

## **PECERA (Hong Kong) Launching Ceremony**

### **Speech by Dr. Betty Chan Po-king Chairperson of PECERA (Hong Kong)**

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#### *PECERA: The Future of Early Childhood Education in Hong Kong*

Mrs. Fanny Law, Prof. Cheng Kai-ming, Prof. Spodek, distinguished guests and professional colleagues,

I want to thank Dr. Spodek for very clearly expressing the aims of the Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA). Prof. Spodek, you were present at the creation of PECERA, so it seems particularly fitting that you should be here today at the birth of PECERA's Hong Kong branch. Mrs. Law, Dr. Cheng, your presence here today lends great support to the movement towards full recognition of the significance of early care and education of children, our future leaders.

Looking at the countries around this vast Pacific Rim, one could say this region represents a microcosm of the 21st century global village. It includes the world's three most widely spoken languages - Chinese, English, and Spanish, as well as other languages of international commerce - French, Japanese, and Korean, among the myriad languages in this vast region. And these primary languages reflect the ongoing fusion of Eastern and Western cultures.

If you look at the GDP of the countries around the Pacific Rim, you can sense the growing financial, economic, and commercial dynamism of the region. APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) was established in 1989, and it now numbers 21 member economies around the Pacific Rim, spanning four continents with a combined population of 2.6 billion people. This APEC region represents 57% of the world's GDP (US\$20.7 trillion) and 45.8 percent of world trade (US\$7 trillion). APEC member states generated nearly 70% of global economic growth in its first ten years, and continues to astonish the world by the level and intensity of its economic growth and potential.

Relative to Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Western and Central Asia, the Pacific Rim is generally stable and peaceful, quietly building its reserves, developing its production capacity, generating material goods and products for the world's markets, strengthening its human resources, and influencing world trends in the arts, music, fashion, and design. Here we feel the forces of modernization and the full impact of globalization. Here we feel the clash and fusion of civilizations and cultures. Here we are building the bridges between East and West.

At the heart of this dynamic and creative tension is China. The oldest continual civilization and culture in human history, China is bringing into the arena of human development all the thinking, learning, philosophy, theory, and understanding accumulated over the past 5000 years. Although it does not have the empirical base of understanding early childhood development, nevertheless over centuries China has

developed a philosophical understanding of the embryonic development and prenatal care of the child, which Western studies are only now recognizing.

The Chinese have always understood that life begins with conception and that the embryo develops and grows within the womb, that everything the mother takes in influences this growth – what the mother eats and drinks, how the mother takes care of herself. This concept of development has been transmitted from our ancestors and is deeply ingrained in Chinese thinking. We all know that human life from conception is growing, learning, developing. For us, the mother is the first educator and we know instinctively that Early Childhood Education is important.

There are many records and references in earlier Chinese texts expressing the principles of early childhood education, particularly with regard to prenatal education, family teaching, and the early childhood physical education of young children. Prenatal nurturing in Chinese history refers to fostering the physical and mental growth of the baby in the mother's womb. The objective of Chinese parents engaged in prenatal teaching is to maximize their child's educational opportunities early in life. These ideas of prenatal teaching go back as far as 2,500 years ago in China where education was embedded in different aspects such as the family, philosophy, and medicine. In the Zhou dynasty, for example, the Queen of Zhou practiced the earliest known prenatal education to her embryonic child so that when the child was born the child would be a worthy successor to the throne.

Later in history, prenatal teaching could still be found in numerous texts and medical journals like Yan's Family Teaching – Teaching Your Offspring 《顏氏家訓--教子篇》, Zhu Xi's Primary Education – Foundation Education 朱熹《小學--立教第一》 and Introductory to Medicine 《醫學入門》 in the Ming Dynasty. These texts include references on how a family can teach their own children. They speak of the importance of the environment, the emotional state of the mother, and how to protect the embryo and newborn during the prenatal and early childhood phases. This includes helping the mother to be happy by providing a calm, nurturing environment. The use of poetry and music to achieve this state of serenity is emphasized, so you often see depictions of women playing the harp or another musical instrument in Chinese art. They indicate foods the mother should eat to influence the growth of the embryo and which contribute to a calm emotional state.

The Chinese have a famous saying, which most Chinese still believe today, that “childhood is the determining factor of a life” (三歲定八十). Some will say that in the three-year-old child you can almost foresee how the child will be at 80. These notions reflect the importance among Chinese of early childhood education, especially prenatal nurturing which has been firmly rooted in all Chinese societies.

Today, Western research is producing empirical evidence and findings that are authenticating what the Chinese have always known instinctively as transmitted from their ancestors. Now PECERA (Hong Kong) can make a significant contribution bringing together Eastern philosophy and Western research and technology to merge into a 21st

century understanding of human growth and development which can influence change in our concepts of early childhood education.

Because, as Dr. Spodek suggests, philosophies, concepts and approaches change, particularly through the dissemination of ideas and practices, the establishment of PECERA-Hong Kong is vital to the future of early childhood education in the region. It will nurture research, provide a database of researchers and practitioners, establish a network of researchers, scholars and educators, and offer a forum for the sharing, discussion, and dissemination of ideas in early childhood education.

One objective of PECERA-Hong Kong is to bring together into one forum various disciplines, which traditionally may have been considered to be outside the area of early childhood education. What we have learned from the Chinese experience is that early childhood is the very foundation of a person, from embryonic development into the first years of human life. Therefore, modern research findings in many areas may impact the growth and development of a person's life, and hence are significant to early childhood education. These areas include nutrition, public health, environmental science, medical and chiropractic knowledge, psychology, sociology, meditation, architecture and design, interior design and spatial relations, among others, which may all impact the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual development of the child. All of these scholars, researchers and practitioners should have a chance to share their findings in the kind of forum we envision for PECERA-Hong Kong. Only through such sharing can we hope to have a synthesis and fusion of ideas into new concepts to be disseminated.

Early childhood education is about not only the holistic development of the child but fostering and enhancing the quality of life, which stems from the early foundation years. If we want a peaceful world, then the qualities of peaceful world citizens must be engendered through early childhood education. As educators we guide and nurture the young on the journey from local to global.

Hong Kong is in a key position to take the lead in this process. Hong Kong itself is an international city, which has grown out of the fusion of East and West. It is at the center of globalization. Its universities and research institutions are an amalgamation of Western and Eastern knowledge and technology. It is undergoing educational reform to meet the needs of the 21st century. This is an opportune time to establish a branch of the Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA) in Hong Kong. It signifies the increasing role Hong Kong can play in the international educational arena.

I have high hopes that PECERA-Hong Kong will become a model international forum whereby we can create new networks of diverse professionals into one platform from where – through dialogue, exchange of papers, conferences, seminars, discussions, etc. – the spark of creativity can ignite a synergy that will benefit young children, our future leaders. To achieve this, PECERA-Hong Kong promises to sponsor one conference per year so that our members can bring back and share the theme and major presentations from the PECERA conference in whatever country it is held in a particular year. In addition, throughout the year we can have special seminars,

workshops, or smaller focus groups where research can be shared, discussed, and promoted.

PECERA (Hong Kong) can play a leadership role in advancing research on early childhood education, and helping us to understand that you do not have to be an ECE practitioner to engage in research and have an impact on the early care and education of young children. All of you who were invited here today were invited with purpose. Some of you come from fields not traditionally thought of as part of early childhood education. We invite you to participate with us in PECERA (Hong Kong) so that together we can begin to understand the full dimension and impact of the early care and education of young children.

Today I warmly welcome our PECERA delegation from Korea. As a result of your presentation I am sure many will want to support and attend the 2006 PECERA Conference in Korea. Beyond Korea, I am confident that when we come together again in Hong Kong for the 2007 PECERA Conference, our network and activities in early childhood education will have spread far and wide in the Pacific Rim.