

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

### **Draft Speech by Dr. Wei Li-Chen Programme Director of PECERA (Hong Kong)**

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#### *PECERA: A Personal Reflection on the Sixth PECERA Conference*

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great honor to be given such opportunity at this event to share my experience and reflection of the last PECERA Conference in July 2005 in Taipei. I would like to start this sharing with a brief overview of the conference. The theme of this conference was “Understanding Individual and Cultural Differences among Children”. During the two and a half days of conference, there were more than 150 researches presented in addition to the invited keynote speeches and symposiums. Because there were only few presenters from Australia and North America last year, the majority of the presenters were from Asian Pacific region such as China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Philippines, Taiwan, etc (in alphabetical order). The participants were engaged in a rich and diverse knowledge and information exchange despite an unexpected visit by typhoon Hai Tang. Because the time limit, I am going to share three personal observations and reflections inspired by my experience participating in this conference.

- I. Being at the conference site, in and out of the sessions, keynote speeches and symposiums, it gave me a feeling that the early childhood education in Asian Pacific region is gaining its own identity. This can be supported by three points. The first is the nature of originality of academic research. Because of this, the issues and problems had been studied and the knowledge generated and shared at a conference as such are imbedded in and uniquely to its social, cultural, and political contexts in the region. For example, a study from the Philippines reported on using indigenous knowledge as a foundation for developing a science-based curriculum for community kindergarten in northern Philippines; while a group of researchers from Japan compared the differences between a science curriculum on water through free play approach, which they called “traditional method in Japan” vs. another method of a series of teacher-initiated activities. The second point is the breadth of the scope of the topics researched and reported. It include a wide variety of issues and aspects in the early childhood education, from specific teaching methods to curriculum approaches, special education, parenting, child development, teacher education and professional development, management and leadership, etc. etc. Research in early childhood education in this region is not narrowly focused. The conference painted a fuller and richer picture of what we are concerned as early childhood education in Asian Pacific today. The third point came from my impression of participating in the symposium – Windows to Taiwan’s Early Childhood Education Programs and the tour of two kindergartens in Taipei. The symposium was presented by three kindergartens in Taiwan, one from rural area, and the other two from urban. Through the tour and symposium, we had opportunities to have a glimpse into each of the programs. Although they are so different because they each has a school based program and curriculum, together they form an early childhood education that

is really for young children. From this experience, one no longer sees a traditional curriculum model that is narrowly defined from formal schooling, or a standard package based on one-size-fits-all rationales. What you see is how teachers use their unique environment and context, create an open and dynamic yet purposeful education that actively provoke and support children's interest in learning through direct involvement in the experience, through exploration and inquiry. Theory and practice are the two sides of a coin. They cannot exist without each other, nor can they develop without each other. The representation of the practice aspect the conference provides compensated the theoretical work presented well for the participants, and makes up an imperative component of the identity of ECE as a profession.

- II. Being at the conference site, listening to the keynote speeches and symposium, my second impression is that early childhood educators in the Asian Pacific region began to pay attention to the issues that had been receiving more and more attention in those modern and/or post-modern societies, which are equity and social justice aspect of early childhood education. It may be a reflection of democratic progresses in the societies in general. Research concerns and representation start to include issues concerning children's welfare and development in the marginalized or underprivileged communities and groups, although there were only handful presentations. They are topics such as children from low socioeconomic status families, children from parents of immigrant or with disabilities, children with special needs. While the keynote speech "Teaching for cultural and linguistic diversity in early childhood settings" by Susan Grieshaber from Australia directly addresses equity issues in education for culturally and linguistically diverse students, the most salient session for me was the symposium: Early Childhood Education for Aboriginal Children in Taiwan: The Past, Now and the Next step. This session brought our awareness of equity issues in the education such as curriculum, resources, availability and accessibility for the young aboriginal children in Taiwan. It illustrates educators concerns and advocacy for underprivileged children in a non-western context. It also directly responded to the theme of the conference.
- III. My last reflection came from two sources: on the one hand, it was inspired by the two other keynote speeches: Society, Culture and Education by Professor Chien Chu-ying and "Fan-lau-huan-tung" and "Fan-pu-guei-jen": New Lessons from Old Sayings by Professor Kau Ching-ven; and on the other hand, came from my professional and living experience on the both sides of the Pacific. As Susan Grieshaber stated in her keynote speech: "Globalization has brought economic, political and cultural changes that have affected all dimensions of education, including the early years" (2005, p.30). Indeed it seems that in Asian societies that I came in contact, globalization is making its visible impact. For example, in the shopping center near my home in suburb Seattle, USA, there is a brand name children's clothing store, where they also carry some children's music tapes and DVDs. Two months after I moved to Shanghai, a program opened up in my new neighborhood by the same company. This time, it was a program that teaches young children English. The big banner hanging on the building says "World Class Early Childhood Education". An article in a local magazine reported how much attention this program is receiving from the parents in Shanghai. It describes how a couple

of young parents, though not making very high income, scrubs to send their daughter of one and a half years old to attend this program twice a week.

Through her research, Professor Chien, taking a macro perspective, brings our attention to the issues and dilemmas that globalization brings on education. Her analysis also brings an awareness to the effects that some concurrent movements in the society such as localization and informationalization have on education. Professor Gao, drawing from old wisdoms of Chinese culture, reminds us about the true meaning of life, and not to forget what the education for our youngest group is all about. While the content of last conference reflects certain level of breadth of research topics, I would like to see more in-depth theoretical thinking on those fundamental issues that impact the life of young children and therefore the development of ECE in our region in the future. In reflecting the last conference, it is evident that most of the researches presented were guided by the theories, concepts or models from the Western contexts. The traveling of information has reached a speed faster than it has ever been before. Just to look into the publications of translated books in early childhood education, some Chinese translation editions were published very closely to, if not at the same time of its English originals. However we need to avoid taking these “imported thinking products” at its “face value” without gaining the understanding of the historical and cultural backgrounds they were generated and their underlying assumptions. Without a critical examination, the appropriateness of Western theories’ applications and/or adaptations in Asian Pacific cultures is not guaranteed. Just to give an extreme example, in a translation of an ECE professional book, the term “Piggy Bank” was translated literally as “Little Pig Bank” (小猪银行) instead of its corresponding term in Chinese. Another example, the idea of “respect young children” and child-centeredness, originated from Romantic Movement and Progressive movement in the west are wide-spread in many classrooms nowadays. Yet quite often, one can observe the “respectfulness” remains as being “warm and nice” to children without truly recognizing young children’s inner capacities of learning, and the support for its growth. Consequently teaching and learning remains as a teacher controlled one-way process. The traditional paradigm has not been shifted. On the other hand, teachers can also be apprehensive by their interpretation of child-centeredness as “children can do whatever they do”. Once there was a report of a child misbehaving in the classroom, where the program has a stated value of child-centeredness. The teacher seemed not knowing what to do, and ended up asking the child to stop as a help to save her face “给我点面子好不好?”. When a new method, approach, theory, or paradigm is introduced, there is much work for us to do as how it is applicable to our own situation, what essence is meaningful to our own development, how it is similar and different to our assumptions of teaching and learning, of methods of classroom management, behavior management and discipline. What is our vision for young children in our time and place? As the dilemmas Professor Chien laid out in her analysis, educators inevitably have to make decisions on choices. All these require that we have the understanding of our own history and tradition, values and beliefs, how we define knowledge and education for young children, what are the goals and hope for our children,

how are all these compatible or conflicting with what we learned from other lands, how do we support and respect parent's dreams for their children, yet help them to make informed choices and decisions. To this regard, there are many topics that need to be discussed, debated, and researched.

The PECERA Hong Kong Working Committee has decided the theme for 2007 conference to be "Re-thinking Early Childhood Education in Diverse Contexts". It speaks right to this direction. I think we as early childhood educators, we have a responsibility not just to take the business at a pragmatic level, but at the cultural and philosophical level where we take into consideration of what we value. After all, there is no one-size-fits-all type of education.

Among PECERA's principal aims it says "Provide an academic forum in the Pacific region for the development and dissemination of high quality research in early childhood education" and "Promote links between research and practice in early childhood education". I think my experience illustrates how PECERA, in fulfilling its aims provides an arena for us to explore and develop the early childhood education that is uniquely for the children in each of their worlds in the Pacific. I believe the launching of PECERA Hong Kong will add continuing energy to the work in this region. I wish our Korean colleagues a successful conference in Korea in the coming summer, and I wish continuing success in year 2007 in Hong Kong!

Thank you.