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Spotlight Session: Identity

Sunday October 8th, 2017

Speaker

Amal Belhoul, Advisor to Watani, UAE

Moderated/Facilitated by: **Maryam Bin Fahad**, Executive Director, Dubai Press Club

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

Values represent the nucleus from which cultural identification is shaped. In her work with Watani Dr. Belhoul tries to link values to the concept of citizenship to activate good practices. The United Arab Emirates' focus is on achieving the goals of the United Nations and the OECD. The government's Vision 2021 aims to reach the international benchmarks by initiatives such as the Moral Education Program (MEP), which was launched in all schools across the UAE in September.

"The deployment of good citizenship values should be shouldered by teachers," Dr. Belhoul said.

Dr. Belhoul is confident that students will easily understand global citizenship practices; in fact, she thinks values such as tolerance and respect come naturally and are only threatened from bad teaching at home or in school. A study done by Watani demonstrates this dichotomy; the UAE scores highly in the area of "respecting the rights of others" but very low at "being considerate." "Individual and social values are not integrated," she said. "Many of the respondents say they don't [interact with] Emiratis. Why is there a lack of equilibrium?"

Globalization is one of the factors. Dr. Belhoul explained national identity is sometimes threatened by foreign cultures. English is often the mother tongue of youth in the UAE instead of Arabic. This means that a new generation spends less time with their families and feels alienated from society.

A new approach of co-operation is needed. Dr. Belhoul noted that in places such as Finland, the Netherlands, Korea and Japan, working in education is viewed with great esteem. She suggested that the UAE revive the profession by developing Masters and PhD programs. Worksheets were distributed to attendees listing values and cultural practices. Dr. Belhoul encouraged the audience to evaluate themselves honestly on such questions as: "Do you practice the Emirati yolla dance? Do you visit the UAE's museums? Do you know what the museums are and where they are





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located? Do you study our traditions?” She encouraged people to take the next step and ask their children or students the same questions. She suggested using games as a way to introduce these social values.

Takeaway: Globalization has lead to a generation in the UAE that feels alienated from its traditional values. The challenge for teachers to instill citizenship ideals such as tolerance in students while at the same time reinforce their identity.

