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Creative Paradigms Towards Internationalizing Education: Critical Thinking in the Internationalizing of Children's Creativity

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Creative Paradigms Towards Internationalizing Education: *Critical Thinking in the Internationalizing of Children's Creativity.*

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I. Introduction.

Our observations begin with underlining the fundamental roles Literature and the Visual Arts

play in the self-identity and the creativity of a child. It first elaborates on some key differences

in the Literature and Visual Material to which many children of minority cultures are exposed. It

then discussed observations carried out in a Middle Eastern region and compares them with

different regions across the world. Finally, it questions current paradigms used to teach creative

subjects in school and concludes by proposing a creative-thinking Literature and Art paradigms

that can be applicable to most teaching programs across the world.

The aim of our work is to give positive visibility to children's identity formation and a universal

awareness among institutes of higher education and schools, which are the stirring forces that

help shape the future of international education.

**II. Context: an overview of the importance that Literature and the Visual Arts play in the
self-identity and the creativity of a child.**

It has been documented that children's Literature and Illustration have served as a vehicle for

national and cultural identity for children all over the world. Not only that but, according to

many researchers, publications and educational programs, images and literature are intrinsic and

play a fundamental role in the development of a child's social understanding of the world.

(Vygotsky, 1978; Hinde, 1987; Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009; Malin, 2012, Sickler-Voigt, 2014;

NCCAS, 2014; NEA, 2015). Oatley asserts that the stories we hear as children shape our view of

the world. Many small children grow up in a sheltered and limited environment; therefore, reading stories to children serves as an empowering way of helping them deal with real life situations. (Oatley, 2018). Visually speaking, scribbling is an intrinsically rewarding activity for young children: as the child starts naming his or her scribbles, his comments to the scribble develop into small dialogues (Roland, 1990 & 2006). This attempt of 'storytelling' helps children to be enthusiastic about their socio-cultural discoveries and develops their sense of confidence as individuals. It also enhances their ability to associate vocabulary to visual imagery, strengthening their cohesion skills, which is the ability to explain what they see. This phenomenon that empowers children through the Arts and Literature in asserting their personal experiences as culturally valid has been coined as '*cultural activism*' (Fishman, 2004): by looking, reading, discovering, interpreting, and re-creating, children co-create their community, adding new values to already existing ones. It has been asserted that creative individuals are more confident compared to those with lesser developed creative skill (Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013; Valley, 2019). It is therefore paramount that children are allowed a great deal of their own time to learn, discover, create, and shape their social and cultural identity. According to the International Association of Universities 2014 survey on the risks and benefits of internationalization of Education, the loss of cultural identity was identified by universities in the Middle East as the number two risk. Therefore, when the internationalization of Education occurs, part of cultural identity is lost. When children are not made familiar with their own

culture, they refrain from developing a sense of '*positive identity*' (Black & Jobe, 2005). This,

consequently, creates a huge sense of conscious and subconscious insecurity in children.

III. Research frame: Identifying the Literature and Visual Material to which many children of minority cultures are exposed.

To understand the evidence of lack of creativity and identity in many children, and identify its

root problem, we must first explain the difference between *mirror* books and *window* books. A

mirror book is a book that reflects everything that is familiar and common to a child: family,

community, clothes, food, buildings, customs; *mirror* books give a child a sense of belonging. A

window book is a book that offers children a view into someone else's culture. *Window* books

develop respect and understanding for other cultures, places, people, faith, and languages

(Bishop, 2012, Gilani-Williams, 2018).

image 1

The example shown in image 1 represents a *window* book about Thai culture for all non-Thai

children; however, it would be a *mirror* book for Thai nationals. It depicts a Thai mother raising

up her child. In the illustration, we can see typical features associated with regional Thai

culture: the hut, the hammock, the white radishes, the pot, which is left hanging in mid-air and even a mosquito. In theory, *mirror* books provide children with a healthy sense of positive self-identity, whereas and *window* books stimulate a sense of empathy and sensitivity to those who are different to themselves. In the following paragraph we will substantiate that most Emirati children and other minor ethnicities do not have a clear concept of their own identity, mainly because they are not exposed to enough *mirror* books when young. As a consequence, they simply reproduce what is most popular or available to them, which are story characters from Western culture (Nesti-Willard & Gilani-Williams, 2019; Gilani-Williams, 2014; Bigger & Gilani-Williams, 2010).

IV. Research method: visual analysis of illustrations.

Our observations are based on a data collection of visual material from Emirati school children and university students. The collection of data, for comparative purposes, was recently extended to children living in Pakistan, Spain, and Thailand. Most of the data reflect the responses of individuals when asked to draw themselves or a house. Some other data submitted belongs to university students' creative work (i.e.: storyboards for short animation, short stories, etc.). The observations show that there is an impact on individuals when they cannot find themselves reflected in books; this has been noted in children's drawings, children's creative writing, college, and university students' creative work.

image 2

In this sample image (Image 2), Emirati elementary students were asked to draw a picture of themselves. The image depicts girls with blond, brown, or red hair and fair skin. When asked who they drew, students replied they drew American girls (Gilani-Williams, 2018). Students were subsequently provided with opportunities to draw authentic pictures of themselves by providing them with books and images that projected themselves as Emirati families. Students then recognized through the employment of critical thinking that the books did not give visibility to children who looked like them. It was felt that visual support empowered the children and increased their sense of self-confidence (Nesti-Willard & Gilani Williams, 2019; Gilani Williams, 2014). Another group of students were asked to draw a house. Below (image 3) are some examples of the collected data.

image 3

After the exercise, students were taken to a large window in their classroom and, through

guided discovery, they realized that the houses they drew were not like the typical flat middle

eastern houses, but English-style houses with pointy roofs and trees with abundant foliage,

features unseen in the desert region where these children live (image 4).

image 4

The drawings below were made by 25 university student-teachers (18-25 years old).

These students were also asked to write their favorite story characters. These include

Cinderella, The Sleeping Beauty, The Cat in the Hat, Harry Potter, The Red Riding Hood, Winnie

The Pooh. In image 5 we can see examples of short clips and animations from University

Students enrolled in an Animation course at UAE University.

image 5

The students have represented different ethnicities, but they have not portrayed their own culture. To understand whether this phenomenon was exclusive to one country, we decided to compare the first observations with other data gathered from other nationalities. Below are examples from Pakistani, Spanish and Thai schools (image 6-group)

Houses drawn by Pakistani children

Houses drawn by Spanish children

Houses drawn by Thai children

image 6

The gathered data proves what was initially asserted: there is an overall lack of identity in both small children as well as young adults, and a tendency to replicate images that are

not original, especially at a subconscious level. When asked why they were drawing

houses that resulted different from their own homes, the most articulated children and

older students provided interesting responses: some stated that they were automatically

projecting an image they have seen from books they read, from TV, or from programs on

internet; others felt that they were trained to do houses in that way from their

schoolteacher.

V. Reflection: what are the current paradigms used to enhance creativity and self-confidence in schools across the United Arab Emirates and internationally?

To find an answer to this peculiarity, we asked ourselves a few questions. The first

concerned itself with finding out whether creative subjects have enough allocated time in

UAE's National Curriculum to allow children to be truly creative. In UAE, in the year 2009

a transformative shift in education happened, which was enforced by ADEC, Abu Dhabi

Educational Council: primary schools were introduced to a new subject, called *Integrated

Social Studies*, which incorporates a cultural and heritage component. In many secondary

schools the *Stem Education* (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) was substituted

to *Steam* (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics), and integrating Art as

equally fundamental to the above-mentioned subjects. In the IAT institutes, Creative

Design was introduced, but was taught only to the highest-achieving groups of students. It

is a cardinal factor that the importance of cultural heritage along with creative skills was

recently taken into consideration and being implemented into the educational system; nevertheless, these paradigms are not long-established, and students still struggle when faced with creativity. Our second quest was to detect the way in which creativity is measured in schools. Before determining how children's creativity is assessed, we should first agree that art making in the art world often requires that the artist bend or alter the rules to create something innovative, creative, or meaningful (Malin, 2012). New ideas are hailed and considered excellent when they are not a copy of others and when they bring something new to the table. Still, it was noticed that many students 'fear' breaking the rules, to please their teacher or to get a good mark (Malin, 2012). Therefore, this inhibits the child and restrains his or her creative potential. The third point to analyze was whether there is enough material to promote self-identity in Emirati and other children in certain parts of the world. We have therefore extended our observational investigations to other areas and photographed many bookstores across the globe. We concluded that children around the world are mostly exposed to the same types of *window* books (the classics: *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Peter Pan*, and so forth). Consequently, when they draw or create a story, they use pre-existing imagery and ideas. To have critically thinking individuals, able to 'create' more than 'reproduce', new paradigms need to be considered.

VI. Reflection: creative-thinking Literature and Art paradigms that can be applicable in most of the teaching programs across the world.

Earlier before we affirmed that children adapt their skills and knowledge to activities, and at the same time they contribute to the knowledge of their community and transform the practice of the community itself. The transformation of both the individual and the community is referred to as the '*community of practice*' (Wenger, 1991) and, since the individual must first understand the context and learn the skills to apply them to any activity, this process is also conceived as a '*learning*' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Engeström, 1993). The first recommendation in relation to Literature and Illustration, is that children in primary schools are given a large amount of *mirror* books and therefore expand their self-confidence through a deeper assimilation of their own community. At school and home, children should be encouraged to create their own stories; only in that way they will become '*creators of learning*' rather than '*consumers of learning*' (Lobman, 2010). At a curricular level, creativity-oriented curriculums should be developed, and a generous amount of time should be allocated to the arts and humanities. A grading system that sees creativity as a bonus and not as a divergence from traditional practice should also be considered. Furthermore, in the classroom or at home, especially with small children, parents and tutors should not correct their drawings or creative scribblings; instead, they should empower them with compliments and encouragement. At a commercial level, communities should produce a greater number of *mirror* books that reflect and preserve

their cultural heritage, so that there is an equal balance of both *mirror* and *window* books.

All children should, in fact, be made equally visible in the literature and in visual displays that envelops them.

VII. Conclusion.

Through our critical observation we hope to reach out not only to the Educational system, but also to writers, illustrators, publishers, and educational institutes, so that they can have a deeper understanding of how books and visual material impact children. Therefore, they will be able to contribute to giving positive visibility to all children, helping them become confident, creative, and successful individuals. We also hope that children will be able to enhance their creativity, and elaborate perceptions of their own truth, rather than referring to cliched images often imposed by the market. Genuine outputs are extremely important, because they illustrate a variety of personal experiences, making the world in which we live a variegated and more interesting place to live.

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