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A Report on Attending a Conference on Early Childhood Studies

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I am a Saudi researcher interested in Early Childhood Studies, and I am conducting Ph.D. research in children's creativity in visual art. I recently had a valuable opportunity to attend a relevant conference that featured three well-known speakers in the field of Early Childhood Studies who discussed their recent research and projects. The AGM and Autumn Conference 'I am five and I know everything' was held on Saturday, 10 November 2018 at Middlesex University in London, United Kingdom. The conference was organised by Early Education, The British Association for Early Childhood Education, and was sponsored exclusively by Pearson Education. The conference ran from 9 am until 4 pm with two breaks, a short first one for coffee, which lasted for 15 minutes, and a long second one for lunch, which lasted for one hour and a half. There were over 50 attendees for all aspects of early years' education, including preschool teachers, undergraduates and postgraduate students, preschools' managers and owners and parents.

The first half hour was for registration, then the next hour was for an annual general meeting for Early Education. The British Association for Early Childhood Education presented the aims and progress of the association over the last year and thanked and honoured those who have been working with them and were about to retire, followed by a short break.

At 10:50 am the introduction and the welcome at the conference was planned to be presented by Professor Cathy Nuthrown, President of Early Education. However, for some reason the professor was unable to attend so one of the association members took over. The member spoke about the reason behind the title of the conference: 'I am five and I know everything'. It is the story of a child who she was trying to help, but he refused, saying he is five and knows what to do.

This report talks from the writer's perspective about the most important points that were presented as new and valuable information to be shared. The conference featured three speakers. The first one started at 11 am, then the second at 12 pm and the last one at 1:45 pm after the lunch break.

The first speaker

Rod Parker-Rees, visiting research fellow, University of Plymouth. Mr Parker-Rees' speech was about 'Playing in and Life Experience'.

Mr Parker-Rees spoke about how children learn more from families and home in

their daily lives than in school. Educators set up educational environments to provide children with learning experiences, but children learn more from what they experience and are involved in daily. This can be called Soft Knowledge.

Some of the most important points that were touched on are the following:

1. Children perform some actions and adopt attitudes from the context without knowing the reason beyond them, simply by watching those who are around them.
2. When involved in an experiment, children tend to prefer people who are collaborators over those who are not.
3. Children care about what they and their families do. For example, what are they doing after having a meal? Or tomorrow?
4. The practice of sharing what happened during the day helps children to learn what can and cannot be said, what is important to be mentioned, and not so much by asking, what did you do today?

The second speakers

Isla Hill, Education Director, Make Believe Arts, and Bonnie Mendoza, reception teacher. Ms Hill's presentation was about what the speakers call Helicopter Stories. These are a way of supporting children to imagine and express themselves and their thoughts and feelings by telling their own stories. Having performed the Helicopter Stories approach on children five years old in her preschool for many years, Ms Hill talked about the impact and input of applying such a teaching approach to children of that age.

Some of the most important points that were presented are:

1. Children are always waiting to be asked to tell their stories.
2. It is important for children to tell their stories in order to form relationships with others because people read and listen to stories in order to understand others and feel sympathy for them.
3. A teacher's role is to help children find the answer or solution for their questions and issues, but not by giving it to them.
4. When a child is asked to tell a story and they make it up, their story should not be corrected to be more logical and meaningful, even if the whole story becomes only a name of someone.
5. It is important to ask children to act while telling stories. For example, when a child tells their story, it is vital to allow them to act by telling a child's story and asking the child and other children what a tree/a dinosaur looks like. And then allowing them to act as a tree/a dinosaur.

The third speaker

Professor Usha Goswami, University of Cambridge.

Professor Goswami's talk was called Communication, Language and Foundation for Literacy: The Early Years. The professor talked about the findings of recent research

on the development of language and communication in children from birth to six years old.

Some of the most important points that were presented are:

1. Infants make sounds in order to gain attention from the people around them and interact with them.
2. Children's brains interact with whomever is around them in terms of language, even when children are sleep.
3. By the age of six, children know 5000 words in their language.
4. Children's brains learn languages faster than adults until the age of ten or so.
5. When correcting children's sentences, educators should only repeat the sentences correctly.
6. Singing with children and clapping hands foster the process of learning language in the brain, especially for children who suffer from dyslexia.
7. The process of learning a language requires providing information from the surrounding environment through having meaningful conversations with children.
8. The quality of a story is not as important as the level of communication, interaction and sound making with children during the story time.
9. When knowledge is not shared with others, it becomes useless and without value.

All Professor Usha's collected points were based on research.

Finally, at 2:45 pm, the last talk was about Reclaiming Our Early Year Curriculum: A Conversation about Ways Forward. The talk was given by a member of the association. The last talk consisted mostly of members of the audience asking the speakers of the conference some questions and gathering some suggestions about the speeches and the conference and then discussing them until the end of the conference at 4 pm.

To sum up, the conference provided the results of recent research and new approaches regarding important topics in children's' lives such as play, story, communication, language and literacy, in order to apply to children in preschools. Also, listening to the audiences' experiences in relation to what was being presented, reflected the reality of English preschools and the Early Years Foundation Stage, which is different from my background experiences in preschools in my home country of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the experience of attending the conference was worth sharing and reporting about.

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