

# On the Importance of Creativity

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Creativity is a quintessential attribute of human beings. When combined with our ability to record and benefit from accumulated knowledge, it makes us the highest-order species on the planet. People throughout history have envisioned their surroundings in new and instructive ways, producing ideas, inventions and works of art that have radically changed life and added to our understanding of the planet and its place in the universe.

## **Diminishing creativity**

We humans have not yet achieved our full creative potential, however, primarily because every child's creativity is not properly nurtured. The critical role of imagination, discovery and creativity in a child's education is only beginning to come to light, and even within the educational community, many still do not appreciate or realize its vital importance.

Research on creativity documents a so-called "fourth grade slump" across cultures. Briefly, these data indicate that when children begin school, their level of creativity is evident and often flourishing. By the time they reach the fourth grade, however, they have become more conforming, less likely to take risks, and less playful or spontaneous than in earlier years. These trends continue throughout the school years and into adulthood. Hence the risk of diminishing creativity faced by children needs to be addressed by adults, if humans are to attain their creative potential. Today's children must be given the chance to develop their creativity to the fullest extent possible; not only for the benefit of their own future but also for the communities we all inhabit.



## **Intervention**

Traditional schooling and parenting do not generally foster a child's creativity. Limits are placed on children's creativity by educational systems that encourage conformity and imitation in learning rather than spontaneity and creative imagination. Moreover, standardized testing captures only the ability of students to provide "correct" answers to questions, without rectifying the thinking process that results in "incorrect" answers or accepting ambiguous but equally valid answers. Even those teachers and parents who do recognize the importance of creativity, often lack the tools and training to encourage a child's imagination and discovery.

In the old economic systems of the past millennium, creativity was 'exogenous' or purely innate and not everyone needed to be creative. Even in the industrial age, the focus was on productivity, not creativity. However, in the economy of the



future, creativity must be diffused and every individual must learn how to enhance his or her creativity. It is not surprising that today the importance of creativity is increasingly emphasized by studies in disciplines ranging from anthropology to organizational theory and management.

But a child is almost always introduced only to the learning process (by schooling) and to the socializing process (by family) but not to the creative process. This is the role for the International Child Art Foundation (ICAF) and other such national and local organizations.

The mission of the ICAF is to prepare children for a creative and cooperative future. Creativity can be encouraged in a variety of ways, and the arts are a dynamic channel to foster a child's creativity. Moreover, collaborative art projects (such as murals) demonstrate the power of collaborative creativity. But the arts need to be more broadly defined than it has been in the past, incorporating the digital arts and new media made possible by the digital revolution.

### **Internet**

The Internet is already the most powerful medium for communication, information, education, transactions and community building. However, the full promise of the digital revolution lies in the blossoming of a worldwide creativity revolution. The Internet can provide a dynamic platform where the use of knowledge, through new forms of learning, allows individuals and groups to attain their full creative potential. To bring about a creativity revolution, however, the Internet's potential as a creativity playground for children needs to be properly harnessed.

### **The arts**

But digital playgrounds (being developed by ICAF) do not mean that the hands-on or traditional arts are ignored. Actually, the arts will assume a greater significance in the economy of the future, if the future economy is creativity-driven. Many children, their teachers and parents already realize what lies ahead. One evidence of this is that over a million children worldwide participate in the ICAF Arts Olympiad, which is launched every four years. The Arts Olympiad starts with national competitions on a universal theme and culminates in an international celebration of children's creativity and imagination held on The National Mall in Washington, DC.

### **Creativity revolution**

How can we bring about a creativity revolution? Parallel to building a culture of peace, creating a creativity revolution requires involvement of children. According to UNESCO, "the encouragement of creativity from an early age is one of the best guarantees of growth in a healthy environment of self-esteem and mutual respect—critical ingredients for building a culture of peace."

The choice we face is not simply to be or not to be creative. But it is whether we must encourage the next generation to be creative, and how best we go about doing so. A creativity revolution begins with each individual—learning how to be creative and supporting the catalysts of change.