



The Other Teacher in the Room: Using the Teacher Interaction and Language Rating Scale to Help Early Childhood Educators Use the Environment as a Third Teacher

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As instructors of an advanced child development course in the Early Childhood Care and Education Department at Capilano College, we wanted to provide our students with an opportunity to critically analyze one learning centre in their classrooms. Our learning goals were to help students link children's behaviour and development to the classroom environment and to see the environment as a "third teacher." Fraser (2000) writes: "the educators of Reggio Emilia have termed the environment a "third teacher" because of the power environments such as these have to inform and shape the kind of learning that will happen in the room." When teachers recognize the influence of the classroom on children's development, teaching practice becomes more intentional. That is, they carefully think, reflect and plan out the environment to extend children's learning. They see the environment as a reflection of their teaching philosophy, their images of the children and the community of learners within the classroom.

Initially, students were asked to choose a learning centre, such as the art centre or the block area that they would like to see changed. Then they observed the children engaging in play in the learning centre, using the following three tools:

- the *Assessment of Peer Relations* (Guralnick, 2003)
- the *Teacher Interaction and Language Rating Scale* (Girolametto, Weitzman & Greenberg, 2000)
- a Reggio Emilia-inspired chart for environment planning based on the work of Susan Fraser (*Authentic Childhood*, 2000)

From the observational data collected, students described and analyzed the level of social interaction between children, as well as teacher interaction and language. They also highlighted how the environment reflected the Reggio Emilia inspired principles of aesthetics, relationships, collaboration, transparency, reciprocity and documentation.

It was interesting for both instructors and students to reflect on the students' observations.

- The children's play was often at the solitary or parallel play level. Minimal language between the children was observed.
- Teacher behaviour and language were of a supervisory nature.
- Many of the learning centres existed as static locations rather than as centres that engaged children and supported them in more complex levels of interaction. As instructors,

our sense in reviewing the students' information was that the learning centres often took on a museum quality within the classroom; they were inadvertently preserved for all time in their original state. As a result, the children's behaviour remained at the level of skill and understanding that they had when they first entered the centre.

- Static centres encouraged teachers to engage in a maintenance style of teaching that preserved the historical integrity of the learning centre, with little expanding or extending of the children's language.

The next step was to have each student develop a set of developmental goals for his or her learning centre. Most of the students' goals contained the following themes:

- to increase the number and level of the children's social interactions
- to extend the complexity of the play within the learning centre (e.g., moving from exploratory play to symbolic play either constructive or dramatic in nature)
- to decrease negative or inappropriate behaviours (as defined by the students)

Using the principles of the environment as inspired by the preschools of Reggio Emilia, the students then made changes to their environments, such as presenting materials in a more accessible, organized and inviting manner. Some of the students moved or increased the size of the centre to support group interactions or to provide a space that better suited the play. Many of the students reported that they replaced plastic toys with open-ended materials.

The students then re-evaluated their environments using the same three assessment tools, and documented their observations and interpretations. The student reports suggest that their changes facilitated increased intentionality in their teaching practices.

- Our students reported that they joined in the play to support children in exploring materials and developing play.
- The environmental changes scaffolded our students and the children so that they could engage in behaviours that were more intentional and focused.
- To support a shared understanding between the children, our students noted that they used language strategies such as labeling, expanding and extending.
- In listening to the adults and each other talk about the play materials, the children developed a group understanding of how to use and talk about the materials.
- The developmental level of the children's behaviours, whether language, social or play, moved towards a more complex level. For example, one student reported that children in the block centre initially engaged in aggressive play themes with little or no evidence of sustained constructive play. By changing the environment, the children engaged in more cooperative social play as they constructed increasingly complex structures.
- Children began communicating their ideas to each other and working together to create mutually agreed upon structures.
- The teachers in these classrooms (as well as our students) changed their teaching strategies to extend children's thinking, promote language use and support sustained engagement with the materials.

In conclusion, the use of assessment tools such as the *Teacher Interaction and Language Rating Scale* supported our students to reflect on their behaviour and practice in their classrooms. This helped the students become more intentional in their teaching practices and to consciously use the environment as a third teacher. **WW**

References:

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