

Introducing CRECE

Center for Research on Early Childhood Education

While early childhood education is a well-studied field, there is plenty of room to do groundbreaking work, believes Beth Graue, Sorenson Professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at UW–Madison’s School of Education and a former kindergarten teacher.

Last year with WCER’s support, Graue launched the Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (CRECE). Its mission is focused on equity, supporting cross-disciplinary research, conducting policy analyses and connecting teacher education directly to research.

Graue says the name CRECE (pronounced “cray-say”) is quite appropriate for the new center. In Spanish, it means, “It grows.”

CRECE is on course to growing a great body of work in education research, especially with the help of its new associate director, Amy Claessens, the Gulbrandsen Distinguished Chair in Early Childhood Education at UW–Madison’s School of Education. Claessens brings to CRECE a strong background in advocacy and lobbying for early childhood education policy. She also has extensive experience as a researcher working directly with teachers, families and home-based childcare providers. For her part, Claessens thinks the new center has enormous potential.

“It is a great opportunity for us to be part of building something in early childhood education from the ground up that will be really important on campus, in the community and in the state,” says Claessens, who worked previously at the University of Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy.

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CRECE is working to create equal opportunity for all young children through shared research, policy analyses, teacher education and development, and partnerships with the early childhood community.

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These two high-profile researchers envision CRECE as a national center that will attract to WCER the researchers, faculty, students, educators, policymakers and diverse community surrounding early childhood education. “I am hoping this center will have an intellectual sparkle that draws people here,” says Graue. “I would love for it to be the place that people think of instantly when they think of early childhood education.”

CRECE has several goals, including building cross-disciplinary research partnerships. “Having partnerships that have strengths across domains is the only way we are going to be able to make a change,” says Graue, who is engaged in building a community of scholars with shared interests via weekly seminars, small research grants and semester-long visiting scholarships.

CRECE also is working with another WCER project, the Madison Educational Partnership (mep.wceruw.org/). MEP and CRECE are collaborating on studies involving 4K and 5K programs, including a Spencer Foundation-funded study on how 5K students transition to kindergarten in the Madison Metropolitan School District.

A high priority of the new center is to engage graduate students—future researchers who will one day influence the field. “A huge issue in the early childhood education field is the training of the next generation of educators and scholars,” says Claessens, emphasizing that it will be a priority at CRECE to prepare students to be leaders in the field by exposing them to a diverse range of views on early childhood education and research methods.

Traditionally, most universities have focused on teacher education and classroom learning components of early childhood education. However, CRECE researchers take a more holistic approach by prioritizing the studying of young children in all the settings in which they live and learn.



CRECE’s Director Beth Graue (left) and Associate Director Amy Claessens (right), both well-respected researchers in their field, envision CRECE as a national research center in early childhood education.

“With CRECE, we are thinking about all the different informal contexts in which kids are learning—at home, at museums, with grandparents and in programs, like Head Start and Madison Out of School Time. It’s really about engaging the community,” Claessens explains. “We need to think, ‘Where are the kids?’ and bring what we know about positive development to where they are.”

In addition, CRECE is engaging local educators through its new Practitioner in Residence Program. In December, CRECE introduced early childhood expert Meredith Dodd to Madison researchers, pre-service teachers and local early childhood educators through a series of events. In several talks she shared innovative practices she employs at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. She also discussed the importance of documenting students’ learning and tapping into young students’ mathematical and literacy capacities.

“We are engaged in very exciting work,” says Graue, a UW faculty member since 1990 and a WCER researcher since 2004. “Between having a colleague of Amy’s caliber and this center as an educational resource, we plan to advance early childhood education through research and practices that address the needs of the field and the potential of all young children.”

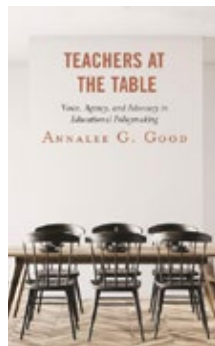
Publications/Findings From WCER Researchers

The Wisconsin Center for Education Research impacts education in Wisconsin and nationwide. Here are the latest findings from WCER researchers:

POLICY

“Teachers at the Table: Voice, Agency, and Advocacy in Educational Policymaking”

This book by Annalee Good draws on a qualitative case study with practicing and pre-service teachers to illustrate norms and routines acting as barriers to teacher involvement in creating policy. It follows teacher pushback against these norms, and details conditions under which teachers can interact in authentic ways with decision-making in schools and the policy arena.



TEACHING PRACTICE

“Teaching Academics About Microaggressions: A Workshop Model”

Education may help reduce the incidence of microaggressions and potential harm to minority faculty, staff and students. This paper details a workshop delivered to over 750 faculty and staff and 200 students at UW–Madison, where facilitators used research evidence to teach about microaggressions. Preliminary data shows participants highly valued the workshop, increased their knowledge of microaggressions and learned evidence-based strategies for creating a more inclusive environment. Published in *UI Journal*.



“Teaching-Focused Social Networks Among College Faculty”

Studies show that teaching-focused relationships give teachers access to information, support and “social capital” that can improve student learning. However, little research has focused on how beneficial relationships *develop* among college faculty. This mixed methods study by Ross Benbow and Changhee Lee shows that less teaching experience, work at two-year colleges and more time spent outside of class preparing to teach link to relationships and discussions that improve professional practice among faculty. Published in *Higher Education*.



LABOR MARKET

“An Inquiry into Principal-Teacher Race Congruence “

In this working paper, researcher Peter Goff and graduate students Minseok Yang and Yasmin Rodriguez-Escutia examined how teachers of color behave in the labor market and found a principal’s race can make a significant difference on teachers of color. When teachers of color work with a principal of color, they are less likely to leave or look for jobs elsewhere. They are also more likely to seek employment in schools led by principals of color.



“College Student Employability: An Analysis of Educator and Employer Conceptions of Workplace Skills”

The common view that college’s primary goal is to teach students workplace skills has redefined higher education, with universal skills like “grit” and “communication” guiding college curricula. Ross Benbow and Matthew Hora use interviews with Wisconsin college faculty and employers to assess these assumptions, showing that skills are viewed as complex, multi-layered, cultural traits and abilities, and that cultural forces play an important role in shaping student workplace success. Published in *Harvard Educational Review*.



LANGUAGE LEARNERS

“Examination of Identification and Placement Decisions for K-12 English Learners”

This study by Ahyoung Alicia Kim, Daniella Molle, Jason Kemp and H. Gary Cook examines how K-12 educators identify and place English learners in language-instruction programs. Findings show EL/title III coordinators (district level) and EL teachers (school level) primarily used home-language survey data and English language proficiency (ELP) scores for identification, and annual ELP assessment scores for placement. They perceived EL misidentification and misplacement to be rare, but suggest over-identification of ELs.



HIGHER EDUCATION

“Documenting the Aims of Higher Education in Wisconsin”

Using participatory action research methods, Bailey Smolarek and Matthew Wolfgram teamed up with seven UW–Madison undergraduates to explore how Wisconsin residents view the aims of higher education. Results in this research report show the views of Wisconsin residents on education are not as polarized as popular public discourse might suggest. Rather, they demonstrate a diverse understanding of the multiple aims higher education serves.



RESEARCH SUPPORT

“A Cyberinfrastructure for Design-Based Research”

Design-based research innovations represent a complex mesh of goals, content, technology use, principles of learning, teaching methods and accountability systems that must be woven together. In this paper, Sadhana Puntambekar and her colleagues argue for creating an infrastructure that would encourage and support collective engagement by multiple design-based researchers. They recommend working together toward answers to important theory-driven research questions to move toward a “bigger science” approach.



News

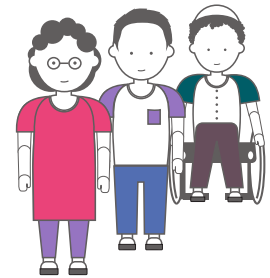
New rural education center opens at UW–Madison

To help create positive educational outcomes for students and families in rural schools and communities, UW–Madison’s School of Education has launched the Rural Education Research and Implementation Center (RERIC). Using evidence-based educational approaches, RERIC will partner with schools, teachers, community organizations and other stakeholders to build on a shared purpose of strengthening rural education. More details at eric.wisc.edu.



New tools on tap for educators of ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities

Do you teach ELL students with significant cognitive disabilities? In many cases, their language-learning needs fall by the wayside. The Alternate English Language Learning Assessment (ALTELLA) project, housed at WCER, now offers online resources that help us learn about this underserved student population. To download these highly useful tools, go to altella.wceruw.org and click on “Resources.”



Study reveals a tough road to college for Wisconsin refugees

For refugees making Wisconsin their new home, earning a college degree presents many challenges, as revealed in a new study by WCER’s Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions. Barriers include limited cash benefits, health issues, poverty and most notably, federal rules prioritizing jobs and self-sufficiency over degrees. Researchers say there is hope, however, with philanthropic support and partnerships between universities and refugee-settlement service providers.



CIMER lends mentoring expertise to national STEM diversity efforts

While quality mentoring is crucial to furthering STEM careers, it is not easily accessed by all demographic groups. To help level the playing field for a more diverse scientific workforce, WCER’s Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER) will provide mentoring expertise on two projects: the CIRTL co-led ASPIRE Alliance and the NSF INCLUDES Alliance, or IGEN—Inclusive Graduate Education Network.



For more findings, news and events, visit: wcer.wisc.edu/news/newsletter.



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