



encouraging a positive learning environment

Nita H. Barbour and Carol Seefeldt, explain how classroom layout, with flexible working spaces, appropriate furniture, adequate storage and display areas frees the teacher to plan for content using a wide variety of constructive and creative materials. And how the social/emotional and intellectual climates provide children with a secure and challenging learning environment.

Piaget maintains that children are constructors of their own knowledge. If classrooms are to provide environments that foster such pursuit of knowledge, then the social/emotional climate must provide both security and challenge. As children mature, then greater challenges must be available.

for large muscle movements, but they have more control of these movements and should be learning to move adroitly within varying amounts of space.

Children understand what their environment permits them to do from the types of materials available and their organisation. When materials are open ended,

anyone works better in an atmosphere where individuals are

The physical arrangement, classroom atmosphere and social interactions can encourage children to explore, to experiment and solve problems, or they can intimidate, discourage testing of one's abilities and limit questioning.

PHYSICAL ARRANGEMENTS

Whether a room is arranged for a preschool child or a primary age child, the organisation of space permits freedom or restricts movement. Rooms organised for exploration have several open space areas with boundaries restricting movement for safety reasons, but allowing natural flow of activity. Although boundaries may suggest different types of activities to be carried on in each area, experimentation requires that space be flexible and that areas have the potential of extending beyond rigid boundaries.

Younger children need more open space as they move about the classroom. Although they are learning the fundamental movements of running, jumping, skipping, hopping and leaping, they do not have such movements under control. Older children still need space arranged

children know that their vision of how to structure their learning is accepted. Materials that must be used only one way can frustrate children who haven't the interest or skill, or bore children who have mastered their use.

The amount of materials in a classroom can also foster or hinder healthy social development. Young children often can attend to only one or two features at a time. Too many choices of materials or activities can overstimulate or frustrate. Likewise, too few materials can have similar effects. Young children have difficulty sharing or waiting their turn; insufficient materials can result in fighting, squabbling or relying on a teacher to monitor the activity. For older children who are learning to cooperate, only one of each kind of tool in the classroom can force them to figure out a strategy of compromise.

CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

Anyone works better in an atmosphere where individuals are respected, have choices and encounter expectations that are not beyond their ability. Preschool/ primary children work best in a climate that

teacher moved to the area and said, "Mandie, I think Gareth is very sorry. I don't think he meant to hurt you." Mandie then replied, "When you hit, it hurts!" "Yes, Mandie, it hurts." Mandie then turned to Mrs. T and asked, "If I hit you, it hurts?" Mrs. T responded, "Why yes, Mandie, when you hit anyone it hurts." "Even Gareth or my baby sister" "Yes, Mandie, Gareth or your baby sister." During the day, Mandie periodically would ask about hitting other people and it hurting, as if this were new information to her. Mandie's behaviour began to change. A positive environment, where she could learn how her actions affected others without being rejected, gave Mandie the support she needed as she began to realise the consequences of her actions.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Young children are egocentric and heteronomous, or other-directed. It is through interactions with their peers that they successfully develop the ability to perceive another point of view and become autonomous or self directed. Whatever the age of the children, rules for classroom behaviours must be established. Younger children will respond to the rules because an authority figure has established them. They may forget the rule, however, if it hinders them from doing what they wish. Mandie knew that she was not supposed to hit, but she continued to do it whenever she didn't get her way. The teacher remained patient with her and used Mandie's own experiences of hurting to help her change. Even three and four-year-olds can begin to formulate a few simple classroom rules themselves and remind each other when rules are violated.

During the primary years, children take rules literally and begin to accept responsibility for their actions. They are becoming self directed. When conflicts arise because of different behaviour patterns, children can be helped to solve these problems and to formulate their own codes of behaviours. When children are free to do this, not only is their behaviour more positive, but they often take responsibility for bringing up and resolving the conflicts.

allows them to be active learners. They will show their enthusiasm for learning as they move about the classroom and talk to their friends and adults about many things.

Young children are exuberant and often quite noisy. Their talk can be loud as they shout across the room to a friend and annoying as they interrupt peers and adults in their impatience to share. Unrestricted movement and talk do not show respect for others. Children need to learn in a supportive atmosphere how to be active without intruding on another's activity and how to share ideas without always being first.

In a classroom where action is prized and children are expected to explore, conflicts will arise. Young children are egocentric; it is only gradually during their primary years that they begin to understand how someone else feels or that the other person has a different point of view. As children develop, they need to

respected, have choices and expectations not beyond their ability.

feel secure in expressing their feelings. When children haven't the verbal skills to indicate their frustrations or anger, they resort to physical reactions. Teachers who provide a positive classroom environment devise strategies and use classroom events that help children express their own feelings and understand how someone else might feel.

Having children talk things out, modelling language to use and role-playing their feelings are three useful strategies. Careful observation and knowledge of children can assist teachers in supporting children's growth.

Three-year-old Mandie usually showed her displeasure by hitting her companion. Mandie's teacher was encouraging her to use words to express her displeasure instead of hitting. At first, Mandie's behaviour did not seem to change much. Then there was a breakthrough. One day while playing with her friend Gareth, Gareth accidentally hit Mandie's head. Mandie looked very startled; Gareth looked ready to cry. Fearing retaliation was about to happen, an alert

One group of second graders was distressed because too much sand from the sandbox was getting on the floor. In a total class meeting, they expressed the problem, brainstormed solutions, experimented with some they thought would work and then reformulated the rules. Primary children do not always come up with sensible solutions and all solutions cannot be tried. Children need guidance in selecting those that are plausible and those that are out of bounds. In a secure emotional climate, children are free to express even absurd ideas without being ridiculed, gradually learning how to focus on more reasonable ones. They learn these skills through experimentation.

Talk is necessary for social interactions. Teachers who insist on quiet classrooms all day long do not provide the opportunity for children to explore how others feel and think. Some teachers believe that children should be free to talk only if they remain on task. A great deal of children's talk while they are

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engaged in activities, however, is not what one would call on task. This talk, too, can be productive for learning how to get along with others and resolve conflicts, or for discovering new things.

One group of third grade children was conducting some experiments at the water table, testing out how to make their homemade sailboats move faster. They were to give a report to the total group at the end of the morning. Josh began to take one of boats and use it like an airplane. Alec, a more task oriented child, became frustrated and went to "tell the teacher." Instead of intervening, the teacher suggested Alec needed to resolve the conflict with Josh herself.

Upon returning to the group, Alec asked Josh how they were going to report on which boat went faster if he didn't stop fooling around. Josh figured they couldn't. He put the boat down, saying, "You guys can finish" and went to get a book. The rest of the team members finished their 'tests' and were ready for the report. Josh's contribution was to inform the class of the hydroplane boats and the speeds that they could muster - information he gleaned from his reading. He and another child became interested in figuring out how to replicate other boats besides sailboats. Later, others in the class designed other boats and tried to figure out how to give their homemade boats more power.

A classroom where social interactions are encouraged, but where children have the freedom to make choices about their activities, provides much richer experiences for children.

INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT

An intellectual environment in any classroom assures that all children, as well as the teacher, are learning. Teachers recreate the curriculum with the children. They initiate units and themes that require children to develop maths, reading, writing, social studies/ice skills. But they build on children's interests, while appealing to their curiosity.

Materials invite exploration and offer choices. The classroom has a variety of materials that may be used in simple or complex ways. A few materials may have one use, but materials can be used in many different centres and for many different purposes. As children are encouraged to experiment, so teachers feel comfortable in experimenting. They observe children, reflect on what is happening, pose questions and evaluate their growth. Teachers who provide an intellectual environment, however, also model curiosity and a desire to learn more. They, too, experiment with ideas, testing to see if different materials or conflicting information will challenge children's thinking. As they rejoice in children's learning, teachers share their own enthusiasm skills or new information they have acquired.

Children from preschool through to primary grades require an environment that takes into account their growing independence. All age classrooms should have physical, emotional and intellectual environments that allow for exploration. As teach range space, they take

into account the realities of their situations: actual room dimensions; age, maturity and culture of the children; goals and expectations of the school and community; and both their and the children's comfort level.

Knowing that classroom arrangements have flexible working spaces, appropriate furniture, adequate storage and display areas frees the teacher to plan for content using a wide variety of constructive and creative materials. The social/emotional and intellectual climates provide the security and challenge that invite children to explore. ■

Nita H. Barbour and Carol Seefeldt are the authors of *Developmental Continuity Across Preschool and Primary Grades*.

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