Researcher Observes Educational System in Saudi Arabia | CPD

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CPD researcher Vonda Jump (at left) participates in a panel discussion in Saudi Arabia. Vonda Jump, senior research scientist at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, traveled to Saudi Arabia in mid-February to make presentations during the International Exhibition and Forum for Education. Jump presented on classroom assessment techniques at the conference, and on evaluation techniques in the 21st century to the Saudi Ministry of Education and university faculty members at the Arab Bureau of Education. Her appearance at the conference took quite a circuitous route. As part of Jump’s Strengthening Early Childhood Education in Jordan project, an essential book, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, was translated into Arabic and published by the Arab Bureau of Education. One of Jump’s colleagues from Jordan is now teaching at a university in Saudi Arabia, enlisting her help with a company, Altofola, that has recently published an early childhood curriculum.

USU graduate Norah Alfayez is the deputy minister of education for girls in Saudi Arabia, the highest ranking woman official in the ministry. Alfayez saw a copy of the book, and also contacted Jump. Jump wore the required head scarf and abaya, which covered her body from head to toe, during her visit. “It was interesting to do the conference presentation, looking out into a sea of black,” said Jump. “For about half of the women, I could only see their eyes, and most of the others had the niqaq (head scarf) on. A few took off the head scarf entirely, because it was a group of only women.” She was also able to observe in the schools, and to talk with educators about the educational process in Saudi Arabia. Some kindergartens enroll both boys and girls, but schools are segregated by first grade, and boys and girls are educated separately through high school and college. They are taught the same subjects, Jump said, and the school day runs from about 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Religion is very important there, she said, and children start learning about Islam and the Quran if they are in school at age 3. Of course, like children in other religions, they will be learning from their families at home before that time. She visited a kindergarten, where she saw only fathers picking up their daughters after school. The father would give the child’s name to the guard, who then relayed it via intercom to a female teacher. The teacher would send the child out unattended, because men and women can’t be together. “To be honest, I would be worried about a person trying to pick up a child without authorization, but it seems like it works,” Jump said. “Saudi Arabia was one of the most different places I’ve ever been in my life, and I hope to return to learn more about their interesting culture.”

Audience members are divided, with men on one side of the table and women on the other.