Topic 4: Physical Environment for Preschoolers

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this topic, you should be able to:

1. Discuss the characteristics of a good learning environment for preschool children;
2. Design a quality physical environment that encourages choices, problem solving and discovery in the process of learning; and
3. Develop spaces and materials that communicate profound response for children and the teaching process.

Topic Overview

This topic discusses the components of a learning environment and how a good learning environment can be established. The importance of incorporating an environmental context that supports curiosity, exploration, play and accepts diversity will be highlighted. You will also be exposed to the floor plan which is appropriate for the preschool setting.

Focus Areas and Assigned Readings

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Additional Recommended Readings

Content Summary

4.1 Components of Learning Environments
The learning environment should reflect values for children and the values of children’s families. It confirms the children’s identity, connection and sense of belonging. Besides, the learning environment must provoke the children’s senses, curiosity and wonder, as well as stimulate their intellect.

Since children are learning all the time, the carefully designed environments should feature structures, objects and props that engage children in authentic choices, problem solving, investigating and discovering. This will create an inviting learning environment that supports children’s social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual growth and development.

4.1.1 Characteristics of a Good Learning Environment
The experiences provided in the learning environment should be developmentally, individually and culturally appropriate. The main emphasis here is, no child is too old, too young or developmentally incapable of doing things. The environment must adapt to the child. Learning centres can be adapted according to the varying abilities of each child. The materials used should also suit the level and capability of the child.
The experiences of the child must be varied but balanced. While the environment should be rich in the use of its materials and activities, it should also be suitable for different children at different dimensions. Children should be given the opportunity for the following:

(a) Active/quiet place;

(b) Social/solitary place;

(c) Novelty/familiarity, challenge and practice;

(d) Open/closed: Open signifies activities which have no correct outcome; closed involves having a clear answer and clear ending;

(e) Simple/complex;

(f) The physical environment can be balanced with real pets or play toys;

(g) Child’s world/world at large: Provide children with materials that reflect the child’s family, community and world;

(h) Time and space should be appropriately organised. Too little room, time or lack of definition of experiences can create problems. The physical space and time should fit the exercises;

(i) Teachers should be fair in preparing and rotating the learning centres and give opportunities and equal experiences to large and small groups, extended projects and so on;

(j) The learning environment must have less set-up and tidy-up time. This will make it easier for the teacher to incorporate learning into routines and available space;
(k) The experiences and materials should be measured in amount and variety. Too few choices and repetition of challenges will make children feel bored easily and might create aggression and unpredictable reactions. Meanwhile, too many choices can lead to indecision;

(l) The senses are important in learning art, science, drama and plays. Light, sounds, colours, aromas, textures and moving objects bring creativity and wonder to learning experiences;

(m) The adults should prepare, monitor and change the environment. They should plan and arrange the type and quantity of materials. They should also observe the environment so that they are able to define problems and generate solutions; and

(n) The adults should fully facilitate the children. They must be close to them, give them full attention, observe, empathise and even intervene in situations when necessary.

4.2 Creating a Context that Supports Curiosity, Exploration and Play

Creating environments for learning is more than simple room arrangement. The context of curiosity, exploration and play should not be ignored. Most of the children’s hours are spent indoors than outdoors. Educators can respond to this issue by exposing children to environments which communicate values and beliefs that relate living and learning altogether. To make this come true, educators must balance indoor activities and outdoor explorations. Educators also can mix natural, commercial or recycled materials to enhance indoor and outdoor setting by manipulating smells, colours, sounds and textures.

4.2.1 Indoor vs Outdoor

Most outdoor environment features are also appropriate indoors. It is totally up to designers or educators to replicate components of the outdoors inside the classroom by being creative with materials, decorations and presentations.
4.2.2 Involve Children in Planning
Invite children to plan the environment. Ask their opinion about where they would like to play, their favourite place in the early childhood setting and so on. By eliciting answers, it gives ideas to educators or designers in setting up the physical environment. Not only that, it engages children in thinking about their learning spaces and encourages early literacy connections with print.

Ideas such as taking photographs, preparing photo books, creating maps of their environments or simply asking them to draw are good methods when assisting children about planning the environment. Indirectly, it supports children’s social-emotional development and higher levels of thinking.

4.2.3 Materials must be Accessible
Materials such as props and objects which are used to enhance investigation and exploration must be accessible to children. The definition of accessible, as mentioned by Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2005), refers to age-appropriate materials, furnishing and equipment that are easily reached and independently used by children.

4.2.4 Relate to the Children’s Interest
Educators need to know the children’s interest when planning and caring for the space. All children regardless of age and ability are easily attracted to aromas, sounds, colours, light, reflections and textures. Try adding materials that invite touching, viewing and listening. All of these broaden children’s experiences as they explore the environment. While planning the programmes, educators must be aware of any sensitivity to natural aromas and allergies which may affect the children, families and staff members.

4.2.5 Create Invitation
Educators may use invitation to organise and present displays and materials. Invitation based on Curtis (2004) is a collection of interesting and carefully combined materials. Educators can aesthetically organise and present the materials or displays which appeal to children on shelves at experiential centres and on tables.
The invitation:

(a) Enhances an emerging interest;

(b) Helps children learn new skills and multiple uses for tools and materials;

(c) Offers activities and experiences with particular content knowledge; and

(d) Introduces children to new concepts or events.

4.2.6 Experiential Centre

Establishing an experiential centre is a good move in early childhood settings. It means to invite children to discover, imagine, investigate, question, think about and test their ideas. This is especially useful to introduce children to materials and tools.

A balance of simple and complex materials and tools should be found in each experiential centre. Once the materials and tools are introduced to them, children are given the opportunity to explore and demonstrate. Examples of this are:

(a) A variety of structures that children can make with different shapes of blocks;

(b) Many ways to use the paintbrush;

(c) How to make play dough or goop; and

(d) Different lines and curves that children can cut using scissors.

4.2.7 Natural Materials

Children will surely be delighted with smells, sounds and textures of the world around them. By adding environmental aspects of the natural world, it can soothe children’s senses and sensibilities. Educators can simply arouse different sensory experiences by filling baskets containing shells, rocks and leaves. To have slightly different activities, use natural materials that can be shaped and formed such as moulding
flour with water, pouring sand into different shaped containers and so on. As children work with these materials, they are learning about themselves and nature that surrounds them by seeing, smelling, touching, tasting, moving and rearranging things.

4.3 Accepting Diversity

The term “diversity” applies to everyone in the early childhood setting which is different in terms of culture, religion, gender, ability, language and lifestyle. All of these enrich our lives and make the world interesting to live in. Children begin to notice differences early and, therefore, early childhood education should reflect the classroom environment that is rich with the lives of children and families. Just as our homes should suit our needs, culture and community, so should the early childhood environment suit those of the children.

The environment must be multicultural and free from any bias. Children should be taught to understand and appreciate their own backgrounds as well as the backgrounds of others. The following are some suggestions for an environment which embraces diversity.

4.3.1 Multicultural Setting:

(a) Mount up posters on the walls that represent the cultures of children; and

(b) A play centre with dolls, toys and books and music from different cultures.

4.3.2 Special Needs Children

Do some adaptations by either adding something in the environment which is not in the early childhood setting or using something in a different way such as modifying, scheduling the use of material so that special needs children can use or participate in the activity.

4.4 Floor Plan

When selecting and arranging materials within programme space, educators should consider the following:

(a) Uncluttered spaces that allow children to focus on materials;

(b) Children’s perspectives and interests;
(c) Purpose of areas and enhancement of holistic development;
(d) Available space, features, height and size of environment;
(e) Aesthetic appeal;
(f) Balance of natural, commercial, simple/complex and authentic items;
(g) Flexibility of time and materials;
(h) New possibilities to transform the environment and generate learning;
(i) Diverse and unusual ways to organise, combine and arrange materials; and
(j) Plans that include ample time to learn such as maintaining and changing the resources.

Figure 4.1 shows an example of a floor plan for preschoolers.

![Figure 4.1: Example of a floor plan for preschoolers](http://www.bmcc.edu/Headstart/Bulletins/Issue53/article10.htm)
Figure 4.2 shows a sample of a preschool classroom design.

**Figure 4.2**: Sample preschool classroom design  
**Source**: http://prekese.dadeschools.net/AS/pbs.html
Study Questions

1. What are the characteristics of a good learning environment should provide?

2. Imagine that you are given a task to set up a learning environment which is meant to introduce children to diverse backgrounds and cultures. How do you set it up interestingly and spice it up according to children’s curiosity, exploration and play? Map your ideas into a sketch or diagram.

3. Below are some common problems that can be remedied by changing the environment. List at least one solution for each problem:
   (a) Too many children crowding into one area;
   (b) Overcrowded shelves;
   (c) Grabbing or arguments over the same toy;
   (d) Hoarding of materials;
   (e) Lack of cooperation during cleanup;
   (f) Wheel toy collisions; and
   (g) Children crying when other children’s parents leave.