

OMEP World Conference, Shanghai 2013

Reflections by

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The conference began with what matters most; children. The spectacular acrobatic and singing performances from two kindergartens reinforced the notion of children as competent agents.



We then heard from a series of insightful welcoming addresses including the Vice Minister of Education Dr. Limin Liu and the OMEP world president Ingrid Samuelsson. Minister Liu spoke about the challenges in providing quality early years education for children in rural western China. He went on to discuss the vast amount of money China is investing in early years education showing their belief in the importance of providing the very best starts for young children. Ingrid spoke about how we should be seeing early years education and care as a central player in health, sanitation, hygiene, education, social work, child advocacy and many more elements, including sustainability. This highlights the impact that having good quality and holistic early years services could have for children worldwide.

During the course of the conference delegates from many of the seventy-three countries in attendance presented a vast array of wonderfully enlightening talks about many topics surrounding the early years. We have picked just three highlights to briefly share with you:

The Effect of Organisational Culture on R-Learning Professionalism and Kindergarten Teachers -Yeon Sueng Lee, Min Jung Kang and Sun Mi Park.

Hannah attended an interesting talk on R-Learning, a method of teaching used in South Korea to engage children in education. 'R-Learning' is a combination of the word 'robot' and 'learning' and it involves a robot taking the role of a teaching assistant to support children's learning. The robots come with their own educational content, have voice recognition technology and are touch sensitive (search the internet for Dongbu Robot Genibo Dog to see a picture). The paper studied Kindergarten teachers professionalism when using robots in the pre-school. 422 teachers were studied and measured in terms of their professionalism towards R-Learning subcategorised into 'Knowledge' (of child development, and of how to use robots in school) 'Attitude' (positive recognition of R-Learning) and 'Skills' (manipulation of robots and teaching and class management). The results suggested that teachers need training courses to improve their knowledge of robots as they had a positive attitude to using robots but a passive attitude to learning how to use them. Professionalism levels were related to the leadership of schools and levels of support within the organisational culture. The presentation revealed a very different attitude and emphasis to technology based learning than is used in England. The researchers then gave us a demonstration with a robot dog and it did look like a high level of skill and knowledge was needed to understand the controls!

Living with Tensions - Jane Zhou

Jemima attended a talk by Jane Zhou who was undertaking her doctorate about early years teachers in China. Jane talked about the tensions between teaching within private, public and international pre-schools in China. The comparison highlighted differences in Western and Chinese early years approaches as well as the differences between the theoretical thought of teaching and the reality of actually doing it. She also talked about how the pay and working conditions are better in public pre-schools but how these jobs are harder to come across. In addition, how it is only if you know someone within the public system you can get your child into a public early years setting which is a lot cheaper in comparison. In addition, how the Chinese teachers engaged in many more training meetings throughout a given week in comparison to English teachers. It was clear that different styles of teaching as

well as changing attitudes towards early years education in China was causing tensions, arguably a sentiment echoed within England.

Working in Early Years in the Pacific Regions - Wendy Rich-Orloff

Kerry attended a presentation by Wendy Rich-Orloff, who is based in Fiji and works with 14 of the countries which make the Pacific Region Islands, consolidating and co-ordinating early years across the islands. Wendy told us about teaching and learning resources in this region, and some of the challenges which they face within their early years centres. It was a fascinating presentation with many photographs, showing how early years settings look in the region. We were all amazed at how simple they were; yet effective. Natural resources are definitely the way forward! There are many challenges which they face in this region - environmental risks being one of the biggest. We saw evidence of how destructive cyclones are to the region, and how the small countries work together to rebuild. She told us how difficult arranging training sessions can be, when teachers from across the region have to come together. Language barriers were also prevalent with each of the countries having its own native language! What was clear though was how each nation is working to improve and raise the awareness of the early years sector, much like we are in the UK.

Early Years in China

Over the course of the conference we sampled many Chinese delights including jellyfish, duck with seven fillings and traditional Chinese dancing, singing and acrobatics. This was particularly impressive as many of the acts were performed by kindergarten teachers! A favourite for everyone it seemed was visiting the kindergartens; we were fascinated by a different culture's approach to early years. Particularly fascinating was the approach to re-using and recycling, a skill we will definitely be taking back with us to England and perfectly reflecting the theme of the conference, sustainable development.



We are looking forward to the OMEP 2014 conference in Cork which was introduced following the new appointment of Maggie Koong the new world president of OMEP. We wish to thank OMEP for sponsoring us to attend the conference and giving us the opportunity to meet and be inspired by academics and experts from all over the world.

