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Nurturing Creativity and Developing Empathy Globally

Ashfaq M. Ishaq⁺ (USA)

Abstract

Creativity is the leitmotif of our times and an essential ingredient for growth and wealth creation in the rapidly transforming global economy. Empathy is necessary in the age of globalization for harmony, co-creation, and collaborative innovation. Together, creativity and empathy are preconditions for a just, prosperous, and nonviolent world. This paper describes the fifteen-year long experience of the International Child Art Foundation to nurture the creativity of the next generation and to bring the world together through its children.

Keywords: *Creativity, Empathy, Children, International, Arts Olympiad, World Children's Festival*

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Creativity

The complexities of our local, national, and global problems cry out for creative solutions. Albert Einstein's principle, that viable solutions cannot be found within the same mindset that created the problems in the first place, calls for outside-the-box thinking. Such fresh thinking cannot spring from imagination bootstrapped to beliefs, fears, or selfish group interests. Creativity is the ability that facilitates imagining the unimaginable, developing potent ideas from thin air, evaluating ideas clinically, and guiding technical inventions or social innovations to fruition.

In the first issue of this Journal, Tom Borrup (2010) provided a comprehensive overview of the meaning of creativity and ways to foster it. What can be added is some research on children, and children's own perspectives on creativity. The influence of certain developmental stages in the creative lives of children and adults is well documented in the creativity literature (Runco and Charles, 1997; Sternburg and Lubart, 1995). Within this body of data, a so-called "fourth grade slump" has been documented across cultures (Torrance, 1968). Briefly, this data indicates that when children begin school, their level of creativity is evident and often flourishing. However, by the time they reach the fourth grade they have conformed to society norms and the rote school environment; children are, less likely to take risks and less playful or spontaneous than in earlier years. This trend in behavior continues throughout the school years and into adulthood.

Researchers from the International Center for Studies in Creativity interviewed artists from ages 8 to 14, and found that they defined creativity as 'expressive creativity' – itself becomes an indicator or predictor of creativity. Climate and environment – both physical and psychological – emerged as key assisters to the creativity of child artists, while the key detractors were distractions (noise, friends, school) and lack of motivation (laziness, depression, stubbornness) (Murdock et al, 2004).

In its own survey of alumni in 2005, the International Child Art Foundation (ICAF) found that child artists value creativity as essential to their living a well-rounded life. For Natasha Janner (age 17, Oregon, USA), creativity provided good ideas for all areas of life. According to Philbert Tiki Yong (age 13, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), "Creativity leads us to innovation, which gives us the power to invent." Alejandro Goldzycher (age 15, Buenos Aires, Argentina) said, "Creativity is important to me because it lets me express what I think and feel in different ways." Creativity "decorates the artwork with a sense of uniqueness," stated Chathura Arachchi (age 17, Colombo, Sri Lanka). Tamara Mamedova (age 17, Baku, Azerbaijan) said that there is something divine about creativity. It is associated with the Creator. "It gives me the possibility to create my own world."

Empathy

Nurturing the innate creativity of children is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for world peace and global prosperity. Complex challenges require cooperative problem-solving, drawing on viable solutions. To be viable, solutions

must respectfully and transparently address competing ideologies in a search for common ground and compromise. Individuals who demonstrate empathy are therefore more capable problem-solvers and leaders. Empathy is the ability to understand and vicariously experience the feelings, thoughts and motives of another; it does not imply acceptance or agreement, or losing oneself to become another, but rather identifying with and understanding another's reasons and reactions. Jones (1990) provided a research-based definition of the successful learner whose major attributes include being empathetic. Gallo (1989) argued that empathy fosters both creative and critical thinking.

The Role of Art

Although scientific understanding of creativity is far from complete, researchers note that a child who is exposed to the arts has the potential to become a more creative, imaginative, expressive, confident, self-reliant, critically thinking, and empathic individual. Scope (1999) suggested that it is possible to enhance children's creative skills through art-based programs. Through creative expression, a child learns about themselves in ways that can be profound and which create meaning for the person. A child can be introduced to the world through the arts without coloring their perceptions with conflict old and new. The arts can also be a key component in a moral-cognitive approach to education. According to Candace Stout (1999), "the arts, with their inextricable ties to imagination, have the capacity to provide an unlimited source of possibilities for connecting self to other and for creating a disposition for sympathetic awareness." Such awareness promotes learning from the 'other' through the (or 'in the') spirit of empathy. Peace researchers believe that the arts can have a significant role in fostering peace-building efforts in a conflict-ridden society. Lederach (2005) and Cohen (2003) point out that aesthetic experiences engage the individual on both sensory and cognitive levels. The arts allow combatants to visualize their interdependence, as well as provide mechanisms to heal and hence create a shared vision of the future (Ishaq, 2006). Shank and Schirch (2008) state that, "the arts offer peace-builders unique tools for transforming intractable interpersonal, intercommunal, national, and global conflicts -tools that are not currently prevalent or available within the peace-building field." The challenge for educators lies in finding strategic ways of incorporating (or rather, leveraging) the arts for nurturing children's creativity and developing their empathy.

The Arts Olympiad

ICAF's flagship program, the Arts Olympiad, employs the arts in combination with sports to achieve the objective to shape creative and empathic character of children. The program invokes discipline and team spirit through sport and inspires creativity and empathy through art for the development of 21st century leaders. Modeled after the Olympics and the World Cup, the four-year program commences in classrooms with structured lesson plans that result in school competitions on the theme, My Favorite Sport. In the Arts Olympiad's second year of the four before the Exhibition, the most outstanding artworks are exhibited in different cities so that local communities can honor their children's creativity. In

the third year, the Arts Olympiad winners convene at the World Children's Festival to develop empathy in a global community setting. In the fourth and final year, the Arts Olympiad Exhibition travels internationally to showcase the imagination of our future leaders who will shape the world.

The Arts Olympiad Lesson Plan involves both students interested in sports, and students interested in art. Each group examines the motivation and objectives of the other, and discusses the application of the Olympic ideals in sports and art. The athletes develop an art project based on sporting gear (a ball, a bat, or sneakers) while the artists develop a game based on art tools (a palette, a mouse, or an easel). The 'artist-athlete' ideal is introduced to break mental barriers and old stereotypes. Athletes, who are more vulnerable to the 4th grade slump, creatively paint the sport that drives their passion in the hope that they continue to engage in similar creative expressions. The artists may face the obesity risk. By visualizing and thoughtfully painting their favorite physical activity they might be inspired to engage in that activity more often.

Local celebration of children's creativity brings the community together around their shared concern for the children and their future. Typically, 20 to 50 Arts Olympiad finalists from a city, county or region convene to showcase their talents. The children bond through common interests, including art and sports. They then discuss their differences and divisions. Art and sporting activities follow to alleviate tensions. Finally, they collaboratively create a mural that reflects their common identity and shared vision. National celebrations of children's creativity and imagination are held in several participating countries as part of the Arts Olympiad. Some events have been hosted by the first ladies, for example, by Peruvian first lady Keiko Fugimori in 1999 and Croatian first lady Milka Mesic in 2002. The children chosen as finalists, based on their innovation and creativity, convene in the capital city of their nation to represent their respective communities. Students from private schools who have little opportunity to meet and work with students from public schools gain the opportunity to develop a better understanding of their compatriots. The objective is to provide children a sense of national identity and to help diffuse ethnic or provincial zeal in order to facilitate integration. One strategic project is co-creation of a mural, often in the shape of the country's map, to depict unity. Finally, the national Arts Olympiad winners are selected by a jury based on their innovative artwork. These winners represent their country at the World Children's Festival the following year.

World Children's Festival

The national finalists from across the globe come together at the World Children's Festival, traditionally held every four years on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The objective of the weeklong festival is to celebrate the 'artist-athlete' and build a nexus for the future. Children are encouraged to discuss their differences and commonalities in workshops hosted by educators. They participate in activities that develop empathy and their musical and theatrical talents are displayed on the 'World Stage' set up across from the U.S. Capitol.

Festival workshops and activities not only focus on art and sport but also STEM disciplines, creating a new STEAMS pedagogy – science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics, and sport. The festival becomes a transformative experience where creativity and co-creation become building blocks for innovation and positive social change. Equipped with a repertoire of new skills, universal values, and newfound confidence, the children begin preparations for global leadership roles (Ishaq, 2007).



Figure 1. World Children's Festival 2011

Empathy: A Case Study

On March 11, 2011, Japan was hit by the most powerful earthquake in its history, which also triggered powerful tsunami waves. On June 16, 2011, 14 children from Japan, ages 7 to 18, arrived in Washington, DC to participate in the 4th World Children's Festival. Accompanied by their parents, the children included the Japan Arts Olympiad winners. Two separate selection of winners took place, the first at the 'Children's Castle' in Tokyo under the direction of Tokyo Zokei University's professor Akio Kasuga, and the second in Kanazawa under the direction of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art's director Masashi Akimoto. Japan's delegation to the festival included a boy from the tsunami-affected Sendai (Tohoku Region), an autistic boy, and a visually impaired girl. The delegation was led by Professor and Mrs. Kondo and ICAF Youth Board Member Rune Kondo (www.japanicaf.org).

In preparation for the festival, the Japanese children wrote the script on "Fearful Earthquakes and Tsunami" which had lines for each of the 14 children to speak in their presentation to an American and international audience on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The children were pleased that their hard work (and speaking English for the first time for many) was greatly appreciated by the audience who asked questions and showed empathy for the earthquake victims.

A workshop was also planned to encourage the world's children to produce "empathic art" for the children of Tohoku. Some paintings the festival attendees made had Japanese flags or read "We love you Japan," or "You are not alone." ICAF Japan's staff ran out of the maccha (green tea) cookies and chocolates they had brought as a token for about 50 participants. But 100 children and adults took part in the workshop, so the rest were presented ICAF postcards and magnets.



Figure 2. Fourth World Children's Festival

The Japanese parents were surprised to meet Professor Paulina Contreras Correa from Universidad del Desarrollo in Chile. Chilean children had also suffered an earthquake in February 2010, almost of the same magnitude that shook Japan a year later. In preparation for the festival, Professor Correa had invited child victims of the earthquake in Chile to produce 'empathic art' and letters for the Japanese children. Some of the letters had Chilean and Japanese flags together as if to convey, "We are friends."



Figure 3. Fourth World Children's Festival

ICAF Youth Board Members from the United States organized their own workshop to make an origami crane for the Japanese child victims of the earthquake. Hundred of white and blue origami cranes were made and children wrote messages on the cranes, which were put together as a painting and was later framed. This 'empathic art' in the shape of a crane, moved the Japanese delegation

because the crane, a bird for peace and prosperity, is the national bird of Japan. The artwork was presented by ICAF Youth Board Member from New Jersey, Sora Nithikasem, to ICAF Youth Board Member from Japan, Rune Kondo at the World Children's Awards Banquet.

At the banquet on June 19, 2011 at the Grand Ballroom of L'Enfant Plaza Hotel in Washington, all the international delegates were dressed in their national costumes. Japanese girls wore kimonos and the boys wore hakamas. Many photographs were taken and email and mail addresses were exchanged, in the expectation that children from different parts of the world will stay in contact with each other, maybe forever. The festival became a touchstone experience that may inspire the children throughout their lives to embrace creativity and empathy for one another.



Figure 4. ICAF World Children's Awards Banquet

The importance of the festival was recognized by Japan's Ambassador to the United States and Mrs. Fujisaki who invited Japan's delegation to their residence. Mrs. Fujisaki took all the children to the Tea Ceremony room and explained the meaning of serenity. The parents were very proud to see their children talk to the Ambassador one by one.

The Arts Olympiad Exhibition is scheduled to take place at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa on March 13-18, 2012. The empathy art from Chile and the crane from Washington will be exhibited there as well.

Conclusion

This paper describes the importance of nurturing creativity and developing empathy in the next generation, bearing in mind that all it takes to upend history and develop global harmony is a single generation. More than 5 million children worldwide have participated in and benefited from ICAF's Arts Olympiads to date. Over 100,000 children have attended the World Children's Festivals and ICAF's related events and exhibitions that develop creativity and empathy in a

global communal setting. However, this is just a drop in the ocean. A critical age for intervention for creativity and empathy is 8 to 12, and worldwide there are approximately 660 million in this age group. Consequently, other organizations need to adopt ICAF's approach to reach more children. In the least, more experts and companies have to explore ways to help expand and support ICAF's work and global impact.



Figure 5. ICAF Participants with the Japanese Ambassador to the United States

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