

Essay Development of children's creativity to foster peace

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The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration

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Peace-making as merely a subdiscipline of statecraft has little value when any small group can cause unimaginable destruction, and violence becomes a socially accepted response to perceived threats. For a global culture of peace to be built, the next generation must be imbued with new systems of thinking and feeling. Such approaches are the domain of cognitive science, translated through practice into perceptual and behavioural change. This essay describes an art-based programme to develop creativity and empathy in young people living in a conflict zone.

Research suggests that creativity can be nurtured by a holistic approach to child development encompassing cognitive, physical, and emotional capacity. Heilman and colleagues wrote that "although extensive knowledge and divergent thinking are critical for creativity, they alone are insufficient for allowing a person to find the thread that unites. Finding this thread might require the building of different forms of knowledge ... through co-activation and communication between regions of the brain that ordinarily are not strongly connected." The arts can aid a child's holistic development, especially empathy, which is defined as the ability to identify and express one's own emotions and to read another's emotions correctly and comprehensively. A RAND study noted that the communicative and personal nature of

creative expression, accentuated through collective arts activities, can forge social bonds while supporting identity formation and cultural transmission. The power of the group transcends the sum of individual efforts.

A working hypothesis is that the arts stimulate a problem-finding attitude that can be used in non-arts areas, including conflict resolution. David Perkins of Harvard Project Zero has argued that the arts provide a sensory anchor, are instantly accessible, and engage and sustain attention, thereby encouraging rich connections. Such beliefs are supported by testimonials from children who have taken part in creative arts programmes developed by the International Child Art Foundation (ICAF): creativity "leads us to innovation"; "lets me express what I think and feel in different ways"; and "decorates the artwork with a sense of uniqueness".

ICAF has developed methods to nurture the innate creativity and intrinsic empathy of children and young people. With nearly a decade's experience, ICAF programmes initiate a developmental and sequential process of healing, creativity, communication, empathy, and cooperation. This progression is illustrated in the Peace through Arts approach, developed after the attacks in the USA on Sept 11, 2001. The initiative was spurred on by the spontaneous artistic expressions of sadness and support from children in the USA and around the world who sent ICAF their unsolicited works.

The approach aims to diminish the transgenerational transmission of trauma and hatred, and draws on the creativity and imagination of young people in teaching them the ethics of responsibility and mutual respect. It first helps children to recognise their responses to trauma, then to understand the reasons for conflict and how artistic expression can reduce tensions. Subsequent modules impart confidence and develop empathy through the experience of collective creativity and provide action steps for children to apply their creativity toward building a vision of peace in their communities.

The Cypriot Peace through Art project is a good example. The 3-week programme in Washington DC involved ten Greek-Cypriot and ten Turkish-Cypriot children, then aged 14–15 years, who had grown up on opposite sides of the "green line" that partitions Cyprus. Participants were selected on the basis of an art competition organised by the Cyprus Fulbright Commission. Before going to Washington, each participant constructed a poster board titled "Myself", describing his or her home and family, hobbies, pets, and favourite things to do.

At the first meeting, the poster boards served to overcome the teenagers' natural hesitation in introducing themselves. They continued to explore issues of self-identity and "the other" in their first activity, which was to produce artistic impressions. For



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"Who am I?", a Turkish-Cypriot drew an eagle ready to fly away with widespread wings. The same teenager for "Who are they?" wrote "Greeks!" (instead of Greek-Cypriots) but drew them as a gentle flower. The answer to "What is keeping us from going where we want to go?" was a church and a mosque. In a related activity, the Greek and Turkish teenagers were placed literally under their own tents to draw a group picture on "Who are We?". The tents were taken down, as each side explained what they had drawn, to the revelation that neither Turkish nor Greek was the language spoken. The teenagers exclaimed "We are all Cypriots!".

Next, the teenagers moved from cultural identity to historical memory. Divided into Greek and Turkish tables, they drew collective pictures of their own history. The Greek-Cypriots drew pictures of ancient Greece and relics. The Turkish-Cypriots drew a picture of a person being murdered. The teenagers inched their way into a discussion of who "murdered" whom in the war. "They told us you murdered us." "They told us you murdered us, too."

Switching from cognitive to affective processing, the groups paired up across ethnic lines. They drew portraits of each other, then made face-masks on each other, initially very cautiously touching the "enemy's" face. They further explored themes of war, peace, and sacrifice in the creation and participation in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

To spark discussion on ideas, music, and art from the Mediterranean, the teenagers visited the Smithsonian Institution's Folk Life Festival in Washington DC. The cultural exchange continued throughout the 3-week programme, with a presentation and discussions about preserving Greek and Turkish ruins; dance and musical performances; and group activities, such as creating mythical mandalas, mural-making, and creation of a collage from images and words in Cypriot newspapers.

The programme culminated in the exhibition of the children's individual and collective works on Capitol Hill, an event sponsored by the Congressional Arts Caucus. Just before their departure, supported by leadership skills training, the participants shared ideas of how they would take their Peace through Art experience back to Cyprus. In a joint letter to their political leaders, they expressed their hope for the future: "We have all written this letter to you because we are separate in Cyprus. We want to be all together in Cyprus. We don't want to break our friendship and forget each other and what we have done in our 3 weeks. We want to ask you if we could all come together?" Through their experience, these teenagers explored dimensions of shared Cypriot national and Mediterranean regional identities, while maintaining their respective Greek and Turkish heritage. Many have maintained the friendships formed through the experience.

The diversity-commonality concept within the Peace through Arts approach is replicated throughout ICAF's global peace-building initiative. It encompasses



community-level art competitions on a universal theme (currently "My Favorite Sport"); national events to recognise competition winners; regional children's festivals such as the May, 2006, European Children's Festival; and the World Children's Festival planned for June, 2007, in Washington DC. The succession of these events builds momentum towards the expression of regional union and a global vision of peace, captured in iconic images and collective works of art such as the 1999 World Mural and the 2003 Art for Peace Pyramid.

Peace, stability, and sustainability are at the forefront of the international development agenda, as set forth in the Millennium Development Goals. As the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said, the Millennium Declaration on which the goals are based "constituted an unprecedented promise by world leaders to address, as a single package, peace, security, development, human rights and fundamental freedoms". The education goals—to achieve universal primary education and promote gender equality—measure access to education. What is taught, and how children are taught, are equally important.

Creativity can be learned and applied; it is achieved and sustained not with words or declarations, but through encouragement and practice. ICAF has explored innovations in pedagogy, emanating from a Symposium in October, 2003, organised with the Qatar Foundation—Innovations in Education: the Art and Science Partnership. The symposium offered direction for an integrated curriculum for art and mathematics, biology, and the teaching of science generally. English-language instruction and computer training are other ways to incorporate arts and creativity in approved curricula.

As a dimension of children's education, creativity development can transform the way children embrace uncertainty, exploring, adapting to, and eventually anticipating a rapidly changing world. The time has come to include the ability to create and cooperate in children's developmental goals and accompanying efficacy measures of learning.

Further reading

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