

Changes in the Environment Through Collaboration

by Jane Cecil, Kimberly Cothran, and Lynn White

As two distinct groups of people with a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, we looked closely at collaboration through a study of space within the environment. We planned to uncover the why of space and the possibilities. By telling our stories, exchanging ideas, and having shared experiences, we examined the motivation behind creating and recreating space, studied how we are influenced to make changes in our environment, and made plans for possible changes at Greeley and Chicago Commons.

Our committee consisted of teachers and parents from the Winnetka Public Schools and staff from Chicago Commons. In May 2000, our diverse groups came together to reflect on what we know about environments and to study the role of the environment and how it impacts children's learning. Although one group came from the affluent suburbs and the other came from the inner city, we shared a common goal of using collaboration as a means to provide environments that can enrich the lives of children.

The Winnetka Public Schools, north of Chicago, have a long tradition of leadership in progressive public education. Strong

support of education by Winnetka residents dates back to 1859 when the first public school building was purchased by private funds. Extensive parental involvement in school programs through PTA activities and volunteers in the classrooms has assisted the district in achieving its reputation. The school district's dedication to developmental and integrated learning is evidenced by programs that develop a wide range of interest. Today, the district serves 1,965 kindergarteners through eighth grade children in three elementary schools, one fifth/sixth grade center, and one middle school for grades seven and eight.

Chicago Commons, which was founded in 1894, is one of Chicago's earliest settlement houses. Today Chicago Commons' core services include Senior Care, Child Welfare, Adult Education and Training, Settlement Services, and Child Development. The Child Development Program provides care and education for children in five communities throughout Chicago. It serves over 900 children between the ages of six weeks and 12 years of age. It provides Early Head Start, subsidized child care, and state pre-kindergarten programs.



Jane Cecil has been in the field of Early Childhood Education for more than 25 years as a teacher and administrator. She has worked

for the Chicago Commons Child Development Program for nine years as a site director, education coordinator, and currently as the manager of education. Through the Chicago Commons study and adaptation of the Reggio Emilia approach, she has interest in the study of the environment and how it impacts families and children. She was a member of the Environment Committee.



Kimberly Cothran has been in the field of Early Childhood Education for more than 15 years, ten of those with Chicago

Commons Child Development Program. While at Commons she has been a Head Start teacher, and a school-age coordinator/assistant site director. Through her interest in her own professional development she joined the committee to further study the role of environment in learning.



Lynn White has been working in the field of Early Childhood Education for over 21 years as a teacher and consultant. She has

been a first grade teacher at Greeley School in Winnetka, Illinois for the last 16 years. She has been interested in the many aspects of the Reggio Emilia Approach since her visit to Reggio Emilia, Italy in 1991. Her interest in the study of environments and collaboration led to the formation of this research committee.

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

As members of the committee, we were inspired and influenced to plan for possible changes within our centers' and school's indoor environments through reading activities, visiting The Botanic Gardens, attending an environment seminar in Pittsburgh, touring Greeley School, and touring two of Chicago Commons' sites. The vision as a committee was to gain insight and knowledge in the process of collaboration, create a sense of investment to enrich children's learning and development, and use research possibilities to create the identity of space.

The group met for three hours monthly to share perspectives and opinions in a dialog and exchange about the environment. The committee over time defined environment to mean: a reflection of one's identity; its living and changing; expression, values, learning, community, and relationships. Defining the word environment gave us a focus and direction to follow. Topics such as: *what is our motivation for change?* and *what is a learning environment?* became the emphasis, and perhaps purpose, of our conversations. These conversations were recorded and later transcribed and used as a catalyst for reflection and further conversation. In addition to sharing our thoughts and opinions, the committee toured each other's spaces. We looked at classroom and non-classroom space. The purpose was to brainstorm and plan for possible change.

The Chicago Botanic Garden has 23 spectacular gardens on 385 acres and is a *living museum* of plants and flowers serving both the public and the scientific community. This environment was an inspiration to all. The Chicago Botanic Garden offered the opportunity for us to experience nature in an awe-inspiring way. Mary, a former kindergarten teacher from Winnetka reflected, "I think what struck me the most was the Sensory Garden filled with plants like rosemary, basil, and peppermint that visitors could smell and touch. We discovered that many of the plants and flowers, like the lamb's ear plant, had different textures. I'm so visual; I appreciate the colors and how things look, and that's always in the forefront. But what I noticed the most was how the hot temperature was making the aroma, whether it was the flowers, or the pines, or the scented geraniums come to life. As I thought, I kept smelling plants that were invoking all kinds of emotions — of warmth, contentment, peace, and the vitality of being in a place where all these living plants were giving up oxygen. We're breathing it in and there's a vitality there. I thought about how these outdoor plants can be brought inside where children would have to take care of them and make them a part of their environment. I was also struck by the sound of the breeze coming through the leaves; it was so peaceful that it made me feel so relaxed."

Another result of our experiences at The Botanic Garden was an inspiration for change which struck Santa Rivera, a Chicago Commons teacher. An exhibit of miniature trains, bridges, and trellises of historical places throughout the United States was intriguing to her not because of the beauty of the garden itself, but rather she focused on *the idea of looking at levels*. "I see the environment not as the ground level only but as a place where you're creating a learning environment, and I also see the top as another level/perspective for play. What I mean by this is seeing things at different angles as a part of learning. I could imagine having a playground where children would have different bridges allowing children to look out, look down, and look up, and that would spark conversation between them. I see this as an opportunity for learning." As a result of some things that motivated us on our journey, we not only reflected on what we wondered about the experiences but how the application of these experiences within our environment would impact adults and children.

GREELEY SCHOOL

One change that occurred at Greeley School was with an entryway to the building which was not the main entrance to the school. We thought it had more potential as a transitional space. Prior to the collaboration project, the entryway stood empty except for a few orange cones (used for blocking icy patches of sidewalks in the winter), a space heater, and an empty, dark shelf. The committee felt it had potential as a quiet nook away from the busy hallway, a place to sit and visit on the way in and out of the school.

The empty shelf and walls were replaced with a wooden bench and cushion, a wooden side table, and a basket of books. A jar to collect sea glass was placed in this area to make a connection to the community. This was chosen because the school is located two blocks from Lake Michigan and we have observed for many years the interest that children have in collecting and comparing sea glass with their friends and classmates. "I appreciate any and all efforts to make the school homey and inviting. Little unexpected points of interest randomly placed about are like little treasures happened upon," comments Nancy, a Greeley School secretary. "The children were very interested and observant," noted Virginia, a third grade teacher.

GUADALUPANO FAMILY CENTER

Guadalupano Family Center is a Chicago Commons Center for preschool and after-school children. The center is located in the

Pilsen neighborhood which is predominately Hispanic. The three-story building had only a small entranceway. The staff observed the need for a lobby or common meeting area for families during arrival and at the end of the day, as well as for informal meetings with staff. In addition, parents didn't have anywhere to sit while waiting for their children to enter class. Converting an office space directly across the hall was the only option. To make the space easily accessible and inviting, a wall was removed to create an alcove.

This new meeting area was designed with furniture and accessories from a Mexican store in the community. Small shelves were added so that photo albums, children's storybooks, and magazines could be stored and used while parents wait. Children's work was also displayed on panels. "Now I have somewhere to sit while I wait. My children get to read books and see their work displayed," observed Head Start parent Yadira A. "This area is so much more family-friendly. I am able to sit with parents in this comfortable area to have informal meetings," commented Iris M., a family worker at the site. "I see my pictures in the



PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY THE AUTHORS

book from my classroom," was what a four-year-old Head Start boy told a teacher.

The experiences gained and opportunities created through the project to build collaboration, relationships, and partnerships among parents and teachers at Greeley and staff at Chicago Commons were unique. The process of sharing ideas, looking at, studying, and understanding what the environment means to children and adults has affected us all. Scheduling meet-

ings that accommodated the busy lives of teachers and parents was difficult; nevertheless, we met. The use of written and recorded documentation supported the continuity of conversations for all members of the group.

Each thought, idea, and point of view of each group member was valued and respected, whether they were a parent or a teacher. The impact of merging our individual points of view and having shared experiences gave us the opportunity to explore and discover what it means to collaborate, while examining the complex and beautiful elements of the environment.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Adopting a "collaborative change" model: The authors introduce us to a collaborative change model where diverse points of view and interesting models were used to identify a plan to modify the environment. You could try this approach to environmental improvement. Convene interested parties, including teachers, parents, perhaps even children who graduated from your program, people with resources and skills to identify places in your community to get good ideas, and then visit, either together or individually. Then, reconvene and share what you learned to see if these insights have any implications for your environment. The improvement plan that results will be widely supported by the change agents who proposed it and will likely be more creative and visionary than a plan produced in isolation.

Starting small: If the approach mentioned above sounds too daunting, start smaller by doing the change model in-house. Visit each other's classrooms, other schools in the area, then environments in the community, adding interested parties along the way. Focus the group's attention on small changes that might make big differences.

Transitional spaces: The authors introduce the idea of transitional space — space that is not home-like or school-like but a combination of the two. Consider whether this idea has merit for your program. Could you create some transitional spaces that give children and families support in making the transition between the dramatically different environments of home and school? What would these spaces look like? How would they be furnished? Who could help design or equip such spaces? Give this idea a try and see what happens!