

# Creating inspiring early childhood environments

Suzie Wood



Suzie has been a part of the early childhood journey for over 30 years across three states. She has enjoyed long and various experiences with children and educators while managing services, lecturing, leading various projects and being a TAFE teacher. She holds a strong belief in professional identity and national professional standards for all early childhood educators. Suzie inspires and develops educators' self-belief as a professional through her consultancy service Nurturing Professional Excellence. Currently, Suzie is Vice President of Early Childhood Teachers' Association.

History reveals an evolution in educators' thinking around the importance of the environment in influencing children's learning. The guidance of the National Quality Framework, emphasising the engagement of children with natural and built environments, has heavily influenced the decisions made by educators across Australia.

Environments are a public statement of a teacher's beliefs. They reflect their thinking, their image of the child and their teaching values.

Loris Malaguzzi stated:

*a space has to be a sort of aquarium that mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes and culture of the people who live within it (cited in Duncan et al, 2010, p81).*

You may be asking where these influences have come from. Traditional influences were born from well-known pioneers such as Montessori, Steiner and Froebel. Whether or not you agree with their philosophical base, it must be agreed that they laid the foundations for creating environments that gave children a place of their own. Froebel, in the late nineteenth century, described the materials in the learning environment as a 'gift' (or invitation to learning) and introduced objects that allowed children to manipulate. The Montessori approach depicted the creation of an environment which had order, was aesthetically pleasing and encouraged sensory exploration. This influence can be seen today in many contemporary early childhood settings. Steiner education has a strong influence



in the arts, natural environment, creativity and well-being and how the environment impacts on the program offered.

Contemporary researchers such as Malaguzzi (associated with the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy) and Weikart (significant to the High Scope curriculum) not only influenced modern day educational programs but also sharpened our focus on the importance of environments. It is well-known by educators who affiliate with

the Reggio philosophy that the environment is seen as the 'third teacher'. This has refocused educators' attention to the materials and spaces children work in and with, and transformed the educational practices of professionals.

Before creating an environment consideration needs to be given to your own philosophical base and the way you believe children learn.

Questions to ponder include:

- What type of environment will be created?
- What are my beliefs and values about how children learn?
- How will my professional philosophy be reflected in the space?

## Steps to creating an inspiring environment

One thing I have noticed over many years of working alongside educators is the need for educators to understand the layering process. The layering process is essential to the development of an inspiring and engaging space. Sandra Duncan, in her book *Inspiring spaces for young children*, talks about seven principles which support the development of spaces:

1. Nature inspires beauty
2. Colour generates interest
3. Furnishing defines space
4. Texture adds depth
5. Displays enhance environment
6. Elements heighten ambiance
7. Focal points attract attention.

So, in thinking about these principles, how can a place of wonder be created?

### Step 1 - define the space

Defining the space will give parameter to the experiences offered. Ensure the starting point begins with a natural canvas. This can be a large or small space in the indoor or outdoor environment. Always contemplate the size, shape and placement of the space.

Practice considerations:

- Take photos or video of the way the children currently use the space.
- Analyse the photos or video with children and colleagues.

- Create a sketch of the room or outdoor space and configure the area. Remember not to always create symmetrical spaces. Angles and platforms can create different dimensions.
- When organising individual experiences consider the need for privacy so the child can concentrate and focus, as well as the placement of furnishing to allow for social opportunities.
- Make a list of the materials you will need.
- Start to create the space.

When planning spaces always ask:

- What is the purpose of this space?
- How will the children engage with the materials in this space?
- Is the space safe but allows for risk taking?
- Does the space create the right mood for the experience?
- Is there a focal point of interest and how will the educator introduce this?
- Are the materials adaptable and changeable, allowing for flexibility?
- How is there interconnection between the indoor and outdoor environment?
- How will you involve children in the design?
- What materials and resources are required to support the creation of the space?
- How will the schedule of the day impact on the use of the various learning spaces?

### Step 2 - create order

Creating order in the environment gives a message that all of the equipment has a place in which it belongs.

Practice considerations:

- Create visual order by layering the spaces with containers, baskets, boxes and other storage items.
- What is the purpose of the space and which learning domain will this space suit?
- Use authentic, open-ended materials in the spaces which will engage children to participate in the learning.
- Thoughtful storage and display of materials will convey a natural sense of order as well as beauty. Remember the principle 'less is more'.

## Step 3 - add aesthetics

Nature provides open-ended opportunities to create, investigate and wonder.

Nature not only provides an infinite supply of materials, but also experiences that can be integrated into all learning domains. It conveys a sense of calmness and tranquillity for both children and adults.

Many people believe modern commercial materials and contemporary house decorations are the requirements of creating an inspiring environment. Unfortunately, this often does not achieve the results intended by the designer.

Aesthetics includes aspects which heighten the senses and brings an individual into the space. Remember aesthetics create the mood of the environment. Consideration must be given to sight, sound, smell and touch, as this relates to the way a person feels when interacting in the space. A room which is full of visual noise is loud and intimidating and will not create a feeling of being relaxed to learn.

The space should be filled with natural elements. Not only are natural items great learning tools but they also enhance the space with beauty.

Open-ended, authentic materials, most recently called loose parts theory, open up to possibilities of wonder and investigation for children to manipulate, design and create. These parts can be moveable within the whole environment and be adapted by children across all key learning domains from the arts to a literacy or maths program.

Use colour, light and sensory objects to support the focal point for learning in the space, enhancing children's curiosity and desire to investigate. Creating a focal point which attracts the eye and promotes curiosity, is a key to the last component of creating a space. A focal point can be an interesting object, something from nature, the built environment or pops of colour which draw the attention of a child into the space. Remember, the focal point has a purposeful intention in its application in the learning environment.

It is important that educators of young children model an appreciation of beauty and aesthetics. Using authentic materials from the real world encourages children to re-enact

and integrate their own knowledge into their play with natural and authentic play props.

Encourage children to marvel at beautiful and special things.

Educators need to step back and critically examine the quality and quantity of commercial materials on their wall. This will determine whether they actually contribute to children's learning or whether they ultimately silence children.

We should respect children as active, curious learners with ideas to communicate. Visible information must have a purpose and demonstrate children's learning as they engage in 'working out the world' (WOW) moments.

Practice considerations:

- Consider the wall space in the environment and how this space will be used to engage children in reflective thinking.
- Use items as focal points for learning.
- Use pops of colour to attract the eye.
- Use sound and music to heighten the impact of the learning space.
- Create beauty using simple, natural and authentic elements.

## Remember

*Early childhood environments should be inviting and cultivate children's curiosity, wonder and imagination. (Curtis and Carter, 2011)*

## References

- Duncan, Sandra, DeViney, Jessica, Harris, Sara, Rody, Mary Ann and Rosenberry, Lois, 2010. *Inspiring Spaces for Young Children* Published by Gryphon House.
- Tarr, Patricia, 2004. *Consider the Walls* Beyond the Journal, Young Children on the Web, May.
- Curtis, Deb and Carter, Margie, 2011. *Reflecting Children's Lives: A Handbook for Planning Your Child Centered Curriculum*, Published by Redleaf Press.

