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Maximising the Potential of the 'Third Teacher': Indoor Developmental Play Environments: 3–8 Yrs

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Maximising the potential of the 'third teacher'

Indoor developmental play environments: 3–8 yrs

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The educators of Reggio Emilia call the environment the "third teacher" because it "speaks to children about what they can do, how and where they can do it and how they can work together" (Paiman & Terrani, 1998, p.1). They see space as an "aquarium that mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes and cultures of the people who live in it" (Gandini, 1994, p.149). Curtis and Carter speak of the environment as providing the "bones of the curriculum" (2008, p.54). Bones because its function is to hold up or support the learning process. What is your third teacher saying? How are your bones functioning? This article seeks to suggest implications for practice arising from the beliefs, theories, position and vision statements of 21st century Australian early childhood and to support these implications with practical suggestions.

> *If we believe that environments should support the child to become capable and resourceful, we will provision the educational environment with a predominance of hands-on, open-ended materials*

Recent early childhood position statements and curriculum framework documents (C&K, 2009, ECA, 2008, NSW DoCS, 2002) use contemporary research on brain development, child development, socio-cultural theory and various curriculum models to clearly articulate beliefs about how children learn. These same documents outline the pedagogical practices that teachers should engage in to foster in children the "skills, knowledge, attitudes and sensitivities" (NSW DoCS, 2002) that will enable them to reach their full potential. These position statements can be used to shed light on the kinds of environments that support, empower and maximise children's learning.

Beliefs that emerge from various position statements, framework documents and theories include:

- The child is a capable and resourceful constructor of their own learning.
- The teacher / carer is a facilitator and co-constructor of learning.
- The child's community, family and teacher / caregivers are partners in a child's education and co-architects of a child's wellbeing.
- Learning occurs optimally in social and collaborative contexts.

- The development of dispositions to learn underpin learner success.
- Each child is unique.
- Democratic practices such as diversity and social justice enable children to become active members of our society.
- Environmental sustainability is dependent on children developing a commitment to the environment and a disposition to create rather than to consume.

(Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Early Childhood Australia, 2008; Epstein, 2007; NSW DoCS, 2002).

A consideration of these issues must begin with a vision for the future. What skills will children of the 21st century need to develop in order to become fully functioning adult Australians? Early Childhood Australia suggests that, "the children we are educating today will need to be resilient, flexible, innovative, clever and connected to their fellow human beings and to the natural environment" (ECA, 2008, p.3) in order to become valuable contributors to a "caring and just" society. The question needs to be asked: What kinds of environments foster the development of these skills and dispositions?

The capable and resourceful child

If we believe that environments should support the child to become a capable and resourceful constructor of their own knowledge, then we will provision the educational environment with a predominance of hands on, open-ended materials such as various lengths and types of wood, junk materials, natural materials, fabric and clay. These materials will allow children to productively investigate, experiment, problem solve and test hypotheses without close adult supervision (Walker, 2007).

Our task as teachers is to invent, arrange, manipulate or create the context and then the children will want to learn (Lubawy, 2009, p.135).

Aesthetic presentations of materials invite the child to interact with the materials, fostering curiosity, engagement and innovation. Positioning these materials in smaller well-defined spaces will scaffold concentration and more in-depth investigation. Small

mats (1 metre x 1 metre) placed on the floor can be used to temporarily define an individual learning / working space. This space allows children to spend time in focused, individualised investigation.

Breaking up the play space into these well defined areas by using movable shelving, tables and screens has several advantages, all of which support children's independence and disposition to learn. Well-defined, consistent play spaces help:

- children feel comfortable in the learning environment and plan their play;
- avoid sensory overload;
- scaffold positive peer interaction;
- development of self confidence;
- children readily find, use and return the materials; and
- children make choices, particularly when diverse items are stored in matching containers.

(Curtis & Carter, 2008; Epstein, 2007; Walker, 2007)

Aesthetic presentations of materials, together with the use of natural materials in discrete play spaces engages children's senses and facilitates development of their appreciation of beauty, respect for the environment, sense of wonder, creativity and problem solving skills (Epstein, 2007; NSW DoCS, 2002). The educators of Reggio Emilia have attained world renown for the aesthetic elements of their classroom environments. Their emphasis on "different forms of lighting, such as lamps, the careful use of colour and form, a thoughtfulness in the placement of any material, however small" (Millikan, 2003, p.62), focuses children's attention on the "extraordinary in the ordinary". This provokes a sense of wonder and curiosity and invites investigation. Considering line, colour, shape, patterns, texture, light and shadow as you choose and position materials and equipment draws attention to the material's aesthetic qualities. Careful use of white, cream and pastel colours can reduce aggression and stress levels and increase academic achievement (Wohlfarth, 1982 cited in Crowther, 2003). Harnessing the elements of size, scale and different levels maximises aesthetic qualities (Curtis & Carter, 2008).

Providing materials and opportunities in the environment which encourage children to record and keep track of their learning (Walker, 2007) further fosters the notion of the capable, resourceful child, that is, one who wonders, explores and develops the disposition to persist and take an interest. Having paper, clipboard, pencils, textas and marker pens for children to use to draw and record thinking and constructions helps them keep track of their learning. It also helps the child to represent their discovery and learning in a different language / medium.

1 Space for ongong projects

2 Open-ended materials

3 Personal exploration

[Photography: Sandra Ludlow]
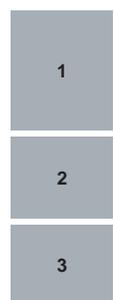
Revisiting a piece of work in this way deepens the child's investigation by "providing a basis for continuing discussion and further opportunities and possibilities for concept formation" (Millikan, 2003, p.37). Providing children with access to digital cameras and digital voice recorders to capture a construction or piece of artwork allows for this same revisiting, celebration of learning and social construction of knowledge. The discussions that emerge from these resources also enrich opportunities for language skill development.

As you plan your classroom environment, plan the layout of the space so that you minimise the need to pack away materials in preparation for the next activity. Timetabling large blocks of time also assists in reducing transitions and packing up. These two practices further scaffold opportunities for a child to think more deeply. As you consider these issues, it is wise to note that, "What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught. Rather it is in a large part due to the children's own doing as a consequence of their act-ivities and our resources" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p.67).

Partnerships and co-construction of learning

Environments further support this notion of the capable child when they make children's learning visible to adults, peers and community visitors. Respectful documentation and display of children's completed projects and portfolios, in combination with the practice of allowing works in progress to remain up (rather than being packed up at the end of each session), shows a respect for and celebration of children's effort and processes. This scaffolds child's disposition to learn as well as their sense of self as a capable learner. Documentation highlights, to both adults and peers, the uniqueness of each child's thinking and learning. It also invites comment and participation from other peers, adults and visitors who see this work. Their comments often provoke opportunities for children to explain, clarify, refine and think more deeply about their work. Providing talking points between the children and their parents allows adults to become partners in a child's construction of knowledge.

Another element of partnership and co-construction of knowledge is found in the social and collaborative nature of young children's learning. The theories of Vygotsky and his notion of the zone of proximal development have shown educators the power of working with peers. If we value this type of construction of knowledge, then our classrooms will reflect this. Materials will be offered as both individual and shared experiences. There will be more than one painting easel, positioned side-by-side so that children can discuss their own work and comment together on their work as it progresses.

> *Environ-ments that intentionally support the concepts of diversity and social justice contribute to the child's acquisition of democratic principles, wellbeing and belonging*

The clay table will offer enough clay and materials for a number of children to work side-by-side, sharing conversations and discoveries. There will be enough space and duplo pieces for a number of children to create and build together or side-by-side.

What language do the chairs in your room speak? The number of chairs placed around a table sends a non-verbal message to the children about how many children may use / share the materials at one time. The positioning of chairs in the learning environment has the potential to set the social landscape of the classroom. The type of chairs also sends a message, soft cozy armchairs or cushions incorporated into a reading nook tend to invite children to curl up and read or, even better, invite multiple children to share the reading experience. Armchairs invite family members to linger in the classroom to share experiences with the child and watch the child interact with the materials. They also provide adults with a place to sit and read their child's portfolio. In this way, specific aspects of the environment contribute to the co-construction of knowledge.

Diversity and social justice

Environments that intentionally support the concepts of diversity and social justice contribute to the child's acquisition of democratic principles, wellbeing and belonging. At the same time, they also have the pot-ential to support the Christian ethos of the school / centre. To achieve these goals, environments should contain materials that reflect the cultural make-up of the children's lives and local community, e.g. religious icons and resources, cultural artefacts, books and messages in the local languages, posters, photos, figurines, dolls, eating utensils (the list is only limited by your resourcefulness).

Social justice is further supported if the environment contains a space for whole group discussions and room meetings to occur. This space is useful because it allows room for children to negotiate, plan, review and celebrate the group's thinking and investigating. It scaffolds the acceptance of different points of view and respect for others' work, thus offering opportunities for children to connect with their peers and teachers. When necessary, the environment should incorporate assistive technologies and equipment (e.g. DD dolls, communication boards, walkers, lamps, large print books) to help children with a disability feel comfortable and competent.

Environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability is fostered when children develop a sense of commitment to and ownership of the environment (Dodge et al., 2002). The classroom environment scaffolds the

development of this commitment when children are permitted to take responsibility for setting up the environment, maintaining its tidiness and taking care of the equipment, materials and animals in the classroom. This has the additional benefit of fostering in children a sense of mastery, confidence and security (NSW DoCS, 2002).

Other practices that will to help foster a commitment to sustainability include: using both sides of a piece of paper; reusing glass jars to store paint, small collectables and paste; collecting fabric scraps, old buttons, shells, pine cones, stones etc. for sorting and pattern making; keeping a reverse garbage junk construction box in the classroom and accepting contributions to it from both the child's family and community members; and using second-hand pieces of furniture, baskets and wooden containers (Kinsella, 2007). Implementing such practices will foster in children the disposition to be creators rather than consumers and raise their awareness to the need to reduce their environmental footprint.

Practitioner wisdom

In preparation for this article, I asked several practising teachers for their suggestions about setting up environments for developmental play. They reported that consultation fosters ownership of the environment and that both staff and children should be given opportunities to negotiate the layout and contents of the environment. They also attested to the fact that children's engagement with materials or provisions is enhanced when the environment remains consistent. It is wise to make small changes to the provisions in learning centres rather than completely changing the centres every week. Any changes to be made to the environment should be implemented incrementally. Once the changes have been implemented, spend time during staff meetings reflecting on their effectiveness.

Conclusion

You will know that your environment is acting as the third teacher when:

- It leads children to use the provisions to confidently and independently explore, work and solve problems and to sustain engagement;
- Children are able to independently find, use and return materials;
- Children and adults are comfortable in the room;
- Children's learning is visible to adults and peers;
- Children offer their ideas for investigations and contribute materials to the classroom environment; and
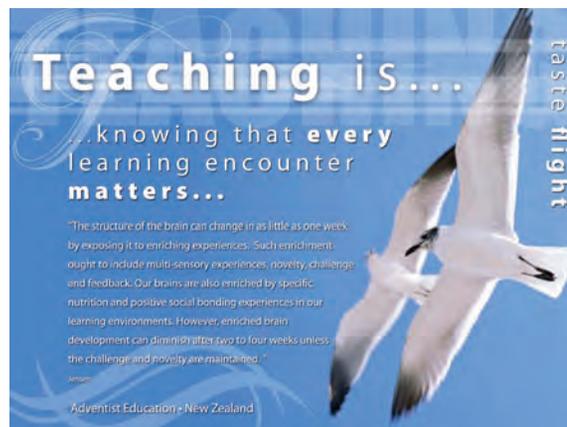
- The children work collaboratively on shared interests.

When these happenings become regular occurrences, the children in your care are becoming capable and resourceful constructors of their own knowledge and you, their teacher, will have become a facilitator and co-constructor of their knowledge. Now, your classroom environment will be operating as the third teacher. TEACH

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> *Implementing such practices will foster in children the disposition to be creators rather than consumers*

["Teaching is...": Lanelle Cobbin]