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Five Scholars Receive the Patrice L. Engle Dissertation Grant in Early Child Development

Established in 2013, the Patrice L. Engle Dissertation Grant for Global Early Child Development provides opportunities for scholars who are from and/or are working in an international context to conduct dissertation research in global early child development. Recipients of the grant are each awarded $5,000 USD to support dissertation research, as well as a two-year graduate student membership to SRCD. This grant honors Patrice L. Engle, a pioneer and leader in global early child development whose work spanned multiple industries, countries, and research fields.

SRCD is pleased to recognize the 2021 Patrice L. Engle Dissertation Grant winners: Ashli-Ann Douglas, Sonya Panjwani, Ozden Pinar-Irmak, Zelalem Wondimu Kitaw, and Yawen Yu.



Ashli-Ann Douglas, Vanderbilt University

“Exploring Pre-primary Children’s Opportunities to Learn Mathematics in a Developing Country”

Ashli-Ann Douglas is a doctoral candidate at Vanderbilt University, where she is working towards a PhD in Psychological Sciences (specializing in Developmental Science and minoring in Quantitative Methods). Ashli utilizes quantitative and qualitative methodologies to examine the development of children’s mathematics skills and identity in home and school settings with the primary mentorship of Dr. Bethany Rittle-Johnson. Ashli’s passion for education rang through in her undergraduate education at Fisk University where she studied Elementary Education and Psychology as well as her pre-college education which she pursued in her home country of Jamaica. Ashli’s dissertation focuses on pre-primary school children’s opportunities to learn mathematics at home including the role of their parents’ knowledge, beliefs, and demographics. The grant in global early child development will allow Ashli to expand her research beyond the US to begin to understand the nature of parental math support in Jamaica, a developing country in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Ashli anticipates that the proposed research will contribute to a more comprehensive theory of parental early math support given its cross-cultural and within-cultural lens and will inform efforts to support children’s early math development globally including informing the design of strengths-based and culturally sensitive interventions.



Sonya Panjwani, Texas A&M University

“Integrated health service delivery networks and their implications on the first 1000 days in rural Colombia”

Sonya Panjwani is a doctoral student in the Department of Health and Kinesiology at Texas A&M University (TAMU) working under the supervision of Dr. Whitney Garney. Sonya also works as a Senior Research Associate in the Laboratory for Community Health Evaluation and Systems Science at TAMU. Her research interests include maternal and child health, sociocultural context of health, health policies, health systems strengthening, and international development. Sonya’s dissertation research will examine how Integrated Health Service Delivery Networks (IHSDNs) in Colombia affect access to maternal and infant care for rural and disparate populations throughout the first 1,000 days of life (from conception to two years post-birth). This project will take place in three rural communities that experience high infant and maternal mortality rates and represent the three main ethnic groups in the country, namely Mestizos, Afro-Colombians, and Indigenous populations. This project will serve as an assessment of IHSDNs in low resource settings and their impact on the first 1,000 days of life and will shed light on the deficiencies rural communities face when accessing care. Sonya hopes to further this project and work with policy makers to increase the availability and quality of services in rural Colombia.



Ozden Pinar-Irmak, University of Massachusetts—Boston

“The role of public preschool services in addressing and mitigating the trauma among young children of Syrian refugees in Turkey”

Ozden Pinar-Irmak is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Massachusetts Boston under the supervision of Dr. Angela K. Stone-MacDonald and Dr. Serra Acar. Ozden holds a bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education from Bogazici University and a master’s degree in Early Childhood Education from New York University (NYU). Her research interests include early education and intervention programs for refugee children and their families, trauma-informed policies and practices in early education, and international inclusive education. Ozden’s dissertation focuses on the role of public preschool services in addressing and mitigating the trauma among young children of Syrian refugees in Turkey. The primary goals of her research are to explore preschool teachers and school counselors’ attitudes, skills, and knowledge about trauma, trauma-informed care, and practices in public preschools and to understand how they realize the impact of trauma, recognize its signs and symptoms, and respond to the trauma in young Syrian refugee children in their classrooms or schools. Ozden hopes to put her research into practice and contribute trauma-informed policies and practices for immigrant and refugee children and their parents in early education services.



Zelalem Wondimu Kitaw, Addis Ababa University

“Socio-emotional learning outcomes of the internally displaced and refugee preschool children and its implication for inclusive education in Ethiopia”

Zelalem Wondimu Kitaw, a PhD candidate in the department of Special Needs Education at Addis Ababa University's College of Education and Behavioral Studies, is supervised by Dr. Belay Hagos (Associate Professor). Zelalem graduated from Ethiopia's Addis Ababa University with a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in special education. Zelalem's study focuses on the socio-emotional and learning outcomes of internally displaced and refugee preschool children, as well as the implications for inclusive education. Refugee and inclusive education, education in emergencies, early childhood care and education, inclusive education for women with disabilities, internally displaced children, and vulnerable children are some of the other related interests. The goal of Zelalem's dissertation is to measure preschool outcomes for internally displaced and refugee children in the areas of early reading, early numeracy, socio-emotional competence, and fine motor functions. In addition, the preschool effects will be examined to see if there is a causal link with caregiver-child interaction and high-quality early learning materials and facilities. Finally, the study's findings will be used to draw implications for inclusive education.



Yawen Yu, University of California, Los Angeles

“Parent-child decontextualized conversations supporting early language and socio-cognitive development of Chinese preschoolers.”

Yawen Yu is a doctoral candidate in the Division of Human Development and Psychology at the Department of Education, the University of California, Los Angeles, under the supervision of dissertation Chair Dr. Alison Bailey and dissertation committee members Dr. Jennie Grammer, Dr. Jose-Felipe Martinez-Fernandez at UCLA and external committee member Dr. Meredith Rowe at Harvard. After obtaining a B.A. in Philosophy from Zhejiang Gongshang University, Yawen received a M.A. in Humanities Studies concentrating on sociolinguistics at the University of Chicago. Her dissertation concerns parent-child verbal interactions in the Chinese context and the developmental implications. This project will build on the systematic investigations of Chinese parental beliefs using interview methods and Chinese families’ daily conversations using corpus analysis. In this project, Yawen will design an evidence-based, culturally appropriate, parent-focused conversation intervention to boost the quality of parental language input during everyday talk and ultimately enhance preschool-aged children’s language and socio-cognitive skills. In addition to evaluating the potential effects of the intervention program, Yawen will also perform thorough monitoring of program implementation to test the feasibility of a simple parent-focused intervention program and develop a logic

model for future scaling up. After the dissertation, Yawen will continue the effort of translating research into practice and policy to support the learning of those living in under-resourced communities in China and other developing countries/regions as well as that of bilingual/multilingual children.