



Environments for learning

A well organised learning environment has the potential to underpin good practice across all Quality Areas in the National Quality Standard and the five Learning Outcomes specified in the Early Years Learning Framework and The Framework for School Aged Care.

In pioneering research, Kritchvesky & Prescott (1969) identified that what is in a space, a room or a yard, and how it is arranged can affect the behaviour of people; it can make it easier to act in certain kinds of ways, harder to act in others. This reminds us of the paramount importance of planning spaces, both indoor and outdoor, for our young people with precision, thought, planning and care.

In the last few decades, contemporary theoretical approaches to learning and development have placed a growing emphasis on the need to provide children with culturally sensitive, emotionally responsive and differentiated learning environments (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 1999; Hamre, Pianta, Mashburn, and Downer, 2009).

What, then, does research tell us hallmarks a 'good' environment for teaching and learning?

The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study in the UK found that the most effective early learning environments had a balanced focus on communication, language and literacy, knowledge and understanding of the world (including sciences and maths) whereas less effective environments spent almost all of their time focusing on children's physical and creative development (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2004). This reflects the importance of intentional teaching and a range of learning experiences in early childhood education. Where children's arts education is supported by appropriate resources and attentive dialogue with an early childhood professional, children's narrative abilities and conceptual skills can be extended (Wright, 2003).

Traditionally, Australian early childhood learning environments have been heavily influenced by a developmental paradigm and constructivist learning theories, with Piaget and Vygotsky's work often dominating the agenda (Berk, 2009; Edwards, 2005). As summarised by Perry (2000, p.4), the 'shift towards a consideration of Vygotskian principles relating to the social mediation of knowledge has prompted a focus not only on what it is that children are capable of on their own (for example as assessed through Piagetian tasks), but also, what they are capable of achieving with the assistance of more knowledgeable others through scaffolding, and through teachers developing and implementing tasks that target the zone of proximal development (Berk and Winsler, 1995; Bodrova and Leong, 1996; Dockett and Fleer, 1998; Fleer, 1992).

Essentially, environments that have the greatest outcomes for children are engaging, caring, stimulating and respond to children's individual abilities and interests. Learning outcomes for children are enhanced when early childhood professionals take an active role in children's learning through observation, listening, questioning, constructive feedback and open communication.

In relation to learning activities, children in high quality environments participate more in reading, writing and listening, and adult scaffolded activities (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2004). The most successful environments in the EPPE study spent time exploring scientific aspects of the environment and games that involved the deliberate development of number and mathematical concepts, guided by individual children's interests. High quality environments have more small group activities linked to particular skill acquisition or concept development, where the early childhood professional teaches language, science or numeracy concepts in an activity chosen by the children. Low quality environments are dominated by activities with little or no adult direction, and where children spend more time wandering around or watching others (Siraj Blatchford et al., 2004).

Learner-centred practice allows children to explore and experience the world around them in a way that best suits their individual interests and learning style (Dewey, 1915). Learning environments which typify this philosophy look at the whole child rather than compartmentalising learning into discrete and often unrelated experiences. A differentiated environment provides for each child's abilities, culture, perspectives, strengths, interests and learning styles (Arthur et al., 2008). A differentiated learning environment encourages children to co construct their understanding collaboratively and allows children to explore their own hypotheses about what might work.

These discussions highlight the importance of educators, educational leaders, and others working with children and families in services, having a clear understanding of the importance of planning environments with consideration and attention to detail. When environments are planned with pedagogy and intentionality in mind, the environment becomes the third teacher. ■

Further Resources

To access more resources around environments for learning in the IPSP online library (www.ipsplibrary.net.au), search for terms such as “environments for learning”, “indoor” or “environment”.

Read more about quality learning environments:

Creating a welcoming environment:

<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/early-childhood/blog/creating-welcoming-environment>

Inspiring the construction of knowledge through our environments:

<http://journeyintoearlychildhood.weebly.com/inspiring-environments.html>

If you would like further support, please email the project officer, at enquiries@gowriesa.org.au

References

Kritchvesky, S., & E. Prescott. 1969. Planning environments for young children: Physical space. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments 2009. *Being, Belonging and Becoming The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Canberra.

Church, A, Marbina, L , & Tayler, C 2011. Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. Evidence Paper Practice Principle 6: Integrated teaching and learning approaches