



Art, knowledge & leadership

Why we need to foster our children's creativity.

The launch of The Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Foundation in May makes a historic milestone in the Arab world that could shape the future of the region. Dubai is already a leader in the post-petroleum economy with societal emphasis shifting from 'look what we can copy' to 'see what we can create'. The foundation aims to push the region into the 21st-century global contest for patents, intellectual property rights and inventions. Can the arts help the region's scientific and technological development? The answer to this important question draws upon a decade-long experience in children's creative development of the International Child Art Foundation (ICAF).

Art has a broader function in defining us and modifying our views of ourselves and our societies. According to cognitive neurobiologist Semir Zeki, 'the acquisition of knowledge by registering the constant and essential characteristics of objects is the primordial function of the visual brain. It is also the primordial function of art. That is why many great philosophers concerned with the problem of knowledge, from Plato onward, have devoted large parts of their work to discussion of art'.

To create new knowledge, to invent or innovate, creativity is as important as enabling education. If God blesses children

to be innately creative, why do adults generally lose their creative potential? E Paul Torrance, often referred to as father of creativity, discovered the 'fourth grade slump' that defines a period when children face a decline in their creativity, which may continue throughout the school years into adulthood. Art is a natural and dynamic channel for nurturing children's creativity and overcoming the fourth grade slump. Research shows that a child who is exposed to the arts is more likely to be creative, inspired to generate new information, and capable of adding to the stock of knowledge, be it in the arts, science or technology. Visualizing an image, dipping a brush in paint, and applying colour to paper to create meaning for others, is akin to working with text to generate and share ideas, or working with molecules in a laboratory to generate new vaccines, for example.

The Arts Olympiad, ICAF's global programme, fosters children's creativity and leadership potential through structured lesson plans distributed free to schools worldwide. Two natural ways in which children gain and apply leadership skills are through artistic expression and athletic accomplishment. The event breaks old stereotypes by celebrating the 'artist-athlete' ideal of a creative mind and healthy body. Children produce paintings

and digital art on the theme 'My Favourite Sport' and the competition winners are invited to the World Children's Festival, traditionally held every four years in Washington, DC. A large delegation from the Children and Girls Centres in Sharjah joined some of the most creative and imaginative children in the US and 50 other countries at the World Children's Festival in Washington on 22 June for four days. They participated in the Children's First project by collaboratively creating symbolic artworks to be presented to President and First Lady and the 2008 US presidential candidates. In a documentary to be produced in collaboration with LEGO, presidential candidates will be asked: How do you as a leader and we as a community foster children's creativity to lead us into a better world?

This question is pertinent for leaders in the UAE and the region. Children's creative development fosters human creative potential and develops creative global leaders for the future. These fundamentals comprise the ICAF mission and reflect the Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Foundation's vision.

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