

# Atlas Training

Quarterly Newsletter \* Winter 2021 \* A Resource for Educators

## In This Issue:

***CDA or college? Which is the right path?***

***Five of the best online resources for early childhood teachers***

***Happiness in early childhood: What does it look like and why does it matter???***

***Atlas Training program updates***

***Cultural competency in a high-quality program***

***Spotlight on early childhood theorists: Vygotsky***



## CDA or college? Which is the right path?

As a professor and academic advisor, I often meet with early childhood teachers to learn about their background and professional goals and tailor their learning plans accordingly. What I have learned throughout my career as an educator is that choosing your education path wisely can make all the difference.

But that path looks different for everyone, and different paths address different knowledge and career needs.

For example, while a higher education degree should be a long-term goal for most educators, it is not always the best starting point. It is my view that someone new to the field should not have to wait three semesters to learn about health and safety or child development. These are skills that matter on the first day of teaching and all teachers should have a foundational understanding of early childhood when they work with children.

State priorities have shifted considerably over the past twenty years, with more spending devoted to college credits and degree obtainment across most states. For many teachers, this shift is hugely beneficial, enabling members of the ECE community to advance professionally without absorbing huge costs in a field that does not pay well in the first place.

While I applaud the advocates and political leaders who have worked tirelessly to provide funding for these college programs, I believe that this orientation should be tempered with caution in the name of practicality.

The reality that seems to get overlooked is that college is not necessarily the right choice for every teacher, and even if it IS the right choice, it is not always the best place to start.

Consider, for example, that it can take six or more years for a full-time teacher to earn an associates degree in early childhood. In the mean time, there may be significant attendance gaps -

sometimes even years - in which a teacher does not advance. In the intervening period, the teacher's level on the state's registry may reflect very little in the way of qualifications.

I also challenge the assumption that college is the best educational format for everyone. During my career as a director, I knew MANY teachers who performed exceptional work with children, but who have had difficulty completing college courses for various reasons. Should the quality of these teachers' work be overlooked and undermined by our existing college orientation, or can we, as a field, consider, that alternative pathways, such as the CDA, provide an acceptable level of skills validation?

Another consideration is that some teachers never complete their degrees or, as is becoming increasingly common, they leave the classroom entirely once they *do* obtain one. This adds additional complexity to the important issue of investment in professional development, as those who invest in training options must consider the long-term fiscal benefits of degree v college investment.

Thankfully, I believe the field is beginning to return to a more moderate perspective on professional development. CDA credentials are now accepted for college credits, and funding for them continues to grow. While I agree that college coursework contributes to better outcomes for children, I believe that this is not the only path that should be available, and that entrance into a degree program is not always a logical starting point for entry-level teachers.

As you move forward, please take time to reflect on what path is best for you. If you believe that you are ready for a college commitment, we encourage you to begin as soon as possible! If it's the CDA, we hope to see you in our programs, where we believe the CDA is the best place to start!

- Maureen Hogan, Ph.D.



## Five of the Best Online Resources for Early Childhood Educators

Being an early childhood educator is a rewarding career; however, it can also be extremely challenging. This year has brought a variety of new challenges because of COVID-19. Educators have had to restructure many aspects of their day to day interactions with their students. Since Atlas Training offers several learning choices on CDA Credential training, we have a vested interest in helping all educators succeed. There are many organizations out there that are designed to help early educators. Teachers who are facing challenges can explore the websites of these organizations and find several resources on age appropriate lesson plans, activities, and subjects.

**The National Association for the Education of Young Children:** NAEYC is the largest organization in the world strictly dedicated to the betterment of young children. Early childhood educators will find a plethora of information on relating to children and understanding their development.

**The National Association for Child Development:** This association offers several resources on educating children of all ages. Their website is broken down into several smaller sites about specific types of problems and concerns of teachers. It has been hailed as one of the best sites for

early childhood teachers that want their students to reach their full potential.

**Resources for Early Learning:** This website offers several different learning activities for children from birth to five years old. Whether you're a new or experienced educator, you will find many ideas on how to encourage children to learn, grow, and have fun. Their activities include math, music, play, reading, science, communication, and art.

**The Gryphon House:** This site was created by a distributor of children's books. They have an excellent resource blog that covers current events that affect early childhood education. Their store has several top selling books on early childhood education resources.

**Zero the Three:** Zero to Three is a national organization that focuses on the first three years of life, with an emphasis on supportive practices and early interventions to maximize young brains' neuroplasticity to overcome developmental delays. Visit their website to access newsletters, attend virtual events, download research articles, and access technical assistance services!



# Joy and Happiness in the Early Childhood Classroom

As early childhood providers, we tend to tailor our work with children to support development in neatly carved domains (creative, cognitive, language, physical, etc.).

While most training programs do reference the interrelatedness of domains, and tie outcomes of more skill-based domains to children's sense of self and social development, the concept of child happiness is regularly overlooked in our conversations about child development.



What is happiness after all? Is it an attitude? A way of looking at situations? What causes happiness?? Is it caused by fulfillment of our desires? By accomplishment? By a strong sense of peace with the world and with one's self?

Children are not going to ask these questions, so they are questions we will have to consider for them. But the most important of the questions we can ask about happiness is this: does happiness even matter??

Early childhood practitioners don't generally spend their time evaluating children's happiness (how could they after all with feedings, diaper changes, observations, and instruction to fit into a single day!), and yet happy children undeniably exhibit behaviors and learning dispositions that contribute to increased development in those neat domains we work so consciously to support.

Happy children usually get along with others and are better able to inhibit powerful emotions and impulses. They are often self-driven and take delight in certain activities, which leads them to engage in these activities with sustained attention in spite of challenges or conflicts they encounter. They may not take interest in every task or activity during the course of the school day, but they accept or embrace challenges and can generally "get through" the less appealing transitions or activities.

One could argue that it is these specific features of happy children - inhibitory control, task persistence, cognitive aptitude, prosocial relationships and behaviors - that cause the child to be perceived as "happy", but I would argue the opposite. That is, that happiness itself contributes to increased inhibitory control, task persistence, etc.

So how do we support children's "happiness"? While happiness is a growing subject (there are even college courses about it!), most recent theories about happiness view it from an adult lens. Children are unique because so much of their lives - and by extension happiness - is dependent on people and environments that they have no control over. So how do we, as their caretakers and coaches, help them to become happy?

The point of this is not to provide you with a neatly packaged conclusion paragraph that answers this question for you. My answer to this question is no more or less valid than yours. The important thing is that we continue to think about this question. As we work through the daily minutia of our work, let this questions continue as a mantra to guide you: Is what I'm doing supporting this child's happiness???

# Atlas Training Updates

Our staff has been busy moving the program to achieve our program goals. Here are some updates about our activities:

- **Spanish Translation:** We are currently working with a translation service so that we can provide a Spanish option in the near future! Our Spanish cohorts will be facilitated by an instructor who is a native Spanish speaker.
- **CDA Renewal:** We are developing a CDA Renewal Program for early childhood professionals with expiring CDAs. We hope to make this module available by mid-spring
- **Accreditation:** Our accreditation application is currently under review with the International Accreditors for Continuing Education and Training (IACET). This accreditation will make us eligible for state scholarships in select states



## Upcoming Cohort Start Dates

- February 1, 2021
- March 1, 2021
- April 5, 2021
- May 3, 2021
- June 7, 2021

# Spotlight on Theorists:

Lev Vygotsky is one of the most celebrated early childhood theorists. While it is not necessary to know every detail of his works and theories, you may recognize some of his ideas that have endured as foundational to our field:

Like Piaget, Vygotsky subscribed to the view that children construct knowledge through their experiences. His theory, however, focused on the role of culture and society in addition to the role of interactions with materials/ environments.

He believed that children learned through their experiences and interactions with adults and peers with more developed skills. He argued that children specifically benefit from calculated adult interactions that support the acquisition and cumulative mastery of skills. Two familiar terms to early childhood professionals that have origins in Vygotsky's works are:

- **Scaffolding:** Using focused questions, challenges, and strategies to help children advance their skills in logical steps. This is done by identifying children's existing skills and slightly altering experiences so that they are slightly more difficult.
- **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD):** Often represented by concentric circles, the ZPD represents what a child can do without adult support. Teachers should support children as they move outside of their existing zones and attempt new skills and activities.

# Cultural Competency in High-Quality ECE Programs

In 2019, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published the position statement *Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education* to help teachers and programs to: 1) build on each child's unique individual and family strengths, cultural background, language(s), abilities, and experiences and 2) eliminate differences in educational outcomes as a result of who children are, where they live, and what resources their families have.

If you are a teacher in an early childhood setting, you may feel that the advocacy work that comes with equity is beyond the scope of your work. After all, your day-to-work probably does not involve protesting funding cuts, or attending committees where specific policies concerning access are taking place. You are also probably not involved in the recruitment and enrollment of families, or the hiring of diverse staff.

But you contribute to EC equity by reflecting on your own biases and by engaging in culturally competent behaviors in your work with children. In fact, your role is more important than you probably realize, because each day your actions, or lack of actions, impact how children come to perceive themselves and their role in the world. Consider these scenarios:

- Margaret is a preschool teacher in a suburban program where most children are native English speakers. A new child, Yanieliz, is enrolled in her class. The child does not speak English yet, and Margaret does not speak Spanish. To support the child, she downloads a translation app on her phone so she can communicate with Yanieliz's parents. She also prints a list of Spanish translations for words that she often uses in her classroom so she can communicate with Yanieliz during the day. She pulls out copies of her Spanish books and reads them during the day.
- Audra is a toddler teacher in an urban program with a diverse class of students. She gets along well with most parents but continuously butts heads with a Caribbean family that wants her to take a more academic approach in her teaching because that is how children are taught in their culture. Audra tells them that this approach is outdated and that they should maybe consider looking for a different program.

What these two scenarios have in common is that the teacher's normal approaches and methods will not work for these particular children/families. The difference is that Margaret evaluates her methods of service delivery and modifies them to address the family's background while Audra takes a "line in the sand" approach and dismisses the family's values.

You will have to navigate conflicts like this throughout your career. While some (like Margaret's example) will require you to simply adjust your existing methods, others (like Audra's) may require you to think outside the box. The solution isn't easy - teachers shouldn't be forced to engage in inappropriate practices just because parents prefer them - but a little investigation into the child's culture could provide valuable insights into how to come to a win-win.

Cultural competence involves understanding the different practices and value systems of different cultures and finding strengths within them. Being "culture blind" - or ignoring the backgrounds of students - is dismissive and can severely restrict a student's developing sense of identity. Instead, teachers need to be active in their acknowledgement of culture.

What does this look like? It depends on the scenario, certainly, but the key word here is *active*. Ask a child's parents about songs they sing at home and then incorporate these into the school day; connect your classroom's learning goals to parents' - it is easier to disagree about specific instructional activities when you both agree about the end goal -; and most of all, find out what families would like you to know and understand about them. Evaluate your own biases and focus on what you and other stakeholders both share - an interest in the development and well-being of the children in your class!