taught us how to manage money, and we learned financial terms to understand how to deal with projects. In the camp, we learned more about the decent work, said one of the youth. "

> "
> …I was an intern for three months in the youth program where I used to work with children. Then I utilized a scholarship of 6000 EGP to apply for a project, and I used the money to enroll in a drama school. After that, I joined Alwan Morgan facilitation school, the non-violent communication training, and the psychological counseling, said one of the youth. "

AWA's communities are suffering from **multiple forms of marginalization**; poverty, inaccessibility to quality social services, and, in some cases, maltreatment. Thus, AWA's spaces act as an **alternative to the safe space that families** should provide, and as **an alternative to the conducive and enabling space that schools** should provide, and as **an alternative to the free and open space that the government should provide.**

> "
> In AWA, I feel safe, respected and appreciated, said one of the young people. "

> "
> AWA does give the girl (abused case) trust in people (not all people but some); however, the closest people abuse her. Having people that are ready to help makes a good impact, but I can't measure it, I can't measure when the girl becomes an adult how this would help her view the world positively, while she is facing now all kinds of domestic abuse, but maybe when she becomes an adult she recalls that there are people who loved her and who supported her, but I don't know how to measure it, said by one of the psychologists. "

In the **mothers'** program, «A'det settat -ladies' gathering-», women learn soft and art skills in addition to individual and group psychological support and trips. Topics and skills were various, i.e., accessories, sketching on different surfaces, cloth recycling, cooking, crochet, time management, psychodrama, and dealing with teenagers' problems. Using the art approach with mothers was highly appreciated as it increased their self-awareness, which was reflected in their enhanced abilities to deal with their children, i.e., less violence.

> **"**
> I really enjoyed the psychodrama training; I learned new things about myself that I didn't know before. I understand now that a lot of shouting at my children was because I couldn't manage myself. Now, I'm better at managing my anger and try to give myself some space not to explode at my children, said one of the mothers. **"**

«Child-Friendly City (CFC)» is a term that UNICEF originates from describing communities or systems committed to improving the lives of children in which their voices, needs, priorities, and rights are an integral part of policies, programs, and decisions.

Therefore, when reflecting on what AWA is providing and ensuring in all its policies, programming, and activities, we can say that AWA provided the different elements identified by the CFC framework.

The concepts of CFC are applied in AWA as its policies and practices (1) promote child protection, (2) are inclusive and participatory, (3) allow children to express their opinions and influence decisions that affect them, (4) ensure living in a safe, secure, and clean environment, (5) allow having places to play and enjoy themselves, (6) allow meeting current friends and making new ones (social network), (7) enable experiencing what it means to have a quality service, and (8) give access to quality social services and a fair chance regardless of their ethnic, origin, religion, income, gender, or ability.

What are the areas of future consideration for AWA?

There are certain areas that came out of the assessment process of the YiA project[3] that AWA should focus on or consider for the future on three levels: organizational, approach, and programs. We outline here the ones that are directly or indirectly related to the approach.

AWA positions itself as a hub for expertise and experimentation

AWA has accumulated several experiences in the past years on different fronts, yet the organization is spreading itself too thin, which affects its ability to capitalize on its own accumulative experiences and resources. Accordingly, the consultancy team is recommending that AWA restructure its set of services and expertise into two main streams:

- Experimentation HUB: the suggested mandate for this stream focuses on: (1) showcasing AWA philosophy and approach through its spaces; (2) providing on-the-job training and coaching for similar organizations; and (3) experimenting new tools, approaches, and programs.

(3) Please refer back to the report titled "Outcomes assessment and documentation of YiA project", Amira H. Abdel-Aziz and Aliaa Ahmad, Collective Routes Company, September 2021.

Overall, it will be beneficial for the AWA team to start viewing the different modalities of space management, which vary from (1) ownership, management, and financing to (2) co-management and co-financing and (3) providing technical support and know-how in managing and setting up spaces. And expand and replicate their space model without being involved in the management of their day-to-day activities, sustaining the space financially, or reaching out to community members.

- Expertise HUB: the suggested mandate for this stream focuses on: (1) documenting and disseminating AWA practice; (2) training and customizing consultation services; (3) searching and suggesting new tools, approaches, and programs; (4) further developing and crystalizing the following: a. Philosophy and interdisciplinary pedagogical methodology that focus on the programs' integration; b. Arts-related: developing a methodology that revolves around "arts for community development," which contains philosophy, methodology, practices, and tools; c. Space-related: free space toolkit and physical space toolkit; d. Environment-related: safe environment methodology toolkit, and e. Documentation: Activities bank, child/youth portfolios

Both streams depend heavily on **partnerships** with well-established organizations that are already active and have a similar mandate of serving communities and children. This will be a key strategy for this direction to evolve and crystallize.

Revisiting the cross-cutting framework to match the newly evolved approach

When AWA focused on children using mainly the art approach, the cross-cutting skills framework provided a very satisfactory and comprehensive framework for designing and tracking relevant interventions. Yet, this framework is anticipated to fall short when designing and measuring interventions that are more related to community engagement and building healthy relationships among community members. So there is a need to revisit the model and add further aspects that correspond with the "community integrated approach," especially the ones related to the employability skills of young people and the behavioral changes and relationship building across community members. Furthermore, AWA will have to develop **specialized modalities** for children who have experienced particular **traumas** or **dropped out** of school.

More attention to AWA team members' mental health

The AWA team should consider their mental health as a core value to sustain their quality services to different community members[4]. This will require planned vacations, not exceeding a particular workload, and seeking support when dealing with several victims of abuse or other cases that need extensive support.

Action-oriented implementation strategies

Overall, there are **5 main implementation strategies** for AWA to move forward: **Capitalization:** this strategy suggests utilizing the existing resources in AWA, i.e., technical booklets and organizational guides, their human capital; **Experimentation:** this one focuses on experimenting with new models of space management and new approaches or new additions to the existing approach.

Dissemination: this strategy focuses on widening and diversifying the channels that AWA uses to disseminate its resources; **Digitalization:** this strategy suggests capitalizing on the well-estab-

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(4) This is a recommendation by one of the psychologists that acts as a service provider for psycho-social support that is provided to children.

lished tools and transferring them into a digital system that can serve AWA in the future and other organizations that work in child development. **Visibility:** this strategy focuses on how AWA is being branded and positioned using its two main outlets, Facebook and its website.

> **In conclusion,** the consultancy team concludes that AWA has accumulated significant expertise in the domain of child development, curriculum design, space management, and community engagement that need to be further utilized and used as a main way for organizational sustainability.

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