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MEET THE MENTOR—Spotlight on Early Childhood Education

‘Children Can Only Aspire to What They Know Exists’

Sunday October 8th, 2017

Speaker: **Dr. Ger Graus OBE**, Director of Education, Kidzania, UK and Global

Moderated by: **Andreas Schleicher**, Director, Directorate of Education and Skills, OECD

Summary Paragraph

What do we know about the relationship between the number of years of early childhood education, academic performance and adult success? Foundational skills linked to problem solving, communication and social skills that affect whether people thrive or fall behind in the modern economy are developed early, and achievement gaps appear before kindergarten. The value of early childhood education as a driver of wider development is broadly accepted and is reflected in SDG4, yet there is no country in the world in which all young children reach their development potential.

Key Points

Dr. Graus’ wide-ranging talk touched on four core areas: the need to focus on children, the aspiration gap, the disconnect between the traditional education environment and the new world of work, and the need to involve the entire community in teaching.

He first described the KidZania concept, a worldwide network of massive, immersive environments at 2/3 of life size, where children can role-play grown-up jobs. The idea was born out of Dr. Graus’ work with children in less developed areas of Northern England, where he felt out of school learning was more fruitful for teaching.





The most important thing about KidZania, he said, is that “children can be in charge of their own destinies. Children need to feel that they are in control of where they are going, and that it’s okay to get it wrong, and the second time to get it slightly less wrong.”

Dr. Graus feels that there is scant focus on children and their needs, even in early childhood education environments. “‘Early Years’ education is too segmented,” he said. “Children are not parcels. Not every classroom has four walls.” A recent analysis of the current literature revealed that the word ‘child’ was not even mentioned. He advocates putting the focus back on the child, and making them part of the discussion.

At KidZania, designers analyzed children’s first choices for activities and created more activities based on that. In doing so, they discovered that even by the age of four, children had absorbed class and gender stereotypes from their parents that affected their role-play choices. For instance, girls would be cabin crew and boys pilots. More affluent boys would role-play surgeons and doctors than any other group.

“Gender stereotypes are as bad as they ever were,” he said. “Who needs to discuss aspirations and attainment? Parents and teachers.”

However, there is a disconnect between the environment of full time education, with its rote learning, obedience to rules, regular testing and repetition, and the world in which young people function and—even more so—the world of work that they will encounter in ten to fifteen years when they graduate.

“How do we create change?” He asked. “What do we say to educators? How do we focus on building a creative approach to social mobility?”

Dr. Graus had several ideas, all of which centered on bringing the outside world into classrooms. “Teachers are not good at careers education,” he said. Inviting alumni to the school to talk about their world of work, for instance, would be a good way to use the resources in the community, or a project to create a genealogy of local industry that makes students aware of the economic forces that form their surroundings. Even work experience days and workplace visits would be effective, he said.

“The one thing we need to get our children ready for is having multiple jobs,” he said, “so they need to be ready for change. It’s about confidence.”

Circling back once more to a heightened focus on children, he said that getting to know the children, what they like, and what motivates them is key to taking advantage of learning opportunities. He gave an example of a study that found that teenage girls were early adaptors of Apple iPhone technology, which would have been an excellent site for a STEM intervention.





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However, their teachers did not notice the phenomenon until the girls' peers caught up, by which time the girls had lost interest, so the opportunity was lost.

Parents need to talk with the school about how to work together and form the culture of how children are taught, Dr. Graus concluded. Then it becomes a dialogue about "a child we know," not a disembodied policy that leaves children by the wayside.

Main takeaway: Building the learning experience around the individual child and their interests creates a pathway for lifelong learning.

