PROJECT UPDATE

Our research project is entering its third year. We have gathered information from over 300 exemplary educators across the nation resulting in the collection of close to 4000 work hours of data via the RTSTUD app. These numbers are still growing! Our time use app was upgraded this year to allow for ongoing collection and we welcome over 200 new centres to the project.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH SO IMPORTANT?

Contrary to popular images of work with young children as easy and instinctual, we think the work of early childhood educators is complex. Our intent is to dig deeply into what it is exemplary early childhood educators do, what informs your work, and how your workplaces support you to be excellent in the care and education of young children. New knowledge produced by the project will help lift educators’ professional status, support pay equity, inform strategies to better prepare and sustain our profession, strengthen employment practices and provide evidence-based content for pre-service education and in-service professional support.

RTSTUD SMARTPHONE APP

We have successfully upgraded the app and it is now compatible with the latest operating systems for both android and Apple iPhones/tablets. This has allowed us to extend the data collection time up until the end of 2019. Invitations to the second round of RTSTUD were sent out in August to all eligible services around Australia.

FOCUS GROUPS

Forty-six focus groups were conducted in regional and metropolitan areas throughout QLD, NSW and WA. A total of 111 educators have participated in face-to-face and online meetings in qualification specific groups. Focus group questions were based upon main findings from the RTSTUD data, and the broad theme of the research: what makes for an exemplary educator? The information shared with us by exemplary educators was rich in detail and offered valuable insight into the complexity of work that you do each day.

Focus group transcript data is currently being analysed using thematic analysis as well as using inductive-deductive analysis with the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) as a heuristic frame.

CASE STUDIES IN 2020

Expressions of interest to participate in case studies will be sent to eligible centres in 2019. We are seeking to recruit ten exemplary early childhood education services in NSW, QLD and WA in the new year. This phase will involve a member of the research team visiting the service to discuss and explore what it takes to be an exemplary educator. The researcher will spend up to eight days at your centre over two field visits. In field visit one (over 3 days) the researchers will get to know the educators; conduct interviews with the centre Director and ‘focus educators’; and invite all educators to complete an anonymous online survey. In field visit two (over 5 days), the researcher will follow the day-to-day work of the focus educators and conduct interviews.

Funding for backfill will be provided to services when educators participate in field visit one interviews.

As part of the case studies, all staff will be asked to complete Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning (SEQUAL) online survey. Preliminary work has been completed to adapt SEQUAL to the Australian context, in collaboration with our Partner
Investigators Prof. Sharon Ryan and the SEQUAL designers at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. We are currently conducting a pilot study to test the acceptability of the adapted SEQUAL. Ten educators of various qualifications from NSW, QLD and WA will be invited to participate in the pilot throughout November.

More details about Case Studies will be sent to centres in due course. It’s a wonderful opportunity for your centre to be ‘active participants’ in research.

THE RESEARCH TEAM

As many of you know, Professor Fran Press is now working at Manchester Metropolitan University. Fran continues as a researcher on the project with the added advantage of profiling this project in the UK. This year we are delighted to welcome Dr Tamara Cumming and Salima Yeung to the team.

Dr Tamara Cumming is a Senior Lecturer with the School of Teacher Education, and a Charles Sturt University Research Fellow (2018-2020). Tamara has worked in the early childhood sector for over 15 years. Prior to becoming an academic Tamara held positions as an early childhood educator, inclusion support manager and research officer in a children’s services organisation. Tamara will be a researcher on this project.

Salima Yeung is a research assistant and PhD candidate at Charles Stuart University. Salima’s PhD explores the relationship between Early Childhood Educator’s well-being and the quality of educator-infant interest. Prior to enrolling in the PhD program, Salima held positions as an early childhood teacher working with children aged from birth to five years.

OUR PARTNER MEETING

The Research Team held a highly successful meeting with representatives from Partner Organisations on 18 June 2019. These meetings allow the team to connect with our research partners.

Our project partners:

- Community Early Learning Australia
- Child Australia
- Crèche and Kindergarten Association (QLD)
- Independent Education Union (NSW, QLD, ACT & NT branches)
- KU Children’s Services
- Inner West Council, Sydney
- United Voice
- Rutgers University
- Manchester Metropolitan University

(From left to right)

Researchers: Professor Linda Harrison, Associate Professor Sandie Wong, Dr Megan Gibson, Dr Tamara Cumming, Professor Frances Press, Professor Sharon Ryan.
Project Manager: Lesley Stoneman
Research Assistants: Salima Yeung, Suzanne Richardson, Kim Crisp
PhD candidates: Mandy Cooke, Leanne Gibbs and Robbie Warren
analysed observations, interviews and documents and was... education. The study applied the theory of practice architectures. Initial results suggest that the predominant discourse evident in early childhood literature of risk-taking as children’s physical outdoor play, was also largely reflected in educators’ perceptions and practices. Findings also suggest that with minimal provocation, educators could think more broadly about both children’s and their own risk-taking. These findings suggest that greater attention needs to be paid to a broad range of children’s risk-taking, including risk-taking indoors and social and emotional risk-taking, and the risks that educators may take, such as the risks that may be involved in curriculum decision making and delivery. Professional development may be an effective tool for developing educators’ and the broader early childhood sector’s understandings and practices associated with healthy risk-taking in early childhood education. Developing understandings and practices associated with healthy risk-taking may support educators’ professional development, the development creative and innovative early childhood programs and, as such, the development of confident, competent and resilient children.

Two publications relating to phase one of our study have been published.


**PhD CANDIDATES**

Mandy Cooke: *Towards a Re-Conceptualisation of Risk-Taking in Early Childhood Education Practices.*

Children’s healthy risk-taking is increasingly being acknowledged as an important part of early childhood education because of its potential benefits to children’s social, emotional and physical wellbeing. Previous research has predominantly examined children’s risk-taking in outdoor physical play. Less attention has been paid to children’s risk-taking indoors, in activities other than play, in non-physical domains nor to educators’ risk-taking. This study sought to explore educators’ conceptualisations of risk-taking in early childhood education and the factors that enable and constrain educators risk-taking practices. The qualitative three-site case study involved 55 educators of all qualifications from high quality early childhood services that include children’s healthy risk-taking in their programs. The selection of services that include children’s healthy risk-taking in their programs placed educators in these services in the best position to offer insight on risk-taking in ECE. The selection of high quality services was to ensure the perspectives and practices offered were associated with high quality education. The study applied the theory of practice architectures as a theoretical, methodological and analytical framework. Data was gathered through observations, interviews and documents and was analysed using thematic analysis and the theory of practice architectures. Initial results suggest that the predominant discourse evident in early childhood literature of risk-taking as children’s physical outdoor play, was also largely reflected in educators’ perceptions and practices. Findings also suggest that with minimal provocation, educators could think more broadly about both children’s and their own risk-taking. These findings suggest that greater attention needs to be paid to a broad range of children’s risk-taking, including risk-taking indoors and social and emotional risk-taking, and the risks that educators may take, such as the risks that may be involved in curriculum decision making and delivery. Professional development may be an effective tool for developing educators’ and the broader early childhood sector’s understandings and practices associated with healthy risk-taking in early childhood education. Developing understandings and practices associated with healthy risk-taking may support educators’ professional development, the development creative and innovative early childhood programs and, as such, the development of confident, competent and resilient children.

Leanne Gibbs: *Leading in a landscape of complexity*

Effective leadership for early childhood education supports the delivery of high-quality programs. Despite the significant influence leadership has on quality, and the increasing demand for early childhood education, there is a lack of research on the cultivation of leadership in early childhood programs. Leanne’s study, therefore, responds to the need for more research on how effective leadership emerges on early childhood education sites and how organisational conditions cultivate and shape its emergence and development. The qualitative research study: *A study of practices that support emergence and development of leading within exemplary early childhood education settings* investigates the phenomena of emerging leadership and the development of leading in three exemplary Australian ECE sites with varying governance arrangements. The study’s conceptualisation of leadership rejects the view of leadership invested in a single leader who charismatically inspires and independently drives change for individuals and organisations but rather understands leadership as underpinned by ‘leading’—a dynamic activity that can be undertaken by anyone and not limited to those in formal leadership roles.

The research study used mini-ethnographic case study methodology and comprised field work with direct observation and unstructured interviews, document analysis and reflective journaling, followed by dialogic cafes. The collection of data and subsequent analysis...
were conducted within a framework of the theory of practice architectures. The analysis of the data illuminated the dispositions, knowledge and skills of emerging and developing leaders and how the emergence and development of leading was enabled and constrained by the particular practice architectures evident at each site.

The research findings support the reconceptualization of leadership as a dynamic collective practice that can be dispersed, and identifies the distinct arrangements of language and culture, physical space, resource allocation and social relationships that support the cultivation of such leadership.

Robbie Warren: Early childhood educators’ conceptualisations and enactment of children’s rights in exemplary early childhood education services.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is supported by General Comment No. 7 which acknowledges that even our youngest children have rights, and their competence and agency, albeit developing, must also be recognised. There has been a considerable advancement and recognition of children’s rights in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The policy and curricula documents that guide educators working in Early Childhood Education and Care services in Australia explicitly refer to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is a provocation for educators to consider the implications children’s rights have on their thinking and practices in educational contexts. Educators in are in a unique position to embed the principles of the Convention into their practices and be key advocates for the full spectrum of rights afforded to children. Educators’ work is, however, complex. The challenge is enabling and respecting children’s provision, protection and participation rights and for educators to meet the individual and collective needs of a group of children. Inclusive of this, is educating children on their rights and responsibilities, which will contribute to a strengthened community where each of us live well in a world worth living in. The selection of Robbie’s research topic for this qualitative study was chosen for its potential to fully understand how educators enable preschool children’s rights throughout the day and, what conditions and arrangements in their services may constrain or diminish their ability to uphold these rights for preschool children. Long Day Care and Preschool services rated as exemplary in their practice have been selected as sites for data collection. Interviews, focus groups and case studies are being used to investigate aspects of educator practices and generate understandings of the following: how exemplary educators conceptualise and manifest children’s rights in their practices; what this enabling environment looks like for children; and what conditions and arrangements in the service support and might diminish or constrain the potential and effectiveness of educator practices in respecting and upholding preschool children’s rights. Robbie is privileged to be concurrently an educator and researcher. She has combined these two roles by way of auto-ethnography. As a practicing educator, Robbie has a unique opportunity to critically reflect through an active and situated place in the field to generate rich data relating to children’s rights. Auto-ethnography alongside ‘traditional’ ethnographic research, will be analysed using the Theory of Practice Architectures to determine the arrangements in the exemplary services that may constrain or diminish educators’ practices to respect and uphold children’s rights. The results of this study will provide deeper understandings of the role of the educator embracing and enacting a rights approach in their work, and why or how children’s rights might also be contested or resisted in ECE services.

CONTACT US

If you have any questions or would like to find out more about the project, please contact either Sue or Kim at the email addresses below. We would be happy to chat with you and put you in contact with one of the researchers.

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