

Age-appropriate Pedagogies in the Early Years

The learning environment

As part of teachers' decision-making processes they are encouraged to use a range and balance of pedagogical approaches when planning learning opportunities that promote active engagement, deep learning and positive dispositions to learning. Teachers are also encouraged to reflect critically on the relationships between the learning environment and their practices. The organisation of the learning environment, the expectations teachers set, the routines, and ways of interacting with young learners reflect teachers' beliefs and values shaping the classroom culture that is established (Curtis & Carter, 2008). The culture of the classroom is instrumental in influencing the dispositions that young learners develop to learning.

To maximise learning possibilities and positive dispositions to learning, priority is given to creating learning environments that are motivating, engaging, flexible, inviting, challenging and supportive for young learners. As part of this process early years teachers deliberately, purposefully and thoughtfully make decisions concerning the construction of the social, temporal and physical environments.

'The environment is the most visible aspect of the work done in schools...It conveys messages that this is a place where adults have thought about the quality and the instructive power of space...'¹

The social environment

Building positive relationships with each young learner and their family sets the foundations for an environment of trust and respect to flourish. Encouraging relationships to develop between learners, and promoting respectful relationships with all members of the school community supports young learners to develop a sense of belonging. Feeling safe and supported is integral to the wellbeing of all learners.

The social environment: Teaching suggestions

Building a supportive classroom climate takes time and flexibility as routines, expectations and accepted ways of interacting with peers and adults are established and maintained.

- Discuss daily routines regularly so that young learners develop a sense of routine and know what to expect. Use of a daily timetable provides visual cues for young learners about what is happening throughout their day
- Look for opportunities to promote and acknowledge positive behaviours when young learners are observed demonstrating empathy, kindness and concern and helpfulness towards peers.
- Promote a 'can do' and 'have a go' attitude where young learners feel confident to try new experiences and try again when experiences don't go according to plan. Teachers can model

¹ Gandini, L. 2002 in D. Curtis and M. Carter (2003) *Designs for living and learning, Transforming early childhood environments*, p. 13, Redleaf Press.



this attitude through ‘think aloud’ strategies for example, ‘When I try something new I sometimes get butterflies in my tummy (identifying the emotion), then I tell myself, ‘You might need to try this a few times before it gets easier and that’s okay’ (acknowledging the feeling and identifying positive self-talk).

- Model ways to celebrate others’ achievements in all aspects of the daily program.
 - ‘Finn can you share how you solved the problem for showing bundles of ten in your work?’
 - ‘Milly thank you for sharing your pencils with Zac that was kind. It shows him what a good friend you are.’
 - ‘Layla used a capital letter at the start of her sentence, good remembering Layla’.

These examples use specific strategies including cuing young learners by name before identifying the action, behaviour or learning that is being celebrated.

- Create opportunities for young learners to feel successful as part of classroom daily life in a variety of contexts whether socially, physically, intellectually or emotionally.
- Model ways for young learners to relax, and self-regulate particularly after each break to help them refocus and settle, for example, through relaxation exercises, songs, rhyme and movement.
- Recognise that young learners respond to physical proximity, gestures and communicative styles in ways that reflect cultural values, experience, and personal preferences. Adjust interactional approaches accordingly.

The social environment: Reflective questions

- How inclusive is the social climate of the classroom?
 - Does it engage all young learners?
 - What evidence do you have to support your response?
- How are young learners encouraged to adapt to unexpected changes in routines?
 - What strategies do you have in place to support young learners’ capacity to deal with change?

- What strategies are used to promote positive interactions and collaboration between young learners?
- How are young learners encouraged to reflect on their actions and the wellbeing of others?

The physical environment

Well planned use of physical space ensures that the learning environment is safe. Thoughtful use of resources and space supports learners’ interests, invites curiosity and signals that young learners and their families are welcome. Flexible use of space promotes active, agentic and collaborative learning and encourages learner engagement.

The physical environment of early years learning spaces may be characterised by:

- opportunities for young learners’ voices to be considered and reflected in the design, use and care of the space
- opportunities that support age-appropriate risk taking, trial and error and challenge
- areas for young learners to engage in individual, small and whole group learning experiences that may be initiated by young learners, adults or a combination of the two
- active engagement in the natural environment and sensory exploration.

The physical environment: Teaching suggestions

Making decisions about the organisation of the learning environment is more than a matter of decoration or the logistics of moving furniture. The choices made reflect the values of the teacher, and the perspectives held about young learners sending messages about what teachers’ value. The organisation of the learning environment contributes to young learners’ sense of wellbeing, opportunities for creative expression, developing independence and sense of self as a learner.

Spatial layout of the room

- Create flexible spaces in the classroom that balance the need for quiet areas where young learners can process ideas, think and reflect with physically active learning spaces
- Establish a group gathering space that has minimal visual distractions

- Define classroom spaces using flexible arrangement of furniture
- Provide spaces where young learners may leave projects to complete over more than one session or day
- Ensure that access to classroom areas is uncluttered and consider students' sensory needs (e.g. a learner with a visual impairment may find it difficult to see the page if the teacher is seated with their back to a window while reading a story)
- Create inclusive learning spaces that reflect cultural diversity (books, puzzles, images, instruments, natural objects)
- Consider the layout of the room from a young learners' perspective (e.g. by sitting on a chair or the floor) and review the organisation in terms of potential visual/acoustic or sensory overload.

Promoting the aesthetic qualities of the learning environment means more than adding decorative touches to a classroom. The careful selection, storage and arrangement of materials determines how readily young learners interact with resources. Materials that invite curiosity and engage the imagination promote creative thinking. Readily accessible resources encourage young learners to be agentic and clearly defined storage contributes to the care of equipment as individuals can see where to return resources when tidying up.

Invite young learners to contribute their ideas when organising materials to support classroom learning so that the learning space reflects their interests and perspectives. When deciding how to organise materials consider the following suggestions.

- Use clear containers so that young learners can see what is inside
- Label the container with a photograph of the contents with the words underneath in Queensland Beginners' font to provide a visual cue about what belongs inside.
- Provide small coloured storage containers to house items on a trolley and consider selecting the same coloured containers. This helps to avoid the competing distractions of multiple colours and creates a visual sense of order as young learners recognise that the trolley is where these containers belong.
- Provide a balance of natural products such as wooden bowls, cane or woven baskets and trays to hold natural items, for example leaves, gum nuts, shells, pebbles, smooth stones
- Store a range of different fabric textures, colours and lengths, baskets of wooden offcuts, and containers of small plastic animals near construction sets to expand possibilities for design with blocks.
- Locate clipboards, felt pens and paper near centrally so that young learners are encouraged to create designs, make lists and signs and record their thinking. This is particularly important for young learners who may be reluctant writers yet keen builders as it promotes the understanding of writing for a purpose.
- Select a wide of repurposed materials to support early mathematical understandings including plastic milk bottle lids, paddle pop sticks, shells, gum nuts, cards, small mosaic tiles, corks and glass beads, for counting, sorting, making patterns, measuring and creating designs.
- Stimulate problem solving through the selection of materials that young learners can use to join objects and connect linking parts for example, jute, ribbon, string, wool, pipe cleaners, paper clips, modelling clay, sticky tape and masking tape.

The suggestions provided are not exhaustive or prescriptive they are intended to act as a springboard for teacher planning. When selecting materials to use in the classroom their educational potential is balanced with the need to ensure the safety of all young learners. Consider health and safety requirements in terms of potential choking hazards (when younger siblings are in the room) and possible allergic reactions when recycling food containers for collage.

The physical environment: Reflective questions

Reflective questions

- What is the first thing that young learners and families see outside your room and as they walk in?
- How does the organisation of the physical space welcome young learners?
- How does the physical environment support active learning e.g. invite students' interest to explore, manipulate, create and experiment with resources?
- How does the environment engage the senses and promote multi-sensory learning?

- How are young learners encouraged to participate in the organisation of classroom space?
- Is there a visual logic to the organisation of the space?

‘An environment that speaks to young children’s inherent curiosity and innate yearning for exploration is a classroom where children are passionate about learning and love schooling.’²

The temporal environment

The temporal environment is a term used to refer to the use of time to support learning. Organisation of the flow of the day provides a sense of continuity and predictability that assists young learners to feel comfortable about what is happening and what to expect throughout the day. The temporal environment of indoor and outdoor early years learning spaces may be characterised by:

- responsive and flexible routines and transitions
- a balance between young learner and adult initiated learning experiences
- opportunities for spontaneous and planned learning
- a range and balance of pedagogical approaches
- extended periods of time to engage in sustained learning experiences.

The temporal environment: Teaching suggestions

- Explicitly teach young learners about the daily and weekly routines using a visual diary or chart to support understandings.
- Consider holding specialist lessons in the prep classroom at the beginning of the year to minimise anxiety as individuals learn about specialist teachers’ ways of working in a familiar environment.

- Discuss the routines associated with meal breaks including hand washing first, the locations for eating and storing lunchboxes. Also identify designated play spaces in the school grounds.
- Model problem-solving strategies for young learners to use to manage unexpected situations that may arise in the playground. After the lunch break discuss any problems that arose and encourage children to discuss solutions collaboratively.
- Respond to young learners’ physical wellbeing in planning and organising learning experiences throughout the day, the week and over the course of the term. Make time in the daily schedule to incorporate the use of sensory experiences including soothing music, textual resources and breathing exercises that help students to relax and settle. Quiet reading after the main break in the day also helps to settle a group.

The temporal environment: Reflective questions

- How are the routines of the classroom organised within the structure of the school day to support age-appropriate approaches to learning?
- How responsive and flexible is the classroom timetable?
- What opportunities are there within the daily program to respond to spontaneous learning opportunities as they arise?
- What opportunities do young learners have to contribute to the daily routine?

² Heard, G., & McDonough, J. (2009) in Capacity Building Series, Special Edition #27, The third Teacher, Designing the learning environment for Mathematics and Literacy K-8 retrieved from www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS_ThirdTeacher.pdf