

EECERA Research Award Application 2017

Practitioner Research – Group

Linda Newman, Nicole Leggett, Melissa Duffy-Fagan, Kate Higginbottom, Kylie Kirrage & Catherine Highton.

Application Abstract

Research Connections: Practitioner Research Engagement Network for Early Childhood Educators was a highly successful project. Participants improved the quality of their practice through engaging in long-term professional learning to plan and implement action research projects. The research visibility has promoted the status of early childhood practitioners [nationally](#) and [internationally](#). Two Australian academics and four early childhood teams took part. They propose, as an outcome, that their evidence-based practitioner research model can inform governments & non-governmental organisations. They advocate their model of professional learning for quality improvement in early childhood services to build knowledge and professional learning, and create sustainable change. The research demonstrated early childhood teacher agency, advocacy and self-determination by showing how issues deemed important for children's rights, families, communities and educators were identified, researched and reported.

The research will be presented in an EECERA symposium in 2017 that shows how practitioner research and socioculturally informed collaboration approaches not only empower and engage teachers in research, but can meet professional learning accountability requirements. This application, and the symposium, will present the project network's processes and outcomes, as well as some initial research findings.

The connected EECERA Symposium (summary):

Collective Moments: Regenerating Agency in Early Childhood Teacher Research and Accountability

Paper 1: Practitioner Research: With Intent: We review the theoretical foundations and benefits of practitioner research: collaboration; communities of practice; practitioner selected focus; collaborative design; and participatory engagement, and question whether it is feasible to infuse intentionally chosen theoretical concepts across a multi-site project. The project involved four early childhood centres and two university researchers in collaborative, socioculturally informed research. The paper shows how the university researchers investigated the project processes and outcomes and the centre teams designed and implemented self-determined locally relevant projects.

Paper 2: Owning it – educator engagement in researching their own practice:

We present findings from the Research Connections data examining practitioner researchers' initial and later perceptions of their learning as they planned and implemented their centre-based projects. Findings suggest that the practitioner researchers were more likely to sustain research on their topics as they were meaningful and relevant to their services. Key themes to emerge related to self-knowledge, constraints, professionalism and the impact of practitioner research. We argue that this contrasts positively to research where external researchers decide on the research focus and that practitioner-selected research can increase the likelihood of sustainable change. We draw attention to the need for policy-makers to recognise and value the potential contributions educators are capable of making through researching their own practice in collaboration with experienced academics.

Paper 3: Taking a risk with risk competence: This paper presents findings from one of the four centre-based Research Connections projects. An action research project focused on developing the risk awareness and competence of toddlers and preschoolers. Children at the centre increased their competence to undertake risky play. Their language around safety and risk increased and more girls undertook challenges. The centre team increased their intentional teaching about risk and safety, and agreed that being given the space and guidance to choose their own professional learning topic had led to their successes.

1. The focus of the research

Research Connections: Practitioner Research Engagement Network for Early Childhood Educators (Research Connections) embedded both research and professional learning. Research fell into two main components: university research about professional learning and practitioner research about locally chosen issues in children's centres. Using socioculturally informed collaboration approaches, we brought four early childhood centres and two university researchers together to investigate the efficacy of long-term, collaborative professional learning in which educators learnt about, chose, planned and implemented their own action research. The year-long project built the capacity of educators as they researched, while also meeting national professional learning accountability requirements.

2. The purpose and aims of the research

The project, which is nearing completion, was situated within an Australia context of focus on quality improvement in early childhood education (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2013b), coinciding with critical shortages in the number of early childhood teachers available to work in children's services (Fenech, Waniganayake, & Fleet, 2009; Productivity Commission, 2011). This coincides with an international climate of standardisation of metrics, assessment, accountability, pedagogy and curriculum. Our research aimed to generate evidence of early childhood teacher agency, advocacy and self-determination as they addressed issues deemed important for their children's rights, families, communities and educators in their teams.

In a context of calls for evidence-based practice, where the 'gold-standard' is seen to be randomised control trials to show skill and knowledge achievement, we aimed to produce a counter-narrative to show how practitioner action research can produce self-generated and evidence-based change. Early childhood services that can build their own knowledge and professional learning to create sustainable change, responsive to local contexts, can advocate for quality that is locally generated rather than externally imposed (Elliott, 2008).

Educators, within their professional role, aimed grow confidence and capacity in contemporary, democratic and socioculturally grounded research and practice and university researchers aimed to collaboratively investigate the strengths and challenges of long-term professional learning with practitioners through examination of project processes and outcomes. Additionally, each of the four centre-based projects had their own relevant aims.

3. The reason for the choice of methodology

The methodology embedded sociocultural theoretical foundations, ontology and epistemology. The purpose, design, planning and implementation called on researched benefits of practitioner research as a social practice: collaboration, communities of practice, practitioner selected focus, collaborative design and participatory engagement. It provided a unique ongoing professional learning opportunity for early childhood teachers in line with current research showing the shortcomings in short-term, "top-down" imposed professional development and the benefits of "ground-up" self-directed professional learning for teachers (Gore, Bowe & Elsworth, 2010; Gore & Gitlin, 2004).

For the first time in the region (and possibly elsewhere), a network of academic and previously unconnected practitioner researchers from the community and private sectors came together for a series of conferences, Leadership Roundtables (LRT) and centre-based University Research Mentor (URM) visits. The project genesis involved conversations between one EC centre Director and the two university researchers. The project grew beyond early conversations about a visiting pedagogista (university mentorship) into a project design that included a

long-term model with three other centres within a research network. The centre Directors then collaborated with the URM's to design the research.

The project intentionally and transparently embedded ongoing professional learning using a series of key concepts (intentional teaching and critical thinking), research approaches and data collection tools that were carefully aligned to the mandatory [Australian Professional Standards for Teachers](#), although not all participants were teacher qualified. From 2016 early childhood teachers have been accredited by the New South Wales Education Standards Authority ([NESA](#)). They are required to attend 100 hours of professional development in a five-year cycle, 50 of which must be recognised by [The Professional Teachers Council](#). This project was approved and will be certificated for 36 hours of professional learning. The project aimed to re-invigorate educators through the unique opportunity to both learn new practitioner research skills, pedagogical skills, and shape the direction of their own research.

The program network model includes a conceptual framework underpinned by sociocultural theories that recognise the value of co-constructed knowledge that is built interactively by participants embedded in the learning context and reflected in a cascade of leadership roles (see section 5) (Perry, 2012).

A variety of research methods were employed to access both formal and informal data about participation. Two anonymous online questionnaires were distributed asking each person to rate specific items on a six-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree on key areas:

- Previous professional development experiences;
- Knowledge of practitioner research;
- Knowledge of intentional teaching;
- Knowledge of creative and critical thinking.

Two Focus group sessions were held, one at the commencement and another towards the conclusion of the project. Participants were offered trigger questions by a URM to encourage collaborative conversation. Additionally, participants were encouraged to keep a journal, and URM visits, emails, text-messages and an online learning site generated field notes.

4. How ethical issues are addressed

Ethical research was foregrounded as teachers sought to enhance professional identities, especially in the highly gendered sector; and be recognized by advocating and making visible the importance of children's agency, competence and rights in their early years. A socioculturally informed project and investigation requires of researchers a willingness and ability to be open and engage with others, within a climate of trust and honesty. The practitioner researchers (PR) (all early childhood educators) and the URM's, needed to all commit to the welfare and wellbeing of the group as a whole. This necessitated discussions at the beginning

of the project about confidentiality and collaboration. One relatively unusual challenge for this project was that it brought together early childhood centres and teams, in some cases previously unknown to each other, in a relatively small group, within a relatively small city. Two centres were 'community-based' (not for profit), and two were 'private' (for profit). Within a climate of increasing competition for 'child numbers' and historical tensions between some private and public centres, it was imperative that trust be established between and across centre teams. Additionally, educators were in teams with their 'bosses' (centre directors), two of whom had the individual power to hire and fire. It is with a touch of gratitude that we can report here that bonds, and potentially life-long friendships, were quickly formed.

It was essential in planning budgets that ethical considerations were made transparent. The project money came directly from the centres' professional development budgets. This allowed for catering, time release for URMs to engage in the project, research assistance, focus group transcription costs, catering for events and a contribution towards URM conference attendance to disseminate findings. The budget was developed as a 'thin' prediction of basic costs, in consideration of the pilot status of the project. Line items were kept to bare minimum levels. This meant that URMs had little paid time available at the same time as they strove to provide maximum availability and support. Time-release costs for educators was an additional cost for centres. We were all in strong agreement, that like other professionals, educators should be able to undertake attendance commitments for the project in work time, rather than in their own time after eight-hour long day care shifts, as commonly happens. This of course increases costs for centres who made a considerable investment in the project, and opens the possibility of increased pressure by Directors for participation and success.

Another ethical interest was sustainability as URMs and Directors had already recognised the shortcomings in 'one-off' staff development and training. We were acutely aware of the need to build future possibilities beyond the initial one-year project. It was anticipated that the network may grown and continue at the completion of the project through the development of a Linkage or other partnership large grant. This work has now commenced.

Ethical implications for URMs and Directors were discussed. As Directors were in charge of centre budgets, and were usually the centre research leaders, they had a particular interest in project engagement and success. This lead to the possibility of coercion or employment tensions. We needed to ensure that this was transparent, discussed openly and proactively addressed. It was addressed both verbally with all participants by URMs and in the wording of information letters. Some centre educators declined participation and this has not compromised their employment or team membership in any way.

5. The process of the research and how it impacted on practice

A collaboration consisting of four early childhood centres and two university researchers met, learnt, planned and implemented centre-based projects over a 12-month period.

Following planning, an information session, invitations and informed consent for participation in phase 1 of the project, a conference day for invitees from the centres was held. All four centres originally invited agreed to participate. This was followed by a series of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) type sessions called Leadership Roundtables (LRT).

URMs each supported two teams (centre-based) of PRs in cycles of action research. The network model recognised the value of co-constructed knowledge that is built interactively by participants embedded in the learning context (Perry, 2012). Each participating group (URMs, Directors and Practitioner Researchers) held unique leadership roles in a cascading model of distributed leadership: URMs lead planning and organisation of LRTs; Directors co-construct LRT content and agendas and mentor Practitioner Researchers throughout the project; ECTs co-construct LRT content and agendas and lead action research in their centres.

Within this framework centre teams were guided through self-determined locally relevant projects aimed at improving classroom practices in a specific area, self-nominated by each centre. They examined and documented their research concerns and questions, planned inquiries, collected data, planned for changes, implemented change projects, analysed findings and reported at a conference.

These learning cycles were modelled on the [Futuro Infantil Hoy](#) in which author one had recently taken a leadership role (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWXScQJZ-Xo>).

6. A reflection on its contribution to practice

A culminating event was a recent local conference where both levels of the research (university and centre-based) were presented. Key early childhood stakeholders were invited with the aim of inviting expressions of interest in extending the project model to achieve growth and sustainability. Impacts of the initial dissemination of the research have been tangible, international and cross-disciplinary. We have attracted a great deal of media interest including [press interest](#) and multiple radio interviews (see attached examples in report) with an audience of 116 million people internationally. There is interest also from local schools and educational authorities in partnering on an extension of the project. We have also been invited to write a blog entry for the Australian Association for Research in Education website. The Australian Early Childhood Quality Authority ([ACECQA](#)) has invited centre Directors to engage with them to share the research. The work has been featured on the front page of our [university's website](#) and an Industrial design researcher has asked to visit one of the centres to test his playground design plans.

Initial findings

Early findings indicate that the need for change was identified by centres, researched and resulting changes will have ongoing and sustainable implications for future quality improvement efforts. For example, Centre 2 wrote:

The centre team increased their [intentional teaching](#) about risk and safety, and agreed that these successes had been achievable because they had been given the space and guidance to choose their own professional learning topic, ... The participating educators say they now feel stronger and more capable as professionals and committed to embedding research into their ongoing practice.

The four projects addressed a range of issues:

Centre 1: Intentional Strategies for Team Collaboration (an examination of team communication and relationships).

Centre 2: Taking a Risk with Risk Competence (Toddler and pre-schooler risky play).

Centre 3: Enhancing teaching practice and children's learning opportunities (Examining roles and responsibilities in a family-grouped long day care centre).

Centre 4: Strengthening transition to school: Insights into adult and child perspectives (Examining the shift from early childhood centre to school).

Early findings indicate changes in the areas of knowledge generation; impacts on practice; and professional learning processes. Constraints on learning were also identified. Each strand has further revealed sub-themes:

Generating knowledge: Self-knowledge; professional learning; new techniques/knowledge

Impacts on practice: Ownership; professionalism; leadership; philosophy/direction/culture of centre; pedagogy/teaching; connections;

Professional learning processes: the research-teaching nexus;

Constraints

Findings analyses are still underway. Brief notes are included here with some early indications of trends.

Questionnaire

The first round of the questionnaire was distributed to 15 people and there was a 100% return rate. Questions asked about previous professional development (PD) perceptions and knowledge of intentional teaching and critical thinking. Participant experience ranged between 3.5 and 22 years. Eleven participants held degrees in

early childhood education and three held Diplomas. One participant held a Masters in Early Childhood. The questionnaire will be repeated shortly to compare findings between the beginning and end of the project.

While participants were mainly reasonably happy with their past PD experiences they were able to see shortcomings. Figure 1 below shows that while the majority felt that their previous PD had led to knowledge building, almost as many only tended to agree, or disagreed.

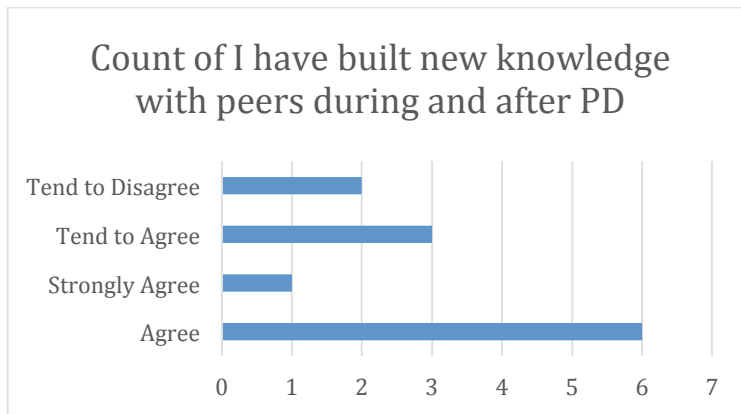


Figure 1: Building new knowledge

In a question aimed at examining the sustainability of previous PD, the majority of participants admitted that their new learning had not been maintained or extended within networks of peers.

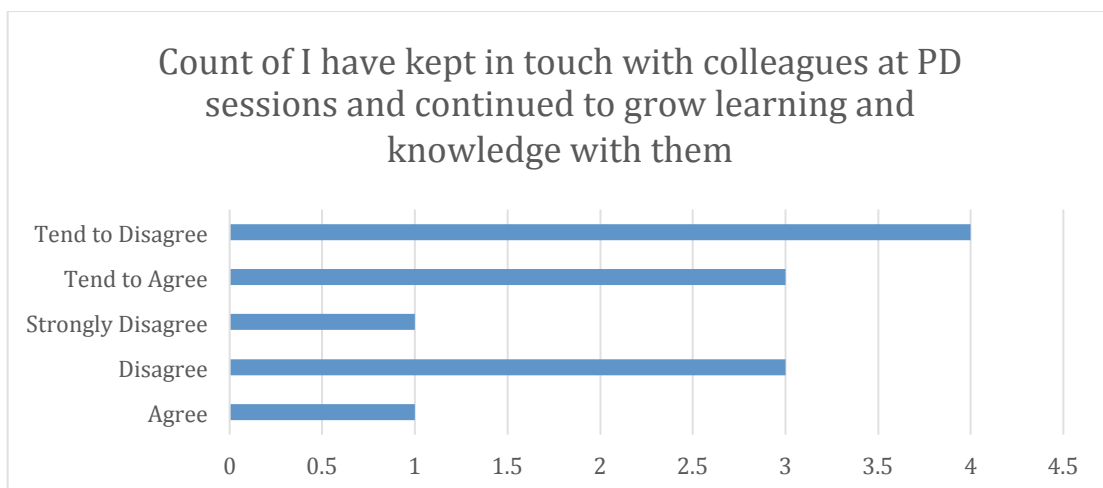


Figure 2: Sustaining learning

A suite of questions examined participants' perceptions of their current ability to write and implement a research plan. These questions will be re-examined at the end of the project. It is evident in the findings outlined in Figure 3, that research planning was new to most participants.

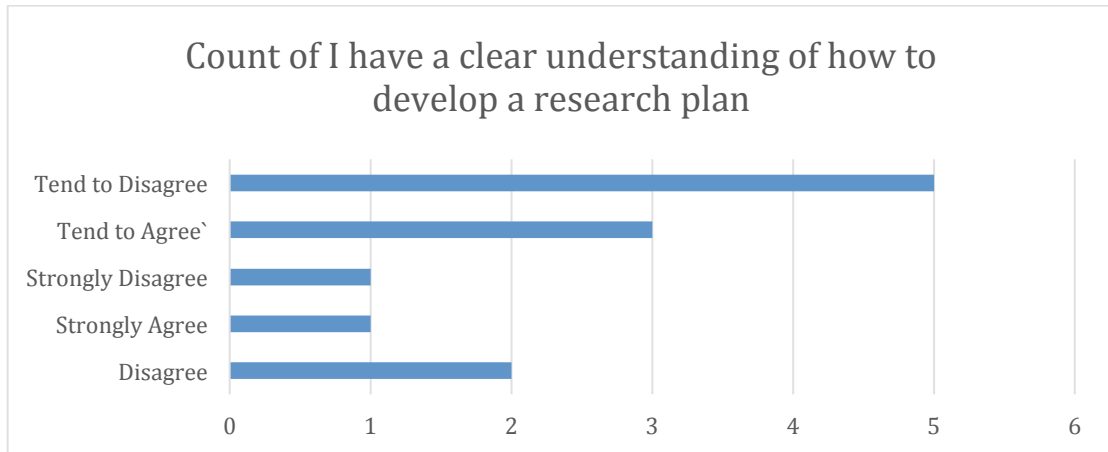


Figure 3: Research planning

One important aim for researchers must always be to disseminate findings with peers. Figure 4 clearly shows that participants did not feel confident at the beginning of the project to share their work on scholarly platforms. It is already evident that this has undergone robust change.

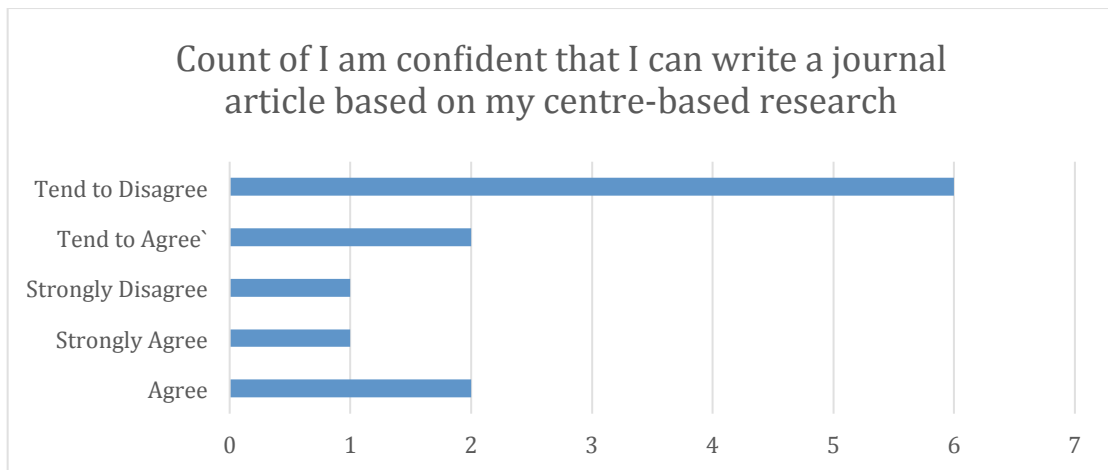


Figure 4: research writing

The questionnaire findings were incorporated into the project design and will be re-examined at the end of the project to determine whether changes have occurred. Focus group data have already indicated that big changes in research knowledge and confidence are evident as was demonstrated in the high quality polished conference presentations last week in our home city. Two of the centre Directors will also be co-presenting with the university researchers at EECERA in August. This is strong evidence of their growth in leadership and research ability.

Focus Groups

Focus group data examined initial and later perceptions of learning as participants planned and implemented their projects. Findings suggest that the PRs were more likely than in traditional professional development, to sustain research on their topics as they were self-selected, meaningful and relevant to their services. This indicates a welcome divergence from traditional research where external researchers decide on the research focus and make recommendations, with practitioners less likely to maintain changes than if they have initiated and implemented change themselves.

Later perceptions: The development of self-knowledge

At the final focus group session, participants were asked similar questions to the first focus group session, with some amendment in order to make questions more suited to the end of the project. These included: *What have you, or have you not gained from the Research Connections professional learning program? How has the Research Connections project differed from other Professional Development you have done? And, Is there anything you would like to share with the researchers at the end of the project?*

Data revealed a growing acceptance and valuing by educators of their new identities as PRs. A more professional climate within their teaching and learning communities is evident. Engaging with research projects has not only empowered them, but given them a voice in which they now want to be heard. The challenge now is finding a way for government bodies to hear and respect the voices of educators in policy development.

The generation of knowledge has the power to ignite a passion for research. To research, is to look again, to see what you didn't see the first time, and to reflect on your findings in a deeper, more meaningful way. As Rinaldi (2003) states:

depth of understanding involves the ability to experience the curiosity, passions, joys and angers of others with a process of empathy, perception and identification, of human understanding (p.4).

Rinaldi urges us all to find the strength and courage for radical change, as the educators in this project have achieved. Rinaldi beckons us to engage in

searching and researching...the value of research, as an openness toward others and toward everything new that is produced by the encounter with others (2003, p.2).

The spirit of research (Rinaldi, 2003) has been lived out in *Research Connections*. Undoubtedly participating educators have re-searched and acted accordingly. We have indications that as these educators have bravely taken to the conference podium, they have begun to fan into flame the potential for action research in other centres and education systems.

7. Any further plans for development

Our future planning is underway and includes engaging policy-makers such as the national early childhood authority and school systems to recognise and value the potential contributions educators are capable of making through researching their own practice in collaboration with experienced academics. This will be achieved through success in a large grant application with policy-makers as partners.

An upscaled version of the *Research Connections* network is already in the planning phase and we will apply for funding to extend and grow the research. For sustainability purposes, this would include a new layer of leadership – that of Practitioner Mentor. These mentors would be selected from among the first group of participants. It is envisaged that their role would be to lead a new group of centres/schools as they develop their projects in a network of increased size. We envisage a cascading model whereby the four original centres may each mentor 2-4 new centres/schools. We have received expressions of interest from early childhood centres, two public primary schools (who heard about the project through the media), A local education system (Catholic Education Office – local region), and the National Education Leader of Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority. We will pursue grant applications to establish a practitioner research hub, nationally, and internationally, and further research with the aforementioned partners. Dr Leggett is already in the process of writing one grant application. At least three journal articles will be submitted for publication from the current project.

References

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- Productivity Commission, Early Childhood Development Workforce, 2011, Productivity Commission: Melbourne, Vic.

Attachments:

3 referee reports

Media coverage report.

PROFESSOR JOHN FISCHETTI
HEAD OF SCHOOL AND DEAN
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



I am very pleased to write this letter of support for the accompanying proposal for the practitioner research excellence award.

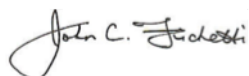
I have the deepest respect for the collaborative work of the Research Connections project in guiding research informed practice with key stakeholders in the early childhood sector. Linda Newman and Nicole Leggett led a project team combining engaged, collaborative and action research strategies. By demystifying the research journey for those in the field, they have empowered colleagues to explore current practice and to embrace contributing to the knowledge base.

The four centre-based projects embedded in Research Connections overlap in vision, but are keenly different ways to show how research approaches can be used by those in the field to inform and change practice. In fact, one of the projects has gone “viral” in its results around New South Wales, all of Australia and beyond.

I am so proud of Linda and Nicole’s efforts and fully support their application for this award.

Please contact me if you have any questions.

Thanks.



Professor John Fischetti
Head of School and Dean
School of Education
T +61 2 4921 5979
F +61 2 4921 7887

John.Fischetti@newcastle.edu.au

To whom it may concern

I am writing to confirm the information in the EECERA Research Award Application 2017

Practitioner Research – Group (Linda Newman, Nicole Leggett, Melissa Duffy-Fagan, Kate Higginbottom, Kylie Kirrage & Catherine Highton) is reflective of this research being undertaken by the group.

I believe the research is very valid and relevant to the education and care sector and am very interested to share the results with the broader sector once the project is complete.

Please feel free to contact me if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

Rhonda Livingstone

National Education Leader

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

d [02 8240 4247](tel:0282404247)

f [02 8240 4206](tel:0282404206)

m [0467 811 350](tel:0467811350)

e Rhonda.Livingstone@acecqa.gov.au

Friday 4 August 2017

RE: EECERA Annual Practitioner Research Award 2017

Dear EECERA Awards Committee,

It gives me great pleasure to be able to provide this statement in support of the application for the EECERA Annual Practitioner Award 2017 from Associate Professor Linda Newman, Dr Nicole Leggett and team. I can confirm that the action and activities reported in their application account have occurred.

Associate Professor Newman and Dr Leggett undertook the collaborative research, a year-long study comprising four industry-led projects, to develop professional learning communities and better support teacher-led research in early childhood education.

The four projects included exploring the value of professional support and connection, strengthening the transition to school, enhancing teaching and learning practice and risk taking.

It was an exemplary model of research in partnership with practitioners, originally inspired by Elder Street Early Childhood Centre and conducted in collaboration with Adamstown Community Early Learning and Preschool, Hamilton Childcare Centre, and Cameron Park Early Learning Centre.

There is a critical need for better frameworks and networks to ensure early career educators are supported and are able to thrive in the workplace. The University of Newcastle is extremely proud of the excellent work being done in this area by Associate Professor Newman, Dr Leggett and their practitioner collaborators.

It was very pleasing to see the strong interest in the media recently including front-page newspaper and electronic media coverage which is further evidence of the impact of the research.

Please contact me if you require any additional information.

Yours sincerely



Associate Professor Ros Smith
Assistant Dean – Research and Research Training
Faculty of Education and Arts
E: ros.smith@newcastle.edu.au
T: 61 2 4921 5180

Date	Headline	URL	Source	Country	Reach
24-Jul-2017 02:53	ABC Western Plains at July	https://app.meltwater	ABC Western Plains	Australia	0
24-Jul-2017 05:13	Would you let YOUR toddle	http://www.mailonsun	Mail On Sunday	United Kingdom	8455
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22-Jul-2017 07:00	Let kids play with fire and fire	https://www.gympietir	The Gympie Times (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	12975
22-Jul-2017 07:00	Let kids play with fire and fire	https://www.gattonsta	Gatton Star (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	14786
20-Jul-2017 09:33	Fire pits and power tools g	https://www.stuff.co.n	Stuff.co.nz - Life & Style	New Zealand	280847
20-Jul-2017 02:45PM		http://www.facebook.	Facebook	Unknown	111726
22-Jul-2017 07:00	Let kids play with fire and fire	https://www.frasercoa	Fraser Coast Chronicle (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	26328
21-Jul-2017 03:24	NSW childcare centre lets t	http://www.kidspot.co	Kidspot.com.au	Australia	938600
20-Jul-2017 10:47	Fire pits and power tools g	https://www.stuff.co.n	Stuff.co.nz - Life & Style	New Zealand	280847
19-Jul-2017 08:50	ABC NewsRadio at July 19t	https://app.meltwater	ABC NewsRadio	Australia	0
19-Jul-2017 08:50PM		http://www.facebook.	Facebook	Unknown	936915
20-Jul-2017 02:34PM		http://twitter.com/Tea	Twitter	Australia	5179
20-Jul-2017 07:00AM		http://www.facebook.	Facebook	Unknown	83004
19-Jul-2017 09:21	Early childhood education	http://trueviralnews.cc	True Viral News	United States	47560
19-Jul-2017 08:48	Research finds exposure to	http://www.abc.net.au	ABC NewsRadio	Australia	1217
19-Jul-2017 08:45	ABC NewsRadio at July 19t	https://app.meltwater	ABC NewsRadio	Australia	0
19-Jul-2017 08:45	ABC West Victoria AM at Jt	https://app.meltwater	ABC West Victoria AM	Australia	0
19-Jul-2017 07:19PM		http://twitter.com/Res	Twitter	Unknown	30
22-Jul-2017 07:00	Let kids play with fire and fire	https://www.sunshine	Sunshine Coast Daily (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	197920
19-Jul-2017 06:50	ABC NewsRadio at July 19t	https://app.meltwater	ABC NewsRadio	Australia	0
19-Jul-2017 06:49	ABC West Victoria AM at Jt	https://app.meltwater	ABC West Victoria AM	Australia	0
22-Jul-2017 07:00	Let kids play with fire and fire	https://www.coffscoas	The Coffs Coast Advocate (Licensed by Copyright Agen	Australia	27490
19-Jul-2017 06:55	ABC NewsRadio at July 19t	https://app.meltwater	ABC NewsRadio	Australia	0
19-Jul-2017 06:41PM		http://twitter.com/Lisa	Twitter	Australia	1991
19-Jul-2017 06:31	Early childhood education	http://www.canberrati	The Canberra Times (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	427709
19-Jul-2017 06:31	Early childhood education	http://www.watoday.c	WAtoday.com.au (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	261533
19-Jul-2017 01:31	Early childhood education	http://www.theage.coi	The Age (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	1703588

19-Jul-2017 12:34PM	http://twitter.com/Uni Twitter	Australia	9331
19-Jul-2017 10:50	1233 ABC Newcastle at Jul https://app.meltwater.1233 ABC Newcastle	Australia	0
19-Jul-2017 06:36	Early childhood education http://www.smh.com. The Sydney Morning Herald (Licensed by Copyright Ag	Australia	5113562
19-Jul-2017 06:31	Early childhood education http://www.brisbaneti Brisbane Times (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	517044
19-Jul-2017 06:30	Hunter kids should engage http://www.theherald. Newcastle Herald (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	169278
19-Jul-2017 10:35	1233 ABC Newcastle at Jul https://app.meltwater.1233 ABC Newcastle	Australia	0
19-Jul-2017 10:16	Why kids should play with http://www.essentialki Essential Kids (Licensed by Copyright Agency)	Australia	327170
			116628298