Children and Families Research Centre

A Macquarie University Research Centre

Institute of Early Childhood

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CFRC Bulletin Board

Recent Publications


Recent Grants


Recent Presentations in Australia
At the inaugural Children and Childhoods Symposium at IEC, Macquarie University, September 2010:

Hodge, K. When a young child’s development is advanced: Program directions from North America and the UK.

Lilley, R. Mind the gap: Maternal perceptions of segregated school ‘choice’ for students with autism in NSW primary schools.


Other presentations:
Hodge, K. (2010, August). Goodness or irritation? The beliefs and experiences of preschool and childcare teachers in NSW regarding parents who view their child as gifted 11th Asia Pacific Conference on Giftedness, Sydney.


International Activities


CFRC Mission Statement
To conduct high quality interdisciplinary research that contributes to knowledge about the learning and development of children and families with a commitment to applying research to policy recommendations and outreach activities in a variety of communities.

First Workshop on Needs Assessment for Young Children in Emergencies

Early Childhood Development specialists from the Asia Region came to Macquarie as part of a research project funded by the Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC). Raising awareness, identifying capacity and developing plans for enhanced programs and services regarding the issue of disaster risk reduction for young children and families in the Asia Region.

Dr Kathy Cologon, Professor Jacqueline Hayden and Dr Emma Pearson hosted sixteen early childhood specialists, government policy makers and representatives from UNICEF and other non-government organisations from four nations (Vanuatu, PNG, Bangladesh and Philippines) at a workshop in Sydney held 23 – 25 August 2010.

The purpose of the workshop is to review what information is needed in order for each nation to develop a disaster risk reduction plan for Early Childhood Development and ways in which this information can be collected and assessed.

Dr Jenny Barr worked with the team in the development and delivery of the workshop. The research team hosted a reception for the participants as well as members of the Institute of Early Childhood and the Children and Families Research Centre.

At the workshop participants reviewed various measures and tools that can be used to collect the needed information within each context. An implementation plan for pilot data collection after the workshop will be developed.

A second workshop will take place later this year after data has been collected, analysed and compared. The second workshop will culminate in guidelines for assessing needs of young children under diverse circumstances and within a variety of contexts.

ARNEC has partnered with the ECD and Emergency team from Macquarie University: Professor Jacqueline Hayden, Dr Kathy Cologon, Dr Emma Pearson, Dr Jenny Barr, Ms Lisa Deters and Ms Rosemary Darley.

Back Row L-R: Ms Lisa Deters, Macquarie University; Ms Lyn Bae, Papua New Guinea; Mr Matiru Pahiama, Bangladesh; Dr Chembra Rahagavan, UNICEF; Ms Jenny James, Vanuatu; Mr Taripiq Islam Chowdhury, Bangladesh; Dr Jenny Barr, Macquarie University; Ms Nicolas Rodger, Plan Australia; Mr Jim Knox Allison, Vanuatu; Mr Smith Anderson, Vanuatu. Front Row L-R: Dr Kathy Cologon, Macquarie University; Ms Syeda Rezwana Akhter, Bangladesh; Dr Tamara Taher, Bangladesh; Professor Jacqueline Hayden, Macquarie University; Ms Lisa Deters, Macquarie University; Ms Isabel Salaie, Papua New Guinea; Ms Beverly Savilleno-Bigallo, Philippines; Ms Dominica Malai, Papua New Guinea; Ms Jurko Miyashara, ARNEC; Ms Elizabeth Whittaker, Macquarie University; Mr Mohammad Noruzzaman, Bangladesh.
Dr Deirdre Taffe is a senior lecturer in Macquarie University’s Institute of Early Childhood. Her PhD topic in 2005 was Mothers’ Beliefs, Mothers’ Talk and Their Children’s Theory of Mind. “I was looking at the interaction between mothers and their infants and the way the mothers thinking about their infants might be reflected in their interactions,” she explained.  

Dr Deirdre Taffe’s interest in infant-toddler development and caregiving is based on the now widespread recognition of the importance of the first three years of a child’s life for their ongoing development, learning and wellbeing.

More recently she has been focusing on early childhood practitioners and their interactions with infants. Her paper published in the International Journal of Early Years in March this year describes a study into early childhood interactions with infants; relations with early childhood practitioners’ interpretations and qualification levels on the routine context.

“The article looked at the factors associated with the quality of adult-infant interaction, a central indicator of quality in daycare centers. With so many children in formal early childhood centres across the developed world, ‘okay’ care is not good enough. With our younger children, care and education programs need to be excellent if we are to support positive outcomes for these children,” she said.

Dr Deirdre Taffe’s study involved 24 practitioners working with 9 to 20-month-old infants in 15 long-daycare infant programs. The practitioners were employed in a mix of not-for-profit, privately owned and corporate-sponsored services catering for children from a range of social and cultural backgrounds. Qualifications ranged from no formal early childhood training to diplomas and university degrees in early childhood education.

Videos were made of individual staff interacting with their nominated infant in three contexts — play, dressing and feeding. They were asked to describe their “best” and “worst” interpretation of the infant, and then were asked to describe their interpretation of the infant in the play context.

In the interview that followed, the practitioners were asked to describe their interaction with the infant in the play context.

“The quality of practitioner interaction with the infant was assessed according to the level of sensitivity and stimulation that they demonstrated in both play and routine context,” said Dr Deirdre Taffe. “This was on the basis that sensitivity and stimulation may have repeatedly been shown to predict a range of developmental outcomes in infant childhood.”

The study found interpretive complexity was significantly related to practitioners’ qualification level. While there was no great difference between unqualified and diploma-qualified practitioners, those with degrees scored highest. Higher qualifications were also associated with greater levels of sensitivity and stimulation in both play and routine interactions.

Importantly, however, those with high levels of interpretive complexity were more sensitive and stimulating than those who showed a less complex understanding of the infant, suggesting that an in-depth awareness of infants’ perspectives and experiences may form a basis upon which more developmentally stimulating interactions and relationships of the infant can be fostered.

“When interactions in play and routine contexts were compared, play interactions attracted higher levels of sensitivity and stimulation than routine events (e.g., changing nappies, clothes),” said Dr Deirdre Taffe. “A previous study suggests that practitioners may overwhelm the infant agency in dressing to focus on their own role in attending to the physical rather than developmental needs of the infant.”

“Early childhood programs are increasingly being challenged to extend learning opportunities beyond play-based experiences. This is particularly the case with infant-toddler programs where routines form a significant part of the daily program, providing the first opportunities for relationship formation and early learning.”

This month Dr Deirdre Taffe begins a new research project looking closely at children’s relationships with each other. It will explore diverse perspectives about the early childhood programs’ interactions with practitioners and other infants and toddlers within a childcare centre.

M.T.

Dr Hodge (right) is pictured here with Dr Norma Lu Haleswood, Director of Early Childhood Education and Research at the Institute for the Development of Gifted Education and the Management of Exceptional Education, University of Denver, Colorado, USA.

Dr Hodge’s research is being funded by the Jams and Jennifer Dobson Charitable Foundation.

Dr Peter Whiteman Associate Director of CFCR Jennifer Bowes, Director of the Children and Families Research Centre and Marina Papis, Head of the Institute of Early Childhood delighted to announce that Dr Peter Whiteman has been selected as the new Associate Director of the Children and Families Research Centre. Peter began working in this new role in August and will continue until the end of 2011.

Jennifer Bowes and Wayne Walbutson, who is Deputy Director of CFCR are looking forward to working in close partnership with Peter to lead the research centre to strengthen its ties with the IEC and to build new collaborative research teams.

On 11 November the CFCR held its ‘Migrant and Refugee Families Conference. The conference discussed topics as diverse as early integration into kindergarten and school, the value of biliteracy, helping migrant mothers care for a child with special needs, child disability, and refugees suffering trauma. Psychologists, linguists, early childhood and educational specialists from Australian universities, government departments and NGOs attended.

Professor Gail Whiteford, Pro Vice Chancellor (Social Inclusion) gave the keynote address, based on her research in rural NSW about issues faced by migrant and refugee families on arrival in Australia. “A common question new arrivals ask is ‘Where is everything?’ They often find Australian streets deserted compared to their home countries and would like to know what people do after they have driven into their driveways and disappeared,” she says.

Among the presenters were Associate Professor Lynda Yates, an associate of the CFCR, and Dr Agnes Taserrasche from the Linguistics Department at Macquarie University. In their report, language training and settlement success: are they related?, which was completed on behalf of the NSW Department of Immigration and Citizenship, they tackled the vexed question of which language migrant families use at home. Inadequate English language skills can encourage migrant parents to struggle to cope with the issues faced by their teenage children.

“Children will tend to learn English and become socialised into peer groups at school a lot more quickly than their parents. With time, English is likely to become their dominant language,” says Professor Yates. “They may even start to lose their first language, especially with important negative consequences for family life, especially where the parents do not acquire sufficient English to catch up with their children.”

“Parents may find they need to use English in the home, even though they don’t speak it, so they might begin to use this language for their own advantage. In some cases, this can undermine their authority. There is a danger that they - often the mother - may get left behind and therefore less able to deal with the usual family issues that arise with teenagers,” she says.

Other CFCR members who presented were Dr Maria Ambrose and Emma Pearson.

For more information on the conference and a schedule of presenters, copies of their PowerPoints and podcasts, please visit the CFCR Website http://www.ucn.mq.edu.au/cfcc/index.htm.

On Wednesday 11 August Mrs Kelly Band, was presented with a plaque by Mrs PhL Lacy, President of the Australian Rotary Health Terry Bean PC Scholarship.

A morning tea was held to enable Kelly and her supervisor Dr Rebekah Grace and Dr Frances Gibson to discuss the terms of the scholarship. Mrs Lacy informed the group that Kelly was being provided with an opportunity to partake in paid work that will enrich and consolidate her occupational therapy experience.

Dr Kelly Hodge’s 2009 Nancy Fairfax Churchill Fellowship was conducted in April-June 2010. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet with academics, bureaucrats and practitioners to discuss policies and practices in delivering programs to gifted children aged 3-5 and also teacher education in early childhood. Dr Hodge was able to observe a range of programs. Some were catered for gifted children only. Other programs were inclusive but with explicit policies and practices regarding gifted children or were early childhood programs with elements that appeared promising for use with young gifted children.

Dr Hodge found a range of curriculum approaches and practices apparently successful in providing intellectual challenges and social-emotional support for gifted preschoolers but very little research into their effectiveness. Possible collaborations here and overseas will be explored to address this research gap.

Since returning to Sydney Kerry has shared her conclusions and recommendations with practitioners and researchers at conferences in gifted education and in early childhood. Her fellowship report can be downloaded from the website of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.

Dr Janet Merewether is a Sydney-based education consultant and creative practice who regularly works with children and youth at Macquarie University. Her research is exploring the potential for screening of extracts from the award-winning novel Mavis Gear to identify non-normative career pathways, particularly the increasingly non-traditional career choices that women make to become single parents. Dr Merewether considered the importance of non-residential child care in understanding the potential benefits of solo mothering, as well as the trials and histories of unwed mothers, illegitimacy and more recent legislative reforms of care and financial benefits in the Australian context.

Mavis Gear - from pariah to social progressive: Solo mothering and changing role of fathers in the Australian Family.

Postdoctoral training is a crucial stage in a career and Mr Thomas White is clearly making the most of his time working with Dr Sheila Bulgren and Dr Susan Doolan at the ARI. Mr White is also currently working with Dr Shirley Wynne.

Mr White was selected from a number of applicants to be the first to participate in the CFCR Postdoctoral Training Scheme in the second half of 2010.

Mr White will be working with Dr Sheila Bulgren and Dr Susan Doolan on an 18 month project looking at various aspects of parenting, including the development of children’s language and play. Mr White will also be working with Dr Shirley Wynne.

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