

## **Unpacking the Theory of Practice Architectures for Research in Early Childhood Education**

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This paper shares an innovative way of unpacking a complex theory for use in educational research. The theory of practice architectures is a site based practice theory focused on examining and transforming educational practices. Accordingly, the theory of practice architectures was selected for use in an Australian Research Council funded project exploring the practices and arrangements that support high quality early childhood education. When the ‘Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work’ project began, the research team of five chief investigators and four PhD students had a beginning understanding of the theory of practice architectures. Over time, the PhD students were immersed in an in-depth exploration of the theory, through reading, attendance at theory of practice architectures seminars and symposia, and discussion groups with authors of the theory and early childhood researchers who had used the theory. This ‘deep dive’ into the theory of practice architectures not only progressed their own doctoral work, but presented an opportunity for the students to help develop the chief investigators’ understandings of the theory. The students were invited to engage in a comprehensive ‘unpacking’ of the theory of practice architectures to help develop the research team’s theoretical and practical understanding of the theory. This innovative approach to unpacking theory resulted in the creation of a set of materials, including summaries of key terms and concepts, analysis guides and samples, and a detailed annotated bibliography. The research team found these materials invaluable in furthering their understanding of the theory of practice architectures and supporting data collection and analysis in line with the theory. We conclude by discussing the benefits of inviting PhD students to address the challenges of unpacking a complex theory for research teams. We proffer the resultant materials for those wishing to engage with the theory of practice architectures in educational research.