

# The classroom as a teaching tool: Evolving spaces to meet children's needs

Like many teachers, Jessie spends lots of hours setting up her preschool classroom for the new school year, carefully considering how materials influence and support the interests of the children. When the children come into the room, excitement is in the air.

In early October, road construction starts outside the school. The children are fascinated! What is happening outside? Those cones! The workmen and their hats! They are truly engaged with the happenings in their surroundings.

Jessie takes note of these changes and shifts the theme for the next month in the classroom to community helpers, including construction. Jessie brings in hard hats and safety vests for the dramatic play center, traffic cones and maps for the block center, and three new books on road construction and heavy equipment for the library.



The classroom environment is a living and evolving teaching tool. Yes, a teaching tool! Every inch of the classroom has a specific and useful purpose, and these purposes are reviewed and modified whenever necessary to support children's growth and development.

During planning time, teachers think about what equipment or materials they need to add, remove, or store away for later use. As children's interests change and the year progresses, the environment around them ideally shifts to reflect new topics and interests. Curiosity sparks learning, and children often share their curiosities with friends, parents, and teachers.

As teachers, we need to ask ourselves if we are listening to the children and making changes to the environment that meet children's needs. The cycle of

observing, reflecting, and planning allows children to unleash their interests knowing that we're there to help them decode the complexities of the real world.

## The classroom: An active teaching tool

Some schools have preset themes or learning units, unchanging from year to year. Unfortunately, this practice doesn't recognize the ever-changing personalities, temperaments, cultural backgrounds, interests, and needs of one group to the next. A better approach is to build a curriculum that truly follows the children's interests, and recognize that themes will emerge with infinite variety throughout the school year.

Remember, simply adding materials isn't enough. When children indicate a new interest—in conversation, by creating a new game, in construction play, or in dramatic play—engage and ask questions. Determine what the children already know (background knowledge)



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

and what they are interested in knowing.

When you offer new materials to sustain the new interest, introduce the materials and give directions on appropriate use. Yes, it's essential that children explore any material's potential, but most children need guidelines to help them regulate their interactions with the material and the other children engaged in the same play.

When interest wanes—and it will with even the

## CHILDREN LEARN THROUGH PLAY AND HANDS-ON MATERIALS.

most lavish planning—determine whether there is a need for additional props or whether it's time to replace the material with something the children express more current interest in.

For example, several children have had recent camping experiences with their families and seem eager to share new vocabulary and activities with their friends. Ms. Ramzy borrows sleeping bags, backpacks, compasses, and a small tent that she can set up in the corner of the classroom. She knows that just adding the equipment is not enough (Chapman 2014) and instead actively engages with the children, demonstrating how to tighten and loosen the straps

on the backpack, how to find north with the compass, and how to move in and out of the tent without tipping it over. She talks with the children about outdoor experiences including insects, poisonous plants, and the night sky.

### Provide concrete experiences

Children learn through play and hands-on materials. Teachers need to provide concrete experiences that the children will be able to use with all their senses. For example, if children are learning about leaves, a teacher gathers real leaves from playground trees for the science area. To sustain interest, a teacher can offer additional materials such as magnifiers; scales; pictures of branches, trees, and roots; and samples of tree bark. The leaf study can extend to other interest areas like art—with collage, painting with leaves, and leaf rubbings; construction play—with measuring tools, landscape diagrams, and cardboard trees to use with unit blocks; and dramatic play—with rakes and straw hats.

### Be flexible with curriculum choices

Follow children's interests as you strive to meet curriculum goals. If you've planned a unit on farm animals but find the children are more interested in planets and space travel, stay flexible. Consider the learning objectives and determine ways to meet the objectives with other materials and props.

If, for example, your farm study objective is to help children learn about sources of food or to sort animals that live in the air, on the water, or on land, reflect on how you could meet your goal through space study. Perhaps you could offer a cooking activity making nutritious milk drinks served in sealed space pouches with straws or catalog ways animals might live on another planet.

### Provide options

Perhaps the most important aspect of arranging rooms and providing materials is choice. Choices encourage children to evaluate and decide which area and which learning tools are best for them. Children will be actively involved with materials, friends, and the adults in classrooms when the space is designed specifically with them in mind (Marion 2007). A teacher must decide if there are enough choices for children in each interest area. This can be

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



a tricky process, but having too much or too little is easy to recognize as soon as the children start exploring that interest area.

## Age appropriate environments

A classroom set-up will look different according to children's ages and developmental levels. For example, infant care requires cribs, changing tables, and comfortable adult chairs for feeding, soothing, and reading to babies. In addition, the infant room will need to have sensory rich play areas, places where babies can touch, taste, and manipulate objects. The visual environment has to be interesting from a baby's perspective, from lying on the back or seated on the floor. Older infants and toddlers will need a place to socialize with their peers, places to experience loud and quiet moments, and of course areas where they can explore freely and safely (Copple and Bredekamp 2013).

Classrooms for preschool children are often created around interest areas (sometimes referred to as learning centers). These are spaces for children to build skills across all domains—physical, cognitive, social, and emotional—both indoors and outdoors. Typical centers include dramatic play or housekeeping, writing, books, counting, art, science, social studies, and creative arts (Copple and Bredekamp 2013). While different programs might have different interest areas or centers, it is up to the teachers and program administrator to tweak the points of intersection between the curriculum and the children's general

and specific developmental needs.

## Examples from a beach study

For illustrative purposes, consider a beach theme. At the beginning of the school year the children might share information on summer excursions and field trips. If you overhear conversations about recent beach, water, or sand experiences, consider this a topic for further exploration.

Conversations could lead to discoveries about the characteristics of different beaches: at a river, lake, or the ocean. Build on the basic experiences by asking questions about activities at the beach like swimming, playing ball, having a picnic, gathering stones, exploring the sand, and charting locations and experiences, for example.

Continue to build with questions about, for exam-

## INVOLVE ADMINISTRATORS FROM THE BEGINNING.

ple, swimming—learning to swim, holding breath under water, or using floaties—each rich in vocabulary and extending activities. Including games the children played at the beach in the classroom could be another fun way for the theme to be explored.

The topic might turn to animals and things found on the beach. Now the theme has evolved and you can begin to gather ideas and materials to transform the classroom. Some of the materials might be beach towels, sunglasses, sand buckets and shovels, seashells, swimming goggles, totes, sand, and swimming gear.

Start by adding props to the dramatic play center while planning ways to bring the beach theme to other centers. For example, add rocks and seashells to the math and manipulatives center. Add books about the beach and travel to the library. Continue the exploration and conversation about beach animals in the science center. To the art area, add materials used at the beach for inspiration or as tools for painting, molding, and exploring. Add buckets and shovels to the sensory table and plant seashells in the sand for children to find, wash, and categorize.

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ





In the outdoor environment, controlled water and sand play invites children to recreate a beach experience or to explore and discover ways to build a unique beach on the playground.

It's these theme-encompassing activities added to each interest area that enhances learning.

## Getting support

Building successful indoor and outdoor classroom environments requires cooperation and collaboration among all teachers, administrators, and the parents of children in the program. Often you can also tap community support—be creative!

**Program administrators.** Wonderful ideas need support from the school's administrators—the policymakers and budget keepers. Getting everyone involved can be a daunting task for a teacher. However, this is an important part of forming relationships and bonds with all the adults in the lives of the children and a teacher's co-workers.

Involve administrators from the beginning (Rea, 2005). Being able to articulate the ideas and direction of what is needed is key. If administrators are aware of the teacher's intent to respond to children's interests, it may be easier to plan equipment and material purchases. The sooner you ask for support, the better.

**Parents.** Remember to tap this wonderful resource. Parents are often eager to be part of the team that supports their children's developing skills. Be careful to avoid inappropriate expectations like asking too often for materials or the funds to buy

them. On the other hand, families are often eager to share materials—unused fabric squares, seashells collected on a vacation, or empty plastic milk jugs. Parents want to be able to help and get involved. Donated items enhance the environment and give families an opportunity to know that their support counts. Be sure to publicly thank families for their donations and be careful to return—clean and in good condition—items that you've borrowed.

**Community.** Many businesses are willing to donate items to teachers and schools, so connecting with them can be helpful for making quick curriculum changes. The school administrators will likely support a teacher who is excited and committed to providing the best learning environment for the children in the classroom. Remember to articulate the importance of needed items and reasons behind the need.

## Tools for classroom environment evaluation

Teachers and administrators have several rating scales and evaluation tools to assess whether a specific learning environment supports children's needs. The three most common evaluation instruments are Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale- Revised edition (ECERS-R), and Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).

Ask which environmental rating scale is used in your program. Working from a particular instrument will help ensure consistency in data collection and evaluations. Ideally, teachers determine quality at the beginning and end of the environmental design process (Jeon, Buettner, and Hur 2014).

## Use the classroom to engage children

Using the classroom as a teaching tool can be exciting and rewarding. The most important thing to keep in mind is that children who are able to explore a theme in depth are engaged learners.

Engaging young learners is a worthy goal for all teachers. Having engaged learners who, through hands-on experiences and explorations, seek answers to the questions that spark their imaginations and build a storehouse of relevant and vital information about the world and the people in it, really works.

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



---

## References

- Chapman, T. L. 2014. Promoting positive peer interactions in the preschool classroom: The role and the responsibility of the teacher in supporting children's sociodramatic play. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 43, 99-107. DOI 10.1007/s10643-014-0635-8.
- Copple, C., S. Bredekamp, D. Koralek, and K. Charner. 2013. *Developmentally appropriate practice: Focus on preschoolers*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Jeon, L., C. K. Buettner, and E. Hur. 2014. Examining pre-school classroom quality in a state wide quality rating and improvement system. *Child Youth Care Forum*, 43, 469-487.
- Marion, M. 2007. *Guidance of young children*. Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Pearson.
- Rea, P. J. 2005. Engage your administrator in your collaborative initiative. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 40 (5), 322-316.

## About the authors

Zlata Stankovic-Ramirez is an adjunct professor of early childhood education at Eastfield College in Mesquite, Texas. She teaches classes in child development while pursuing her doctorate at Texas Woman's University in Denton. Her research interests include early childhood classroom environments, gender development, and media influences on child development.

Catherine Dutton, Ph.D., is a lecturer in the Family Sciences Department at Texas Woman's University. Her research interests include media instruction, adolescence, and religiosity. ■