Rethinking Our Use of Resources Part 2 – Space, Attitude, and Attention

by Margie Carter

Working with directors across the country, I've been struck by how tied down with a scarcity mentality we are in this early care and education field. Yes, of course, budgets are tight and expenses are rising; but I think that we are so used to getting hand-me-downs and left-overs, that we sometimes think we don't deserve more. Perhaps a good first step for breaking out of narrow thinking about our resources is to do a little dreaming. What could really change the way children and adults *feel about* their time in our program? How could our environment feel more nourishing to the staff and families, as well as the children?

As I discussed in the last issue of *Exchange*, (November/December 2005) "Rethinking Our Use of Resources — Part 1: The Pedagogy of Time" we would do well to expand our thinking by considering resources that we may be overlooking — our physical spaces, our use of time, and what might be thought of as our psychological resources, our attitudes, and what we pay attention to. We have a good deal more control over those things than we tend to exercise, though this sometimes requires some disciplined refocusing. I don't mean to sound like a Pollyanna, suggesting that issues of time and space are easy or without complications or financial implications. But with the attitude of intentionally using our space and our time to reflect our vision and values, I think we might be making some better progress in our efforts to steadily improve, if not redefine, quality.

Space as a resource

How should we think about space as a powerful resource easily within our reach? In a direct as well as subtle manner, the environment expresses the values and knowledge of those who design and care for it. The physical space and materials, along with the social-emotional and organizational climate, including our routines and interactions, all reflect how those in charge view childhood and the process of teaching, learning, and building relationships. The environment teaches us about ourselves — as teachers, children, and families. It regulates our feelings and behaviors, and shapes a significant part of our identity. This is not a resource to thoughtlessly squander!

Carl Sussman, speaking about the norm within much of the child care world to accept extraordinarily low facilities and equipment standards, says, "It is so firmly entrenched a reality that providers rarely notice the depressing conditions, reflect on the programmatic ramifications, or imagine changing it." Carl goes on to say, "The role of child care as a work environment for adults remains virtually unstudied . . . . So, while nice space attracts parents — a lesson many for-profit providers learned years ago — the physical quality of a center may also influence the most important child care relationship: the way teachers interact with children." To his thoughts I would add that the quality of the physical space impacts the relationships all around, among co-workers and between teachers and families. I also believe the physical space in which we work impacts how we view our jobs — what we think this work is really about, and how much pride we take in it.

If we are to take seriously the notion of space as a powerful resource, we can't confine our thinking to a traditional assessment tool or rating scale, important as those tools are. Rather, we need to be continually clarifying our values and our vision, and examining our spaces to see how these are sustaining or undermining the principles and pedagogy we believe in.

In his landmark book, *Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments That Work*, Jim Greenman discusses how "space speaks." He reminds us that the experience of space is individual and it

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is cultural; and he offers some important characteristics and dimensions of space to consider. We should consider these for the adults as well as the children in our programs.

Parallel elements for children and adults

In our book, *Designs for Living and Learning*, Deb Curtis and I offer five environmental elements that reflect values we feel are important for children:

- Creating connections and a sense of belonging
- Keeping space flexible and materials open-ended
- Designing natural environments that engage our senses
- Provoking wonder, curiosity, and intellectual engagement
- Engaging children in symbolic representation, literacy, and the visual arts

I believe these elements are equally important for the adults in our environments — our staff and the children's families, along with visitors who walk through our doors. Here are examples of concrete strategies we can adapt with this in mind.

Strategy:
Create spaces for staff to feel they belong

Staff in our programs need not only a space of their own with tools for their work and relaxation; they deserve their lives to be reflected throughout the building. They need comfy places to sit with the children which go beyond those little chairs or sitting on the floor. Encourage them to bring in photographs of their families and objects or art that nourishes them and give them opportunities to share stories about themselves with the children, their families, and co-workers. What a resource this is for building relationships and shaping curriculum possibilities!

Strategy:
Shape the environment with families

Likewise, rather than asking parents for donations of this or that, develop systems for including families in shaping your environment. Their ideas are an important resource, not just their hand-me-down furniture or willingness to come to a work party.

Make it a practice to have family photos and a special object brought in as part of the enrollment process. Spend family meeting time exploring some of the same values clarification activities that you use with staff in order to expand your ability to work with parents as partners.

Could you create a system for parents to add their thoughts to documentation displays you post? Teachers often post observations and photos of the children's activities as a "final product," rather than documentation in process. Documentation can instead be seen as a collaborative process, an exchange of curiosities, delights, and possible explanations of the "why" underneath what is observed. Having a visible place for parents to add their voice to the experiences under consideration helps them further shape the environment.

Each time you consider a change to your space, ask your families to offer their ideas. This doesn't mean you have to incorporate every suggestion, but it does imply that the environment belongs to all of you and that it's a resource that must be continually negotiated.

Attitudes and attention as a resource

Are you one of those providers Carl Sussman describes who "rarely notices the depressing conditions, reflects on the programmatic ramifications, or imagines changing it"? If so, you might consider that your own attitude and what you give attention to is a potent resource you can mobilize. A litany of complaints, excuses, and "yes-buts" consumes energy you could be giving to focusing on bigger dreams. What you give attention to can become a resource that can create its own momentum. What would you like that to be?

Do you promote an attitude of closely looking and listening to how "space speaks" in your center? Our physical spaces have a strong influence on the social emotional environment of our programs, and so does the organizational climate that we steadily build and give attention to. Even seemingly mundane tasks can be infused with attention to the details of a nourishing and engaging environment to mobilize anticipation about what the children and adults are experiencing. Can you imagine a better resource than airwaves full of joy, stories, and discoveries of who we can be together when we are at our best?

References

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