Chapter 5:

Designing the Learning Environment

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Guiding Principle: The Environment

The Kindergarten environment allows complex, rich play to thrive. It is a warm and inviting place where children and adults inquire, learn, and co-construct together.

Children's natural curiosity and inquisitiveness are nurtured in learning environments that encourage active, explorative play and sustained peer interactions. The Kindergarten environment—including its physical, social, and organizational qualities, both indoors and outdoors—plays an integral role in children's learning.

Teachers create a multi-sensory, enabling environment that supports emergent literacy and numeracy. They recognize children's different learning styles and many ways of knowing. Children benefit from repeated opportunities to represent their ideas through playing with blocks, engaging in dramatic play, documenting, writing, painting, and drawing. Children make choices and engage in play in a rich learning environment designed to extend and build upon their interests and the Kindergarten curricular goals. The environment reflects the diversity of the children, their families, and their communities. Teachers value outdoor play, recognizing its potential for the highest level of development and learning in young children.

"In order to act as an educator for the child, the environment has to be flexible: it must undergo frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain up-to-date and responsive to their needs to be protagonists in constructing their knowledge" (Gandini 177).



Guiding Principle: The Schedule

Kindergarten scheduling is responsive to children's changing needs, allowing a developmentally appropriate curriculum to emerge over time.

The daily Kindergarten schedule includes at least one hour of child-directed, adult-supported playtime to allow for deep and engaging play experiences. Outdoor play is a regular part of the child's schedule.

Typical routines of the day are used as learning experiences, and teachers maximize *teachable moments* as they occur. Teachers adjust the flexible schedule to meet the needs of individual children or to allow productive play to continue a little longer. They deliberately reduce transitions in length and frequency. Teachers take a long-range view of the schedule, knowing that inquiry-based learning and a project-based approach cannot be rushed or compartmentalized.

Four Dimensions of the Learning Environment

The learning environment in your Kindergarten classroom reflects your values and your image of the children you teach and of learning itself. The Kindergarten learning environment should be open, inviting, and interesting because it affects both the atmosphere and expectations for learning. When designing the Kindergarten learning environment, "we need to think about creating classroom environments that give children the opportunity for wonder, mystery and discovery; an environment that speaks to young children's inherent curiosity and innate yearning for exploration in a classroom where children are passionate about learning and love school" (Heard and McDonough 8).

Imagine the learning environment in your classroom as being composed of four dimensions (Nash 6):

- **Temporal (time):** The way you manage your schedule and your available time with children in your class.
- **Space:** The physical dimensions of your Kindergarten classroom.
- **Things:** The resources found within the environment, including toys, furnishings, learning centres, props, books, and other materials.
- **People:** The peer group and adults who interact within the environment and the larger school in which the Kindergarten classroom is located.

As you read about each of these dimensions of the learning environment in this chapter, try to imagine how children in your classroom experience that dimension personally and what changes, if any, you are inspired to make.

Time

Some Kindergartens operate the full day, every day, while many in rural Manitoba operate the full day, on alternate days. However, the majority of Manitoba's Kindergartens operate on a half-day basis, five days a week. Half-day Kindergarten must still allow children a relaxed atmosphere where projects unfold over a period of days and where rich socio-dramatic play with many chances for communication and collaboration can occur. Manitoba's Kindergarten curriculum is designed for a half-day Kindergarten schedule, so teachers can relax into the time frame within which they work, without feeling the curriculum demands are the reason to over-structure the day or to leave free play until all the "real work" is done.

Developing a Classroom Schedule

Try to organize your daily and weekly Kindergarten schedules to reserve extended blocks of time for children to engage in sustained play, investigation, exploration, and interaction (with adults and peers). As you observe children while they play, you will notice that not everyone is doing the same thing at the same time; instead, some children move quickly from one interest area to another, while others can easily spend all day on a single exploration. Remember that the most important variable

in your Kindergarten learning program is not the length of the day, but the quality, variety, and developmental appropriateness of the learning experiences that children find there. Uninterrupted blocks of time encourage children to engage deeply in playful learning. Try to develop a schedule with large blocks of time that are flexible, involve minimal transitions, and can accommodate investigations and project-based learning and promote children's task orientation. Think about a balance between teacher-directed and child-initiated times, while ensuring that the length of time in teacher-led activities remains developmentally appropriate. Use extended blocks of time to rotate through the room, interacting with individuals and small groups, and help children move forward by scaffolding on their learning.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) recommends that within your daily plans, you account for differentiated learning by planning experiences for the large group, for small groups, for individuals, and for classroom centres. Whether you have a half-day or full-day schedule, aim to include a time for the following (ETFO, "Daily Planning"):

- physical activity (in your classroom, outdoors, in the gym, or in the multipurpose room)
- a circle or large-group meeting that facilitates time for sharing, stories, and introductions to new materials in the classroom, or new learning experiences
- learning centres, including large blocks of time for self-initiated "child-choice" activities
- nutrition and rest, as needed
- children "reading" books independently
- music and movement

For half-day and full-day schedules, see Appendix O: Sample Schedules.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children recommends that child-initiated learning times must be long enough to allow children to engage deeply in learning with their friends and the materials in the classroom. The time for child-directed playful learning should be at least 45 to 60 minutes (Copple and Bredekamp, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* 222).

In one rural Manitoba school division, some schools timetable 50-minute blocks. One school combines two 50-minute blocks so that teachers have 100-minute blocks to work with. In Kindergarten, this allows for literacy time, uninterrupted play, integrated thematic units, and so on. The "first 100 minutes" preserves an uninterrupted chunk of time, with no pullouts for gym, music, or library time, and reduces the need for too many transitions. This type of child-centred approach to the timetable helps Kindergarten teachers to meet the recommended 45 to 60 minutes of child-initiated play for children.

Consider balancing quiet and more active play for children, time for outdoor and gross motor play, time for snacks and rest, and of course time for whole-group, small-group, and individual time with you as their teacher. In addition, you may need to factor in time for physical education/health education, library activities, music, and school-wide events. A good rule of thumb is to use the first part of the day for activities that require more focus, especially early in the school year when children may be physically and mentally exhausted by the day's end.

When you think about the organization of your Kindergarten, it is a good idea to begin with the time dimension of your environment. A young child's concept of time differs from that of an adult's, and some children in your classroom may have more "time knowledge" than others, depending on maturation and experience. Children's prior experience in preschool programs may have provided them with opportunities to develop a sense of time as they experienced a schedule somewhat like that of Kindergarten—with arrival and departure framing playtime, rest time, circle time, art time, outdoor time, snack time, and so on. Experienced children may respond to the Kindergarten schedule comfortably. Others will learn about this feature of school life through their time with you in Kindergarten. A special event (such as a birthday party or a field trip) and familiar repeating patterns (such as library time once a week or shared writing time each afternoon) provide children with the chance to hold onto something temporal, which helps develop their concept of time.

While a schedule is a reality of Kindergarten and, indeed, of life itself, flexibility in time scheduling is essential. Teachers should concentrate more on task development than on task completion within a particular time frame. Overscheduling, overly strict routines, and frequent transitions with concurrent cleanups can often sabotage rather than encourage children's constructive use of time.



Children flip over the card representing "today" during their circle time, which helps them to visualize the passing of time.

Sensitive teachers work toward establishing a routine that offers children the comfort of predictability during their time at school. For many children, consistency helps them feel safe because they know what to expect next, and the routine becomes a support for their growing self-regulation. The flexible schedule that includes large blocks of uninterrupted time lets children relax enough to become completely engaged in their learning and to develop task orientation. It also allows you enough flexibility to respond to teachable moments as they present themselves. Encourage children's sustained interest, watch to see what absorbs them most, and demonstrate

respect for children's choices. Value the learning they do while playing. Stress-free routines and schedules help support children's learning.

Visual schedules, which are often used for children with exceptional learning needs, benefit all children by helping them to anticipate what happens next during the day or to note something special, such as music time or library time. Remember that your routines support risk taking, cooperation, and development of personal identity, and help you to build a respectful community of learners who can articulate who they are and what they can do. Moving away from a clock-driven teaching practice and toward a values-based pedagogy is recommended.

The Language of Time

While many teachers incorporate a daily calendar time into their circle experience, it is not always presented in a developmentally appropriate way and, in fact, may not be necessary at all (Beneke, Ostrosky, and Katz). Simply reciting the days of the week or the date of the month by rote does not link the calendar symbol to the concrete experience of time passing in a way that benefits most children. Instead, look for ways to link terms such as *today*, *yesterday*, and *tomorrow* to something observable and concrete, such as the weather. As part of a science inquiry, for example, children can track seasonal changes and weather variations from day to day, make predictions about what type of weather they might expect for tomorrow, record their observations using graphs (e.g., sunny, cloudy, rainy, snowy), and deepen their understanding of the passing of time.



An amarillys inquiry allows children to predict, estimate, measure, and record changes they observe.

Beneke and her colleagues suggest the use of picture schedules, which help children to develop a better understanding of the sequence of events. You can create a linear representation of time, for example, by adding a cube to a stack of interlocking cubes to represent each additional day in school. You can introduce estimation games, paired with children's inquiries, to help them understand the passage of time. For example, children can guess how long it might take them to walk quickly across the playground, and then carry out the activity using a stopwatch to see how fast it actually takes. A wonderful way to support children's predictions and estimations is to have an amaryllis bulb growing in your classroom in winter. Children can measure new growth each day and add their measurement to a graph, marking the passage of time in a dynamic way. Your project-based learning approach can help children develop meaningful understanding about time passing by. As discussed in Chapter 4, documentation displays can be used to help children "capture" their learning and to support time-related vocabulary.

Use teachable moments to introduce and practise the "language of time" as you carry out Kindergarten learning activities. Use words such as soon, later, early, yesterday, today, tomorrow, next week, morning, noon, and evening, and link your use of these words to real experiences to help children make sense of these words. (You might use calendar time to address Kindergarten learning outcomes from social studies [KH-018: Distinguish between yesterday, today, and tomorrow], as well as from science, English language arts, education for sustainable development, and other subject areas.) Keep in mind that the exact time of day is far less important for most children than it is for adults. Young children live in the moment much more than their teachers do. For example, during block building, children may be intensely focused upon a new discovery, showing remarkable concentration, self-regulation, motivation, and creative thinking. Suddenly, due to the demands of the schedule, we interrupt their flow, call out a cleanup warning, and push children to move to another activity. Should we be surprised when some children are reluctant to put away their blocks according to our timelines?

Rest Time

To support children's development of self-regulation, intentionally plan for quiet times in the flow of the day and quiet places that support this important developmental goal. Planning for quiet time to rest busy minds and bodies is really important, especially in full-day Kindergarten or early in the year for half-day Kindergarten.

Rest time provides a choice for children to close their eyes for a few minutes or to read quietly to themselves. Try to think about ways to create an atmosphere that



A child-sized tent with soft pillows provides a quiet place to withdraw and rest privately with a favourite storybook.

supports a restful time. Dimming the lights, playing soft classical music, and reading aloud from a chapter book as children make pictures in their minds may be strategies you are already using. As the school year unfolds and children mature, they may not need an actual nap or rest time, so by observing the children in your class carefully, you can adjust the nature of the rest period in a developmentally responsive way. However, the mood for a rest time each day can be set at the beginning of the year and will become part of a daily routine that children can anticipate and relax into.

Kindergarten children work hard physically, emotionally, and psychologically while they are at school, and being part of a large group is often a new and somewhat stressful experience. For some children, the need for a quiet space or a privacy spot where they can withdraw from the hubbub for a short while is a real and legitimate need. Think about where in your classroom children can find a spot for comfort and privacy. You can easily create these cozy spots by using a child's tent, painting an appliance box and cutting out windows and a door, or simply placing a tablecloth over a table so children can retreat underneath. Place soft cushions and stuffed

animals inside the quiet area, and instill a routine that offers the space for one or two children to play quietly, look at books, reflect, relax, listen to music, or share stories.

Encourage children who are having a rough day to use the special quiet area to calm down, think, relax, or problem solve. Encourage all children to respect their friends' need for some privacy.

Circle Time

Many teachers like to start their day with an initial circle time, "carpet time," or opening meeting, where adults and children can plan their day together. This whole-group time supports the development of your caring community and gives children the opportunity to interact with each other and with you. You may use this time to set the stage for exploration and discovery,



Language Development during Circle Time

Circle time provides excellent opportunities for EAL children to develop their English language skills. For example, if your goal is to help a child focus on verbs, consider using a gesture or a specific word that cues the EAL learner to watch or listen to you carefully. Consistent use of phrases such as "What did you see me do?" or "What did he or she do?" followed by your use of a sentence frame that says "I saw you_____," would help to scaffold on that child's language development during circle time (Buhrow and Garcia).

by presenting new information and introducing a new learning centre or other new materials. As you plan for circle time, consider how you can include all curricular areas, including arts education (dance, drama, music, and visual arts), language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. When you integrate learning across the curricular areas, you help ensure your circle time is relevant to children's daily lives.

As part of the circle time, you may encourage children to reflect on what they learned yesterday or last week, and to decide how they plan to continue their learning today. For example, you could share with children the digital photos you took earlier in the week to support their reflections. This plan-do-review sequence is another important part of the daily routine and builds children's *metacognitive* skills. During this circle time, you are modelling oral language and helping children to organize their own thinking and learning. As the children take turns, they are further developing their self-regulation and social skills.

Some teachers end the day with a closing circle or final meeting where they encourage children to reflect on what they have done at school that day and what they might like to do tomorrow. The children may bring samples of their work to the circle to help them along. Teachers can probe a little further, asking children questions that extend their learning and link back to the plans they made at the start of the day. Some helpful questions are:

- What did you learn today?
- What will you do tomorrow?
- What went well?

- What could you change for next time?
- What will you continue?
- What will you need?

These conversations help the teacher to adjust plans, think about what additional materials or props might be added to the environment for tomorrow's learning, and what types of research are needed to prepare to support the children's learning.

How long is a circle time experience? While this may vary somewhat, based on the classroom and the makeup and prior experiences of the children you teach, consider the language development of the children in your class when determining the duration of circle times. Generally, for younger children (Junior Kindergarten), a 5- to 10-minute circle time may be enough. Early in the school year, Kindergarten students may enjoy a 10- to 15-minute circle time, while by the end of the year, most will manage a 20-minute circle time. However, your circle should also meet the needs of kinesthetic learners, so make sure it includes the chance for some movement through exercise, yoga, dance, or games (such as Simon Says). Generally, it would not be considered developmentally appropriate to have more than 20 children in a large group all listening to a teacher and being drilled on the alphabet, numbers, the calendar, and so on. Avoid situations that require all children to be doing the same thing for too long. Use small-group learning experiences to teach important concepts, and differentiate your instruction accordingly.

Snack Time

Young children in school have physical needs, such as the need to rest and to refuel with healthy snacks partway through their morning and afternoon, and with healthy lunches in full-day Kindergarten.

Teachers handle snack time in a number of ways. Some teachers have moved away completely from the typical whole-group snack time to an independent choice snack centre where children choose to eat their snack when they feel hungry. Some teachers schedule snack time just before or after recess. Others use the recess itself for children to have snack time under the supervision of an educational assistant, while the teacher has a break. However, children also need some outdoor active time, so setting aside one need to serve another may not be the best choice for all children. In some classrooms, children bring their own daily snack from home. Other teachers make healthy snacks with children as part of their cooking or food science experiences. One Manitoba teacher has made an arrangement with a local group to have its members bring in a daily snack for the two Kindergarten classes. Another teacher creates a special shared time as children eat quietly while she reads to them from a chapter book. What do you do?

When children and teachers "break bread" together, mealtime rituals in the class are established. However, snack time is not just about eating. Snack time should be a stress-free, pleasant, and culturally appropriate occasion, and provide an environment for social learning, peer-to-peer conversations, and positive interaction to occur. Plan at least 10 minutes for children's snacks, keeping in mind that some children may need more time.

Placing a plastic tablecloth on the table provides a visual signal to the children that now it is mealtime rather than puzzle or playdough time. It is one simple way to help create a special mealtime atmosphere.

For snack times or mealtimes, think about invoking a family atmosphere where people enjoy sharing highlights of their day with one another. Providing children with opportunities to have conversations with each other and with you, trying new foods, or enjoying the cultural foods they bring from home are great ways for children to expand their perspectives.



A small group of friends eat their snack together at a self-regulated snack centre.

Children practise healthy living and self-help skills as they wash their hands before eating, pour water or juice for each other, and clean up after themselves.

Be mindful of children's allergies and potential allergy triggers. School-supplied snacks should be nutritious food choices. Teachers can talk to children about what makes a nutritious food choice and share information with families as needed. If you sit with children during snack time, rotate your position during the week so that different small groups have the chance to have you at their table.

Space

Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning recommends a physical space for Kindergarten classrooms that is of sufficient size for the exploratory and kinesthetic learning undertaken by young students. When new schools are built, Kindergarten rooms are a standard 93 m²/1000 sq. ft., but when enrolment ranges from 10 to 15 students, the room size may be reduced to 70 m²/750 sq. ft. When enrolment totals 9 or fewer students, the room size can be further reduced to 46 m²/500 sq. ft. In a combined or multi-age class involving Kindergarten and other elementary grades with enrolment of at least 15 students, the room size is 80 m²/860 sq. ft. If the enrolment is fewer than 15, the classroom size is appropriately reduced. In Manitoba's current space standards, the Kindergarten classroom also receives up to 150 sq. ft. of ancillary space for storage, typically adjacent to the classroom (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, *School Building Space Standards* 12).

Your Kindergarten classroom should provide safe, pleasant, functional, and stimulating surroundings so that children have many opportunities to play and learn, both independently and with each other. Young children need ample space. In general, most Early Years teachers feel the need for more floor space than can be provided by a classroom built for regular classes. The integrated, child-centred, active learning approach calls for space for a variety of learning centres, for large- and small-group work, for quiet carpeted areas, and for tiled areas that allow for play with water, sand, paint, and other messy materials.



Children play in a safe, pleasant, functional, and stimulating classroom.

Since young children are active learners, they need and deserve freedom to move, which means that your Kindergarten students do not require assigned seating. Children do benefit from a locker or "cubby" for their own personal possessions. Kindergarten equipment and supplies also require adequate storage space. Innovative school teams, however, cooperate in meeting this requirement in a variety of ways, and resourceful and creative teachers find many ways to make the best use of classroom design and size.

The Classroom

Art is often taught in the regular classroom, yet teachers do not always see the classroom itself as an exercise in design. Your classroom should be welcoming and interesting without overloading the visual circuits. Ensure that your classroom has different areas for different types of learning experiences, and that table placement is flexible to accommodate those experiences. The child, like the adult, is highly influenced by the physical environment; therefore, evaluate the learning space with the same consideration you give to your lesson plans so that it works with your educational programming goals, and not against them.

We have a tendency to lay out our classroom furnishings on a grid with straight lines and rows of tables, but it can be far more visually interesting and functional to angle the carpet and set the tables askew. By using this setup, you also avoid creating open "traffic lines" for children to run along. When you place furnishings around the perimeter of the room, you actually close in the space, rather than opening it up. Instead, think about creating pockets of learning for individuals and small groups with the strategic placement of your library and learning centres. Think about the placement of your own desk and storage area, and where you will keep your supplies. If your space does not seem functional, try shifting it around until you find the arrangement that works for you.



Natural materials such as bamboo curtains, rattan or seagrass baskets, and plants all help to define learning zones. Place bamboo sticks (two metres high) into a floor vase or a flower trough with stones in its bottom to create a simple visual divider that can be easily moved. Dividers can also serve as storage units for baskets.

Plants help create a natural barrier between learning centres.



Kindergarten classroom, the loft provides a quiet space to look at books or work with tablets. A swath of sheer fabric provides children with a sense of privacy and coziness, while still facilitating visual supervision.

In this blended Junior Kindergarten/

A child practises the steps coming down from the loft.

The Kindergarten classroom can be organized with various traditional play centres, such as sand and water, blocks, library, dramatic play, and visual arts centres. The classroom will include changing interest centres or temporary centres that relate to specific emergent learning goals. Discovery centres are deliberately designed to extend scientific and mathematical inquiry. To reduce noise, and to keep traffic flow manageable and mess under control, try to position noisier or messier play zones close to one another (e.g., place the dramatic play centre near the block centre, or place the creativity centre close to sensory tables). Place quieter zones (e.g., the manipulative centre and library or book centre) away from noisy play areas. You can read more about the various play centres in Chapter 6. To encourage small-group interactions, incorporate room dividers to help create smaller nooks where a few children can play, while still allowing for visual supervision.

The example of a Kindergarten layout in Figure 5.1 gives an inspiring visual representation of how the various play centres, student cubbies, teacher work area, and whole-group space can be set up in your classroom based on the recommendations found within this Kindergarten support document.



Figure 5.1: A Kindergarten Classroom Layout to Inspire*

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Children and Aesthetics

When we discuss children's growth, we do not always consider their aesthetic or spiritual development, although this is an important part of who they are. Children often respond intuitively to beautiful items; however, keep in mind that beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder. Plants, shells, crystals, prisms, and many found items such as button collections can reach into children's hearts and spirits.

Reduce clutter in your classroom by clearly labelling and storing materials and resources that you and the children need. Some teachers make the clutter disappear with the use of curtain panels attached to the tops of storage shelves (with hook-and-loop fasteners, such as Velcro) or hung on rods, so that they can be easily removed or moved to the side. Many classroom walls are covered with commercially produced (and often quite expensive) bulletin board displays, banners, posters, nameplates, trimmers, letters, calendars, charts, number lines, and more. Try to reduce your use of prefabricated commercial products and aim to achieve beautiful spaces that have meaning to the children. Not only are the "According to Montessori, knowing how to arrange an interesting, beautiful environment for children is as much a part of teaching as knowing how to select fine children's books for the library" (Mooney 27).



Clutter disappears behind curtain panels; softness of furnishings and wall colour with pops of bright colour help create an aesthetically pleasing and comfortable space.

commercial charts and posters expensive, but children also pay closer attention to displays they have made themselves. Thoughtfully display children's artwork, prints

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A table lamp adds a homey touch and reduces the need for fluorescent lighting.

of famous art, and beautiful artifacts from the cultures represented in your classroom and in Manitoba.

Limit the amount of visual display so that children have white space on which to rest their eyes. This can be especially important if your group includes children with sensory challenges, as too much clutter and visual stimulation may hamper children's ability to selfregulate.

Think about your classroom lighting. Research shows that good lighting contributes significantly to the aesthetics and psychological character of the learning space (Dunn et al.). Many children and adults are negatively affected by fluorescent lights that shine on them all day, so an ideal classroom benefits from natural

lighting, with a skylight or windows. Natural light is the most desirable light, for children and adults. A model classroom has windows with low sills that frame interesting views and that can be opened for fresh air. Adjustable blinds or curtains can be used to control natural light for rest time and for relief in hot weather. Placing small table lamps or pole lights in various areas of the classroom can help mediate dark winter days without the need for overhead lights to be on all day. Think about the best type of lighting for the areas of your classroom. For example, the writing centre can be supported with focused task lighting, like a desk lamp at home. The dramatic play area's exuberance is better supported with bright clear lighting, similar to what you might have in your own kitchen. Try to match the kinds of learning experiences with the types of lighting you select in an intentional way.

Bring plants, fish, and animals into your classroom, as these also help to soothe children and provide an opportunity for them to exercise responsibility as they care for living things. Watching fish gently swimming in water offers children a feeling of tranquility. As plants flourish and grow in the classroom, children experience important first-hand learning about nature. Be aware of any allergies among the children in your classroom that may have an impact on the inclusion of living things.

Remember that outdoor playing and learning, especially in natural environments, develop the mind, body, and spirit of the child.



Many classrooms have natural displays for children to touch and explore.



Exploring transparency and light using a repurposed overhead projector.



Exploring culture and identity.



A rabbit adds to the classroom learning environment and is set free to visit during free play time.

Comfort and Relaxation

Regardless of whether children attend a half-day or a full-day Kindergarten, they work hard at school and need furnishings for comfort and relaxation within the classroom. Clearly defined cozy spaces offer the respite and comfort of softness where children can lounge, think deep thoughts or daydream, play quietly, or read, as they choose. In many classrooms, children sit on the carpet or on carpet squares during circle time, but some classrooms also include soft furnishings such as loveseats or child-sized sofas. These spaces are also available to children who want a quiet spot where they will be not be interrupted by their friends' more active play at certain times of the day.

Think about other ways to add softness, warmth, and comfort to your classroom environment. Items such as area rugs, beanbag chairs, big corduroy floor pillows, blankets for creating hiding spots or tents, stuffed animals, cushions in the dramatic play area, swaths of airy fabrics, soft dolls, and puppets all help to deinstitutionalize the Kindergarten classroom. These items also reduce noise and echo, and help to make the space feel a little more like home for young children. Other ways to soften the physical space of your Kindergarten classroom might include intentionally creating conversation areas, adding colourful prints in inexpensive frames, and placing silk flowers in a vase. Invite parents to contribute family photographs of their children with the people who love them for display in the classroom, or to share cultural artifacts to add to the ambience of the classroom.



Pillows and a beanbag on a 100-square carpet help soften the classroom space.



A beanbag is a favourite place for relaxing and playing.

Room for You

Do you have a desk and a chair in your Kindergarten room? How often do you actually sit down at your desk while the children are with you? Does it tend to be full of clutter and stuff, leaving little space for you to sit and work at in any case? Think about how a desk fits in your room, and what it contributes to your pedagogical approach. Think about the valuable real estate a desk occupies, and what you might place in that spot, instead. If you are short on space, you may find you can remove it without much hardship.

Of course, you will still need space to store your own personal possessions, but many creative Kindergarten teachers are finding alternatives to desks. One of these is a shelf dedicated for "teacher stuff" that is placed just above the height of children's heads to double up on space. Consider other possibilities. Move your computer close to your interactive whiteboard. Place guided reading materials near the table where you meet with small groups of children. Place a wicker "work basket" in a visible spot where children can easily drop off notes



A teacher shelf has replaced the need for a desk.

or work for your review. Use a filing cabinet to keep important papers. (Do you really need all those paper files, with so much information being stored electronically?) Make sure you have several comfortable adult-sized chairs. You might include an armchair or a rocking chair in your reading area, and a chair on wheels on which you can scoot around while children are engaged in small-group explorations. There should also be some high cupboards or a closet for your use, a place where you can store materials that are used infrequently or that require direct supervision.

Things

The importance of play to children's learning is emphasized throughout this support document. But what kinds of quality materials best support children to play and learn with purpose? What you choose to place in your classroom, or remove from it, is an important indicator of your intentionality. If you survey your room with a critical eye, do you notice pieces of furniture that are shabby and chipped? Where do children see themselves, their families, and their community reflected in your classroom? Where do they experience beauty? What supports children's emerging literacy and numeracy in authentic ways? What supports their independence and choice making? How do the "things" in your environment reflect your view of children, and of teaching and learning?

Early Childhood Furnishings

As early childhood activities are action-oriented and largely individualized, furnishings must be safe, portable, light in weight, and child-sized. Floors, walls, and ceilings should absorb sound. Where possible, Kindergarten classrooms should be located on the ground floor, with windows at children's eye level. A sink in the classroom and easy access to washrooms with low toilets and wash basins are great assets to the Kindergarten classroom.

Children wash their hands after messy play or before meals.



Since you are designing your classroom to allow for children's movement, it is not necessary to provide a table and a chair for each child; a dozen light stacking chairs and six or seven stacking tables should be ample. Aim for fewer desks and items that have limited use, and make room for open, flexible spaces and furnishings. Some Kindergarten teachers choose to forgo chairs completely to reduce clutter and noise from moving chairs from one space to another. Others place tennis balls onto each chair foot to reduce the sound of chairs being dragged around and to protect the floors from scuff marks.

(L) A rocking chair is helpful for highly active children. (R) Children kneel as they work.





Some children benefit from opportunities to sit on special chairs, seating discs, or "wiggle" cushions with kinesthetic properties. You may find that these are helpful for children who are very active, or those who have sensory processing, physical, or focus challenges.



This art area includes accessible shelving for supplies, hooks for smocks, bulletin boards to display children's art and documentation, and a drying rack (in the bottom right corner of the photo).

Easily accessible built-in storage space for use by the children is a necessity. Each child should have a clothes hook and a shelf or locker space for shoes and other personal items.

Because sensory play is a prime way through which young children learn, sand and water areas are essential parts of an early childhood learning environment. All Kindergarten classes need a sandbox and a water table in the classroom or in an adjoining indoor space. A sandbox lid can also be used as a

surface for drying paintings, or as a flat surface for playing with puzzles or with small manipulatives. Since creating artwork is a regular feature of Kindergarten, you may choose to have a drying rack close to your art easels or the visual arts table for drying children's paintings. Sensory play can be facilitated with materials other than sand and water. Think about using mud, rice or flaxseeds, snow, cornstarch, fall leaves, Moon Sand, pumpkins and their "innards," playdough, or clay. Recipes for playdough and oobleck or cornstarch magic can be found in Appendix P: Simple Recipes for Children.

(L) Children are deeply engaged in water play.
(R) Girls are gardening using rich black mud.





As an occasional alternative to sand, consider filling your sensory table with rich black soil and gardening tools, add fresh green playdough in clay pots and some plastic bugs, and you are set for a gardening exploration.

An ideal Kindergarten space might include a large climbing apparatus to encourage gross motor play. Some classrooms also make good use of a loft to provide children with experience in climbing stairs and the chance to play and learn in another area or on another level. The climbing structure may have to be set up in the gymnasium or in an adjoining hallway. If space does not allow for a permanent structure to facilitate

Children's riding toys are parked indoors but are played with outside on a paved surface. active gross motor play in the classroom, you can use your existing space in creative ways to offer children movement and physical activity. Set up an obstacle course, play Simon Says, march or dance to music, or move like various animals. Active gross motor play should also occur outdoors as often as possible.



These riding toys are lined up and ready to use.



A large dead tree makes an impressive natural play structure.

The Outdoor Classroom

Richard Louv, in his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, elevates the importance of children's connection to nature:

A growing body of research links our mental, physical, and spiritual health directly to our association with nature—in positive ways. Several of these studies suggest that thoughtful exposure to nature can even be a powerful form of therapy for attention-deficit disorders and other maladies. As one scientist puts it, we can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature. (6)

As children experience the outdoors, they make discoveries about trees, flowers, the wind, shadows, and so on. When they pump themselves on swings or run down a hill, they explore laws of physics. As they inquire about what happens to the snow as it melts, the puddle as it evaporates, or the wind that blows their kites or streamers, they master many science, physical education, and other learning outcomes.

Remember that

The world does not need children who fill out worksheets silently and without questions. The world does need children who: notice the world around them with wonder and awe; who are curious and ask "why" and "how"; who are connected to the earth and so take responsibility for it; who, when faced with a problem, have the confidence and security in themselves to think, "I can do this"; who care about the solution enough to come at it again and again from different perspectives, and delight in that process of trial and error and experimentation; who ask others for help easily, and share discoveries excitedly. (Tawingo College)



Connections through Nature

It may be easier for students to make connections between the concepts they are learning and their own life experiences when they are able to experience the concepts in a natural setting. *Indigenous knowledge* is based on the protracted, intimate relationship between an Indigenous community and its traditional territories.

Children in Kindergarten can develop their literacy and numeracy competencies outdoors just as well as in your indoor classroom. A walk outdoors can include nursery rhymes and fingerplays, counting the numbers of trees you pass, and categorizing pebbles you pick up or leaves that have fallen in autumn. You can share stories and legends, or solve problems as you walk to the nearby park or in the forest. All these outdoor experiences help children to see that literacy and numeracy activities, and learning itself, are not only indoor activities; playful learning about language and numbers happens everywhere.

Consider introducing young children to gardening: "Involving children in gardening at an early age gives them the opportunity to develop a sense of wonder about the world and be amazed every day with each new discovery" (Miller 64). Planting a garden with children helps them to understand the growing cycle. Children will also be eager to try foods made from

produce grown in their own garden (e.g., plant cherry tomatoes for an early crop before the end of the school year). One Kindergarten class, for example, used the harvest to explore mathematics, lining up cobs of corn from smallest to largest, estimating the number of seeds in a huge sunflower, and creating patterns from orange and purple carrots. The class also made applesauce from the crabapples that grew on a tree in the yard.

If you do not have easy access to an outdoor learning space, what would it take to create an outdoor environment that offered all the learning opportunities one would typically find indoors in a Kindergarten classroom? The chance to play outdoors is often relegated to recess, but outdoor learning responds to many needs and can offer superior learning opportunities (see Chapter 9). These may include deep learning experiences through socio-dramatic play, discovery and inquiry in mathematics, science, and nature, building and construction, sensory activities using water, sand, mud, and snow, physical development, visual arts, and music. In addition, children have opportunities to extend their critical thinking, discovery, problem solving, and cooperative skills.

An ideal Kindergarten classroom will have its own access to the outdoors so that teachers and children can easily move in and out, and toys and learning aids can easily be moved from one space to another, to make good use of the outdoors for learning. These materials can include paint easels, dramatic play props such as pots and pans for a "mud kitchen," magnifying glasses, clipboards and pencils, and sidewalk chalk, as well as more traditional outdoor play materials such as balls and hoops.

Plan to get Kindergarten children outdoors for active play at a time when the older children are not outside so that they have the chance to master skills without the pressure of older children around them.

(Top) This outdoor classroom is accessed via a door from the Kindergarten classroom. (Bottom) Children enjoy sliding down a low-grade hill.



Outdoor play should happen in winter, too.



Experiencing Risk

Every day the people we know face different types of risks and challenges. How did they all learn to assess those risks and to overcome the challenges along the way? They began to develop these skills through play in childhood. Many educators agree on the value of exposing children to *graduated risk* (as is developmentally appropriate). Play helps children to develop their physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional competencies, such as self-confidence, emotional resilience, and the ability to assess risk and to take good care. Opportunities for children to play with loose parts outdoors, to challenge themselves and each other, and to learn and flourish in the outdoors are legitimate Kindergarten learning experiences. Many children do not have sufficient opportunities to play freely in the outdoors, as parents may perceive it to be too dangerous, and many children live in urbanized environments without much access to nature.



Girls challenge themselves in climbing and balancing as they search for frogs in some marshlands.



A child uses a real tool to cut dead branches for the shelter being built in the woods (in upper right corner).

Of course, risk and challenge are relative. Your special role in supporting and extending children's encounters with risk is to weigh carefully the benefit of risk, and then to mediate graduated risk through intentional planning (e.g., by ensuring there are enough materials to discourage fighting). The adult role is to remove hazards children do not see, not the risk within the play itself; to be "hazard aware and not risk averse and to employ a sense of perspective when assessing play based situations" (Warden, Nature Kindergartens 107–108). For example, children can choose to climb a tree, and decide for themselves how far they climb. You may be coaching,

scaffolding, and encouraging children as they try to master new physical challenges: "Offering children a risk-rich environment allows adults to help keep children safe by letting them take more risks, whilst guiding them through a progression of experiences" (Warden, *Nature Kindergartens* 108). You may wish to demonstrate the correct use of a real tool, instead of giving children plastic versions, and then supervise children using a small tool (e.g., a hacksaw) until you are sure they understand the safe way to use it.



Reflection: Outdoor Play

As you reflect on outdoor learning opportunities for your Kindergarten class, consider questions such as these:

- Does your school have an area for outdoor exploration?
- How do you use the outdoor environment to enhance your Kindergarten learning program?
- How do you encourage challenge and mediate risk?

People

Many of the theorists discussed in Chapter 3 describe the importance of social relationships to children's learning. You may not have thought about the social environment in the same way as the more physical aspects of the environment discussed so far in this chapter; however, the emotional climate is very real to young children who can be like little barometers responding to the feelings in the room.



Inclusion of Indigenous Cultures

To feel welcomed and engaged in school, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children must see themselves and their cultures reflected in the curriculum and in their school community. The physical environment and resources should be inclusive of Indigenous cultures. Programming and pedagogy should include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives and practices. Parents and community members, including Elders, contribute to children's success when they are meaningfully involved in teaching and learning.

The Social Environment

Because learning is a social construct, the learning environment provides the context in which children make social connections and develop a sense of belonging. Children benefit from the group experience when their environment reflects the individual children, their families and cultures, their teachers, and their peer group, and when intentional teachers plan for ways to build social relationships.

Purposeful social interactions are a vital part of children's learning:

Children are active, competent learners who learn through interactions with people, objects, symbols and ideas. Teachers do more than simply set up the learning environment, provide time for play and assume that learning will occur. The quality of teacher interactions has a significant influence on children's levels of involvement in learning experiences and their learning outcomes. Through interactions, teachers and children jointly construct learning as they collaboratively investigate, explore and build on ideas and thinking. Through these purposeful interactions, teachers also build connections between children's prior, past and future learning across the day and the Kindergarten Year. (State of Queensland 12)

Kindergarten children are placed in a large-group situation where they need to develop personal behaviour patterns in relation to both peers and adults. Some children may need your help in recognizing that other people hold different perspectives or points of view from theirs, and that others' rights are equally important. With your support, children learn that to be happy and productive in a social setting, they need to compromise, collaborate, and develop patience in

Starting circle or meeting time with a welcome song that mentions each child by name helps build social inclusion.

adapting comfortably to new patterns of socialization. Some children also need help in learning the language of social manners, respect, and friendship-making skills. Coaching children to ask, "Can I help?" is one way for them to enter peer play that is already underway.

As discussed in Chapter 10, the home-school connection is especially important to young children. A photo display of children with their families helps build continuity between home and school. Displays such as these honour a child's family, home life, and the local community, and communicate powerful messages of belonging for children and their families. Children enjoy learning something about their teacher's family, too.



The door to this Kindergarten classroom has been personalized with the names of the children and their signatures.

The abilities to manage strong emotions and to relate positively to peers are critical competencies for school success. Kindergarten children may have mastered varying levels of self-regulation. You can support children in their growing ability to self-regulate through your warm and responsive interactions. As you coach and model self-calming strategies, rule following, and task completion, you serve as a co-regulator. You facilitate children's growing ability "to understand, express, and modulate their thoughts, feelings, and behavior" (Murray et al. 3). You can encourage children's "acceptable" behaviours by providing a social setting that encourages authentic opportunities for them to practise their social skills, build their competencies, and take initiative. As children play and learn together, as they learn to manage their small conflicts independently and to enjoy group activities, they deepen their positive relationships with one another.

Depending on their prior experiences, children may need your help to interact happily in groups, to defer satisfaction, and to find pleasure in cooperation and in generosity toward others. Most five-year-olds are moving past the egocentrism of younger developmental stages and are beginning to recognize that they cannot always make decisions based totally on their own needs and desires. The desire to be part of the "we" and for the approval of their peers helps them get past the egocentric "me." Your role in creating a play-based learning

environment and an unhurried schedule gives children many chances to experience and initiate cooperative, open-ended interactions with their classmates and you.

Kindergarten children respond well to teachers who are nurturing and responsive. Ideally, mutual respect between children and adults develops in this social environment. Children must feel safe in order to learn, and they develop a sense of self-worth and self-esteem when their physical, psychological, and emotional needs are acknowledged and supported. The adults working in a Kindergarten setting must be perceptive, observant, and ready to guide. You can maximize children's positive behaviour and their interactions with peers and adults through your sensitive and intentional attention to your classroom space; the types of learning experiences you offer; the strategies you use to guide children's behaviour; and the way you develop and adjust your schedule. Teachable moments provide opportunities to explain, to practise a new skill, or to reinforce a skill already being learned, and must be seized as they occur.



Children have generated and written their own rules for circle time







Children collaboratively complete a large mural over several days. The mural is later displayed in the foyer of their Kindergarten classroom.

Rules to Live By

A few simple rules can be formulated in group discussion periods with children and should be enforced almost without exception. For example, if the group agrees that a tricycle or a riding toy may be used in a designated safe area, then the children should follow this rule consistently.

Create a social climate that helps children feel welcomed and safe and that communicates they are an important part of a group. Messages in the classroom help promote children's feeling of belonging and indirectly guide their behaviour by clarifying and reminding them about expectations. Simple actions such as placing two or three chairs in front of the computer or posting a new provocation at a play centre (e.g., a tadpole observation centre) remind children about sharing, taking turns, and collaborating.

Games and activities that require two or more children to play help encourage peer relations. Taking turns can be further encouraged through strategic placement of timers close to popular activity areas. For example, children can negotiate a reasonable time frame for one friend to have the favourite tricycle with the handlebar streamers before it becomes the next friend's turn. Some teachers have children use a small whiteboard reservation system to sign up for or "reserve"

a turn with a popular learning activity. Simple games with rules not only help Kindergarten children develop social skills by encouraging fair play, but also help prepare children for the rules inherent in learning to read (e.g., children may later learn the rule that when "two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking") or the "place" rule in mathematics.

When you provide children with the chance to work together to complete a task, you further enhance group identification and cohesion. Shared learning activities, such as making soup together, creating a large mural collaboratively, or writing a thank-you letter from the class to the visitor from the Humane Society, are developmentally appropriate ways to develop the class spirit. Other events that help build

Simple games with rules, such as The Power of Ten, help build children's social skills. What do children need to know to be successful at this game?



Children are engaged in a simple game with rules.

classroom community are daily read-alouds, class book projects, inquiry projects, morning meetings or interactive whiteboard learning activities, classroom celebrations for "100 days," and so on.



Reflection: Games and Social Interaction

When you look around your classroom and the resources you have placed within it, reflect on questions about the materials and their role with regard to social interaction:

- How many children can play a given game or engage in an experience at one time?
- Can more than one child play?
- What teaching is required for the children to learn the game or to use the materials?
- What skills do children need to play the game or use the materials effectively? Do the children have those skills?

Organizing the Classroom

The four dimensions of the learning environment discussed in this chapter (time, space, things, and people) set the foundation for the learning that occurs in your Kindergarten classroom. Organize your classroom before school begins in the fall, and make changes throughout the school year and over the years with intention. Make your classroom and your Kindergarten learning program your own, but at the same time, honour and celebrate the choices children make within your classroom space.

Choice Time

As you organize your Kindergarten classroom, think about how you provide children with choices so that they can take charge of their own learning during the day. Offering this kind of freedom does not create chaos; rather, you are intentionally creating "a safe environment where children's choices are possible and respected" (Wien, *The Power of Emergent Curriculum* 49).

Try incorporating choice time in ways that best suit your groups of children, their interests and needs, your available space, and your own personal pedagogical approach. As you encourage children to make their own choices about which materials to use and which play centres to visit, keep in mind that the way you have set up their learning environment communicates your classroom values, such as collaborating with friends, making personal choices, taking responsibility, and supporting children to focus on what is most meaningful to them. During choice time, you have a special opportunity to build relationships with individual children, observe their progress and document their learning, create informal small groups, and build on teachable moments.

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Consider how your classroom space allows children to move easily from one area or play centre to another, offering both physical and academic freedom to choose among many rich learning experiences. Are there spaces that allow for noisy as well as quiet work? Does the classroom have areas for independent play as well as spaces for small-and large-group learning activities? Is your room flexible enough to allow you to change it as needed? And do you use universal design principles to ensure accessibility of materials (availability and visibility) to promote children's self-direction and decision making?

Offer "rich childhood experiences where children can build their passions and attention over time, and use open-ended materials" (Curtis 42).

Kindergarten teachers often use play centres as a way to facilitate children's choice making and playful learning while meeting specific learning outcomes in the Kindergarten curriculum. During choice time, the children choose the centre they will go to and decide for themselves on the length of time they will spend there. Choice time provides a time when children can initiate their own learning and can discover, explore, and practise new and emerging skills. Your environment can provide the kinds of hands-on learning young learners require, but learning centres also foster children's collaboration, cooperation, and communication as they interact socially, solve problems together, learn independently, and engage in openended learning activities that are not meant to produce a final product.

True learning centres are not assigned, but are chosen.

Some teachers assign children to centres and rotate them through all experiences in an effort to streamline the process, to ensure all children try all centres, or to focus on a child's specific needs. Keep in mind, however, that in the most effective learning environment, the centres must have an element of choice. Remember that true learning centres are not assigned, but give children an opportunity to choose where, how, and when they want to participate. The provocation or invitation you set out at a learning centre is what draws a child in, so intentional planning for this is critical.

Active play centres are not meant to be workstations full of worksheets for students to complete. Rather, children learn to take initiative and responsibility as they move about the classroom. This type of personal responsibility builds a strong foundation for lifelong learning. Therefore, assigning children to particular learning centres reduces opportunities for children's initiative and responsibility—the main outcome of providing a choice of learning centres.

While you allow children to choose learning centres, you should be observant of which areas are well used and by whom, and which children do not visit certain centres at all. Instead of coercing children to visit a centre, reflect on what kinds of items you might add to the classroom that would be of interest to these children, or whether another centre or learning activity might support similar learning goals. For example, one Kindergarten teacher noticed that boys did not visit the writing centre, although many of the girls spent large

Carpentry pencils have a body with a rectangular or elliptical cross-section, which makes them easier to grip and prevents them from rolling away, and they make either thick or thin lines depending on how they are held.

blocks of time there. When she intentionally added clipboards with graph paper and carpentry pencils, a level, measuring tapes, and meter sticks to the block area, she noticed the boys engaging in writing and measuring activities there, which supported emerging literacy and numeracy development while they built with blocks.

When you plan which areas or zones will be available in your classroom, be intentional about your selections and keep your big goals in mind. These will probably include creating many opportunities for children to develop independence and self-confidence as they make their own choices of where to go and what to do there. Play centres should be open-ended enough to allow children to consider their own inquiries and to make cross-subject connections in a seamless, integrated way. Each play centre should offer children opportunities for learning in natural and authentic ways and for furthering their social skills.

Some teachers use a few moments of their opening circle time each day to review the choices that will be available to the children and to introduce any new provocations that have been added to centres or new learning experiences that will be "open" during choice time. Children may sign up for the choices they wish to try, or they may enjoy reviewing the choices presented to them in picture format. A picture board provides children with opportunities to make choices, as well as to build literacy. In some classrooms, teachers indicate on a chart how many can play in more popular centres. In other classrooms, children are allowed to negotiate the number of participants, but may need your support to do so.





(L) Children place their names under the photo of the centre where they plan to play.

(R) Three choices and a timer.

Some children, especially those with exceptional learning needs or those who have not attended an early learning program prior to Kindergarten, may be easily overwhelmed by too much choice. To support their choice making in a developmentally appropriate manner, reduce the number of options by offering only three to begin with. Consider using a timer for children who wander without settling into one play activity to encourage their task orientation.

As you develop learning experiences for the children in your classroom, think about the following:

- concepts, competencies, and content that children are capable of learning (curricular learning outcomes, children's emerging competencies and their respective zones of proximal development, and ways to scaffold their learning)
- materials needed for both the teacher and the children
- resources available through the community
- ways to arrange the materials in order to motivate the children
- strategies that support authentic assessment and documentation of children's learning (for more information, see Chapter 4)

Scaffolding Learning

When you introduce a new learning centre or when you change a centre significantly with the addition of new materials, your role will likely be more active as you welcome children to this new learning experience. You may need to introduce and demonstrate the use of particular tools, such as hammers or tweezers. As you share different ways to play in the centre, your role modelling will help guide children's learning and behaviour. You may remind children about similar activities they have enjoyed in the past and help them to transfer prior learning to the new centre. You will also be a co-player as you and the children co-construct learning together as you scaffold (but do not over-direct) children's playful learning. As children gain familiarity with the play opportunities in the new centre, you will likely "fade out" the level of assistance you offer to most children in a gradual release of responsibility. This process may look something like this:

I do it . . . We do it . . . You do it.

The Kindergarten curriculum and your ongoing observations of the children in your classroom to identify their interests, abilities, and needs will help you to determine the materials or things you place into their environment. Many ideas about how to enrich your play centres are provided in Chapter 6. As well, the many curriculum guides available through Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning can provide you with detailed descriptions of materials and programming content.

In the following vignette, a teacher reflects on the choices she has made in her Kindergarten learning environment.



Vignette: A Blank Canvas—Creating a Kindergarten Environment*

This year has brought refreshing change for me. After several years away, I have returned to teaching Kindergarten. I have moved into a new classroom space, giving me an opportunity to rethink every aspect of the space and materials that I choose for the classroom. I was a nursery/Kindergarten teacher at the beginning of my career.

In the 1980s, a variety of educational approaches influenced my classroom design. I was influenced by the HighScope approach, which sees children as active hands-on learners, promotes an attractive orderly room arrangement, with an array of organized learning centres full of materials for children to select and use in open-ended ways, and developmentally appropriate environments, routines, and approaches. My interest in the Montessori approach convinced me of the benefits of child-sized furniture and materials arranged with attention to order, aesthetics, and sensory exploration. The approach promoted by Alice Yardley and the British Infant School System influenced my image of myself as an advocate of play, child choice in play, and the value of many interest centres (e.g., reading corner, house centre, sand, water, blocks, art). I was also influenced by what I learned about the Waldorf approach to the use of materials from nature and its strong emphasis on the arts, imagination, and creativity.

These ideas continue to be strong influences for me, but over the past 10 to 15 years, I have studied the ideas of Reggio Emilia with great interest. Reggio Emilia has influenced my practice in many ways, but most obviously in the way I design my classroom space. I see the children in my Kindergarten classroom as full of potential, competent, and capable of building their own theories. I use my environment as the third teacher, provoking wonder, discovery, and creativity. The physical space encourages encounters, communication, and relationships. The arrangement of structures, objects, and activities encourages children's choices, problem solving, and discoveries in the process of learning.

The Kindergarten space at my school is one of the nicest classrooms in which I have taught. The space is large, with two windows and plenty of storage space.

"The materials we choose to bring into our classrooms reveal the choices we have made about knowledge and what we think is important to know. How children are invited to use the materials indicates the role they shall have in their learning. Materials are the text of early childhood classrooms. Unlike books filled with facts and printed with words, materials are more like outlines. They offer openings and pathways by and through which children may enter the world of knowledge. Materials become the tools with which children give form to and express their understanding of the world and the meaning they have constructed" (Cuffaro 33).

During the summer before the school year started, I began planning the basic design and made a list of the areas I hoped to develop in the classroom. Reggio Emilia influences led me to consider the following design concepts:

- creating connections and a sense of belonging
- keeping space flexible and materials openended
- designing natural environments that engage children's senses
- provoking wonder, curiosity, and intellectual engagement
- engaging children in symbolic representation, literacy, and the visual arts

^{*} Used with permission of a Kindergarten teacher.









(Top L) The classroom as I began to move in. (R) The classroom in the second week of September.

(Bottom L) An old overhead projector is reused for light exploration. (R) A light table is placed in front of a mirror.

I specifically wanted to focus on classroom design that engaged the children's senses. I had not paid as much attention to this idea in designing Kindergarten classroom spaces early in my career. I chose to include a sound-making area, as well as spaces and materials that would allow the children to explore light.

My second priority was to design an environment that would encourage creativity and imagination in every area in the classroom. I chose to remove the typical play stove, sink, and fridge and the dress-up clothes for dramatic play, opting instead to combine the large blocks with dolls, dishes, baskets, play dishes, and yardages of fabric. I hoped that this would open up the dramatic play possibilities from more standard and perhaps somewhat prescribed North American domestic dramatic play material. As children

played in this new dramatic play area, I observed them using the materials in imaginative ways. I believe that these more open-ended materials allowed the children to create what they needed for their play. The large hollow blocks could become a car, a boat, a fort, or a sink or stove. The fabric could be used as a tablecloth, a tent, a cape, a gown, or a sari. The possibilities were endless and under complete control of the children.

The classroom space has continued to evolve as the year has progressed, responding to the needs of the group and the interests of the children. It reflects the community of children and adults who inhabit it. It has the warmth of a homelike space. I specifically chose to use found or other cast-off furniture rather than institutional furniture ordered from a catalogue to create this atmosphere. The money saved from not purchasing shelving and other classroom furniture could then be spent on high-quality toys and other high-quality play materials.

I feel happy and comfortable every morning when I walk into the classroom and I hope the children do too. The classroom is organized, aesthetically pleasing, and inviting. The care and thought that went into the classroom design reflects my belief in the environment as the third teacher.



Reflection: Your Classroom Learning Environment

As you reflect on your classroom environment, consider these questions:

- How and where can children select and plan their own activities and learning experiences in your classroom?
- How do you arrange a "provocation"?
- How do you arrange materials to suggest their use? How do you reposition materials to spark a new interest and/or new connections?
- What are the essential materials, furniture, and equipment in the Kindergarten classroom? What changes would you like to make in your own classroom?
- What are the influences on and who are the influencers of your own classroom design?

Summary

Chapter 5 introduced you to four dimensions of the learning environment: time, space, things, and people. Chapter 6 focuses on learning centres and how they support Manitoba's Kindergarten curriculum.



Continue Your Learning

For more information about the learning environment, see:

Greenman, Jim. Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments That Work. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, 2007.

Rivkin, Mary S. *The Great Outdoors: Advocating for Natural Spaces for Young Children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2014.