



2.4

Responsive Environments: Time, Space, Materials, and Participation



The organization of time is more art than science. Educators are encouraged to find the flow and flexibility that enhances each child's day.

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The environments in which children live, play, and relate can open up or limit opportunities for their care, play, and learning. The early learning and child care educators' role in designing the environment is central to children's experiences. The educators' knowledge helps them to understand the kinds of play and learning experiences that support each child's care, sense of belonging, as well as nurture their dispositions to learn.

Socio-cultural perspectives of learning take seriously the child as a social learner who **co-constructs** knowledge in relationship with the environment and in relationship with other learners, both adults and children.

Environments that encourage **multimodal literacies** acknowledge that there are many ways to explore and demonstrate knowledge and, for children, this is often through play. Creating **responsive environments** requires awareness that the image of the child—a mighty learner and citizen—must be continually reflected on as educators respond to children's interests and exploration through the design elements of time, space, materials, and participation.

Time for play, for inquiry, for thinking, and for pursuing an interest alone or with friends and educators is important if learning is to become meaningful for the learner.

Rigid daily routines can create imbalances in daily experiences and minimize the importance of play and learning that children are engaged in. When children experience fluid time that reflects their rhythms in care and play, they are able to develop their ideas alone and with others. When educators consider children's natural rhythms in the design of the environment, they create a responsive environment. When educators organize time so that children can continue their play over hours and days, children are able to develop their ideas deeply. This may mean that children's play materials are saved as they have left them or that lunch routines are adjusted in response to children's play.



Consider how time is used and organized:

- Do the routines of the day dominate? Are your daily routines flexible enough to respond to children, as learners and citizens, to participate in decisions that concern them?
- Are all the routines and transitions necessary for this group of children? Do your routines happen because they have always been done a particular way?
- How do you invite children to be decision-makers in the organization of their daily experiences, routines, and rituals?
- What would happen if “clock time” did not determine your daily experiences? What would happen if your daily routines were determined by children’s internal rhythms?

Space for play, for alone time, for social play with others, and for focused opportunities to pursue an interest are important for children as learners and as citizens. Through the organization of space, educators consider both familiar and novel play spaces that can ignite possibilities for children’s exploration, imagination, creativity, and decision-making. As educators design space, their intentions to open up opportunities for children are evident through the elements of time, materials, and participation with others, materials, and ideas.

Consider how space is organized and designed:

- How do the spaces you create for/with children reflect who they are as learners and citizens?
- How do the spaces you create for/with children nurture their playfulness, seeking, participating, persisting, and caring dispositions to learn, in familiar and novel ways?
- How can each child see his or her family and self in the playroom space?
- How do you create spaces for/with children, as individuals and group members, including both healthy and flexible indoor and outdoor spaces? Do they inspire imagination and possibilities?
- How do your playroom spaces support children, families, and educators to share time together or be alone as they wish?

The organization of space—both familiar and novel play spaces—can open up opportunities for children to make choices.



By observing and documenting or participating alongside the children's encounter with the materials, we begin to understand what the children are thinking and feeling through the materials.



Materials open up possibilities or limit possibilities for young children's care, play, and learning. Considering the connectedness between the elements of time, space, materials, and participation can result in children having an **encounter with materials**.¹ Offering materials in a beautiful, thoughtful, clean way and using light and shadow to bring attention to the shapes, colours, or contrasts in the materials inspires the child's participation. Inviting children to become familiar with materials—exploring, inventing, creating, and changing—infuses the materials with their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. By observing and documenting or participating alongside the children's encounter with the materials, you may get a glimpse of what children are thinking and feeling through the materials.

A variety of materials, including purchased, natural, recycled objects, and loose parts can inspire children's creative sensibilities in diverse ways and support learning and understanding of family, social, and **cultural practices** and traditions. When selecting materials, consider whether they offer multiple ways for children to explore and use them in practical and imaginative ways. Equally important in offering interesting and open-ended materials is the manner in which they are made accessible to children.

It is an art to find balance between too many and not enough materials, to organize materials so that children can see and access choices, and to present them in ways that intrigue children—provoking thinking and inviting manipulation.

Consider how materials are selected and presented:

- Are your materials for play and learning interesting for and reflective of this group of learners? Are the materials respectful of family, social, and cultural practices and traditions?
- Do the materials and how you offer them invite children to access them independently and use them in a variety of ways? Are materials presented in a thoughtful, clean, beautiful manner and respectful of the natural world?



- Do the materials and how you offer them invite children to explore ideas, thoughts, and feelings by inventing, creating, and/or changing the materials over time and with others?
- Do the materials invite children to engage in a wide range of learning experiences, independently and with others?
Can the children
 - be creative, explore, and represent in meaningful ways?
 - explore, inquire, and create theories and solve problems?
 - build real-world and/or imaginative structures?
 - author, act, direct, and produce personal narratives and stories?
 - collaborate, take turns, share, negotiate, and challenge their ideas with others?
 - learn and practice skills for their learning and development?
- Are the materials you offer to children representative and respectful of their family, social, and cultural practices and traditions and ways of knowing?



Participation of educators, children, and families is central to a practice of relationships and is revealed through the early childhood environment. *A Practice of Relationships* describes the complex and dynamic role of the educator within multiple relationships that can contribute to the well-being and sense of belonging for each child and family in the early childhood community.

As educators, you are called on to listen carefully to children and families and critically reflect on experiences of inclusion and exclusion while making curriculum decisions. Your attention to the curriculum framework values, principles, holistic play-based goals, and dispositions to learn supports your curriculum decisions and the design of the care, play, and learning environment. Do your decisions ensure that each child has the time, space, and materials to participate within the environment and with others? The environment reveals how you value the contributions of family, social, and cultural practices and traditions and also the many ways that children participate with materials and others. Think about how participants are able to contribute openly and how they may be silenced.



The environment extends who you are in relationship with the children—as mighty learners and citizens.



Consider your participation and that of others:

- Who are you in the early learning and child care community?
- How do you recognize each child and his or her family within the time, space, and materials?
- How do you help to create opportunities for families and children to participate in decisions that concern them? How do you listen and attend to families and children when they participate?
- How does the environment you have created nurture children as learners, risk takers, and citizens?
- How does the environment communicate value for each family's social and cultural practices and traditions? In what ways are family, social, and cultural practices and traditions reflected in routines of the day? ...in the child's play and learning materials?
- How do you recognize and value children's and families' personal rituals within daily routines?
- How do your decisions, participation, and communicative practices invite children, their families, and friends to become active participants within this community?

The infant and preschool programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy, refer to the **environment as a third teacher**.² This philosophy considers how time, space, materials, and participation are influential elements in children's learning and **citizenship**. The environment is not a substitute for you; rather, the environment is a reflection of who you are in relationship with the children—as **mighty learners** and citizens—and their families. The design of the care, play, and learning environment communicates an image of a child.³

The socio-cultural perspective, which is foundational to *Flight*, recognizes that knowledge is co-constructed by children, families, and educators together and is also demonstrated in many different ways. Educators support early literacy through providing various materials for children to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings—through multimodal literacies. When you think of the artist, the dancer, and the architect and what they are able to communicate and inspire through their language of paint, sculpture, movement, dance, and design—this is what multimodal literacies can offer a child as well. In Reggio Emilia, they describe this idea as the “hundred languages of children.”⁴



How you think about children, as mighty learners and citizens, how you value family connections and contributions, and what you consider as important learning processes are reflected in your design of time, space, materials, and the act of participation—this is early learning and care curriculum.

