

Learning to move: moving to learn in an intriguing environment that draws infants & toddlers into investigative possibilities

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Gandini, in the book 'The Hundred Languages of Children – The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education' (Edwards, C. et al., 1996, p. 148) describes environment as 'a space that teaches'. My understanding of the word environment has undergone considerable change. During the past 20 years, I have steadily moved from an early, superficial understanding of environment as being about resources, equipment and things seen, to one that recognises the power of things unseen but felt. Gradually moving from a position dominated by the quantity and presentation of resources that relies often on adults for availability, order and control to one that understands the potential and freedom of resources that inhabit a space. My mind is stretched even further as I reflect on the qualities of the space and the power potential that exists within it.

Malaguzzi said,

We value space because of its power to organize, promote pleasant relationships between people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective and cognitive learning. (quoted in Edwards, C. et al., 1996, p. 177)

Considering environment as a space shifts our thinking in a remarkable way. The word resources moves beyond the notion of the material and physical to a fluid flexible opportunity to creative, thoughtful and imaginative possibilities.

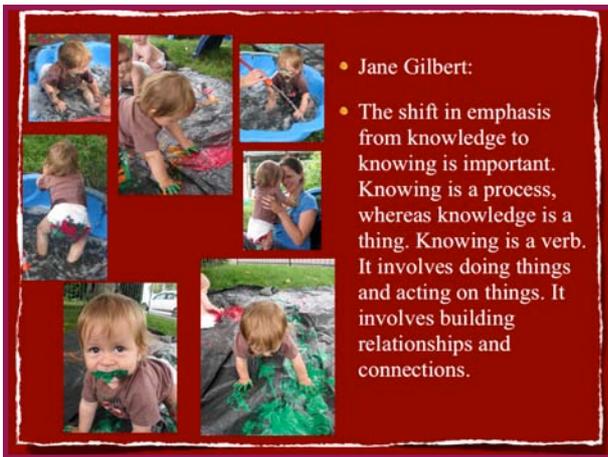
A wonderful interaction with a young baby still lives strongly in my mind. For a little time he had been gazing up at a hanging object that was positioned in a static position above him. In my mind I felt the toy was mediocre and his interest reflected the mediocrity. I nudged the equipment aside and held my hand in line with his gaze. At that moment his interest deepened and he began to struggle to reach out and to grasp my hand. I watched and adjusted my hand and encouraged him and he reached higher tightening his muscles to control his movement. Oh the delight and the joy as he

grasped my hand. The game continued for some time and his skill and accuracy increased. At one point I was briefly distracted and turned away. When I returned my attention this little one, still lying on his back, had filled the space above him with his own hands and he was intently concentrating on his own goal and that appeared to be to catch his own hand. He had filled the space above him but the potential of that space had been stimulated by the previous living interaction with another person. Previously what occupied the space had been chosen by an adult and for the baby there was a measure of powerlessness.

Restoring the balance of power between teacher and child so that the space becomes a collaborative space where the opportunity for dialogue, spoken and unspoken, exists, restores the balance and returns to the young child in many ways the power to choose. Fixed equipment by its very nature shuts down opportunities for children for original thought and exploration as it is designed to function in an adult thought out way.



The teachers at Greerton Early Childhood Centre (Greerton Early Childhood Centre, 2010) discuss an environment that has the potential to provide a collaborative space to develop between children's intentions and teachers' intentions, one that thrives on the shaping and reshaping of knowledge for a purpose, testing ideas and throwing these into surprising combinations. An environment that says 'yes' to the ideas that children and teachers have on a daily basis.



• Jane Gilbert:
• The shift in emphasis from knowledge to knowing is important. Knowing is a process, whereas knowledge is a thing. Knowing is a verb. It involves doing things and acting on things. It involves building relationships and connections.

Gilbert writes of a shift for teachers from emphasising the acquisition of knowledge to understanding the process of 'knowing'. She writes (2005, p. 77),

Unlike knowledge, it is not something that can be taken in and mastered. It has no end point, but is always on the way to something, always in process.

With this in mind, consider the ordered set plans of the past, e.g. the planning that planned specifically the ways teachers could provide opportunities for young children to discover the specific properties of water i.e. teaching the concept of sinking and floating on Monday, pouring on Tuesday, watering the garden on Wednesday, making paper boats on Thursday and 'free play with water' on Friday. Often on the very first day of the plan the water 'activity' rapidly turned into the delight of splashing, distributing, watering, tipping and pulling the plug out.

As I write my mind goes back in time to the concept of environment and discovery my daughter had when she put polypropylene long johns and a long sleeved undergarments on her very young boys on a crisp May morning and out they went to play. A moment later she went out and saw her 18-month-old toddler pull the plug out of the water trough and crouch under the water squealing with delight as it gushed through the hole in the bottom of the water trough. He was soaked to the skin but for the moment warm and comfortable. These children were prepared for the environment and prepared for the possibilities of the potential of the space.

The opportunity existed to use their knowledge about water in a way that the wonderful process of 'knowing' could flourish. Establishing opportunities for all children to shape and reshape knowledge for a purpose is integral to the teachers understanding of environment as a 'space that teaches'. With this concept in mind, as a foundation to teaching practice, teachers will be confronted with challenge.



The appropriateness of terminology commonly used and teacher's tasks such as 'setting up the environment' must be seriously considered.

Greenman (1988) puts out the notion that the environment is a living, changing system. I am sure most teachers understand environment as a changing system but when one adds the word 'living' then thinking comes from a different understanding. The possibility for joy, struggle, risk taking, success and failure will exist when the possibility of surprise is embedded in the process of "finding out". Children who spend their time in a carefully constructed and often static environment encircled by rules and routines have little opportunity for choice and freedom of thought and action.



Within an environment that works for us rich opportunities exist for dispositional learning to be encouraged rather than taught.

Dispositions to learn develop when children are immersed in an environment that is characterised by well-being and trust, belonging and purposeful activity, contributing and collaborating, communicating and representing, and exploring and guided participation. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 45)

An environment is a living changing system. More than the physical space it includes the way time is structured and the roles we are expected to play. It conditions the way we feel, think, and behave: and it dramatically affects the quality of our lives. The environment either works for us or against us as we conduct our lives. (Greenman, 1988, p. 5)

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