

A world of good

The recent World Forum on Early Care and Education was a positive experience, reports *David Wright*

Advances in neuroscience continue to confirm what we already know intuitively – that we, human beings, are innately social and our emotional well-being is contingent on healthy relationships. We thrive in community. We grow and achieve through mutual inspiration and encouragement. These principles underpin the World Forum Foundation, a movement that has grown out of the simple notion of sharing best practice in an American locality to become a global agent for change.

By example, it challenges us to rise above our own situation and work with colleagues from different nations and contexts to improve the life chances of young children. It advocates for all children, celebrating diversity and declaring all that we hold in common.

The latest biennial World Forum on Early Care and Education (ECE) was held in Auckland, New Zealand in May, and taking part was a privilege, with nearly 700 colleagues from more than 60 countries attending.

The event comprised a programme of cultural, educational, inspiring, affirming and poignant plenary and seminar sessions, with optional visits to local settings. Contributions were varied, colourful and impactful.

FROM NEPAL TO COLUMBIA

We heard from colleagues working with survivors of the Nepalese earthquakes – children who have experienced trauma and loss, of their homes, their mobility, their parents and family members. Also from Nepal, Indira Ranamager presented her work on strengthening the resilience of children of incarcerated parents. Rana Ismael, working in Lebanon with displaced Syrian children, described her work providing play therapy opportunities and childhood activities in refugee camps.



Indira Ranamager discussed work in Nepal



Article author David Wright (right) meets his namesake, David Wright, in Papakura

We watched a video from Maria Clemencia Rodriguez Muenra, the First Lady of Colombia, in which she outlined her belief in the importance of early years education, policy changes, and the finances her country is committing to ensure all children there receive a quality early years education.

Among many other events in a packed programme, I visited the Tech Playground, where we were invited to explore and play with ‘cheap tech’ resources costing a few dollars – microscopes, LED lights, cameras, see-through boxes and coloured slides – to create imaginative displays. I attended seminars on observation, leadership, children’s rights, gender, race and equity, quality relationships and connecting children with nature – facilitated by the UK’s Claire Warden from Mindstretchers.

Also from the UK, Cheryl Hadland of Tops Nurseries ran a pop-up workshop on ‘Saving the planet from destructive waste and climate change’. And Laura Henry, a UK representative of the World Forum, gave a personal account of the impact of her involvement with the organisation (see <https://youtu.be/TQE5Hsu4sJ8>).

I was a presenter at the session on ‘the importance of men in early childhood education’, which turned out to be interactive and personal. There were inspiring examples of settings that have built a more balanced gender workforce, with accompanying evidence of improved outcomes for their children, positive support from parents and healthy group dynamics. Equally, there were disheartening tales of discrimination, suspicion and loneliness from some individual male practitioners.

Overall, there was a recommitment to the working forum on Men in ECE, with many attendees registering a determination that the next World Forum will report on significant progress in changing culture, expectations and the number of men working with our youngest children.

MEN IN CHILDCARE

During my stay, I was also able to attend a national event for Men in Early Years – EC-MENz – in Papakura, 30km south of Auckland, and hosted by my namesake.

In my journal for the day, I noted, ‘In one sense, it was just a group of men chatting, throwing a ball around, playing guitar, stirring the fire pit and sharing meals together, but at another level there was a significance to the sharing of stories, the validation and affirmation of one another’s vocation. Speakers referred to “brave” men. There was a lot of laughter.

‘A major theme was playfulness and power of humour to engage with children. There was reassurance that it is OK to be yourself. Men were encouraged to be authentic and true to their identity. Someone made the comment about being child-like and having the ability to join children in their world. Someone else asked, “Do you mean like Peter Pan?” I reflected that maybe we are all seeking permission to fly to Neverland, to cast off the uncertainty of adulthood and to create a safe place of imagination and creativity in which to build relationships together with children.’

There were two overseas speakers. Ron Blatz from Canada encouraged and commended the group for their achievements and their example to others around the world in bringing male early years practitioners together. American Jerry Parr recalled his second day as an early years teacher: he discovered that the rest of the staff had all been arrested at the weekend on a protest march and he was left to run the school single-handedly, with the help of some parents!

Russell, the organiser, closed the proceedings with this comment, ‘We have a well-kept secret. We do the best job in the world. We just need to share it with others.’

I would completely agree.

FURTHER INFORMATION

● <https://worldforumfoundation.org>