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# Research e n t r a i

**S**TROLL THROUGH THE HALLS OF FPG and you will see a legacy of the Institute's role in preparing researchers for early childhood careers. Behind almost every desk sits a researcher who once trained at FPG as a doctoral or post-doctoral student, a researcher mentoring a student, or a student conducting research under the tutelage of an FPG researcher.

FPG's role in training researchers can be traced back to its establishment in the 1960s as an independent center within The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While not able to enroll students or offer courses, FPG supports faculty who serve as chairs or members of doctoral and thesis committees, and enlists graduate students to work on various research projects. Thousands of students have done so over the years, attracted by the chance to work with expert faculty and funded projects on a variety of topics. Many of these students have gone on to work at FPG, where they have, in turn, mentored a new generation of student researchers. Others have moved to all parts of the country to serve as teachers, administrators and researchers.





**Jan Blacher**  
Former student,  
nationally recognized researcher

Researcher, teacher, writer, film consultant, parent—Jan Blacher does it all. Since receiving her doctorate in Special Education and Developmental Psychology from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1979, Blacher has been trailblazing through the field with remarkable energy. Now a professor of education at the University of California at Riverside, Blacher has won more than a dozen honors and awards, received 32 grants, served on 20 professional advisory boards, and authored or co-authored more than 50 journal articles. She is a consulting editor for *Mental Retardation* and a columnist for *Exceptional Children* magazine.

Last year, Blacher was asked to consult on an independent film called *Pumpkin* starring Christina Ricci and based around a character with mental retardation. “Working with an actor was one of the most interesting activities I’ve ever done,” Blacher says. “The film got rave reviews and made it to the finals of the Sundance Film Festival.” Laughing, she adds, “It just goes to show that having solid research training has real world applications.”

Blacher is equally excited about her role as principal investigator of the UC-Riverside Families Project, a 16-year longitudinal study of families who have children with severe mental handicaps. This study is the first to follow families after their children with developmental disabilities have been placed out of the home. What she has found is encouraging. “Placement out of the home is no longer placement out of the family,” Blacher says.

“Since the passage of the ADA and now IDEA, we’ve documented more contact between families and children placed in homes. The law brought more awareness and involvement with these children. It provided more family support and services that have allowed out-of-home placement, when necessary, to be done much later in life.”

Blacher says she feels “eternally indebted” to UNC and FPG for her training. “I attribute my grant-winning success to my training at both of those places,” Blacher says.

“Jim Gallagher schooled us well in how to do this. And even though I wanted to focus on research, I learned about policy and clinical work as well. I had Rolls Royce internships while at UNC.”

This tradition of preparing researchers continues with a host of new grants and opportunities. One of the most recent is a grant from the US Department of Education, Office of Special Educational Programs (OSEP) to train doctoral and post-doctoral students how to analyze the many national programs and data gathered about young children with disabilities.

“The country is in desperate need of people who know how to conduct large studies within a policy context,” says Gloria Harbin, principal investigator for the grant. “Policymakers are asking for evidence that the various programs they have funded are working, and we are having a hard time finding researchers capable of doing the studies. Because of the importance of these programs, the people who conduct these analyses will have an impact on shaping public policy for children with disabilities aged birth through 18 for the next five to ten years.”

Under the \$1.6 million grant, FPG will train nine individuals in each of three years. Six of those chosen will have completed all doctoral coursework, and three will have already obtained a PhD. This will be an interdisciplinary group, including psychologists, sociologists, special education and public health researchers. Recipients will go through an eight-week “boot camp” at FPG to learn the methodological skills necessary to conduct and analyze studies.

After their training, students will conduct a 10-month apprenticeship at one of the large research organizations or universities that house one or other of the national data sets. Students will choose one of the studies and conduct a secondary level of analysis, selecting their own question to research. “Not only will this be important in their own training,” Harbin says, “they will be crafting and answering important questions that would otherwise have gone unanswered, because the

agency funded to do the study didn't have the fiscal and human resources to do this level of analysis."

Harbin adds, "Our long-term goal is to encourage these students to go to work for one of these research organizations, or for a state agency, or to go back to a university to teach a new generation of students how to do these studies."

The first year of the program, beginning in January 2003, is devoted to designing the training curriculum and the apprenticeship experience. The first cohort of students will begin work in January 2004.

### **Integrating disciplines to understand developmental disabilities**

Recent advances in behavioral science, neuroscience and molecular genetics have led to dramatic gains in our understanding of the pathogenesis of neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism and fragile X syndrome. In recognition of these advancements, the UNC Neurodevelopmental Disorders Research Center received a training grant from the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development to develop researchers with expertise in both the biological basis and clinical manifestations of neurodevelopmental disorders.

## **Karen Sparkman**

**Doctoral candidate in UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Education**



As a former special education teacher and school psychologist, Karen Sparkman has experienced first-hand the need to promote social and emotional competence among young children.

Sparkman believes teachers' educational beliefs and practices are key in helping young children achieve this competence. Her work with FPG researchers, funded through a student-initiated grant from the US Department of Education, is helping her understand which classroom practices teachers identify as being most conducive to helping young children regulate their behaviors and emotions and get along with peers.

A native of Greenville, SC, Sparkman is a third-year doctoral student in the Early Childhood Families and Literacy

Studies (ECFL) program in UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Education. She came to UNC from Atlanta, where she was in charge of statewide training and technical assistance for Part C (children aged birth to three years) of the Individuals with Disabilities Act. Doctoral training was made possible by tuition assistance and stipends through an Early Intervention Leadership Training grant awarded to FPG from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Sparkman hopes to continue her research through a faculty appointment that blends early childhood/special education teacher preparation and local/state policy development.

"In my work, I have noticed a real lack of [translating] research to practice," Sparkman says. "We tend to do what we're used to doing, not what the research suggests we should do. My goal is to work with practitioners, students, and researchers to facilitate the integration of research findings into our day-to-day practices, especially as it relates to inclusion efforts and policy development for young children and their families."

Sparkman spends her days observing teacher's interactions with students in child care centers, developmental day programs and Head Start classrooms throughout the central region of North Carolina. She will conduct both qualitative and quantitative analyses, using data obtained through interviews with teachers and observations of their interactions with children. Her findings will ultimately be incorporated into her doctoral thesis: "Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Preschoolers with and without Disabilities: What is the Role of Teachers' Educational Beliefs and Practices."

"Working with researchers at FPG has been a great learning experience," Sparkman says. "They allow me to work as a partner in their research efforts. My grant requires me to state how my research will translate into practice. The guidance and model provided by FPG researchers is making that connection clear."

“This broad-based and integrated perspective will enable researchers to better relate across disciplines and will maximize the potential for major research advances in understanding the pathogenesis and treatment of these disorders,” says Joanne Roberts, FPG researcher and co-director of the post doctoral research program with Joseph Piven, director of UNC Neurodevelopmental Disorders Research Center.

Currently, six post-doctoral students are funded by this grant, including developmental psychologists, geneticists and molecular and cell biologists. Program sponsors facilitate interaction among the students around different aspects of research in developmental disabilities. Several of the post-doctoral fellows are planning to visit the FPG Child Development Institute to observe a child with Fragile X syndrome. This will give each of the students the chance to learn something different about the disease. One of the post-doctoral fellows, Elizabeth Hennon, a developmental psychologist, works at FPG on the Fragile X Communication Project. She plans to observe a geneticist conduct a Southern blot analysis (a type of analysis to determine if an individual has Fragile X or another type of genetic disorder).

“This will really help me to understand the genetics of Fragile X,” Hennon says. “Conversely, the biologist will be able to observe how a child with Fragile X behaves. The beauty of this fellowship is in having people from diverse backgrounds talking with each other.”

Hennon is also learning about grant writing from Roberts.

“Beth will hopefully acquire the skills during this fellowship to write and get an NIH grant funded of her own,” Roberts says.

“That will make her even more marketable.”

### **FPG's role in preparing PhDs**

FPG has a long history of preparing interdisciplinary researchers in early intervention and family support. These

efforts have primarily been supported by federal grants from OSEP through the UNC School of Education. The newest of these doctoral grants will allow several students in Speech and Hearing Services and in the School of Education at UNC-Chapel Hill to take courses together that focus on research in early intervention.

“There is a huge shortage of doctoral level faculty in the area of speech

and hearing, and in early intervention,” says Betsy Crais, FPG fellow overseeing the project with Harriet Boone. Over the four semesters of the program, grant recipients will be mentored in research by faculty from FPG, the School of Education and Speech and Hearing Services.

“Classes will be co-taught by faculty from these different disciplines, which will give the students multiple perspectives,” says Betsy Crais. Students will receive stipends to attend national meetings on early intervention, make presentations and meet peers. ■

The beauty of  
this fellowship  
is in having  
people from  
diverse  
backgrounds  
talking with  
each other.

## To Learn More

Carolina Interdisciplinary Large-scale Policy  
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Preparing Special Education and Related Service Academic  
and Research Leaders with an Emphasis on Communication  
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