

Appreciatively Inquiring in Early Care and Education

by Ellen M. Drolette

“Education has been framed as a problem fraught with adversities. I think it is time to cut that out. This is the time to reframe education as a great opportunity, a chance to understand what works well for children, families, and communities. We need to extend and expand models of success.”

—Marge Schiller, July 2014

What if every morning, you took a few minutes to think about what will bring you joy in the day ahead?

I do this first thing in the morning with my cup of coffee. (I am human though, and sometimes it just does not happen!) In the quiet of my living room, I think about what I hope for from the day. Often, it is the same thing I hoped for the day before: to have laughter,



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Appreciative Inquiry 101

Appreciative inquiry is a way to notice, seek, and create positive change in our lives. In organizations, AI is used for strategic planning, leadership development, self-development, and organization design—but you can also use it in your daily practice in and within early childhood education, and with children and families, in order to create the program you dream about.

joy, dancing, and imagination filling my classroom, and to be my best self—asking open-ended questions, and having the utmost patience when children become frustrated.

This morning ritual is an example of appreciative inquiry, and it is one of my favorite subjects to talk and write about in the early years. Appreciative inquiry might sound a bit technical, but it is not—it is quite simple, and life-giving when applied well. Put simply, it is a way of tweaking your default, every day mindset, so that you pay more attention to the brightest moments.

Rethinking Your Day with Appreciative Inquiry

I became certified as an appreciative inquiry practitioner through Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, a few years ago. While studying there, I met Jackie Kelm, a practitioner of AI and an early adopter

of the practice in her personal life. She started helping me learn how to fold AI into my life and work in my child care program. Kelm is also the author of “The Joy of Appreciative Living.” I had the opportunity to work with her one-on-one on an issue I had been having. You may be able to relate.

I had a case of Mondays starting every Friday and lasting all weekend, because Mondays were dreadful every week. It felt like the children would be overtired—like they had sugar hangovers. I thought they were showing up exhausted, and I was over it. But Kelm helped me reframe those thoughts in a different light.

It might sound overly simple, but I started by repeating words in my head like balance, calm, and joy, and visualized the day ahead in terms of how I could put those ideas into action. For example, what calm would look like in my program, and how would I interact with each child?

Monday came. The day was fantastic, and I thought it might be a fluke. The following week, I went through the same process. The day went well again. I did some reflection on this for my class, and it hit me: it was not the kids, it was me! I was showing up depleted. I had already emptied my tank before I arrived. I was most definitely working from a deficit-based attitude, and now had a real example of what a strength-based mindset can look like.

Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

You can break down appreciative inquiry into five principles — you might think of them as five different ways to approach the idea. Those principles are Anticipatory; Simultaneity; Constructionist; Poetic; and Positive.

The anticipatory principle says that when we anticipate good things will happen, we are moved toward that future. Have you ever seen athletes who look focused right before a big competition? Athletes are moving through what they want with visualization. You might not think it, but that core principle applies just the same to your child care setting.

When I know that I need to have a difficult conversation with staff or a family in my program, I can utilize this principle by rehearsing how I want the conversation to go in my head. What do I want the outcome to be? What might they feel when they come into the conversation? When I do this type of exercise, I can take the stress out of the task and focus on the relationship and the outcome I want.

The simultaneity principle suggests that inquiry and change happen simultaneously. The moment we ask a question, we begin to create change.

If a colleague were to ask you, “What brings you the most joy each day?” your mindset automatically leans toward the positive thoughts within your setting. Imagine if you were able to ask families during parent/teacher conferences, “What has been a highlight in watching your child learn and grow this year?” or “What do you want more of for your child?” The key is to focus on growth and finding positivity. You can reinvent anything from staff surveys, interviews, and annual reviews with this method.

“Words create worlds.” That is the essence of the constructionist principle. For example, if someone at your early education program constantly complains about the winter weather, it can wear people down. But you could reconstruct this narrative: “What are some activities you loved to do as a child in the snow? Or mud? Or when it was hot out?” We can then follow questions with more questions. “I wonder how we can emulate that here in our program.” This is a big part of shaping the opportunities you see in your current circumstances.

The poetic principle states that what we focus on grows. When we focus on something we are genuinely passionate about, like a project, advocacy for the early care and education field, or a child who needs early intervention, we find joy and confidence in pursuing that goal.

In practice, it is essential to understand that the poetic principle can have different narratives. For example, two early childhood educators could be talking about a child who bites others. One may describe that child as being aggressive or unkind, but the other may describe this behavior as developmentally appropriate. It is like two people reading the same poem—you can interpret behaviors and intentions in different ways.

The positive principle is probably the easiest to remember: If you feel good, you do good. There is a plethora of

research about the impact of positivity on your neural pathways and overall health. Juliette Tocino-Smith of the University College of London articulates it in this way: “The positive principle is about the emotional context in which the goal is framed. As such, encouragement, personal support, and other forms of positive affect can have a pivotal effect on how a person enacts change. Even acknowledging and feeling grateful for the mere presence of others in one’s life can strengthen the extent to which a person feels empowered to embrace growth” (Tocino-Smith, 2020).

We can look at how we interact and make intentional changes each day toward creating an appreciative classroom. For example, instead of a casual “Hey” in the morning, we can try a cheery “Good Morning.” Think about what others are doing well and tell them, “I really love the way you handled that tough transition with Nora; I can tell she really trusts you.”

Practicing Appreciative Inquiry

Let us take a look at how you and your staff can find ways to weave appreciative inquiry into each day.

Create a vision board. This is about imagining what you want to see in the future. What do you want more of? What brings you joy? What mantras are helpful for you to keep your goals in sight? Gather glue, sticks, scissors, magazines, photos, embellishments, and start getting crafty by making a collage of the phrases or images you connect with these goals. Hang it in a place where you can look at it each day, read the mantras and begin manifesting the message.

Gratitude list. It is not a journal! Many people feel intimidated by the idea of a journal, and instead choose to write

about each thing they are grateful for. Start small: make a list of three things, people, or anything you are thankful for. You can do it in your calendar, a datebook, a notebook—do not overthink it.

Have paired conversations. Use staff meetings, interviews, meetings with families, and discussions with children to ask questions that help everyone explore appreciative inquiry. Here are a few examples:

What has been a high-point experience in your time working at this child care setting, when you felt the most alive, successful, and effective?

Do not worry about being humble—what do you value most about yourself, and your work as a teacher, supervisor, or parent?

What are the core elements that make our child care setting work at its best, when it feels like a great place to be? How can we make room for more of that?

If you had three wishes for our child care setting, what would they be?

For children: What made you the happiest today? What was your favorite part of the weekend? What was the best thing you did this week?

There are many creative ways to bring an appreciative lens when working with families and children in early care and education settings. The examples and principles I have shared are just the beginning. Creating a philosophy that adopts trust, communication, honesty, positivity, and collaboration are steps toward creating an appreciative early childhood education program. Use the principles as a framework for how the organization creates the reality they want.

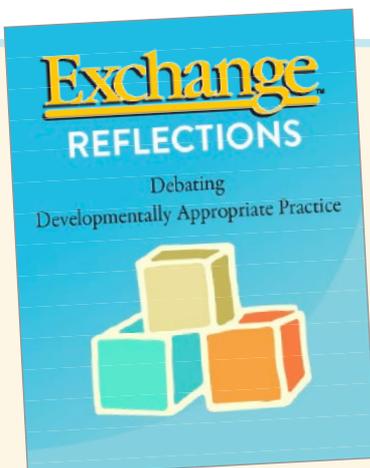
Using appreciative inquiry brings out the best in people and organizations. It is a change in mindset and takes intentional changes in the way we welcome families, hold conferences, talk about challenging behaviors, communicate with co-workers and with children.

For more information on Appreciative Inquiry, check out the Center for Appreciative Inquiry or contact Ellen at Positivespinllc@gmail.com for more recommendations.

References

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