



Emergent Environments: Involving Children in Classroom Design

by Sarah Felstiner

As teachers and directors, we have a growing awareness of the need to design environments for young children that are aesthetically pleasing, inviting, and nurturing, in addition to being functional and safe. Taking our cue from the comforts of our own homes and from the careful attention to beauty we see in schools like those of Reggio Emilia, Italy, many of us are replacing molded plastic furniture and mass-produced décor with softer materials, wicker baskets, collections of attractive treasures, and elements from the natural world.

At the same time, we're also coming to value a teaching-learning relationship that gives children authorship of their own curriculum, moving towards a more organic model for planning activities and projects. Again, following the lead of the Reggio Emilia schools, we're using close observation of the children's play to consider what provocations or experiences to offer next. By embracing this kind of flexible planning, we're making room for unexpected courses of study to emerge, and for current interests to be deepened and extended.

Holding these two values together — a beautiful, inviting environment, and an emergent curriculum based on observation — we uncover a new possibility: we can create environments that reflect and support our vision of children as capable, powerful designers of their own learning. We can make a point of opening up opportunities for children to have influence on the physical space in which they work and play.

Together with my co-teachers at Hilltop Children's Center in Seattle, I've been experimenting over the past ten years with



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ways to offer children a more significant role in shaping their classroom environment. What follows are a few of the strategies we tried and simple ideas we arrived at for engaging children in classroom design.

Space for possibility

To begin, we need to cultivate an ongoing openness to change and development of the classroom environment, rather than keeping things "the way they've always been" or imitating traditional room arrangements. Anita Rui Olds, a visionary champion for quality child care environments, urges us to "design buildings that establish beliefs in opportunity and possibility. The key is to understand what nourishes our children and use this awareness to inform every step of the design process." Even when we're not starting with an architectural framework thoughtfully designed for child care, we can't let our thinking be stunted by the ever-present roadblocks of time, space, and money. "Action follows thought," Olds continues. "We can choose to change. We can choose to design spaces for miracles, not minimums."

Along with being mentally open to change, we may also need to clear the clutter and crowdedness from current room arrangements, and make physical space for possibility. The environment is a powerful educating force, in and of itself, and everything about it sends strong messages to the children who live there. Educators in the schools of Reggio Emilia sometimes refer to the physical environment as an additional teacher, playing a large part in shaping the learning that happens. And Anita Rui Olds reminds us that "rooms, toys, and play structures tell children what they can do" (Olds, 2001, p. 12). If we want to invite children's input for classroom design, we need to leave some space physically open so they can move and experiment with materials. A totally "finished" feel, with games and toys crowding every surface, sends the message that children's input is not welcomed.

In their book *Emergent Curriculum*, Elizabeth Jones and John Nimmo suggest that if we intend to build a curriculum around the passions and questions of each particular group of children, we need to see the environment as an invitation: "Teachers of young children begin by provisioning the environment with accessible, open-ended materials and tools, and an inviting aesthetic. In turn, the environment invites young children into action . . . That's how the curriculum starts to grow."

Movable parts

Perhaps the simplest and most powerful way to involve children in classroom design is to offer materials that let children reconstruct and change the environment daily. If those items are readily available to children, they can use them as needed to design their own playscapes, experimenting and figuring out what they want. Every day at Hilltop we see children customizing their classrooms with:

- large sheets of cardboard, hinged with strong tape
- fabric of all sizes, and clothespins for clipping it to things
- wooden cubes (1 foot square) for stacking and climbing
- big plastic blocks and wooden hollow blocks
- tall cardboard tubes (about 1 foot in diameter)
- lengths of plastic rain gutter
- logs and large driftwood pieces
- and other cheap or found materials.

These kinds of loose parts are large enough to act as architectural elements; and children use them eagerly to create private spaces, rooms for small group play, surfaces to climb on or under, as well as instant castles, rockets, boats, and more.

As we added more unstructured, flexible, and natural materials to our classrooms, we noticed children using the other pre-structured games and toys less frequently. So we began storing those types of materials in closets and cabinets, for occasional use, and having the loose parts always out and available, easily and attractively stored. We found, serendipitously, that this made it easier for children to help keep the classroom in good order, further reinforcing their ownership of the space.

Design based on observation

Just as we carefully watch children's play for cues about what possibilities and activities to offer next, so can we pay attention to the ways children use and modify the classroom in order to shape new designs for the physical environment. At Hilltop,

when we observe children repeatedly replaying a particular game — stacking blocks or burrowing in piles of pillows or gathering in small groups — we try to rearrange the classroom to facilitate or enable that kind of play. These changes have ranged from simple to elaborate:

- When we noticed that children kept carrying the same basket of dolls over to where the blocks are kept, we made a space to store the basket there.
- When children seemed frustrated by having to break apart their precious Lego® structures at clean-up time, we provided an empty "Saving Shelf" for work they want to revisit.
- When we heard repeated cries of "I can't see!" and "I'm getting squished!" at our morning meetings, we built risers that also serve as cubbies for nap mats.
- When we saw dramatic play games that always crowded out space for other kinds of play, we built a loft to create more room for drama play.
- When we recognized that small group projects and detailed art work were continually interrupted by more boisterous play, we rearranged class groupings and staffing throughout the school to provide two dedicated "studio" rooms for that focused work.

"Most of all," Carla Rinaldi points out, schools are "living spaces that are continuously characterized and modified by events and stories that are both individual and social" (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998, p. 118). By cultivating an ongoing awareness of how children use the classroom space, you can customize it to meet the needs of the specific group of children who live there.

Including children in the process

Once you've identified the need for a new room arrangement or piece of furniture, consider finding a way for children to be directly involved in making that change happen. For instance, if your observations of children's natural patterns indicate that the drawing supplies need to be closer to the blocks, tell the class some stories of what you've observed, and then enlist their help in making the move. Children love doing real, purposeful work; and by rearranging the materials themselves, they may also get a clearer sense of the reason for the change.

At Hilltop, we've often noticed the need for new furnishings to support the play we're observing, and we've usually tended towards custom furniture that can be inexpensively built by Hilltop families. Whenever possible, we've tried to include chil-

dren in the construction process, so they can see the new furniture take shape. Some of the things we've built— like a table for the fishtank and shelves for the water table toys — have been simple enough that children could do all the gluing and hammering of the pre-cut wood pieces themselves. For more intricate projects, we try to make the pieces elsewhere, but still do the final construction on site, for children to see.

When we added a new loft for dramatic play, children and families worked together on painting it. Two years later, an entirely different group of children began inventing ways to pull things up and down from the loft with baskets and strings. Teachers eagerly supported this new development by launching an in-depth study project with a small group of interested children to design and build a system of pulleys for the loft. These children drew their theories about pulleys, tested their hypotheses, visited the hardware store and the science museum, met with a parent who would be constructing the pulley system, and finally helped with the installation.

Children feel powerful when they play a real part in designing or changing elements of the classroom to enrich their own play, and they have the right to exert control over the place where they spend such a significant part of their childhood. Don't forget to keep watching and assessing once you've altered the environment — are the changes creating new possibilities for play and learning?

Documentation: process and product

One other critical thing we can do is to create a classroom that reflects and represents the children and families that live there, by making sure their faces and their work are visible throughout the classroom. Much has been written about the power of documentation — both as an organic *process* of flexible planning based on observation, and as a tangible *product* of books or display panels that tell the story of the children's work. And there are plenty of simple ways to make children's lives evident — artwork on the walls, photo albums and journals, framed family photos on a shelf, a basket of child-made books, etc. — the important thing is that children see their own ideas and images having an impact on the physical space around them.

Carla Rinaldi challenges us to discover “how many possibilities there are for the individual child and the group of children, the protagonists of the experience, to have a story, to leave traces, to see that their experiences are given value and meaning. It is the question of memory, narration, and documentation as a

right, and as that which embodies the vital quality of the educational space” (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998, p. 119).

The dual characteristics of documentation — the *process* of observing and responding, and the *product* of visible displays — both play a part in our intentions for an emergent curriculum, and for a child-designed classroom. First, our careful attention to children's play informs new possibilities for curriculum, as well as the ways in which we might want to reshape the physical environment. And then, the displays we create to tell the stories of children's work naturally infuse the physical space with an authentic identity.

The children's classroom

When we engage children in designing the physical environment, we improve the functionality of the classroom by customizing it to their natural play patterns, thereby enhancing the developmental appropriateness of the space as well. We support young children's innate drive to experiment and feel powerful, and strengthen their ownership of and care for the classroom.

By genuinely including children in classroom design, we also cultivate a curriculum that places children at its center. Vea Vecchi, an art specialist in the Reggio Emilia schools, proposes that “without a philosophical basis that gives meaning to the educational experience to be lived in the space, the identity of the space will not emerge” (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998, p. 166). But by combining our intentions for an emergent curriculum with a rich and responsive physical environment, we can create a classroom that belongs uniquely to the children who live and learn there.

References

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