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Rethinking Our Environments

When I was in college, many, many years ago, I first heard about the concept of dialectics, learning that every event holds a tension of opposites, good things containing the seeds of bad and vice versa. Perhaps this explains the shift in some of my impressions of early childhood programs as I travel our country. I find myself feeling less proud and increasingly uneasy with the standardization of so many early childhood programs.

Over the past 30 years our field has developed many valuable resources to help us recognize the attributes of quality programs for children. For instance, mention the topic of environments and most of us have images of room arrangements with familiar learning areas and materials. These are predictably uniform and easy to spot when you peek into most any accredited child care or Head Start program.

On the one hand, this is a good development, because we've established the importance of an orderly, safe environment centered around some key principles of what young children need. On the other hand, a combination of our environmental assessment tools, guidelines for curriculum approaches and materials promoted by commercial vendors have all led us into a look-alike syndrome. Ultimately, this can't be good for children or our values of encouraging diversity and centering our programs around the specific people they serve. In the United States we would think it odd to walk into any of our friends' homes and find them all looking the same. Why, then, has this

become the norm with child care programs? As important as they are, standards and regulations have begun to give us tunnel vision and warp our sense of what's desirable and possible.

The concept of environments encompasses far more than how a room is arranged or furnished, as the Beginnings Workshop articles in this issue of *Exchange* suggest. If we are to create engaging, nurturing places where children will spend the bulk of their waking and some of their sleeping hours, we will need to break out of the confines of checklists and catalogues, valuable as these may be. Our child care staff will need some other resources and strategies for rethinking the early childhood program environments they want to create. This might include a revisiting of our professional roots, as well as drawing inspiration from new places.

Consider Your Values and Reflect Them Throughout Your Environment

A typical child care staff member walks into her job with the environment already in place. Over time a teacher may begin to rearrange how the room is set up or supplied, but rarely is she offered guidance for thinking through what *messages* are conveyed by what we place or leave out of an environment. Even when staff sets up a room for the first time, the focus is usually on selecting things from early childhood catalogues and figuring out what to put where. The earlier step of clarifying how

an environment reflects a set of values, unconsciously or intentionally, is often missing.

Strategy:

Translate values into mottos and mottos into practice

I recommend taking time to work with staff, as individuals, teams, or a whole group to identify *the message* they want their environments to convey. This could be done playfully by asking them to create a motto for each area of their room, and one for the whole room. You might give them an example of an often referred to quote that hangs in the entryway of one of the Schools of Reggio Emilio — "Nothing Without Joy!"

Next ask the group to explore their values around potentially differing practices such as organization and aesthetics, providing for or avoiding messy play, conflict, and active bodies. If you were to show you valued these things in your environment, give several examples of what that might look like. Remember to include interactions and communications, and ways to nourish relationships, as well as the physical materials and arrangements of the space. What might we see if these things are obviously valued?

Strategy:

Reinvent assessment tools

As you work with staff to define the agreed upon values that you want to see reflected in the environment, format

these into an assessment tool to be used as a cross-check on your progress and needs for improvement. For instance, if you value the opportunity for children to engage in big, active play, or for a tired parent to sit in your room at the end of the day, or for staff to have a place to gather for relaxation, discussion, or professional development, where is this clearly visible in your environment? If you want children to be able to relate to things from nature, to be able to explore and investigate an object or pursuit over time, where is there evidence of this in the environment you have created?

An assessment tool might be something as simple as making a list of these values you want to see expressed in your environment, and assigning them a number or color code. Then have staff draw a floor plan of the space to be assessed and go down the list and put the code for each value in all the places where it is clearly evident. This process often reveals how we need to better walk our talk.

Understand How Different Elements Impact Behavior

There is a terrific amount of research available outside the early childhood field for us to draw on in designing our environments. To translate some of this literature into practical knowledge for your staff, try some hands-on activities.

Strategy: **Identify how different environments make you feel**

Gather a collection of different and some contrasting pictures of environments from popular magazines or calendars, featuring things like garden landscaping, home decorating, landfills, hospital, hotel or bank lobbies, shopping malls, mountain tops, sunsets, snow storms. Spread these out for staff to consider and ask questions like the following:

- Which of these environments are you drawn to? Eager to Avoid? Why?
- If you were to spend most of your time in one of these environments, how might it make you feel? How might you begin to behave? How might it impact your identity?
- What specific elements in these pictures contribute to the feeling they give you?

As you debrief the smaller group discussions, generate a list of things that are important to pay attention to in designing an environment. These will include:

- Colors
- Natural light
- Sounds
- Temperature
- Order and arrangement
- Ease for the eyes, ears, and body
- Familiarity and comfort
- Intrigue and wonder

Conclude by having each staff member identify one thing they want to add and one thing they want to eliminate from the program's environment. Develop some action plans around these ideas.

Strategy: **Send staff to seminars outside of the early childhood field**

Do some library, newspaper, or internet research to explore available resources and trainings related to environmental design topics and ask for staff volunteers to attend. These might include working with color, interior or landscaping design, designing storage, organizing traffic patterns, air quality, noise pollution, music therapy, and aromatherapy. When we begin to think more broadly about issues of environments, we discover valuable resources for our work.

Remember the Role of Schedules, Routines, and Rituals

The concept of environment refers not only to the physical space and materials in it, but also to what happens in that space — the interactions, routines, schedules, and rituals — planned or spontaneous, intentional or unconscious. How time is spent and how much time is available for what conveys our values and contributes to the overall feel and message of the environment. Even the music we choose for clean-up time and how we conduct it should reflect the spirit of who we want to be together.

This particularly struck me when I visited Dee Dee Hilliard's class at Martin Luther King Jr. Day Home Center and saw total participation and engagement during clean-up time, with everybody rocking out to the great tune of the Pointer Sisters, "We are Family." Inspired by this I've been introducing programs to another great song with a calypso beat, "Oh My Goodness, Look at This Mess!" on the Sweet Honey In the Rock children's recording, *Still the Same Me*, which conveys how much fun and pride comes with taking responsibility for clean-up. Here are other strategies I've used with staff to understand the role of routines, rituals, and schedules in the environments.

Strategy: **Read children's books to find important elements for transition times**

It's far too easy for teachers to view transition times as the space between the real learning activities, rather than a critical part of our curriculum. I frequently see teachers either issuing commands and chastising children to hurry along, or trying to keep those who are ready entertained or attentive

while the others finish-up. Whether it be saying good-bye to a parent, cleaning up, toileting, or getting ready for outside, naptime, or a new classroom, children greatly benefit from clearly established routines designed with some aspects of a ritual.

In staff meetings I read a children's book related to waiting or making a transition with some kind of ritual, and then have the group brainstorm the elements that made it go smoothly. This leads to a discussion on how to build these elements into the program's transition times. Favorite books for this purpose include Angela Johnson's *The Leaving Morning*, Deborah Turney Zagwyn's *The Pumpkin Blanket*, Susi Gregg Fowler's *I'll See You When the Moon is Full*, Byrd Baylor's *The Way to Start a Day*, Beverly and David Friday's *Time to Go*, Joyce Dunbar's *Tell Me Something Happy Before I Go to Sleep*, Margaret Wild's *Tom Goes to Kindergarten*, and Kathi Appelt's *Oh My Baby, Little One*.

Strategy:
***Assess your daily schedule
with dots***

Time is a significant shaper of an environment and how it is used always reflects a set of values and priorities. In the name of teaching and including all

the things that we feel are important for children, we often chop their time into little boxes, interrupting their pleasures and learning processes, and contributing to what I think of as an ADHD routine. Meanwhile, research suggests that it takes children a full 45 minutes before they really get into the complex kind of play that fosters deeper learning.

I'm always encouraging teachers to invent ways to open-up their schedules to allow for an extended block of self-chosen play and exploration. I suggest they write down their daily schedule and then assess it along the following lines:

- Put a green dot in front of all the time blocks where children are engaged in self-chosen activities.
- Put a yellow dot in front of all the time blocks where children have limited choices, are in a transition routine, with specific adult guidance.
- Put a red dot in front of the time blocks where it is teacher directed and children have little or no choice.

I then ask them to add up the actual amount of time spent in each of the three kinds of time offered to children, and consider whether that reflects their values and satisfaction with their schedule. If it is under an hour, I ask them to

work together to invent ways to extend their *green dot time*.

Strategy:
***Keep the adults, as well as
the children in mind***

It is not only the children, but the adults in our programs who are impacted by the comfort, organization, and aesthetic of our environment. We need to consider how their emotional and social needs are impacted by such things as schedules and routines. Like the children, teachers too, need time and a place to work on a project, alone and with others, and rituals to help them through the stress, loss, and sacrifices that come with dedication to their work. And, of course, they need attention, acknowledgment, a respected voice, and opportunities to be active, to rest, to learn more, and to experience meaningful celebrations, parallel to what our environments strive to offer the children.

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