

Further details: Cradle-to-Career School Designs: Learning from insider experiences

Project Description

This full time 3 year PhD studentship, starting in September 2018, is fully funded by the ESRC CASE studentship scheme [ESRC NWSSDTP](#) together with the [Manchester Institute of Education](#) at The University of Manchester and [Reach Academy Feltham](#).

CASE studentships involve a PhD student working in partnership with a professional organisation to undertake a study which has been designed to enhance the organisation's work. This creates an exciting opportunity for students to undertake a PhD which bridges between academic and professional concerns, having a direct impact in a professional context while also producing a PhD thesis.

The PhD will require the successful candidate to become an 'embedded researcher' based at Reach Academy Feltham (RAF), and to develop an in-depth ethnographic case study of RAF's cradle-to-career school design. The PhD will be supervised by Dr Kirstin Kerr and Prof Carlo Raffo from The Manchester Institute of Education, and closely supported by Luke Billingham, leader of 'Reach Hub' – the internal structure established to support RAF's cradle-to-career design. Further details of the required project are outlined below. Applicants are strongly advised to discuss their applications with Dr Kirstin Kerr.

Detailed project proposal

Background and aims

Like many countries internationally, the UK has entrenched patterns of educational inequality. As a whole, the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children do least well in school and most often live in poor areas, where access to good quality services and positive life chances are particularly limited. What schools can do in response is a major policy concern. This CASE studentship will explore the possibilities arising from a new type of school design, widely characterised as 'cradle-to-career' initiatives. Emerging in poor urban neighbourhoods in the USA, and now increasingly in the UK, cradle-to-career designs engage with barriers to learning in children's family, community, and wider socio-environmental contexts (Lawson 2013, Lawson and Van Veen 2016). Tailored to local areas, they aim to: (i) provide children with a seamless 'pipeline' of support, from pre-school to positive post-school destinations; (ii) improve children's outcomes across a range of domains, including health, education, housing, and material well-being; and (iii) enhance the capacity of children's family and community contexts to support better outcomes.

While these designs hold considerable promise, the knowledge base about them is, as yet, limited. Reports in the scholarly literature tend towards descriptive and process-oriented accounts, with grey literatures dominated by professionals' accounts of their own initiatives. A particular issue is that professionals' assumptions about how their cradle-to-career designs will work in practice, and how children, families and

communities will engage in and benefit from these, are rarely surfaced and scrutinised (Douglass-Horsford and Sampson 2014). Concerns have been expressed that as the field develops, cradle-to-career systems are being designed without actively engaging with the lives and experiences of those they intend to benefit – a scenario which at best is likely to limit their impacts, and at worst, prove alienating (Kerr et al 2016). This studentship is designed to address these issues.

The studentship will be embedded in Reach Academy Feltham (RAF), an ‘all-through’ school for learners aged 2-18. Founded in 2012, RAF is at the forefront of cradle-to-career school design in the UK, and after consultation with professional partners and community members, has focused its activities on improving: (i) school readiness, through antenatal, postnatal and early years development support; (ii) family strength and capacity, through wide-ranging parent and family support programmes; and (iii) post-school outcomes, through services to support learners’ well-being, educational outcomes, and wider life chances. Through a detailed empirical case study of RAF’s cradle-to-career design over a 21 month period, including substantive research into its children’s and families’ engagement with this, the studentship will:

1. surface and scrutinise the understandings of the professionals leading RAF’s cradle-to-career design, focusing on what this is intended to achieve and how it anticipates doing so
2. explore how a sample of children and their families engage with, experience, and are impacted upon by RAF’s cradle-to-career design
3. support the professionals leading RAF’s development through their engagement with the study’s findings.

Specifically, it will address the following research questions (RQs):

1. What does RAF’s cradle-to-career design do to try to improve outcomes for children and their families?
2. Why does it do this and what does it hope to achieve?
3. How is RAF’s design intended to work in practice for children and their families?
4. What evidence is there that RAF’s design is working as anticipated for a sample of children and their families, and what factors account for this?
5. What does this suggest for the development of RAF’s design?

Research Design

The studentship will develop a case study of RAF’s cradle-to-career design, with case studies of ten families engaged with RAF’s provision embedded within this. The study will also draw on a range of interrelated conceptual perspectives to help explore issues which are central to cradle-to-career designs, including: how learners’ identities, expectations and outcomes are shaped by their environments (Kerr et al. 2014); how these environments can be made more resilient (Gutiérrez 2016); and how learners’ identities can shape their trust in schools to support them in pursuing good outcomes (Yeager et al. 2017).

Empirically, the study will have two broad phases:

Phase 1 (5 months) focuses on RAF’s cradle-to-career design. To understand what RAF’s design does, why, and how it is intended to work, the professionals who lead this will be supported to articulate their ‘theory

of change'. This will set out: the situation RAF is trying to change; what RAF hopes to achieve in the long term by changing this situation; the actions RAF will take; how RAF envisages these actions working, step-by-step, over time, to achieve the desired long-term outcomes; and the kinds of evidence of impact anticipated. Primary research activities will include interviews and reviewing relevant documentation. The CASE student will also become familiar with RAF's local area through field visits and reviewing socio-demographic data.

Phase 2 (16 months) develops in-depth case studies of 10 families, identified in consultation with RAF's leaders and family support workers. Each family's engagement will be tracked over 5 academic terms to explore the extent to which RAF's approach is working as anticipated and the factors which account for this. At a minimum, interviews will take place with each family on a termly basis. Broadly, these will explore: (i) families' current situations, their future plans, and the factors shaping these – in relation to a range of outcomes and families' capacities to support these; (ii) family members' engagement with RAF and its impacts; and (iii) their engagement with other forms of support, which supplement or provide an alternative to RAF's provision. To ensure interview activities are easily accessible, discussion tools, such as the family outcomes star (www.outcomesstar.org.uk), widely used by charities and statutory services, will be adapted as appropriate.

Interim findings will be fed back termly to the leaders of RAF's design to support its on-going development. Through this, the study aims to make direct contributions to RAF which will help to secure positive engagement and outcomes, whilst also generating knowledge relevant to those involved in similar developments elsewhere.

Timeline of main research activities

- Sept-Dec 2018: Familiarisation with secondary data sources on RAF's design and community context.
- Jan-March 2019: Induction activities at RAF. Complete ethics application.
- April-Aug 2019: Phase 1: Developing theory of change with RAF's leaders. Recruit case study families. Pilot Phase 2 research instruments.
- Sept 2019 – Dec 2020: Phase 2: Family case studies developed over five academic terms. Termly feedback provided to RAF's leaders.
- Jan-Sept 2021: Complete full draft of thesis. Pursue dissemination activities.

From September 2018 – March 2019 the successful candidate will be based in Manchester with occasional visits to RAF. The candidate will subsequently be embedded at RAF.

Outcomes

Beyond direct impacts on RAF, the study has the potential to be truly field-shaping by addressing concerns that cradle-to-career systems are being designed without reference to the lives of their intended beneficiaries. It will do this by surfacing and bringing together professionals' understandings, with insights into the engagement experiences of children and families, and how these are shaped by their complex socio-ecological environments. Importantly, this will also counter the tendency in research and policy to treat the environments in which schools operate, and in which children and families live, simply as a 'backdrop' to

activity rather than as actively shaping this. The study's findings are therefore likely to have significant practical and conceptual application within this emerging field, with the transferability of findings to other contexts in the UK, USA and beyond, supported by its in-depth case-study design. Furthermore, findings will have high policy relevance, illuminating: (i) the potential of cradle-to-career designs to tackle inequalities in disadvantaged areas, and (ii) the related design issues schools must consider.

Dissemination

The CASE student will be supported to disseminate findings to diverse policy and practice audiences, in addition to high profile academic journal articles and conference papers. This will utilise RAF's networks and those of the academic supervisors. For instance, RAF already provides training for other academies focusing on particular aspects of its design; it is a teacher training partner for Ark Academy Trust, which runs 35 schools; and its delivery partners and supporters range from Isabelle Trowler, Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, to the National Childbirth Trust and the Rank Foundation. In addition, Dr Kerr's (first supervisor) networks will support dissemination internationally. She is, for instance, a participant in the Research Affinity Group of the Coalition of Community Schools, the primary organisation for practice and research into cradle-to-career developments in the USA.

References

- Douglass-Horsford, S. & Sampson, C. (2014) Promise Neighborhoods: The Promise and Politics of Community Capacity Building as Urban School Reform. *Urban Education*, 49(8): 955–991
- Gutiérrez, K. D. (2016). Designing resilient ecologies: Social design experiments and a new social imagination. *Educational Researcher*, 45(3): 187–196.
- Kerr, K., Dyson, A., and Gallannaugh, F. (2016) Conceptualising school-community relations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods: mapping the literature. *Educational Research* 58(3) 265-282
- Kerr, K., Dyson, A. and Raffo, C. (2014) *Education, disadvantage and place: Making the local matter*. Bristol: Policy Press
- Lawson, H. (2013). Third-generation partnerships for P-16 pipelines and cradle-through-career education systems. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 88: 637–656.
- Lawson, H. & van Veen, D. (2016) *Developing community schools, community learning centers, extended-service and multi-service schools: International exemplars for practice, policy, and research*. The Hague, NL: Springer International.
- Yeager, D., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Hooper, S., & Cohen, G. (2017). Loss of institutional trust among racial and ethnic minority adolescents. *Child Development*, 88(2): 658-676.

Person specification

Applicants must hold a Master's degree at merit level or above in a relevant social science or humanities discipline, such as education, social anthropology, social policy, or sociology. They must demonstrate a keen awareness of issues relating to the impacts of disadvantage on education and life chances, and of policy efforts to address these. Experience of working with schools, children's services or wider local authority services, in third sector organisations working with children and families in disadvantaged contexts, and/or in community development, is highly desirable. A high level of competence in qualitative data generation and analysis is essential as the study will involve the development of ethnographic style case studies.

The successful candidate must be DBS cleared.

The successful candidate must also be able to undertake the first six months of the PhD study in Manchester in order to engage in postgraduate research training and access the university's full range of services. He/she will subsequently be based at RAF, making regular visits to Manchester.

Candidates must satisfy the ESRC's academic and residential eligibility requirements and be UK (full award) or EU citizens (fees only). Find out more about eligibility [here](#).

Financial support

The studentship covers academic fees, provides an annual Maintenance Stipend (£14,553 in 2017, exact rate for 2018 subject to confirmation from the RCUK), and access to a Research Training Support Grant (RTSG) for reimbursement of research related expenses including – but not limited to – conference attendance, training courses and UK fieldwork. In addition, RAF will provide financial support for regular travel to Manchester and the purchase of essential equipment.

Further information

Applicants are strongly recommended to discuss their application with Dr Kirstin Kerr in advance of submission. Dr Kerr's contact details are: kirstin.kerr@manchester.ac.uk

The deadline for applications is 04.02.18. Interviews will be held at Reach Academy Feltham, and will take place in the week beginning 19th February.

Candidates invited for interview are expected to cover their own travel expenses.

Application

Apply by 4th February 2018 5pm GMT by emailing Christopher.kitchen@manchester.ac.uk the following:

- A full CV
- A personal statement outlining the applicant's suitability and interest to undertake the proposed project, paying particular attention to the proposal's substantive and methodological aspects.
- An example of a piece of academic writing produced by the applicant of 5,000-10,000 words.
(Applicants may consider submitting two shorter pieces of c.5,000 if these deal separately with

conceptual and empirical analyses.) This may be a chapter(s) from a Master's dissertation, in which case, an abstract or introduction outlining the context/aims/research questions of the study must also be included.

- The names and contact details of two academic referees who are able to comment on the applicant's suitability for PhD study and to undertake the advertised project.
- The name and contact details of an additional referee who can comment on the applicant's professional suitability to be embedded at Reach Academy Feltham.