



SOLUTION SEEKERS:

Anita Zucker Center Researchers Aim to Transform Development and Learning in Early Childhood

by Linda Homewood

The Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies at UF has experienced dramatic growth in influence and impact over the past year. The center’s interdisciplinary approach focuses on children’s development and learning from birth to age 5. These early years open a child’s lifelong pathways in development to learn and contribute to our society. Center heads Patricia Snyder (director) and Maureen Conroy (co-director) and affiliated UF faculty researchers seek new solutions that will improve lives and train future leaders in the field. Here are a few examples of the center’s impactful work...

Center Director Awarded \$3.5M to Investigate Teaching Tools for Inclusive Preschool Learning

Preschool children with early learning challenges benefit from being part of an inclusive class, but UF researchers say they still need extra support that can be found through a promising teaching approach known as embedded instruction.

For more than 25 years, Anita Zucker Center Director Patricia Snyder has been examining instructional approaches that support young children’s development and learning in inclusive environments. She wants to

make sure the instructional practices used in preschool classrooms are based on scientific evidence.

“Providing access to inclusive learning opportunities for young children with learning challenges is not sufficient,” Snyder said. “Embedded instruction helps ensure young children’s meaningful participation in everyday activities, routines and transitions in the preschool classroom and provides situated learning opportunities for them.”

Snyder and her research team have received a significant boost that will allow them to continue their work with preschool teachers and the children in their classrooms. They will conduct a four-year randomized controlled

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efficacy trial focused on an embedded instruction intervention through a \$3.5 million grant from the National Center for Special Education Research, part of the U.S. Department of Education.

Snyder, the David Lawrence Jr. Chair in Early Childhood Studies at UF, is joined by co-principal investigators James Algina, an emeritus professor of research and evaluation methodology, and Mary McLean, a professor of special education and early childhood studies. Anita Zucker Center researcher Brian Reichow and postdoctoral fellows Crystal Bishop and Joy Polignano also are supporting the study.



This summer, Reichow and his colleagues finalized the parent skills training program with plans to test the training in multiple countries in North, South and Central America, Africa, and Asia.

Reichow is eager to bring the best global practices back home to Florida to help children and families in communities throughout the state.

Doctoral Training Prepares Future Leaders

Preparing Leaders in Early Childhood Studies and Implementation Science a four-year grant worth \$1 million from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, has been awarded to UF. The funding

will help support five doctoral students in the Anita Zucker Center and the College of Education's Special Education Program to become the next generation of leaders in the field.

Center faculty Maureen Conroy, Mary McLean, Brian Reichow and Patricia Snyder, are spearheading this new training initiative.

"The project will generate a cadre of new leaders in our field to conduct research and influence policies and practices to address the existing service gap and ensure that all children have access to high quality learning opportunities," Conroy said.

Mentored apprenticeships in research with core faculty and community-based leadership roles are integral experiences that students will receive as part of their Ph.D. training. The practical knowledge will help them prepare for leadership positions in which they can help improve the outcomes of young children, including those with, or at risk for, disabilities, and their families.

Interested students and practitioners can learn more about this opportunity at <http://education.ufl.edu/special-education/phd-grant>.

Global Effort Aims to Improve Lives for Children, Families

Associate Professor Brian Reichow joined the college's early childhood and special education faculty in 2014 through the UF Preeminence initiative to improve the lives of children with autism and other developmental disabilities, and their families.

Working through the interdisciplinary Anita Zucker Center, Reichow has taken his efforts to a global scale, collaborating with early childhood experts from four continents on a project headed by the World Health Organization.

The project seeks to establish resources particularly for families in low-resource areas with few or no trained specialists. Their mission: to develop a universal parent skills training program to improve the lives of children with a developmental disability — and their families.

"After the parent skills training, we expect parents to gain more knowledge of how to interact and communicate with their child," Reichow says. "Establishing a strong reciprocal relationship between the parents and their child early in life will help set the stage for later growth and development."

Donor Anita Zucker's Goal: TO 'REPAIR THE WORLD'— STARTING WITH ITS CHILDREN



From the time they were UF freshmen, Anita Zucker and her late husband, Jerry, worked side-by-side completing their education, nurturing a family and building a successful life in Charleston, S.C.

The Hebrew phrase, *tikkun olam*, meaning “repair the world,” was at the heart of everything they did. It led Anita Zucker to become an elementary teacher where she gained an understanding of how the earliest building blocks would ultimately construct strong, vital communities. Jerry Zucker, who became an engineer and businessman, used his entrepreneurial know-how to guide their professional and personal endeavors. It also fueled Anita’s passion to help children.

“Every child needs to have every opportunity,” Zucker says. “Healthy communities have to start with our youngest children.”

By partnering with the UF College of Education, her alma mater, Zucker continues to live out the Hebrew creed. She is creating opportunities that benefit everyone, from babies and their families, to those who are teaching and working with young people. She is making it possible for early childhood experts to educate parents and caregivers about the critical developmental years before age 5. These experts are also training tomorrow’s researchers and educators, who will continue to prepare and enrich children for generations to come.

UF is carrying Zucker’s vision much farther than her local community and Florida. Experts in the Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies are working to reach every community in this country and beyond. Together, they are working to repair the world, beginning with its children.

Project Prepare Scholarship Funds New Master’s Training Program to Serve High-Need Communities

Through a new grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the University of Florida College of Education is providing financial support this fall for 12 graduate students in early childhood special education.

The new master’s students in the college’s Unified Early Childhood Program are the first to be accepted into the one-year training and mentoring program led by Mary McLean, a professor, who joined the Anita Zucker Center last year through the UF Preeminence initiative, and Hazel Jones, an associate professor, both in special education and early childhood studies. The program, known as Project Prepare, addresses a national priority of preparing students to work with young children with disabilities in high-need communities.

McLean received the \$1.2 million in funding from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs to address this national priority for families and children. She expects to fund 60 master’s students over the next five years.

Each student receives a scholarship stipend of \$13,750, with a service obligation to work for two years as a teacher for children with disabilities in any U.S. state or territory.

Building on Success, BEST in CLASS Early Elementary Intervention Study Launches

Nearly one in three children who enter school display challenging behaviors that can compromise their learning opportunities and academic success.

To help children and their families start the educational journey on sure footing, Maureen Conroy, the Anita Zucker Professor in Early Childhood Studies at UF and her colleague Professor Kevin Sutherland at Virginia Commonwealth University designed the BEST in CLASS intervention to help preschoolers in early childhood classrooms learn the social and behavioral skills needed to be successful. They recently completed an efficacy trial of the BEST in CLASS intervention in early childhood programs that demonstrated positive outcomes for nearly 200 teachers and 500 children and their families.

This fall, the colleagues were awarded nearly \$1.5 million by the National Center for Education Research at the Institute of Education Sciences to adapt their findings to benefit children who are entering elementary school.

“The early years of school are critical for academic success,” Conroy said. “BEST in CLASS helps teachers gain the knowledge, tools and supports needed to build positive early learning experiences, including teacher-student relationships that can support and create positive behavioral change.”

Early Childhood Expert Named Anita Zucker Professor at Interdisciplinary UF Center for Excellence

Maureen Conroy, an early childhood expert and professor at UF's College of Education, has been named the Anita Zucker Professor in Early Childhood Studies.

Conroy, who co-directs the Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies at UF, is working with other center researchers to transform science, policy and practices in early childhood. Their efforts, gaining national and worldwide attention, are impacting children, families, practitioners and communities.

"Ninety percent of a child's brain development happens before he or she turns 5," Conroy said. "Our research mission is to provide science-based approaches for supporting young children's development and learning during this critical time."

The Anita Zucker Center supports young children who are most vulnerable, their families, and their early childhood providers to create supportive early learning environments to help them succeed. Conroy and her center collaborators partner with colleagues from a number of colleges at UF as well as other community, state, national and international stakeholders.

Zucker, a 1972 UF education graduate and a UF Board of Trustees member, has long been interested in early childhood studies. In 2011, the Charleston, S.C., native contributed \$1 million to the College of Education to establish the endowed professorship that Conroy now occupies. Last year, Zucker gave another \$5 million to expand the center's efforts and UF's Preeminence initiative in early childhood studies.

"Anita Zucker's generous gift is a game-changer that ensures our work will reach children and families in our community, state and across the nation and world," Conroy said.

A graduate of Keene State College in New Hampshire and a two-time graduate of Vanderbilt University, Conroy's 38-year career has revolved around conducting research and training future researchers and practitioners working directly with young children and their families.



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"The appointment of Maureen Conroy as the inaugural Anita Zucker Professor in Early Childhood Studies will advance significantly our national and international visibility and impact," said Patricia Snyder, director of the Anita Zucker Center and the David Lawrence Jr. Endowed Chair in Early Childhood Studies. "Having the Zucker Professor and Lawrence Chair working side-by-side demonstrates UF's commitment to achieving preeminence status in early childhood studies."

Zucker, who taught elementary school for 10 years, earned a bachelor's degree in education at UF in 1972 and received her master's in educational administration and supervision at the University of North Florida. In 2008, when her husband, Jerry, passed away, she succeeded him as CEO of the InterTech Group. Jerry Zucker graduated from UF in 1972 as a triple major in math, chemistry and physics.

"Early childhood really is the key to unlocking doors for later learning and success in life," Zucker said. "Transforming our children's lives through education is important in so many ways."