Setting the scene

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF p. 15) emphasises that:

Learning environments are welcoming spaces when they reflect and enrich the lives and identities of children and families participating in the setting and respond to their interests and needs.

The last e-Newsletter dealt with outdoor learning spaces. This one deals mainly with how to organise indoor spaces to maximise children’s engagement and learning.

As the EYLF (p. 16) reminds us:

Indoor and outdoor environments support all aspects of children’s learning and invite conversations between children, early childhood educators, families and the broader community. They promote opportunities for sustained shared thinking and collaborative learning.

An experienced early childhood educational leader recently explained his approach to creating indoor spaces for young children:

Our focus is to make it less like an institution and more like a home, so we have lots of smaller spaces, an eclectic mix of furnishings with nick-nacks, and framed family photos and framed artworks on the walls, and collections of strange and interesting objects on benches and surfaces to investigate.

Rooms need to change slowly, especially the nursery where children need familiarity, so change there is around furnishings and how it is laid out over a long period of time and following children’s interests. With the preschool space, of course, children are consulted about what they would like to access and do and everyone is involved in the move.

The ‘language’ of environments

Drawing on the work of Reggio Emilia in Italy, educators in New Zealand have been exploring the ‘language’ of learning environments for young children (Pairman & Terreni, 2001). They identify key aspects of early childhood environments as:

- **physical**—organisation and aesthetics for learning
- **interactional**—social interactions between children and adults
- **temporal**—routines and timetables.

This e-Newsletter focuses on physical environments and the authors note that sometimes they have been surprised to find activities poorly related to each other—block and construction areas in front of dramatic play areas, for example, or a water trough too near the quiet reading space.

They offer the following tips:

- Areas should be organised for easy ‘flow’ between activities, creating a sense of order, a feeling of belonging and opportunities both for solo contemplation and for children to collaborate with others, as they choose.
- Visible boundaries are important to separate different kinds of activities to enable children to make these personal choices.
- Existing features, such as windows and platforms, should allow children to access the views, while nooks and crannies provide retreat spaces.
- Choices of activities, materials and equipment should be visible and easily accessible and children need to know where they can find things, so they can set their own goals and construct their own knowledge.
- The ‘aesthetic’ of the overall space should promote constructive activity and purposeful exploration, with muted colours, a variety of different light sources and natural objects displayed to arouse curiosity and wonder.
Children making choices and decisions

The High/Scope project, originating in the USA, has demonstrated the long-term benefits of quality preschool programs. High/Scope bases its educational approach on four guiding principles:

- **Engage children in stimulating interaction with people, materials, events and ideas.**
- **Involve children in planning, carrying out and reflecting on intentional activities.**
- **Provide a curriculum based on a variety of appropriate learning experiences.**
- **Provide consistent support for children’s personal decision making.**

In Australia in 2007–08 (Connor, 2008), a group of educators trialled five key ingredients of High/Scope’s ‘active learning’ approach:

- **Materials**—abundant supplies of open-ended materials that can be used in a variety of creative ways and which stimulate thinking.
- **Manipulation**—opportunities for children to handle, combine and transform materials and ideas.
- **Choice**—opportunities for children to choose materials and plan activities.
- **Stimulating language and thought**—inviting children to describe what they are doing and their understanding of it.
- **Scaffolding**—building on children’s efforts by adults talking, joining their play and enabling them to solve problems.

Australian educators realised these principles had implications for how indoor and outdoor learning environments are organised.

Most settings already had areas for different activities—blocks, drawing, reading, dramatic play etc. Staff looked at their environments and made the following changes:

- They displayed materials and equipment so that all children, whatever their ages, could see and choose.
- They organised materials into distinctive containers so that children could access and return items.
- They labelled baskets with photos and words describing the contents.
- They sat with children, showing them how different equipment might be used and how to pack away.

**They created an environment in which children became in control of their choices and their learning—they had autonomy and ‘agency’—and they built children’s responsibility for the spaces in which they work and learn.**

As well, educators became thoughtful and intentional about how they might enrich the learning potential of an area.

As staff at a setting in NSW commented:

*We’ve added simple items to the block corner area, such as bamboo, feathers, cardboard tubes and packaging from recycling depots; it’s greatly extended creative play.*
Conclusion

There are, inevitably, challenges in organising spaces in most settings to maximise children’s learning.

In settings where one space is shared by children of different ages, for example, sharp scissors, paints and small construction pieces have to be placed on shelves out of the reach of babies and toddlers. The youngest children may need separate materials and spaces provided for their comfort and available only to them.

However, ‘changes that radically affect the way children utilise the learning environment are often cheap and achievable’ (Pairman & Terreni, 2001).

It costs nothing, for example, to display children’s artworks respectfully, framing and highlighting one or two pieces rather than ‘clothes lines’ of pegged-up works. It costs nothing to display reproductions of artworks and objects from different cultures, many of which families may be able to donate or loan.

In field visits, I have been impressed with how educators work with difficult spaces. They creatively break big rooms into smaller ‘rooms’ and extend small spaces by expanding into underutilised areas, such as verandas, for small group talk and play with an adult. They use semi-transparent fabrics, perspex and partial dividers to give children a sense of privacy while fulfilling adult supervision responsibility; and they provide large cushions and blankets that offer children a sense of ‘cosy and cubby’ when they are tired, or just want to be alone.

Often, educators in settings have to ‘work up to’ what they’d really like, gradually replacing plastic with wooden and cane furniture and providing ‘real chairs’ at a suitable height so that babies can ‘sit at the table’ communally.

Whether we like it or not, spaces educate. The way we design and organise learning spaces gives children messages. We can give the message that ‘we care and we know this place is important to you’ by paying attention to the ‘look and feel’ of spaces; we can impact on children’s behaviour by ‘inviting’ them to participate in particular activities, by consulting with them about materials, activities and locations and by separating quiet and exuberant activities.

We give cues to expected behaviour by the way we set things out:

- If chairs at a table are colour coordinated, we give a sense of belonging to a group.
- If we and the children set tables with matching crockery, we are saying ‘this is together time and eating a meal is a civilised experience’.
- If we offer children some choices about what, when and where they eat, we are saying ‘you have rights here’.

Sometimes, we just become used to ‘how things are’ and it takes a fresh pair of eyes to see how things could be improved. So, ask children, ask colleagues, ask families, get a friend in and ask: ‘What messages are we giving here? How could we say what we mean in the “language” of our spaces?’

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References


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