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CREATING ENGAGING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS



DR KAREN TONGE

PhD; M.Ed, The Early Years with Distinction; B.Teaching, (Early Childhood)

TWITTER: @tongekaren4

EMAIL: ktonge@uow.edu.au

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0065-7008>

UOW SCHOLARS PAGE: https://scholars.uow.edu.au/display/karen_tonge



UNIVERSITY
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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this presentation is to share my knowledge and experiences as an Early Childhood teacher, lecturer and researcher striving to create the best possible environments for children's learning and development.

When we design environments for children, creating 'spaces and places', indoor and outdoor, that afford engaging play experiences is paramount. Quality, engaging, play-based environments are valuable places for young children's learning and development.

Throughout the presentation, current research will inform pedagogy, best practice and recommendations that you can embrace in your own services. Provocations and recommendations will be offered to guide your critical reflection and future practice. It is important to note that there is no prescribed way of designing environments, as the creation of these must reflect your local context, culture and children within your service.

Key areas will include:

- Creating playful experiences
- Affordances in environments
- Time, Place and Space
- Nature –based play experiences & environments
- Bringing the outdoors-indoors

As you engage in the presentation, I invite you to reflect on your own experiences as a young child. What environments and experiences were most meaningful and memorable, and how can we recreate these for the children of today?

Warm Regards,
Karen Tonge

REFLECTIONS....



- ▶ As educators, it is important to place ourselves in the position of a child so that we can begin to understand what their environment looks and feels like. This will enable us to create the best possible environments that promote learning and development.
- ▶ An effective way of doing this is to reflect on our own childhood, and our most meaningful and memorable experiences.



Provocations

- Who did you like to play with, or did you play alone?
- Where did you play, what did you play with?
- Were there rules and who set these?
- Where adults present, and if so, what was their role?

Recommendations

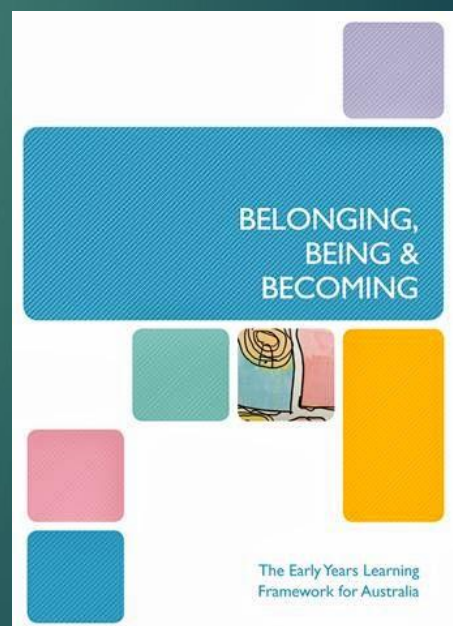
- Observe what social and physical patterns are evident?
- Use a Time-Sample observation (Arthur et.al., 2018) to map and track the movement of children in the space
- Involve the children conversations about their most / least favourite experiences

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE – AN AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

- ▶ In Australia, children commence formal schooling at around 5 years of age.
- ▶ Prior to formal schooling, the majority of children aged 3-5 years will attend an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting
- ▶ ECEC include Preschool (3-5yrs, centre-based), Long Day Care (birth-5yrs, centre-based) or Family Day Care (birth-5yrs, home-based)
- ▶ Qualifications and experience of educators in ECEC vary
- ▶ All ECEC centres must have an indoor space as well as an outdoor space (or a space that replicates one).
- ▶ Services are guided by the National Quality Framework, which includes the National Quality Standards (regulations & assessment) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Belonging, Being, Becoming)

'assists educators to provide young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop a foundation for future success in learning' (DEEWR 2009, p5).



CREATING PLAY-BASED ENVIRONMENTS

Play is key to learning and development in young children. Play must be central in ECEC environments

- ▶ Through play children develop skills, knowledge and understanding in all developmental domains.
- ▶ Play is a context for learning that enhances curiosity and creativity, enables connections between experiences and learning, and supports relationships and children's sense of wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009).
- ▶ Creating environments that are engaging, and rich in age and stage appropriate play-based experiences is crucial.



Provocations

- Is play a key element of your philosophy and environments?
- As an adult, do you consider the environment appealing, engaging and 'playable'?
- Are you capturing all developmental domains through play?

Recommendations

- Revise your centre philosophy. Is play a central element?
- Pretend you are a 6mth old; 12mth old; 3yrs old; 5yrs old. Is your environment appealing and engaging?

INDOOR ENVIRONMENTS

- ▶ All environments (indoor and outdoor) offer 'affordances'.

The THEORY OF AFFORDANCES refers to the possibilities within an environment that have the potential to be perceived, discovered, shaped and/or used by the children – these can change according to the child's desires, capabilities and limits, as well as restrictions placed on the child (Percy-Smith et al., 2009).

- ▶ What makes a quality, engaging indoor environment?

It is essential to consider the features and affordances of indoor environments. This includes:

- ✓ is the environment **physically, socially and emotionally safe**
- ✓ does the space **reflect child, family and community interests**
- ✓ are **spaces and resources accessible** to all children
- ✓ is the environment **inclusive** of all children & families
- ✓ are there places for **independent and group** experiences
- ✓ are the experiences **age & stage appropriate**
- ✓ a **balance of activity styles**, such as quiet, active, creative, messy
- ✓ is the design suitable for **easy movement** around the space
- ✓ is there **natural light and ventilation**
- ✓ is the space **welcoming**
- ✓ **displays & resources** at child-level
- ✓ embrace & celebrate the **child's voice**

(Checklist created by UOW Early Years students in EYPE202, 2019)

OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS

- ▶ Outdoor environments have many unique affordances
- ▶ It is important to acknowledge that there is **nothing that can be done indoors that cannot be done outdoors**
- ▶ Typically, outdoor environments afford increased activity and movement, risky play (Sandseter et al., 2011) as well as interaction with natural elements such as weather, plants, trees, insects and animals.

Research shows that children's physical activity is greater in outdoor environments (Raustorp et al., 2012).

Children's physical activity is further increased with the availability of mobile equipment (e.g balls, bikes, hoops) and surface markings (e.g hop scotch, bike tracks, court markings) (Vanderloo et al., 2014)



Provocations

- Can you think of any experience that cannot be facilitated in an outdoor environment? Why? Could the experience be modified to suit the outdoor environment?

Recommendations

- You may not have access to an outdoor environment, but consider what you can do to bring the 'outdoors-in'.
- Create a space or a room for active play... incorporate movement into transition and group times
- Plan an excursion to a greenspace, park or community area

QUALITY ENVIRONMENTS

- ▶ Creating a quality environment is integral for children's learning and development. Consideration of the quality of the **physical, social, emotional and cognitive** aspects of the environment is necessary.

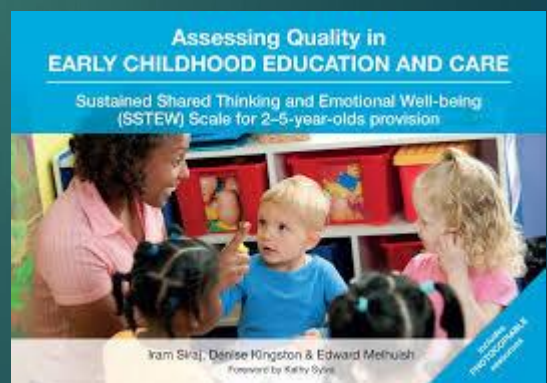
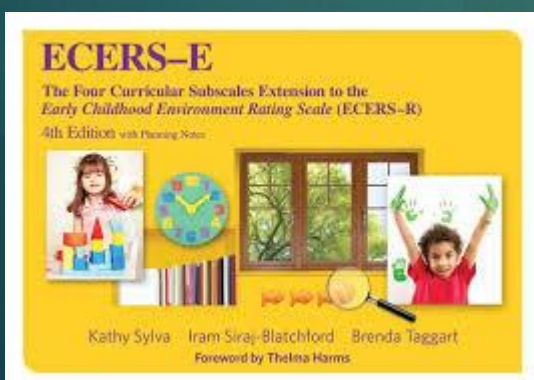
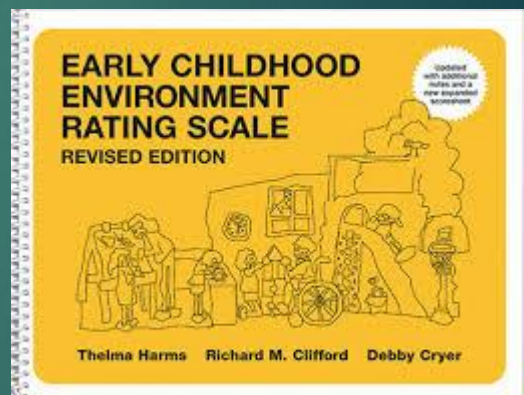
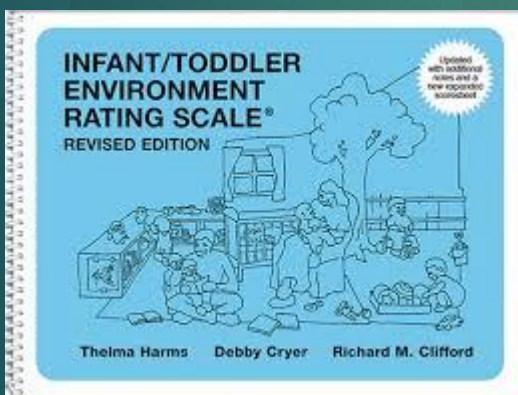
- ▶ SO, WHAT DOES A QUALITY ENVIRONMENT LOOK LIKE?

There are resources available that allow us to assess the quality of environments. These include, but are not limited to the **Environmental Rating Scales (ECERS)**.

The ECERS include: The Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale, the ECERS-R (revised), the ECERS-E (Extended) and the Shared Sustained Thinking Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS).

These rating scales assess a variety of areas, all integral to quality ECEC environments. The assessments include areas such as physical aspects such as space and furnishings; routines; curriculum domains; and the quality of interactions.

<https://ers.fpg.unc.edu/infanttoddler-environment-rating-scale%C2%AE-revised-iters-r%E2%84%A2>



TIME, PLACE AND SPACE

TIME is valuable for creating engaging environments.

Theorist Csíkszentmihályi (2008) presented the concept of **Flow Theory**. Sustained and uninterrupted time in an experience creates a sense of 'flow', which is the optimal state for learning.

Shared sustained thinking (SST) (Siraj et al., 2015) is an episode in which two or more individuals "work together". Both parties contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend.

A sense of flow and shared sustained thinking are critical in an engaging learning environment. The best conditions for these to occur in is where there are periods of uninterrupted time.

To create a quality environment, children must have a sense of agency (DEEWR, 2009), where they have responsibility and ownership of the space.... **Creating a PLACE for them and their learning.**

The **affordance of, and use of SPACE** is integral in children's learning environments. Research shows that it is not just the amount of space that is afforded, but more-so what is happening in the space that is critical (Tonge et al., 2020).

Research shows that when children are offered free-flowing routines, where they have the opportunity to move freely within and between spaces, the quality of interactions and outcomes are increased (Tonge et al., 2020; Tonge et al., 2018).

Provocations

- At the end of each day, will you and will a child(ren) remember a moment of SST that they had?

Recommendations

- As a team, reflect on the use of time, place & space in your centre. Are your programs free-flowing?
- Create places that children have helped develop and have ongoing responsibility for

NATURE-BASED PLAY

- ▶ Literature shows that **children need contact with nature and natural things** for their wellbeing, however children are becoming increasingly separated from the natural world as their access to the outdoors diminishes (Dowedell et al., 2011).
- ▶ Reasons for this may be due to safety concerns, weather conditions, dense housing and/or lifestyle choices (Kyttä, 2004).
- ▶ With many children attending ECEC, these settings have the potential to promote children's engagement with nature.

Biophilia is the instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems. The term "biophilia" literally means "love of life or living systems" (Kahn, 1997).

- ▶ Children's sense of **biophilia needs to be nurtured**. Hands-on sensory experiences are necessary and need to be immersive and open-ended rather than structured and scripted, as well as being developmentally appropriate (Bredencamp et al., 1997).



Provocations

- What natural elements do you have around your ECEC?
- Is connection with nature embedded in your program?
- How can you promote biophilia within your program?

Recommendations

- Plan an excursion around your local community, and the children can observe the living systems around them
- Support the children to connect with another centre, perhaps in a different location and compare the natural environments.

NATURE PLAY CASE STUDY

BUSH PRESCHOOL

► Bush Preschool (Forest Preschools)

Children from a local preschool spend regular and sustained time in the bush, located in close proximity to their centre.

In a backpack the children each carry water and a snack. The educators carry a First Aid Kit and a CB radio. No other equipment is taken – the Bush environment affords all necessary teaching opportunities.

The children enter the bush in all weather conditions, and may spend up to 6 hours exploring. Key areas are marked, one of which is approx. 2km from the centre. The children lead the experience.

Keiraville Community Preschool <https://kcps.org.au/innovative-education/bush-preschool-program-wollongong/>



Nature play experiences afford opportunities for environmental awareness, connection with Indigenous culture, sustained time for uninterrupted time for exploration, inquiry and learning through play.

They afford TIME, PLACE & SPACE,
promoting a sense of Biophilia

NATURE-PLAY CASE STUDY 'BEACH FRIENDS'

► Beach Friends (Beach program)

Children from a local preschool spend regular and sustained time on the beach, located in close proximity to their centre.

Being a beach-side community, this context is familiar to the children. During the experience, children engage in playful experiences such as collecting artefacts, which are then shared with the group and then returned to where they were found.

The children become aware of the affordances of this environment, and although they do not enter the water, experiences do involve exploring rock platforms, the features of sand, water and ocean habitats.

KU Wombarra Preschool

<https://www.ku.com.au/childcare/centres/kuwombarra>



Provocations

- What opportunities are there in your local community for engaging with nature?

Recommendations

- Create spaces that reflect the local environment
- Create virtual connections with people in places such as Antarctica, a desert, a coastal area, a mountainous area

BRINGING THE OUTDOORS-INDOORS

- ▶ It is clear that all environments have specific affordances. The indoor environment provides opportunities for specific time, place and space, as does the outdoor environment.
- ▶ In some cases, these environments may have limitations, or may not even exist, and so how do we ensure we provide the same opportunities for all children in ECEC?
- ▶ Consideration of:
 - the room layout
 - artefacts and resources, including 'loose parts'
 - bringing nature in
 - interactions
 - scheduling of time and place
 - thinking beyond the ordinary
 - connection between spaces

..... are all key aspects that have the potential to bringing the outdoors-indoors (and vice versa!)

Provocations

- What are the key features of the environments in your ECEC?
- Are these environments connected and/or adaptable?
- How can you promote connectedness between your environments?

FINAL COMMENTS

I hope that you have enjoyed this presentation and that it has inspired some new ideas and ways of thinking about the environments that you create for children.

Being reflective, exploring new ideas and being able to embrace what we have around us are critical for creating the best possible environments for children's learning. However, the most important consideration is listening to the voices of children – what they bring to these environments, and how we respond to this.

As mentioned in the introduction, there can be no prescribed environment design, however your environment must be responsive to, and reflect the uniqueness of your own context.

Be a researcher, be reflective and be brave to embrace new ways of creating Places and Spaces for children that will promote and celebrate children's learning.

All the best,
Karen Tonge

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