

# Linking Research to the Practice of Education

Linking Research to the Practice of Education is a publication of the School of Education (SoE), UNE, for all educators: early childhood, primary and secondary. It introduces research, conducted by SoE staff, applicable to educational settings.

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## Editorial

Welcome to the August edition of *Linking Research to the Practice of Education*, a UNE School of Education research newsletter for all educators. We are delighted to share with you some findings regarding the February 2019 issue. Our newsletter was disseminated to some 11,000+ educational institutions across Australia and New Zealand. By the end of February, the newsletter had been viewed 5,289 times. Importantly, 33% (N = 1,722) of our readers had referred the newsletter link externally, outside of their institutions. While the majority of these views were from Australia, we noted 237 views from New Zealand, 33 from the United States of America and 11 from elsewhere! From this data we suggest the newsletter is having an impact in the field.

Four articles are presented in this issue. First, Dr Jennifer Charteris and Dr Dianne Smardon examine students' choices and voices and discuss findings from a study conducted in New Zealand classrooms. In the second article, Dr Sue Elliott again discusses her team's outdoor nature play project at Thalgarran Environmental Education Centre with early childhood and primary students. There are implications here for outdoor playspaces in schools and early childhood centres. In the third article, Dr Rachel Adlington builds on previous work that was featured in February's edition with an article about 'Blog co-authorship: The role of comments in classroom blogs'. She outlines ways teachers can facilitate and support students' use of blogs in the classroom. The final article is by Dr Marg Rogers who writes about ways educators can form 'Effective partnerships with families who have a parent who works away'. Marg offers tips on how to manage potential resulting disruption to the household, which could affect children's wellbeing, development and learning.

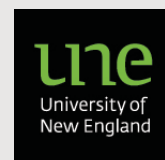
We hope that you find something useful in this issue. The next issue will be published in February, 2020.

Nadya, Sue and Marg

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## Student voice-managerialism or democratic participation

Dr Jennifer Charteris (UNE) and Dianne Smardon (Education Contractor)

Children face significant complexities and challenges in our hyper-connected world and, as educators, it is worthwhile to pause and think about how we are preparing them with the skills and knowledge to contribute as democratic agents. The importance of student 'choice and voice' has come to the fore over the last two decades, and yet this notion of power sharing is neither ubiquitous nor without tensions.

### Purposes and positioning of student voice

Students have unique perspectives and can contribute to teaching and learning decision-making and school governance. In our research with Principals in Aotearoa/New Zealand schools (Charteris & Smardon, 2019a; Charteris & Smardon, 2019b), we have seen a range of discourses, that is, ways of thinking about the purposes and positioning of voice-work. We divide these discourses into two categories that can overlap in schools – student voice for managerial purposes and student voice for democratic participation.

The following managerial student voice discourses have an emphasis on system improvement that can sometimes ignore the power and influence of students.

1. **Governmentality**- a means to monitor the effectiveness of teaching.
2. **Accountability** -a means to ensure that practitioners are teaching and leading appropriately.

3. **Institutional transformation and reform** -a means of leveraging pedagogical and systemic change in schools in the interests of efficiencies.

In contrast, the democratic student voice discourses are learner-centric in orientation.

1. **Learner agency** – students determine agendas and make decisions.
2. **Personalising learning** - curriculum, teaching and learning activities are tailored to students' needs and interests.
3. **Radical collegiality** - student tell their own stories, have influence, and gain new positions of power that can create discomfort and involve a radical change for the adult establishment.
4. **Decolonising voice** --students understand the value of a decolonising project where race privilege is critiqued and challenged through practical action.

The following questions could assist you and your colleagues to think about how you approach student participation and voice in your school:

- How can students co-lead professional learning and development so there are 'teach the teacher' opportunities? (*This is where teachers are positioned relationally as the key learners.*)
- How do you provide feedback to students so that they know what action has been taken in response to their voice contributions?
- How do students meaningfully, without adults being tokenistic, contribute to school leadership and governance so that they can address wicked problems in partnership with adults? (*Wicked problems are social or cultural issues that are usually difficult to address because: there may be*

*contradictory knowledge about them; there may be people with diverse values and views involved; there may be significant financial implications; and, these problems interconnect with other problems so there is a problem chain).*

With the student led rallies around climate change we have recently witnessed, student voice is on the agenda. It is timely to consider how the voice work in your school educates students to act responsibly and in the interests of democracy.

If you are interested in our student voice papers, please contact Jennifer and request the papers through Researchgate  
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jennifer\\_Charteris](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jennifer_Charteris)

Alternatively, you can email her directly on [jcharte5@une.edu.au](mailto:jcharte5@une.edu.au).

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## Nature play: Outcomes and possibilities

### Dr Sue Elliott (UNE)

In a previous newsletter issue (Vol. 1, No. 2) the development of a new nature playspace and research project at Thalgarrah Environmental Education Centre (TEEC) near Armidale, NSW was

outlined. This update describes some of the project outcomes. However, for a more detailed report, refer to Elliott, Taylor, Rizk, Kennelly & McKenzie (2018). The aims of the project were to find out about children's perceptions of play possibilities in the new TEEC nature playspace and inform further development of the playspace and environmental education programs.

To briefly contextualise this project, we are currently in the midst of a global nature play movement, well supported by literature around the physical, cognitive and social benefits for children (Knight, 2013; Malone & Waite, 2016). Nature play can be framed as the antidote to contemporary children's health issues such as obesity and concerns about digital addictions. In Australia, this movement has inspired emergence of 'Nature Play' initiatives by state governments and programs such as bush kinders and nature schools (Christiansen et al, 2018). The potential of nature play in uniquely Australian settings is still to be fully investigated and here we identified an opportunity to examine both children and teachers' perceptions about nature play affordances in the new TEEC nature playspace.



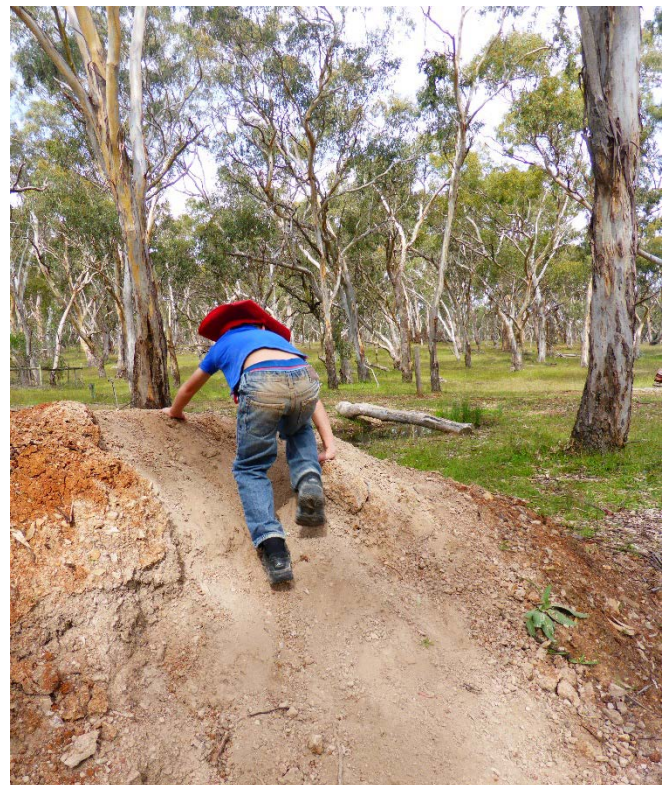
During the implementation of the TEEC project both preschool (3-5 year-olds) and Year 1 and 2 school groups (6-8 year-olds) played in the new setting weekly over a 6 week period. We sought the children's perceptions about nature play affordances through walking interviews and focus groups supported by the children's photographs of their self-selected 'best' playspaces. Also, a researcher journal was maintained throughout and teacher questionnaires were completed post their final visits. In the following paragraphs some key outcomes are discussed.

### **What did children say were the best playspaces?**

Children prioritised a rope swing, a leaning log for climbing, a muddy waterhole, a dirt pile, a water trickle hill and a sandpit with old bones. With the exception of the first two which offered specific physical and risk management challenges, all of the latter choices included various muddy combinations of soil, sand and water. It was later identified that swings were unavailable in the children's school playground, while many children seemed to appreciate the manipulability of the muddy combinations and the sensory joy of being wet and muddy. The children shared various reasons for their choices, but "enjoyment" was most commonly cited. Social opportunities came second, children often referred to playing with and having "fun" with friends. Other frequent reasons included embracing risk factors such as jumping from high on the leaning log or swinging "really" high on the rope swing. In summary, physical challenges and sensory play experiences with others were prioritised and offer a prompt for rethinking possibilities and what might be offered in your outdoor settings.

### **How did children's play change over time?**

The project was deliberately scheduled over 6 weeks with children's data collection occurring only in the final weeks. This aligned with typical programs, where regular and repeated visits are advocated to build familiarity with spaces and the potential play affordances. As researchers we observed change over time as the children's play evolved and became more sustained with creative storylines. For example, a small group of children on many visits played 'mining the dirt hill', developing mining tools and varying their quest. As one child stated "we tried to find some gold and fossils, but we still haven't found them yet, and now I'm just going to dig up the clay" (Casper Year 1, Walking Interview). If nature play programs are implemented, they need to be more than 'one off events' to a local park. The children continued to ask 'When are we going again?'... A signal for repeated play opportunities to evolve in increasingly familiar and socially-shared natural settings.



## What were teacher's responses to nature play?

Both the preschool and school teachers were highly positive about the project and nature playspace, as quoted below:

*A highly valuable program that I know will be a highlight for the children for years to come. I hope this is potentially the beginning of how this type of play/learning can be integrated within schools in our area.*

*The children's behaviour was impressive in the Nature Play area as they all played cooperatively together and there was also individualised play and exploration.*



In particular, the school teachers mentioned that only two TEEC rules outdoors and much freedom was a new concept for the Year 1/2 children. Informally the school teachers also shared how the children self-managed any challenges they experienced in the nature playspace, quite different to children's frequent referral to the yard duty teacher when at school. This invites questions about the contextual and relational differences of nature playspaces as opposed to typical school playgrounds, a topic for further examination.

In conclusion, the TEEC nature playspace has now become integral to many of the education programs offered by TEEC. Also, there have been significant local outcomes such as physical changes in school and early childhood centre outdoor playspaces, observable shifts in teacher and parent perceptions about nature play, creation of a TEEC nature play video (available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_KaslIF39tM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KaslIF39tM)) and the establishment of an annual 'Nature Play' conference at TEEC.

**Acknowledgements.** Thanks to the co-investigating team: Dr Subhashni Taylor and Dr Nadya Rizk, University of New England, New South Wales, Australia and Mr Matt McKenzie and Dr Julie Kennelly, Thalgarrah Environmental Education Centre.

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## Blog co-authorship: The role of comments in classroom blogs

Dr Rachael Adlington (UNE)

In the February 2019 edition of the School of Education Research Newsletter, I discussed how blog co-authorship occurs through the use of tags as organisers of meaning. In this, the second of three articles, I explore how bloggers and their readers co-author blogs through commenting, and how comments might be used to enact interpersonal meanings in learning experiences. I use the Australian Curriculum: English (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2015) as my framework.

Bloggers invite readers to co-author by 'switching on' the commenting feature on posts. When comments are added by readers, those comments become part of the text to be read by other readers. In addition, bloggers might actively solicit co-authorship from readers. For example, a blogger might ask readers to share their opinions about the topic of a post in the comment section, or the blogger might start to tell a story in the post and ask readers to add an ending by commenting. Here, co-authors are co-constructing the text. But, co-authors are also interacting with each other and, just like in face-to-face conversations, interpersonal work is being done in building relationships and achieving social goals. The literacy knowledge needed for doing this work is described in the Australian Curriculum: English sub-strand Language for Interaction (ACARA, 2015). The social goal of a narrative might be to entertain or to reinforce social expectations (Humphrey, Droga & Feez, 2012), and different language choices will achieve these two goals. In blogs, bloggers and reader-commenters work together to achieve the social

goals of blog texts: the post-and-comment combinations.

In the classroom, learning experiences involving commenting might utilise class-based blogs or blogs maintained by individuals and organisations outside the school. Individual student blogs can be used to co-author a wide range of texts for different social purposes, such as the narrative described above in which one student blogger will start the text in a post and ask classmates to complete the text by commenting. A class debate might also play out in a blog, whereby a position is put forward in a post and comments explore or rebut the position. In terms of using Language for Interaction, once co-authorship is initiated, the blogger hands considerable power over to readers to co-author and contribute what they wish. So, any blogger who invites co-authorship must work carefully in posts to steer co-contributors in the desired direction for co-contributions. The blogger must make effective language choices to do this.

Students might comment on blogs authored outside of school by, for example, professional authors, scientists and organisations such as museums (<http://australianmuseum.net.au/news-blogs>). These blogs allow students to interact with people located at a geographical distance, enabling rich experiences. Here, commenters must make appropriate language choices in interacting with authors, so as to build different kinds of relationships to the ones with classmates.

Students must learn to manage language in blogs, just as they manage language in off-line texts. A key idea to develop among students is that social goals are a feature of all texts, including those located in blogs (or other online texts). Further, co-authors must have a shared understanding of social goals to work together to achieve them. The Language for Interactions sub-strand notes that the way 'language used by individuals varies according to their social setting and the relationships between the participants' (ACARA, 2015), and the blog is a powerful setting in which to explore this concept. In addition, the Creating Texts sub-strand requires creating 'with clarity, authority and novelty a range of spoken, written and multimodal texts that entertain, inform and persuade audiences' (ACARA, 2015). With this in mind, the blog may be considered both a social setting for co-authorship and potentially containing a range of text students need to master at school.

In the next issue of the School of Education Research Newsletter, I complete this series of articles by returning to the co-authorship potential of tags, exploring how bloggers use tags to express and develop ideas within and between posts, and how tags might be used to represent ideational meanings in school-based blogs.

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## Effective partnerships with families who have a parent who works away

Dr Marg Rogers (UNE)

Many Australian families experience a parent working away from home on a frequent or prolonged basis in the primary industries, transport or sales sectors or through deployment within the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Researching how these families are affected, and how they cope, survive, and sometimes thrive, during these challenging times offers insights into the ways early childhood educators can promote family resilience. By following these eight steps, educators can partner effectively with these families to ensure they are emotionally and physically supported.



Click on image to access free researched-based children's app (Only available on iPads)

## Raise your awareness

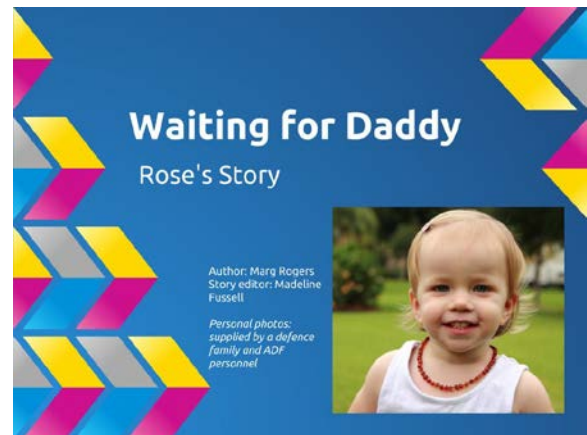
A first step for educators is to find out which children and families in your service have a parent who frequently works away. This may be obvious for those children and parents in defence or mining, but less obvious if they work in transport, sales, consultancy or the legal profession. It could also be a non-primary caregiver who is separated from the family.

## Prepare yourself

As a second step, do some background reading to explore the impacts, experiences and understandings of young children whose parents works away. Research the views and experiences of both parents who work away and those who remain at home. Discover the differences for families when parents are away for a prolonged time or parents who are frequently away for shorter periods. Each family and child is unique, however there are common experiences and issues for young children in their understandings of these potentially disruptive family events.

## Reflect deeply

Thirdly, be mindful that many families living this lifestyle are able to list the benefits it affords, despite the difficulties. For whatever the reason, individual families had chosen this lifestyle at this point of time. Reflect upon your own attitudes and assumptions about the industry the parents work in and how these may influence your relationships and ongoing communication with parents and children. Professionals supporting these families may encounter 'ethical struggles' (Baber, 2016, p. 150).



*Click on image to access research-based children's eBook*

## Realise the importance of your role in the child's microsystem

Fourthly, remember that you may be a constant in a changing landscape for the child and the family. Educators and directors often provided practical and emotional support that is highly valued by all family members.

## Increase your range of strategies

The important fifth step is to discover what works for each child and family. The following tools and strategies offer a starting point:

- Explore some of the websites associated with the industry most relevant to your service e.g. [Mining Family Matters](#) and [Defence Community Organisation](#).
- Find appropriate local or online resources (e.g. <https://www.miningfm.com.au/lifestyle/tips-for-happy-kids.html> or <http://www.defence.gov.au/DCO/Family/kids/Programs-products.asp> ) and inform families what is available because they may be unaware.



- Work from a [strengths based approach](#) (Sims, 2002) and ensure the family member's know their individual and family strengths for coping.
- Partner with other professionals and organisations e.g. family support, counselling and volunteer organisations who may be of assistance and refer families to these services.

Strong ties to a family's community helps build their resilience (Rogers-Baber, 2017), so be a catalyst for this type of connection. Also, whilst the families may not utilise the supports offered, it may be reassuring for them they are available (Rogers-Baber, 2017).

### Identify the family work cycles

Sixthly, increase your awareness of the emotionally charged build-up times before a parent departs and the use of emotional distancing amongst family members to create emotional safety. The emotional levels of the family vary, so aim to identify what is the most difficult time for both parents and for the child within the cycle. Also, seek to understand the emotions involved in the lead up to reunion, because this may involve mixed feelings for all concerned. Re-integration is one of the most challenging times for families because it involved changes in roles, responsibilities, relationships, power, decision-making and independence. It is also extremely difficult for the parent returning because family members left behind may have changed and the returning parent may feel superfluous. As an educator, do keep the parent who works away up-to-date on the child's development, achievements and experiences within your service to help alleviate these feelings and to encourage ongoing communication with the child. Ask the parent to reciprocate by sending photos and information about the place they are working, inviting them to involve a

toy mascot that belongs to the class to take with them and photograph the toy's adventures.

### Work with their family narratives

The seventh step is to support and encourage family narratives. Parents show their strengths when they use short, age-appropriate narratives to scaffold their child's understandings about the changes occurring at home. These narratives are generally two or three sentences that explain where the parent is working, how they travel there and when they are to return. They empower children with answers to adult and peer questions about home life, and are often embellished and explored in play situations. Parenting strengths are often revealed in such narratives (Baber, 2016) and Gottschall (2012) explains that narratives are powerful teaching tools used throughout history across all cultures. Educators can support children's use of family narratives by first investigating and understanding the narratives, then scaffolding and reinforcing their use. Reinforce the narratives through providing cues for the child around the time the parent is due home, by linking it to an event the child can remember such as: a birthday, holiday, Easter or special event at your service.



*Click on image to access research-based children's eBook*

## Use age and culturally-appropriate activities and resources

Lastly, tailor experiences to support children's understandings, giving meaning to their daily lived experiences and fostering their resilience. Creating and reading simple photo story book using child characters from families experiencing parent absences can elicit discussions, art works, role plays, puppet plays, movement, rhymes and raps. These activities may explore some of the emotions and experiences the characters in the books have, thus creating a safe emotional distance for children to either openly discuss their own families' experiences, or reflect internally. Sharing these books in eBook for with families may create valuable opportunities for discussions to continue at home. This should develop the child's verbal responses to difficulties related to parental absences, rather than defaulting to emotional outbursts.

## Conclusion

Using a strengths-based approach, educators can engage with families to help them realise their potential and build resilience to effectively manage stressful times. These protective factors can help the family survive the upheavals of departures, time apart and the re-integration process that can affect all family members emotionally, socially, cognitively and physically. This article has been informed by ongoing PhD research in the area of young children experiencing deployment within defence families.

For further related research articles, please go to [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marg\\_Rogers2/research](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marg_Rogers2/research)

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[www.teach.nsw.edu.au/getpaidtostudy](http://www.teach.nsw.edu.au/getpaidtostudy)

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Bachelor of Special and Inclusive Education (Primary) – [une.edu.au/courses/courses/BSIEP](http://une.edu.au/courses/courses/BSIEP)

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