

Creativity and Cultural Habits of Children and Youth

Intervention of Tamer Institute for Community Education

Minister of Culture, general director of the education and culture at the

EU , Ladies and gentlemen...

Good Morning,

I come to you from where the sun continued to rise, the wind never ceases to blow, the rain falls from above, and most of all where hope is never lost and optimism about the future thrives. I stand before you to represent my people and all humans who thrive for freedom, liberation and democracy. I come to you from the Tamer Institute for Community Education which just received the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for 2009. For that and many other deeds, I would like to express thanks and appreciation for the Swedish people and government for their generous giving, for their open minds and for the promotion of humanism through care for children and their literature.

Tamer appreciates and admires having us amongst you, the EU states, in order to share with you our humble and won to earth experiences, to further reflect on how to develop best practices that will strengthen children's and young people's participation in cultural activities. I am confident that we all have things to share and learn from each other and I wish all the success for every one in this conference.

Political context

Since the Ottoman period, Palestinians have been suffering not only from military occupation to their lands, but also attempts at the fragmentation of its social and cultural foundations.

Military occupation affects every detail of the Palestinian daily life, for example, The Wall of annexation and expansion, which is built by Israel, is only an example of the challenges faced by the Palestinian families. The closures of schools that were so denounced by the International community were replaced by other means sometimes less visible, but always as destructive: Just as an example: children going to school are only allowed to pass the gate in the Annexation Wall at 8 o'clock in the morning. This same gate closes at 2:00 pm, leaving children behind the wall in case of any delay after the closing time. Some children lose their school days, other are lost behind the gate away from their houses.

Can you imagine living in a society when your own mobility was restricted? Were educational materials were restricted from your children's schools? Having books being banned from entering to the Palestinian territories, especially to the Gaza Strip! Closing or demolishing schools and universities, as well as destroying possibilities of increasing a family's income, are all measures that affect the creativity of our children and forces them to limit their minds to their own and their family's survival. And by survival, we mean day to day survival: long term survival is abolished because, as a 15 year old girl said in her poem, "death is a possibility" .

It is in this context, that Tamer's Institute for community education, was established in 1989. Our expressive goal is to restore our children's creativity, their will, and aptitude for self learning and development.

Tamer Institute founders participated in the **popular learning committees**: Volunteers from each neighborhood provided schooling activities to children during the school closures and curfews.

Origins

Tamer Institute developed this popular learning committees experience during the years after, into active learning methods through expressive arts and inclusion of children's literature into the schooling system, aiming at protecting our children identity by reinforcing values like pride, sense of responsibility, wisdom, generosity and apprenticeships, which are values that define the Palestinian being.

Tamer institute focuses its efforts to maintain values of the community as well as to strengthen our children's creativity in order to ensure their emotional, mental, social and economical growth.

Reading, writing and expressive arts are the strategic tools which will achieve this goal taking into consideration the geographical, social and educational environments of the Palestinian children.

Therefore, for the past twenty years, the institute has been employing multiple dimensions in working with children. It focused mainly on reading, writing and expressive arts inside public and schools libraries, with parents, inside schools and with sectors that involve in children and youth's learning processes. It is through these experiences that children and youth are able to integrate positive values. In the long run, these positive values prove to have brought up community leaders who will lead their society towards a democratic and progressive thinking. Some examples needed many years to develop and proved their effectiveness; others are in process of development.

Accordingly, and throughout the years, and through its main programme: the National Reading Campaign, which started in 1992, and grew to become a Palestinian ritual with more than 300 local organizations involved in planning and implementing the activities. Now our reading campaign is a space where children can join the world of books.

Tamer works mainly with children between 6-12 years and with young people who are between 13-21 years, and it has developed its work around two goals:

I Provide ***Spaces for Reading and Writing and Create Atmospheres for Expression.*** Children's libraries are perceived as the perfect spaces or mediums to generate for both goals. Libraries provide books for children and youth to read, and artistic activities are conducted around books like creative writing, drama and storytelling.

It is important at this point to explain that the traditional educational system teaches the child to listen and memorize, while by allowing the child to express himself among his peers, the child also learns the power of being listened to, of convincing and of shaping the world.

Inside community libraries, children interact with animators like fish in the sea, like trolls in the forest. Animators use marvelous techniques to urge children into widening their imagination and into creativity. They read and then make up their own stories, and imitate the characters they create and give life to what they imagine through sketches they make. Libraries are becoming the mediums where these children release feelings and turn ambitions into reality.

Inside schools, Tamer undertakes a strategy of working with teachers on active learning techniques that includes children's literature to school courses. Tamer has worked with teachers from Governmental schools, and UNRWA schools on using storytelling, drama and puppet theatre to introduce information for children and to allow children analyze them and respond to them. Arts teachers were also provided with techniques of analyzing children's books illustrations with children inside classes.

Tamer Institute have not only built on networks with schools and community libraries, but also motivated for atmospheres where children and youth can express their feelings, needs and opinions, about what they read, live or involve in. Tamer initiated the 'Nakheel Youth Teams' and believes that these teams, help in creating atmospheres for expression.

No doubt that these activities build on the following three main basic concepts of the Institute :

- A) Self-confidence, determination and self esteem in decisions that youth take in life and in response to the changes on the social and political environments surrounding them.
- B) Constructive self- criticism, tolerance and negotiation skills among the youth teams and communities they live in.
- C) Intellectual prospects, critical thinking and experiences that strengthens youth attachment to their communities and cultural identities.

Youth participation had significant reflections during the past twenty years, both on the community level and on the individual level. Members of Youth groups of the institute have either joined leading productive initiatives, or have joined high level expression forums like journalism and writers.

Yara'at group

Yara'at is the newspaper for literature, which started in 1996 and represents a free forum for literary and educational self- expression for youth. *Yara'at* is open to all youth in Palestine and in the Diaspora to encourage them to express their personal experiences, feelings and ideas through creative writing and drawings.. Yaraat, in Arabic means the young pens, and it is representative of the free spirit of young people that flowers in our society to freely convey their feelings and creativities. It is envisioned, run, managed and produced for and by youth ages 14 - 23 years and urges them to share their ideas and experiences and seek facts and knowledge, while ensuring active and participatory learning. *Yara'at* is open to poetry, creative writings and drawings and welcomes debate and discussion of issues that relate to Palestinian youth today.

Today we can name several well – known writers who were part of Yaraat and have great impact in the country and the region: i.e Basima Takroui, Maan Samara, Buthayna Hamdane. Others have made their way in the media Gevara Budeiry and Hareth Rayyan, or main staff in NGOs promoting reading, such as: Ruba Totah, Ahmad Ashour, Hadeel Karkar.

Little Continent Group

The 'Small Continent Youth Group' aims to acquaint Palestinian youth and children with undiscovered geographic, natural, and historic aspects of Palestine through field trips, documentation of personal experiences and discovering the land, the people and the environment. It provides a comprehensive learning experience that involves physical, mental, and spiritual activities combined, all of which contribute to the development of the national identity of Palestinian youth and their relation to their environment.

The success of such activities in strengthening the Palestinian identity and creativity can be illustrated by the successful stories of several of its youth:

'Amer Shomali', who is today, leading a design firm and is to publish the first 90 minutes animation film in the Arab world.

Hafeth Omar, who is an active member of a youth initiative 'AL Mahata Galary' for abstract art, doing paintings and designs.

Wisam Albatran who is today a consultant in a successful regional firm for business advisory.

Voices Group

Voices from Palestine started in 2003, after the Israeli aggressions against West bank cities and villages, when Tamer youth expressed their need to convey their message to the international community. The youth write in English and explain what it means to live under Israeli occupation. This experience enhanced the youth awareness for the human rights and rights of the child. They are becoming our best advocates of those rights.

Hadeel Karkar from the first generation of *Voices* illustrated herself as teacher of English literature in Birzeit University. The institute is proud that

Hadeel is using the innovative skills and knowledge with university students and exchanging her experience in Tamer with them.

My First Book Competition

This initiative started in 1996 to support self confidence among children to use writing and drawing as tools for self expression. By publishing books for children in an early age, children are able to feel heard, appreciated, trusted and supported. This activity has been a motivator for children to address other children and adults and share experiences with them. Some of them have grown up into successful youth having self esteem and motivation for life.

Jouan Shamy , is a young woman who has once had her book published in my first book competition. Having her story written about a problem she has in her eye nerve, helped her become a doctor specialized in eyes, fully accepting her problem and taking initiative to help others accept it.

II Working with related sectors, stakeholders, decision makers.

In its efforts to ensure a positive environment to the child and a supportive community, Tamer has been playing a major role at the national level in multiple actions :

- The development of a strategy paper on developing children's literature within a common vision between all stakeholders. This strategy recognizes the importance of training and developing management skills for a better development of the sector.
- Networking actions between related sectors
- Visibility actions to promote the development of children creativity, as the organization of conferences on children's literature. Publishing magazines. Writing in the press.

Conclusion

Tamer believes in a mission that helps generations to conceptualize their needs and ambitions, get use of the values they gain, and translate them in the ways they choose. During the last few years, it also tried to mobilize the whole society, including decision makers, education specialists and all the sectors related to reading into working together in order to adopt its policy and achieve community change under occupation. Most of all, Tamer has a vision that is based on the belief that change is bound to happen, and the best is still to come, that best could only be achieved through the children ..
..... creating, smiling, aspiring and dreaming.

Thanks for listening