

Award winners of the 2015 Patrice L. Engle Dissertation Grant in Early Child Development: Alexandra Chen, Maku Ocansey, Jenny A. Ortiz, and Inge Wessels



Alexandra Chen is pursuing a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, concentrating in Human Development and Psychology. Her advisors for this project are Profs. Margaret Sheridan (UNC) and Amar Hamoudi (Duke), and her academic advisor is Prof. Sarah Dryden-Peterson (HGSE).

Alexandra's dissertation focuses on the impact of refugee trauma on children's brain architecture and their abilities to learn.

Specifically, this project uses cognitive testing to investigate how Syrian refugee children's exposure to toxic stress is related to their cognitive function, and whether certain models of education and psychosocial programming can have a positive impact. Prior to

moving to the US for her PhD, Alexandra served as a child protection and mental health specialist for several UN agencies and NGOs in the Middle East and Africa, most recently as mental health and psychosocial advisor to the UN on the Syria crisis. Alexandra hopes that her dissertation work will help to inform the design and implementation of integrated psychosocial and education programs for refugees in the Middle East and beyond, and advance our ability to engage parents, teachers, and government stakeholders in improving the standards of education and mental health for children in armed conflict.



Jenny Amanda Ortiz is developing her doctoral program at the Center of Psychological Studies CEP-Rua/Institute of Psychology at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) in Brazil. She is working under the advice of Silvia Koller and co-advice of Marinus van Ijzendoorn. Jenny has a Doctoral Fellowship of COLCIENCIAS, the Colombian agency that promotes science and technology. She is part of the first cohort of fellows of the ISSBD-JF Mentored Fellowship Program for Early Career Scholars, which allowed her to have international exchange and collaboration. Her project is also partially supported for the *Programa de Associação para Fortalecimento da Pós-Graduação PFPG/CAPES/ANII/Mercosul*.

It is entitled "Adaptation and Evaluation of Video-Feedback Intervention for Sensitive Care in Childcare Centers" and is being conducted in Uruguay. The project aims to adapt the evidence-based intervention to promote caregivers sensitivity (Video-feedback Intervention to Promote Positive Parenting and Sensitive Discipline, VIPP-SD) into Spanish and with caregivers who are working in public childcare centers, and then to test the intervention effectiveness using a randomized controlled study. Jenny hopes to continue studying early interventions to improve the lives of children in vulnerability contexts by working with policymakers in order to help narrow the gap between knowledge, policy and practice in low-or middle-income countries.



Maku Ocansey is currently pursuing Doctoral studies in Nutrition at the University of California, Davis with designated emphasis in International and Community Nutrition. Her supervisors are Drs. Kathryn Dewey and Elizabeth Prado. Her research titled “Assessing developmental outcomes at preschool age following three micronutrient supplementation strategies for pregnant and lactating women and their infants in Ghana” will be centered on assessments of child development of the International Lipid-based Nutrient Supplement (iLiNS) cohort when the children reach preschool (4-6 years of age). The iLiNS trial was a randomized, partially double blind, controlled trial conducted in Eastern region

of Ghana to test the efficacy of three types of micronutrient supplements for preventing malnutrition in pregnant and lactating women and their infants. Maku’s research will evaluate the long term consequences of such an early intervention on child development. Before beginning her doctoral training, she obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Nutrition and Food Science and a Master of Philosophy degree in Nutrition from the University of Ghana, Legon. She also worked extensively on research studies focused on preventing maternal and child undernutrition in rural Ghana as a Research Assistant, and gained hands-on experience conducting developmental assessments of children at 18 months of age on the iLiNS Ghana study. Maku hopes that her project will contribute to our understanding of the long-term developmental consequences of nutrition interventions during the first 1000 days. It is her desire to partner with policy makers and stakeholders in Organizations with a nutrition focus to translate research into practical and comprehensive strategies to improve early childhood developmental outcomes in Low and Middle Income Countries.



Inge Wessels is working towards her Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) in Psychology at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Her supervisor is Associate Professor Catherine L. Ward. Her project will be conducted in Cape Town and is titled “Understanding Engagement in Parenting Programs in Low-Income Contexts”. Inge’s Honours and Masters research projects were also conducted in South Africa and focused on parenting programs. After her Master’s degree, she interned with the WHO Department of Violence and Injury Prevention and Disability in Geneva, which led to the publication of a document on evaluating parenting programs. She has been involved in other parenting-

related work, including the development of a radio series aired on 11 stations across South Africa as well as providing technical support to consulting companies evaluating family-based programs. She is currently the Project Manager of the Sinovuyo Caring Families Project, which involves the development and testing of a parenting program to reduce the risk of child abuse, for high-risk families with children aged 2-9. Inge hopes that her dissertation will contribute to increasing access to parenting programs for the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach families.