

When the whole world was talking

World Forum on Early Care and Education, 2009

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Commencing the conversations

It was in Belfast, Northern Ireland, June 2009, when 625 early childhood professionals from more than 80 countries gathered to attend the Eighth World Forum on Early Care and Education.

We arrived as strangers, unsure of what to expect but certain that destinies would be determined and career paths changed through listening to professional dialogue and engaging with communities in passionate conversation.

Conversations to connect children as citizens

A challenging question was posed to the group.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is 20 years old: should we celebrate? Every one of us here, whatever country or context we come from, can give proof to the fact that the rights are not a reality for every child.

We must celebrate the existence of the Convention as a platform on which to stand and address the needs confronting and surrounding all of us. Individual schools have achieved great things through the involvement of young children in identifying their rights as citizens. Children from the Boulder Journey School in Colorado contributed their perspectives.

Children have the right to have fun; be listened to; clean air; play tea parties, even with real tea; hang upside down when it is safe; guess how things work; have their hair look like they want; and lots more!

Presenter Clionagh Boyle challenged our views on quality environments, media initiatives and programmes to support special differences, giving us a greater understanding of the complexities of the ecology of Child Rights.

Critical conversations on conservation

If we want to save our world then we have to develop the love of nature in our children while they are young. We all need to love the earth and its natural treasures before we will work to save it.

Presentations covered topics such as perspectives on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Early Childhood through

indigenous knowledge, entrepreneurial thinking, and the recycling of waste, all critical issues for human survival (John Siraj-Blatchford); Early Childhood Reggio inspired environments in Australia and America (Fran Bastion); and the richness of nature as the foundation and uniting thread in all quality learning experiences (Clare Warden).

Creative conversations

Delegates were creatively courted and converted by verbal and non-verbal conversations. A workshop by Maureen Harris on Montessori music was discussed around tables long after the event. The role of photography and filmmaking was another creative avenue presenting new directions in education. The busy art session challenged participants to think creatively by “creating community through the language of materials”.

Conversations with champions

Lillian Katz in her address, Conversations on Early Childhood Education, said “Whoever might be the leader of our country in 40 or 50 years from now, is likely to be in someone’s early childhood program today... Knowing about children is not enough, we must know each child.” She spoke with such wisdom and clarity, challenging us to think about the essentials of teacher education and competence.

It was life changing and life giving to be present and share ‘real space’ with amazing creators, mentors and leaders. I found myself chatting with Lillian Katz over a book signing; catching a lift with Margaret Akinawbe, a beloved spokeswoman for Africa’s children; listening to the gentle Jan Peeters crusading for men in Early Childhood Education; devouring Dr Stuart Shanker’s critical findings on how social and emotional interactions develop the mind thereby affecting the development of the brain; and reflecting with Professor Colin Gibbs as he described teachers who have “presence” as those who promote wonderment, love and compassion. These experiences now make reading research seem like a friendly chat with newly found friends.

Captured by a conversation

Whilst taking a final stroll around Belfast, I witnessed

“If we want to save our world then we have to develop the love of nature in our children while they are young”

Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

an inspirational scene. There amongst a double row of water fountains a young, bright-eyed, giggling boy with tight black curls ran, jumped and danced for joy as spouts of water splashed over his face and soaked his beautiful clothes. With arms raised high to the sunshine, ready to catch the water as it fell, he clapped enthusiastically, spreading the water all around. His father, a well-groomed businessman, stood back laughing. Passers-by paused, suspending their lives for a moment to absorb this sacred scene of childhood joy.

I realised that captured and expressed in this moment was much of what this World Forum promoted; the importance of the role of men and father's in the lives of children; the importance of spontaneous play; the need to incorporate natural play-spaces in public places in order to connect children to nature; the willingness of adults to suspend their agendas and allow time to appreciate the spontaneous expressions of children's joy; the friendship and hospitality of strangers; the celebration of diversity; the view of children as our teachers and often times, healers; the call to remember that children are our first priority, they are

citizens now; and the refreshing notion that it is good to take time to celebrate!

The conversations go global

The power of our conversations throughout this week will result in the creation of something new, something good. Our words create worlds, worlds of hope, peace, love and greater joy for children and those who work with them and for them.

Bonnie Neugebaur offered the 2009 World Forum Challenge, which can potentially involve all of us in advocating for children. It's called *1:01*. At one minute past one, everyday, take 1 minute to advocate for improving the life of young children in some small or large way. There is an online web blog where you can be inspired by others or tell your story of advocacy for children (www.worldforumfoundation.org).

In 2011, the World Forum is destined for another city. Wherever that may be, plan to attend. It is a time where you will feel the world's warmest heartbeat and hear the most inspiring words helping to re-ignite your love of children and empower your contribution to it. TEACH

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