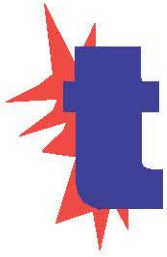


INTENTIONALITY



a special project

by Jenny Edwards



The smell of oil mixed with gasoline is still one of my favorite smells. That is the smell of my father when he would come home from work and give me a great big bear hug, with his bristly face against mine as he lifted me off the ground. My father, who was an auto mechanic, hence the mixed scents of oil and gasoline, taught me the value of having and using the correct tool. Just like auto mechanics, most professions have specific tools they use to accomplish their work.

Our tools include our knowledge of child development, the art of reflection, and applying intentionality in our planned activities and room arrangement. "An intentional teacher acts with purpose and knowledge to ensure that young children acquire the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in school and life. Intentional teaching is playful, thoughtful, and purposeful" (*The Intentional Teacher, NAEYC*). The importance of room arrangement is often overlooked, but when research and intentionality are applied, how a room is set up becomes an integral part of educating children.

This article features a special project and partnership with Hudson Valley Community College's (HVCC) Education and Social Sciences Department. Guided by the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Brightside Up and the Education faculty began a project to revitalize the preschool teaching laboratory. The first step was reflecting on the general arrangement of the room and the placement of the interest centers. The latest research advises that loud interest centers such as dramatic play and blocks are set apart with physical space and furnishings from the quieter centers, like the library center, the cozy spot, and the writing center. Children who need a break from all the activity of a preschool classroom can retreat to the more quiet and less active centers. This helps children with their cognitive focus and emotional control. The arranging we had to do was to add a "buffer center" between the library and block centers. Typical buffer centers are art, science, sand and water tables, math, and fine motor which usually feature quiet materials, limit the number of children, and have a moderate level of activity.

Follow along in this 3-part series as we revitalize and investigate the intention built into the centers at the HVCC preschool teaching lab. In this issue, we will explore the sensory, library, and cozy areas and invite you to look at your own learning spaces as we explore purposeful room arrangement together.

INTENTIONALITY IN THE SENSORY AREA:

What We Changed:

The sensory tables are a part of the science center, but due to the depth of learning and purpose, we have set them separately. We placed the three tables (light, sand, and water) in the middle of the classroom, directly in front of the science center. Then we added specific learning materials to each table. For the light table, we placed x-rays on the adjacent shelf. We also included transparent magna tiles in a container under the table and placed color mixing jars and activities on a shelf right next to the table. The sand and water tables are equipped with many measuring spoons, cups, and seriated containers.

Opportunities for Learning:

An intentional teacher will stock the tables with appropriate tools to maximize learning and facilitate educational conversations. When they are scooping sand into different size containers, they are learning the concepts of size, weight, and volume. When they are pouring from container to container, they are learning the physical properties of liquid and solids. When they are counting how many scoops it takes to fill different size containers, they are learning the value of numbers and the concept of volume.

What's the Big Idea?

There are many learning opportunities through sand and water play, yet let's not overlook just how much of a regulation tool sand and water play is. Sand and water play has a natural centering effect for children. For example, if a child is distressed from separating from a parent, playing in the sand table naturally calms

the child. This is very akin to burying your feet in the warm, smooth sand while ocean side and letting the relaxing feeling move up from your feet to eventually envelop you.

In addition to helping to regulate a child emotionally, children are learning the self-regulation skills of keeping the sand and water in the tables and learning gross and fine motor control skills with pouring and scooping.

The Rating Scale:

Sand and water play may occur indoors or outdoors. Alternate materials must be safe and not cause any health or safety issues related to choking, getting stuck in noses or ears, or aspiration. Using food is not considered an appropriate material because children can become confused about how food is used; food is for eating and not for playing. Additionally, it is an ethical issue related to world hunger and wasting food. There must be enough material and tools so that children can dig, scoop, pour, fill containers, and experiment with the material in a satisfying way.

Expanding the Learning:

Intentional interactions will facilitate much learning. For example, when children are playing in the sand table, you might notice children counting scoops of sand. Join them and ask open-ended questions: "How many scoops of sand will fill this container?" "What if we used a smaller scoop?" "What if we used a larger scoop?" If the children seem to be interested in this experiment, begin a chart with tally marks to track of how many scoops it takes to fill the small container, medium container, and large container. Then you could introduce the concept of changing the size of the scoops and keeping the containers the same. This would be a wonderful spot to introduce the making predictions and writing them down, then conducting the experiment with the larger and smaller scoops. The sensory tables, when organized wisely and include frequent interactions with the educator, can facilitate learning in all academic areas: math, science, language, literacy, writing, and social/emotional development.

INTENTIONALITY IN THE LIBRARY CENTER:

What We Changed:

In the preschool lab, we brought all the books together in one place and created the Library Center. This took some intentional sorting to make sure that the books were good quality and appropriate. The library center can contribute to the overall representation of diversity in the classroom if the books are carefully chosen. There are many books that show different races, cultures, ages, abilities, and gender roles (traditional and non-traditional). Other books to enhance the library are fantasy/ fiction books, non-fiction books, and books that feature other academic areas such as math, science, and social studies. As you intentionally choose appropriate materials, it is a good time to also discard inappropriate materials such as books that depict violence or frightening images or books that stereotype cultures, abilities, ages, and races.

The library interest center is also an area that can include many soft furnishings such as pillows, cushions, and small couches and chairs. Think of the library and cozy spot as an area where children can escape the "hardness" of the classroom (the tile floors and thin carpets in the other areas). To include softness to our center, we added a bean bag chair and a carpet.

Opportunities for learning:

When sharing books with children, introduce all the parts of the book: the cover, inside cover illustrations, and the title page. This is where you can introduce conversations about the cover art and the inside illustrations. Ask how the illustrator created the images. What medium and colors the illustrator chose. Then conduct a "story walk" where they flip through the pages to get a feel for what the

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story is about. This is where you can encourage conversations about the book through asking open ended questions such as: "Let's look at the cover, what do you think this book is about?" "Who do you think is the main character?" "Why did you guess that? What clues did you use?"

When they begin to read the story, draw attention to certain letters when pointing to the text while reading. This helps the young child gain print awareness; where letters make up words to convey meaning.

What's the Big Idea?

A library center naturally increases a child's vocabulary when an educator is intentional about interacting with children and sharing books with them. Additionally, when you warmly and comfortably share a book with a child, the child learns to associate those positive feelings with books. Reading aloud to children is the number one indicator of future academic success and formal and informal reading times included in the daily schedule helps to ensure adequate exposure.

The Rating Scale:

A high-quality program's library center is well defined and be separated from the block center and dramatic play center. It should have a variety of books displayed with the covers facing out and not overcrowded. All

the books must be appropriate for the age group and should not contain violent images or stereotypes. A library center should also include an abundance of softness.

Expanding the Learning:

When children are excited about a story, they naturally want to do more with it. For example, if they enjoyed *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, they may want to create beautiful butterflies with art materials. They could also graph the foods the caterpillar ate to determine what it ate the most, building data collection and counting skills. If it is the right time of the year, bring caterpillars into the science center to observe their life cycle. This activity could naturally lead to learning about Monarchs and planting a milk weed patch. Children can create puppets to re-tell the story and incorporate fruits and vegetables from the dramatic play center. This could also lead to a discussion about healthy and unhealthy foods. Extend the learning into a study of life cycles, and discovery of other life cycles through books and research. If the children are really desiring more knowledge, they could create a map of the Monarch's path to Mexico and watch videos of them over-wintering there. This could lead to a study about Mexico, and so on.

INTENTIONALITY IN THE COZY CORNER:

What We Changed:

A cozy corner is a place in the classroom where a child can retreat to take a break and relax. It can also be a place where a child can go when upset and needing some time to re-establish a sense of calmness. We decided to integrate the cozy corner into our library area. This classroom's cozy spot includes sensory jars, soft furnishings, books about emotions, and many puzzles featuring all different kinds of families (more diversity!).

Opportunities for learning:

A cozy corner is an excellent area to discuss all the different kinds of emotions and what tools we can use when our emotions are very big. It also naturally leads to conversations about

regulation, self-control, and the choices we make. It is a wonderful area of the classroom to help children understand who they are, how important they are, and that their actions do not change the love that we have for them. This can help them understand they are accepted and belong.

What's the Big Idea?

The main purpose of the cozy corner is to help children regulate themselves when the need arises. Each child is different; therefore, a cozy corner should be equipped with various tools to help each child get back to center. Soft furnishings, sensory jars, fidget toys, puzzles, and books are examples of some tools to include. You can support each child individually to help them find what works best.

The Rating Scale:

The rating scale requires that a high-quality program have at least five interest centers and one of them must be a cozy corner. This is a clearly defined space with a substantial amount of softness where children may lounge, daydream, read, or play quietly. It must supply enough softness so that a child may escape the typical hardness of the classroom such as a couple of bean bag chairs or large pillows or a child-sized couch.

Expanding the Learning:

When children are given words for their feelings, they will eventually replace abrupt actions for verbalizing what they feel, if we encourage them. Therefore, having charts and posters about feelings/emotions in the cozy corner will help them build their understanding of all the different emotions plus add to their vocabulary.

In the next issue, join us as we look at diversity, fine motor centers, and classroom displays.



cozy corner



library



sand table