



Executive Functioning and Approaches to Learning

Syllabus

Instructor Contact Information:

Name:

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Course Description:

How do children learn about themselves as learners? What drives children’s learning in the first place? What do children want to learn about? What do engaged learners do and how do we support this kind of learning in early childhood? How do children understand the world around them? How do these ways of understanding the world link children to other domains of learning, such as math, science, and literacy? To their diverse experiences and communities? To their ideas about themselves and their roles as learners? This course will explore these related questions and pose many more. If the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework describes all the domains and elements of learning we want young children to develop and know, this related set of questions is the glue that binds all the domains together. Bridging the gap between what children can know and how they approach this knowledge—their approaches to learning—will be our focus, using the central organizing ideas of self-concept, engagement, and self-expression.

Complementing our inquiry is research on diverse topics such as executive function, social-emotional development, cultural diversity, and individual difference. This research informs and fleshes out a holistic and responsive perspective for understanding how children approach their own learning in everyday settings for formal, informal, center-based, and home-based early learning. As a practical model for putting this holistic perspective on children’s learning to work in these settings, we will learn how different curriculum models, such as The Project Approach and Reggio Emilia are implemented to assist children in approaching understanding. Early learning from the child’s own perspective—a perspective that typically involves many questions, points of interests, and engaging explorations. The Project Approach and Reggio Emilia will also help us see how Creative Arts Expression can be integrated into learning in all domains and how this unique learning domain lends itself to children’s developing self-concept. Self-concept and self-efficacy, in turn, serve as foundational elements that reinforce children’s approaches to learning. In addition to being the backbone of approaching learning, self-concept and self-efficacy are the “book-ends” of the course, providing a starting point and a logic to why we study approaches to learning in the first place and how approaches to learning serve children’s potential for learning and development.

Course Objectives:

1. Students will Know (gain knowledge of child development and specific teaching practices):
 - a. Know how children develop important learning approaches
 - b. Know how social contexts, interactions, and relationships affect learning approaches
 - c. Know what specific teaching practices support learning approaches
2. See (objectively describe what is happening when you observe children's approaches to learning):
 - a. What to look for as indicators of approaches to learning
 - b. Spot positive and negative approaches to learning (behaviors)
 - c. Identify when teaching strategies are having the intended effect on children's approaches to learning
3. Do (set goals, plan, implement strategies in early learning settings and contexts)
 - a. Demonstrate interactions and enact relationships with children and families that support approaches to learning
 - b. Create learning activities that promote approaches to learning
 - c. Implement or adapt curriculum strategies known to teach and establish positive approaches to learning in children
4. Reflect (observe your practice, assess, analyze, plan for change)
 - a. Step back and notice how learning about children's approaches to learning sheds light on your own learning (parallel practice)
 - b. Journal about your experiences learning about learning and your thoughts and ideas about promoting approaches to learning with children
 - c. Use reflective teaching strategies and tools to observe and assess children's approaches to learning

Modules: This course will be divided into 3 modules and an introductory session. Each module will give students the opportunity to **know**, **see**, **do**, and **reflect**. We see these as the core components of effective and intentional teaching. This course is intended to help you grow in your ability to do each of these things, and thereby improve your classroom interactions and practice.

Introduction Module

Module 1: Self-Efficacy (Sessions 2 & 10)

Module 2: Approaches to Learning Components (Sessions 3-7)

Module 3: Practices and Strategies for Creative Self-Expression (Sessions 8 & 9)



Know = Gain knowledge of child development and specific teaching practices

See = Objectively describe what is happening in video clips of your own and others classrooms, using specific behavioral language

Do = Set goals, plan, implement strategies (**Do** can also involve enacting knowledge within the context of “in class” activities)

Reflect = Observe your practice, Assess, Analyze, Plan for change

Session Summaries:

Session 1: Course Introduction

The instructor module introduces the construct of *Approaches to Learning* and covers ideas of what it is and what it is not as a learning construct, including related concepts such as “learning dispositions”, “domain generality”, and “executive functions”. Then we highlight questions that frame what the course will cover such as “How do children learn about themselves as learners?” and “What do engaged learners do and how do we support different approaches to learning in early childhood?” Next there is an outline and summary of each session and general description of assignments and course participation. Finally, we briefly discuss assessment of approaches to learning.

Session 2: Self-concept in Early Childhood

The underlying assumption in this course is that any approach to learning occurs in a social context that is comprised of the individual child, groups of children, and other caring adults. This session frames approaches to learning as inherently connected to children's beliefs and ideas about themselves, or their *Self-Concepts*. Several major ideas derive from this perspective and are covered in this session:

- Self-concept emerges very early in childhood and takes on distinct stages of development.
- A child's *self-concept is intricately related to relationships with others*.
- There is a dynamic interplay between children's thoughts and beliefs about self and approaches to learning.
- Learning is a process of self-construction.

Session 3: Engagement and Interest

In the first of five sessions specifically addressing approaches to learning as discreet but related learning skills or dispositions, this session highlights two of the broadest and most critical aspects of approaches to learning: engagement and interest. We spend the larger part of the session learning about *how interest affects children's learning*. We suggest ways to learn about children's interests, how to connect them to relevant and meaningful learning activities, and how to enrich and expand children's natural interests in the world around them. In the second half of session we focus on engagement, drawing largely on the work of Mary Lou Hyson and her action/emotion model of approaches to learning. We highlight what to look for in engaged learners and evidence based practices for *how to foster engagement in learning*, a pedagogical skill based on understandings of individual and groups of children's interests, temperaments, and social dynamics.

Session 4: Motivation and Initiative

Once you know about children's interests and have some strategies for engaging them in the learning process, the next approach to learning we want to understand is *how children become motivated to learn and how they take initiative in their learning*. In the first half of this lesson we discuss motivation, covering the relationship between children's interests, self-concepts and motivation, describing major theories of motivation, and what we know about rewards and punishments as incentives for early learning. Next we discuss initiative and how it relates to children's independence in learning and their ability to make choices about learning activities and goals.

Session 5: Planning and Problem-Solving

In the domain of approaches to learning, perhaps no elements are as researched or as valued by caregivers than planning and problem-solving; the ability to plan, set goals, and solve-problems are critical cognitive skills that predict later academic and life outcomes. In this session we focus in first on *planning, how it develops, why it is important* (what it allows children to do), and evidence based practices for how to foster this approach to learning. We also relate planning to children's development of Theory of Mind and Executive Functions. Next we cover problem-solving, discussing *the nature of children's problems and how to strengthen problem-solving skills*. We take a perspective on problems that seeks to multiply and extend them- not just solve them.

Session 6: Attention and Persistence

At this point in the course, it starts to become apparent how inter-related these supposedly discreet elements of approaches to learning really are. For example, how can you pay attention

if you are not interested? And doesn't it pay to be motivated if you are expected to persist at a task? In the first half of this session we provide an overview of *what is known about attention as it relates to approaches to learning*: paying attention, knowing what to attend to, switching attention. We highlight the importance of providing challenging activities that engage and call on children's attentional skills and demystify the question of what it means to challenge young children. Next we discuss persistence, *emphasizing the value of giving children time and space to persist*, persevere, and repeat activities. We also relate persistence back to motivation and learners' self-concepts.

Session 7: Communication and Cooperation

It goes without saying that communication and cooperation are critical skills for early learning and for life. In this session we *relate language and verbal communication to approaches to learning*, suggesting among other skills, the importance of private speech, collaborative peer play, and scaffolding in children's learning and skill acquisition. We emphasize the effects of relationships with adults and peers in learning anything at all and revisit *ways to foster early socialization skills*. Finally we link cooperation and collaboration in early childhood to the development of children's self-regulatory skills and relate these skills to other approaches to learning, reinforcing connections between *self-regulation* and self-concept.

Session 8: Purposeful Activities, Projects, Play

This is a fun session! All along we have been highlighting examples from practice that indicate how approaches to learning play out early learning settings. This session brings special attention to three of the types of activities and formalizes their relationship to different elements of approaches to learning. First we discuss *"purposeful activities"* or those that are structured and goal-oriented, showing how they can be used to bring forth and strengthen approaches to learning such as planning, problem-solving, and persistence. Next, we describe the *"project approach"*, specifically how it provides a formal curricular strategy for building on children's interests, problem-solving, and initiative. Finally, we draw attention to *"play"* and explain how different aspects of this foundational activity of early childhood lend themselves to approaches to learning such as communication, collaboration, and problem-solving.

Session 9: Creative Arts and Self-Expression

Even more fun awaits us in session 8! In this session we focus on an often neglected domain of learning that is a hallmark of early childhood learning activities and a critical outlet for self-expression: creative arts. We discuss *the role of creativity in early childhood* and its relationship to self-concept and to self-expression; we characterize creativity as "not just something that occurs in the head" but as embodied cognition, and we relate it to approaches to learning. First we highlight the multiple dimensions, mediums, and *modes of artistic expression* such as the visual arts and the dramatic arts, providing examples of how to enrich such activities so that they foster creativity. Next we *relate artistic self-expression to important learning domains* such as language and literacy, science, and, and math, demonstrating art's relevance across the curriculum as well as its relationship to approaches to learning in different domains.

Session 10: Self-efficacy in Early Childhood

(Note: When going through this course, you'll notice that this session is included in Module 1. Don't be confused, grouping this into Module 1 with Session 2 is intentional. There is a strong tie between self-concept (Session 2) and self-efficacy (Session 10) and therefore grouped together.)

We end up back where we began but with new questions. Whereas we started with children’s ideas of “self” and the relationship between self-concept and learning, we end by looking at how a strong self-concept and positive approaches to learning allow children to DO things and to enjoy learning for learning’s sake. We analyze self-efficacy, questioning our taken-for-granted assumptions about what children should be able to know and do when they leave preschool; we relate self-efficacy to self-concept and competence or mastery. We develop a perspective on young children’s self-efficacy that takes into account their diverse learning styles, different approaches to learning, and divergent and shared values. *We give strategies for making children’s learning visible to them so that they see themselves as “people who can do things.”*

Course Schedule:

Module	Session	Session Outline	Reading	Assignment
Introduction	1	Course Introduction		
1	2	Self-Concept	<p>Im, J., Parlakian, R., and Sanchez, S. (2007). Understanding the influence of culture on caregiving practices: From the inside out. <i>Young Children</i>, 62(5), 1-3.</p> <p>Katz, L. (1993). Distinctions between self-esteem and narcissism, (pp. 1-21). http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/eecearchive/books/selfe/practice.html</p>	Reflection and Representation
2	3	Engagement and Interest	<p>Hyson, M. (2008). Why do approaches to learning matter? In Hyson, M. <i>Enthusiastic and Engaged Learners: Approaches to Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom</i> (pp. 20-29). New York: Teachers College Press.</p> <p>Ogu, U. & Schmidt, S.R. (2009). Investigating rocks and sand: Addressing multiple learning styles through an inquiry-based approach. <i>Young Children</i>, 64(2), 1-9</p>	<p>Video Response</p> <p>Baseline Video</p>
	4	Motivation and Initiative	<p>Da Ros-Voseles, D. (2007). Why children’s dispositions should matter to all teachers. <i>Young Children</i>, 62 (5), 1-7</p> <p>Suggested Reading: Robins, G. (2012). Praise- what do young children</p>	Reflection and Representation

			think? n Robins, G. <i>Praise, Motivation, and the Child</i> (pp. 71-81). New York: Routledge.	
	5	Planning and Problem-solving	Epstein, A. (2003). How planning and reflection develop young children’s thinking skills. <i>Young Children</i> , 58(5), 1-8.	Reading Review
	6	Attention and Persistence	Gillespie, L. G. & Seibel, N.L. (2006). Self-regulation: A cornerstone of early childhood development. <i>Young Children</i> , 61(4), 1-6. Suggested Reading: Dweck, C. (1999). How does it all begin? Young children’s theories about goodness and badness. In Dweck, C, <i>Self Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development</i> . Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers.	Video Response
	7	Communication and Collaboration	Florez, I.R. (2011). Developing young children’s self-regulation through everyday experiences. <i>Young Children</i> , 66(4), 1-7. Suggested Reading: Bodrova, E. & Leong, D. (2007). Tactics: Using language. In Bodrova & Leong, <i>Tools of the Mind: The Vygotskian Approach to Early Childhood Education</i> . Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Press.	Video Response
3	8	Purpose, Projects, and Play	Guyton, G. (2011). Using toys to support infant-toddler learning and development. <i>Young Children</i> , 66(5), 50-58. Lewin-Benham, A. (2006). One teacher, 20 preschoolers, and a goldfish: Environmental awareness, emergent curriculum, and documentation. <i>Young Children</i> , 61(2), 1-7.	Reflection and Representation
	9	Creative Arts Expression	Marigliano, M.L. & Russo, M.J. (2011). Moving bodies, building minds: Foster preschoolers’ critical thinking and	Reading Review

			<p>problem solving through movement. <i>Young Children</i>, 66(5), 44-51.</p> <p>The Project Approach (2014, Oct). The Philadelphia School Preschool Dog Project 2010-2011. http://projectapproach.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/DogProject2010-2011.pdf</p> <p>Suggested Reading: Pelo, A. (2007). To see takes time: a long-term investigation into the lives of leaves. In Pelo, A, <i>The Language of Art: Inquiry-based Studio Practices in Early Childhood Settings</i>, (pp. 125-137). St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.</p>	
1	10	Self-efficacy	<p>Egertson, H.A. (2006). In praise of butterflies: Linking self-esteem and learning. <i>Young Children</i>, 61(6), 1-4.</p> <p>Jones, N.P. (2005). Big jobs: Planning for Competence. <i>Young Children</i>, 60(2), 86-94.</p>	<p>Final Representation: Response, Reflection, Review</p> <p>Video Assignments</p>

Activities and Assignments:

In-session Activities (20%)

Within each session's presentations there will be opportunities or activities designed to check your understanding of what you are learning, engage in discussion with others, or reflect on your thinking in your journal. You are expected to keep a journal, separate from any notes you take during the presentations. The purpose of the journal is for you to have a place to play with ideas, reflect on questions asked throughout the course, ask your own questions, and process your understanding of content. It is not a diary in the sense that it is not private, but it is a place for you to include personal ideas, separate from any notes you might take about the instructor's ideas. You will periodically turn in your journal at scheduled assignment dates (see course schedule). The purpose of video response assignments is for you to react to videos that illustrate the ideas we cover in a session. The response or reaction to videos is not meant to critique, criticize, or judge what happens in the video. Rather, you are asked to use what happens in the video to think through what we learned in the session.

Reading Review Assignments (20%)

The purpose of reading review assignments is to prompt you to read critically and to synthesize content. Critical reading means not just reading for understanding, but also analyzing, constructing arguments for/against ideas, and intentionally interpreting while you read. These assignments are intended to help you link the ideas from practice to theory and theory back to practice by reading about the work of practitioners and scholars in the field of early childhood

learning and development and thinking critically about how the readings apply to approaches to learning, self-concept, and creative self-expression. Read the articles assigned for this session (ideally prior to the session). Take notes on the articles while you read, and then respond to a series of questions or prompts.

Reflection and Representation Assignments (20%)

The purpose of reflection and representation assignments are to get you taking stock of what you are learning and re-presenting it to check your own understanding. Reflective teaching practices- the ability to look at yourself and think about your own thinking, learning, actions, and motivations- is a critical element of supporting young children's approaches to learning. These assignments build on the journaling you are prompted to do within each lesson. They are a place for you to synthesize the session's content, rearrange and play with ideas to reflect how you are taking them up, and to re-present your current understanding. Representations can take many forms, and you are encouraged to include your lesson notes and journal entries; illustrations, diagrams and doodles; photos and videos from your own practice; 3D creations and constructions; or any combination. There is no limit to the form your representations can take; the only stipulation is that they pertain directly to this session's topic(s).

Video Assignments (40%)

The video assignments are an opportunity to practice and reflect upon newly learned skills. You will record three videos, one baseline video at the start of the course, and two more that will be submitted during the course. The last two videos will showcase your learning and provide a chance for you to reflect on how your teaching practices have changed and ways that you would like to improve.