The Environment Is a Teacher

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The Environment Is a Teacher

Space speaks. Architects and designers know this; young children know it too. Every day, they are reading the environments through which they navigate. The environment is a teacher. When we can read its many layers as children do, we can use it as an ally. "Beauty is the voice that calls the child to engage with the materials and elevates him to a higher level of grace and courtesy as he interacts in his environment" (Haskins, 2012, p.34). How do educators design classrooms so that they have a cohesive sensibility and rationale for decisions about the environment?

In educational discourse, the word "environment" usually refers to the physical environment, inside and outside. It will serve us well if we can expand this perception to include the context in general, including the relationships among the people and between them and the materials, the rules, the schedule. These contexts should be co-constructed by the adults and children because the impact on everyone is tangible.

View of the Child

A starting point for critical reflection is a clear statement of how we view children. If we posted our view of the child in large letters in our classrooms, we could invite collaboration as we work to bring our practice into alignment with those stated views.

If, for example, we believe that children are part of our community and their voices should be heard in decisions that affect them (in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), their input should be sought and considered in decisions about the classroom environment. They figuratively and quite literally have a different perspective than the adults in the room.

The Ontario Early Years Policy Framework presents a view of the child as competent, curious, and capable of complex thinking. If we embrace this view, and see children as able communicators, collaborators and meaning-makers who are forming relationships every day with people and materials, who are capable of empathy, whimsy, sensitivity and joy, how would the classroom reflect this? A lack of clutter, and thoughtfully organized, aesthetically rich open-ended materials invite the children to make relationships, and to communicate their ideas in many ways. Pedagogical documentation, strategically located, prompts expansion on ideas, complexity, and reflection.

> "Children are a laboratory for the senses with each sense activating other senses... As a result, the child's environment cannot be seen just as a context for learning or a passive setting for activities; it is an integral part of learning and helps define their identity"
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> *(Zini, as cited in Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012, p. 319).*

Children can best create meaning through living in environments which support "complex, varied, sustained, and changing relationships between people, the world of experience, ideas and the many ways of expressing ideas" (Cadwell, 1997, p.93). It is not merely a matter of decorating. The arrangements of materials should invite engagement, meaning-making, and exploration. Thinking of "aesthetic" as being the opposite of "anaesthetic", a shutting down of the senses, may help with appraising the environment in a richer way. Ann Lewin-Benham (2011) has suggestions for engaging in a process of transformation of classroom aesthetics.

Safety

Many decisions about environments for learning are based on concern about safety and ease of disinfecting, rather than concern about the need to provide a stimulating environment that promotes exploration and inquiry.

Educators who have engaged in critical reflection about how their view of children was evidenced in their rules, found that there were contradictions to be addressed (Wien, 2004). After articulating a view of children as competent, these educators realized they had so many rules to govern children's behaviour that a significant number of their interactions each day were devoted to policing. The justification for most of those rules related to concern about the children's safety, fearing that without these rules, children would suffer injuries. The educators were delighted to discover that reducing rules actually resulted in fewer accidents. The children started to assess the hazards that could arise in their activities and take steps to ensure their own safety. This freed up the

educators to spend more time engaged in dialogue and documentation of the children's activity. These knowledgeable, responsive early childhood educators created a better environment, consistent with the Early Learning Framework's view of their role.

If our environments are designed to eliminate all risk by not allowing access to breakable items or physical challenges, how can children learn to exercise self-control and become aware of their own actions? Children can be supported to develop relationships with materials that call upon them to be mindful and respectful, when they are given the opportunity to learn to be responsible for their own safety, and to care for their environment (Gambetti, 2002). It is worth the significant investment of thought and time required to introduce these materials and organize them in ways that provide visibility and access, invite investigation and respect, and contribute to the aesthetic beauty of the setting.

Diversity

Creating an environment that acknowledges and values diversity, where young children can ask questions about gender, physical abilities, 'race' and ethnicity, is also important (Green, 2001). "As children play with familiar objects that give them a sense of belonging, as well as unfamiliar objects that represent different lifestyles, they learn that all children and families make music, dress, eat, and spend time in activities. This awareness can lead to developing a true respect for cultural diversity" (Kirmani, 2007, p.97). Looking critically at our approach to decorating for themes and holidays would be a significant step toward a more meaningful approach to planning our environments. The commercialism of traditional holidays can be downplayed so they do not become the focus of the curriculum. The huge amount of time that is traditionally devoted to decorating for themes and holidays, which are often difficult to celebrate in inclusive ways, can be avoided (Green, 2001, p.22). Educators should work to ensure relevance and connection between the classroom and the lives / family life of the children. As indicated in the Early Learning Framework, forming partnerships with families and communities strengthens the ability of early childhood settings to respect the capabilities and sensibilities of young children, while respecting diversity, equity and inclusion are required for honouring children's rights, optimal development and learning.

Time

The schedule is often the elephant in the room. This element of the context is served at the expense of responsiveness, focus and joy. When the teachers in one classroom were challenged by their supervisor to eliminate all watches and clocks, they had to collaborate with the children to gauge when to change activities, go outside, have a snack, extend

an exploration. Wien and Kirby-Smith (1998) describe how this provocation supported thoughtful consideration of how the schedule can be made to serve children and educators. The experience was liberating.

Goals

Co-constructing these rich, complex contexts for early education requires reflection and collaboration; it is professional work to be engaged in by educators who see themselves as researchers. There cannot be a recipe for this thoughtful, responsive work. "Each situation, from lunch to getting ready for nap time, can be a moment of research, because all of that constitutes an increased attention to the environment, to the preparation of materials, and to the contexts for research" (Gandini, 2005, p.65). There are several other aspects to consider: the relationship between indoors and outdoors; the sustainability and transformability of our choices of materials; the use of light; the soundscape.

Educators can choose an entry point for co-constructing meaningful contexts for engagement. One way to begin is to use photographs and documentation to reflect with colleagues what every part of the environment communicates. Colleagues may tackle one corner at a time and strip it down so it can be reconstructed to reflect the view of the child that they wish to embrace (Wien, Coates, Keating, Bigelow, 2005). Children and parents can be invited to participate in this process. Educators who observe, document, and reflect on children's engagement with the environment become partners in learning with the children.

Questions to Guide Reflection and Decisions

- How well does each part of the environment invite investigation, lingering, conversation and collaboration?
- Are children's words and work visible in the environment in a way that communicates respect and value for their meaning-making and communication?
- How well does the environment "challenge children aesthetically to respond deeply to the natural world, their cultural heritage, or to their inner world" (Tarr, 2001)?
- To what extent are children able to discover and develop their capabilities through reasonable risk-taking?
- Does the schedule support thoughtful, sustained engagement with ideas, materials, and friends?
- What can we learn from how children respond to the life, materials and events in their environment?

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