

Making Caring and Learning Together a Career

An interview with Abhirami Gunasingam

by Margie Carter

Despite continued research and extensive literature on the importance of children's early years, the ECE field continues to struggle as a viable profession. Low status, high stress, inadequate salaries and working conditions all conspire to deter teachers from making this a career. Those of us who are aging and retiring from the field wonder and worry about the future of our beloved profession.

While we press for suitable policies and economic solutions to stabilize the early childhood field, how can we support a new cadre of teachers to move the profession forward? What will grow and sustain new leadership?

I mourn when I see wonderful teachers leave the field, or even leave the classroom to take up administrative positions that might give them a slightly larger paycheck and sense of agency. Somehow we assume this is the only viable career path for those who want to work on behalf of children or ongoing teacher improvement. I want us to rethink this notion and invent new possibilities for a sustainable career in ECE. As we work on financial solutions, we have to simultaneously enhance our work environments, our organizational cultures, and the intellectual engagement of our teachers. This seems a different focus than most quality improvement efforts underway across the United States.



Abhirami Gunasingam has a Bachelor of Science in Biology and is currently working on her Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education along with earnestly participating in the Resources for Infant Educators® (RIE®) Practicum Training Program. Prior to working as a teacher, she worked as a researcher for five years and uses the skills gained to enable children in her care to become life-long learners. Abhi is currently a Board Member of the Central Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children (CMAEYC) and provides trainings in her community. She currently works as a Head Teacher in an Infant Room. Being present and engaged with the children in her care is the best part of her day.



Margie Carter is a former teacher, child care director, and college instructor. She has co-authored seven books with Deb Curtis and is a long-time contributor to *Exchange*. Margie co-founded Harvest Resources Associates (www.ecetrainers.com) to support those in the early childhood field to strengthen their leadership in calling for an expanded vision of quality programs for children, families, and teachers. Part of her inspiration for this work comes from the regular study tours she leads to Aotearoa New Zealand to learn from their exemplary policies and practices.

Regulations, rating scales, and ever-growing mandates may hold people accountable to standards, but can they lure and keep people excited about working with children and committed to a career that welcomes young human beings into this world?

An Interview with Abhirami Gunasingam

Last spring while touring a lovely campus center in Lansing, Michigan, I stood in an observation booth watching a remarkable infant teacher. I marveled at her admiring, steady attention to several babies crawling over and around her. She leaned in, smiled, gestured, and shifted her position to give as much acknowledgement and support as each child needed. I was reminded of the lyrics of one of Tom Hunter's songs, "You'll know when you are known full well." Surely this was how these babies experienced their time with Abhi, developing a solid identity as someone appreciated, respected, and known well.

Noticing my keen observation of Abhi, my guide in the observation booth began to tell me about what a delight she was to have as a student and how she transferred her interest in science to child development. She showed me a handbook Abhi had developed for observers and then led me to a stunning piece of documentation on her extensive investigation of babies crying. Now here was an emotionally and intellectually engaged teacher who was already taking her role as teacher researcher very seriously. I wondered what would keep such a fine teacher in pursuit of this work as a career rather than losing her to another field? There wasn't an opportunity for us to meet in person, but Abhi and I started up an email correspondence.

Margie: Can you tell me a bit about what drew you to work in early learning and whether you have thought of this as a career or just an interim job?

Abhi: I decided to make the United States my new home several years ago. At that point I realized I had an

opportunity for a new adventure. I reflected on my life and focused on all the aspects that brought me great joy. I came to the realization that working with children brought me great joy. I began my new adventure in the ECE field by enrolling in an ECE program in 2010. Even though I saw this as a potential career, I still needed to prove to myself that I was capable and competent to work with young children. During my degree program I discovered that there was a great need to create nurturing environments for infants, toddlers, and their caregivers. I am grateful for all those who I came into contact with during my teacher training as they fueled my desire to change the way in which infants, toddlers, and their caregivers were seen.



Photo caption here

Margie: Have any of your assumptions changed as you've gained experience in working in the field?

Abhi: When I started in this field I assumed that every early childhood educator completed a degree prior to being hired to work in the classrooms. I was puzzled when I observed that many in my ECE program were already working in classrooms with children before completing their degree. I was unsettled by this fact. During my degree program I learned that the first three years of a child's life were crucial for brain development. I wondered why adults who were not educated in child development nor had healthy dispositions to work with a vulnerable population were allowed in classroom positions as teachers. This approach continues to place young children in unhealthy care and learning environments. I am convinced through my observations and experiences that, without compromise, we need to have very knowledgeable and thoughtful individuals working with the youngest of human beings.

Margie: I sure share this assumption with you, Abhi, that our children deserve and will only really thrive when they are in settings with adults who are self-aware and think carefully about what is best for each child and the dynamics between them. This process of translating theory into practice and re-conceptualizing theory with reflective practice is the mindset of someone who wants to make this a career, not just a job to get by.

Growing as a Teacher Leader

Margie: As you move forward with your work in ECE, what guides your thinking?

Abhi: I use my observations, experiences, readings, research information, and self-knowledge to guide my thinking. I take time to reflect on all the knowledge I gain on a daily basis in order to fine-tune my practice. I allow the *NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct* to influence my decisions. I have an ethical responsibility to do no harm to the children in my care. Therefore, the child and the adults who care for them become my focus when I start to problem-solve and engage in critical thinking. My intention is to cherish the young children and the adults who care for them on a daily basis by creating environments that match developmental stages and interests of *both* children and adults.

Margie: As the years moved along, what helped you deepen your understandings, eagerness to learn more, and your commitment to the work?

Abhi: When I started working with young children as a student and then as a new teacher, I asked a lot of questions of all who were in my care and learning environment. At some point my eagerness to ask questions must have been off-putting because my colleagues suggested I become more like Vanna White from the TV show *Wheel of Fortune*. I could not accept this as a legitimate request of a young

professional in the ECE field as it felt like an insult to my intelligence. To me, questions mean that individuals are critically thinking about our practice and serve us well in our decision-making process. Asking questions and critically thinking about your observations is key in creating a sustainable profession as this provides opportunities to gain new knowledge and identify gaps in best practices. Mastering how to support and nurture leaders who make and justify decisions in line with their current understanding of best practices is key in creating a sustainable profession. This skill releases early childhood educators from making decisions out of fear and ignorance. Children will be harmed when adults who care for them waiver in their decision-making or make decisions out of fear. Realizing that I had an important role in building future leaders in my field deepened my commitment to my practice.

For instance, my discoveries of infant crying enhanced my ability to be more responsive to and customize care for *individual* children. The knowledge gained as a teacher researcher has enriched my practice by helping me guide

adult responses to crying, sustaining my learning, bringing daily practice to contribute to theory, and growing in my role as an advocate.

A Message for Aspiring Teacher Leaders

Margie: What suggestions might you have for teachers, both new and seasoned, who might be stuck in a rut or habitual ways of viewing their work?

Abhi: In a field inundated with early childhood educators of varying experiences and educational qualifications, understand that you are responsible for developing your thinking. Do not outsource this task of thinking to someone else who may not have your best interest at heart. Let your sensitive observations and research guide your thinking. Nurture your social-emotional health because you cannot give young children what you have not experienced for yourself. These are key components of my own journey in developing identity and leadership in a field that combines caring and learning between human beings.

Teacher as a Researcher: My Discoveries of Infant Crying and Changes to My Daily Practice

by Abhirami Gunasingam



"Cyrus, Crying": A portrait by Bekah Galer

My journey to become a teacher researcher has been strongly influenced by wanting to understand more about what infants are communicating when they cry. Teachers in my program are told to help the crying child first. But often, three children would cry at the same time. How do I decide which crying child to partner with first?

I realized that if crying is an infant's *primary* way to communicate, that meant I needed to treat crying as a language that had to be deciphered. I decided to respond instead of reacting to crying, which meant I needed to critically think about my own behaviors and plan a sequence of behaviors to implement when I heard an infant begin to cry. For instance, when I identified that a child was protesting, I moved closer to let the child know that I was available to him. From my readings I learned how the caregiver's response can support or undermine how babies develop a sense of trust. I also recognized that infants need partners to learn and develop self-regulation.

For observers who come to my classroom, I created a documentation display in order to make visible a written plan of how I planned on supporting crying infants. I partnered with one of the parents, Bekah Galer, to create the portrait needed for the documentation display. Bekah is a gifted artist who envisioned her son as her model for the portrait she later named "Cyrus, Crying." According to Bekah, she applied orange and yellow around his face to capture *her* feelings of anxiety and stress when her son cried. She chose blue for his tears to express *her son's* feelings of pain and sadness. Collaborating with a parent on this project not only strengthened my relationship with the parent, but also deepened my understanding of the feelings surrounding crying infants from a parent's perspective.