Growing by cultural differences while maintaining self identity in a challenging world [1]

Dr. Soroor Qarooni
Board member Bahrain Women Association for Human Development
Director Anti Child Abuse and Neglect Program Be-Free
Director Human Empowerment Technologies
Budaya
Bahrain
Cheeerup@hotmail.com

① Introduction

In this fast changing world, the factor that is getting bigger and bigger is diversity and differences. This is becoming more visible than ever in people from one family, extended family and community, let alone people from different religions and communities. Culture is no longer a national and a fixed issue that is defined by heritage, history or even common issues and values among people of close social relationships. Nowadays it is difficult to find people that have similar definitions of their culture, especially among children and teens.

Globalization in all its forms, including the media is reshaping young people's definition of culture and even challenges its meaning in the deepest level. The increase of the social networks in the internet such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace in addition to the easy access, attraction and interaction they provide, have a direct effect on young people's perception of the world and who they think they should be in this world. They might criticize some of the main values that their own culture inherits and may get attracted to other values that are far or even in conflict with the values of their own culture. In Be-Free center we do lots of work with children and teens in areas of helping them not only understand and respect differences and other cultures but how to grow and learn from different cultures while maintaining their own identity. Our work with children and teens in many Arab and Muslim countries provided us with some insight and experience of how to instill these concepts while they are young and at the same time help see this as a value. Some of the trained teens had themselves a role of "Peers-Helping-Peers" in this area which they have a range of interesting challenging, thrilling and successful stories that can be learned from.

This paper will give a brief on the current situation of children by focusing on children in the Arab world and Be-Free approach in dealing with part of these challenges that are related to differences and diversity.

① **Children and teens in this era**

Many children and teens in this era live a life that does not represent their culture. It is more difficult for parents to see themselves in their children compared to past generations. There are fundamental differences in many main issues including the way of life, concepts, expectations and dreams. In a study made by Be-Free, basic questions were asked to children and teens, that are known by their age, such as: What is the number one traditional food for Bahrain?; What does a grandparent mean in a family?; What is the traditional word used for condolences?. Only 20% of them were able to answer these three questions correctly, or close to the correct answer. In workshops that Be-Free has conducted for children and teens in some Arab worlds, it was found that the majority do not have the correct answers to similar basic questions.

There are many challenges facing children and teens, below are some of these main challenges:

③ **From generations flow to globalization**

Since the beginning of human history, knowledge and information were passed through parents to children. Parents always had more information and experiences about life than their children, and children needed to ask their parents questions about different issues including areas that may be embarrassing, difficult or complicated. Nowadays, this does not apply anymore. Children and teens have other ways to get answers to their critical questions such as the question of "Where do babies come from?". With the globalization and communication tools things are taking a different dimension. With a push of few buttons on the keyboard, they can get more information than what they asked for. They can get the feeling and excitement accompanied by the information. Parents no longer have control on the type and amount of information they want their children to know.

Role models are not defined by parents and parents are rarely considered to be role models for their children. On the other hand, the idea of having heroes as role models is decreasing, especially with teens. Many tend to have their own scattered role model built from many peoples, from different countries and different cultures, not one person. They may get beauty, power, life style, communication patterns, relationship management each from different people.

④ **Values**

Hollywood and many other main media and film producers that target teens are encouraging values that are far from universal human values. They focus on areas such as money, power, sex and beauty. This is one of the areas that many teens find it conflicting with their parents and community that have other values as its foundation. This whole process, increase the gap between teens and their families and close community.

⑤ **Attachments**

Children and teens have always been facing challenges in dealing with adults especially parents where they are forced to do things they don't like to do but are requested to. The difference nowadays is in the relief they can have by being online and live a total different experience. They have a convenience choice to have a parallel life on the internet especially when they are on sites that give them an experience of virtual life. They utilize MySpace, face book and other interactive social networks to build a life with no commitments and no real challenges. They can be a personality that they want to be and experience being it without any restrictions or supervision from adults.

They get detach more from their culture and community and get more to people of other cultures and different values. In a way, the definition of community is vague and geography and location is not a strong factor in communication and even attachment. It has an advantage of being exposed to differences but without a strong base, they may get confused and choose base on fun and easy life not on the bases of what is better for their personality and future.

⑥　　**Feelings**

Children and teens are dragged by fun and entertainment. They tend to live in the present rather than thinking of the future. In the Arab world, additional challenges are there that encourage children and teens to live in the present with fun. Many children and teens lack pride of their past and present as the nation's history is presented in a way that focus on the weak parts and ignores the bright and powerful areas. Moreover, the current political and social situation in most Arab world is not encouraging in addition to the Islam-phobia that is spread in many parts of the world which reflects in news and other media.

⑦　　**Be-Free approach in partnership with children and teens:**

Be-Free views the situation of the children and teens over the world as challenging. We also think that there are additional challenges facing Arab children and teens. Be-Free studied the situation for years and had children and teens from different areas and backgrounds involved in all its processes of understanding, evaluating, planning programs, implementing and re-evaluation. Since children and teens tend to listen to each other more than they are willing to listen and understand adults, Be-Free adopted a program called "Peers – Helping – Peers". It trains children to be effective and help their peers when they see them acting in a way that can be harmful to themselves or others. They get intensive training and consultation to help them find ways to encourage their peers to think in other ways and use words to inspire and help them evaluate and see other sides of what they are intending to do or act.

In addition, Be-Free conduct different workshops targeting children and teens in schools, clubs and other places where they gather. These workshops focus on Basic life skills empowered by main concepts about dealing with differences and understanding cultures and how can they grow with them.

Be-Free works with children and teens to build a strong foundation where they can compare against when they want to adopt and choose from. This foundation is Universal Human Values as it is common in all religions and cultures. Lying, cheating, blackmailing, hurting are against these values. We work with them on the importance of acknowledging other people's way of life and choices. They are also encouraged to learn to have non judgmental approaches to different ways of dealing with similar issues.

Having the Universal Human Values in mind as a base, they are encouraged to note and acknowledge the positive and creative side of the differences and learn from them. They are encouraged to review what they do and see if what they learn can help them live in a better and more positive way that helps them and others. They are encouraged to build a vivid picture of who they want to be and achieve based on their personalities and abilities and not necessarily copying others whom they might choose as role models.

Be-Free is aiming to help all children and teen to view themselves as important people whom presence in the world can make a change. One of the main areas that we work with children and teens to strengthen this belief is the concept of leadership and power. In Be-Free, we adopt the definition of leadership that states everyone that can invite a positive change, no matter how small, is a leader and has power. This concept worked very strongly with children and teens and the feedback we got from children and teens, their parents and school is highly encouraging. They report a change in attitude, more self esteem, less violence and more respect for others and life as a whole. In addition, they report that these children and teens could attract more friends which in turn give them the feeling of power.

---

[1] This article is a summary of the paper titled "Growing by cultural differences while maintaining self identity in a challenging world" presented at the International Conference on Multiculturalism and Global Community organised by the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies in cooperation with the Sharif University of Technology, Iran, the Iranian National Commission for UNESCO and the Museum of World Religions from 24 – 27 July 2010 in Tehran, Iran. The entire research paper can be requested from the author: **Cheeerup@hotmail.com**