



RETHINKING THE CLASSROOM LANDSCAPE

Creating environments that
connect young children,
families, and communities

Sandra Duncan, EdD, Jody Martin, Rebecca Kreth

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Preface

Children are miracles. Believing that every child is a miracle can transform the way we design for children’s care. When we invite a miracle into our lives we prepare ourselves and the environment around us We make it our job to create, with reverence and gratitude, a space that is worthy of a miracle!

—Anita Rui Olds, *Child Care Design Guide*

Is your space worthy? If we blindfolded you, took you on a plane, and dropped you in the middle of an early childhood classroom, would you know where you are based on what you see? Our premise is the answer would be “no” because most classrooms look the same. The majority of materials and equipment now found in most early childhood classrooms are specified and manufactured for early childhood environments. The result: cookie-cutter classrooms.

Rethinking the Classroom Landscape encourages teachers of young children to transform ordinary spaces into reflective and meaningful landscapes. With easy-to-implement ideas and strategies based on five guideposts, this book supports and encourages educators to create early childhood environments that vividly connect to children, adults, and their communities. We believe in the importance of neighborhood and communities, the connection between past and present with the people who live in these communities, and the influence of geography, topography, flora, and fauna. We believe that early childhood environments should be not just the actual spaces and objects within these spaces, but also a reflection of the geographical, cultural, historical, and environmental forces shaping these spaces. We believe in the important distinction between space and place.

It is our hope that after reading this book and seeing the beautiful images of classrooms across the country, teachers will rid themselves of the cookie-cutter mentality and become curators of classroom landscapes that honor the miracles in our lives.

—Sandra Duncan, Jody Martin, and Rebecca Kreth



Introduction: Guideposts for Children's Landscapes

If you don't know where you're from, you'll have a hard time saying where you're going.

—Wendell Berry

The Power of the Environment

Space speaks. Even though we cannot hear the classroom's walls or floors talking, the equipment conversing, or the learning materials chattering, they are, indeed, speaking to us. They are telling us how to behave, act, react, engage, and even think. The space is whispering "run" or "pause and linger for a while." Not only is the space speaking to our physical beings, it is speaking to our emotions and our senses, as Jim Greenman notes in his book *Caring Spaces, Learning Spaces*. Physical objects speak and let us know if they can be touched and explored . . . or if they are off limits. Furniture in the space and the way it is arranged silently speaks by influencing our behaviors and controlling our emotions. The physical environment is indeed very powerful. The environment, however, is more than the physical setting within the classroom's four walls.

Architect Mark Dudek defined the classroom environment as an evolving landscape for children’s exploration and play within the four walls and beyond. Environment is not only the actual spaces and the objects within it, but also the social and cultural forces that shape the space—and are in turn shaped by those who use them. American heritage farmer and poet Wendell Barry believes our environments—both indoors and outdoors—connect us to where we are and translate into who we are in powerful ways. So it is with the landscapes we create for young children.

For many of us, the classroom is defined as four surrounding walls and the accompanying floor, a few doors, some windows, and perhaps children’s bathrooms, storage areas, and preparation spaces. As architect Dudek pointed out, however, a classroom environment should be considered as much, much more. In addition to the physical structure, the environment includes the land on which the structure is built. The environment is the natural geography, topography, flora, and fauna. It includes the local neighborhood and a mosaic of cultures living within the community. The environment consists of the community’s past and present . . . its traditions, food, and music. The classroom environment is about relationships and connections within and outside the classroom walls. Its landscape is both visible and invisible, finite and infinite, and a powerful influence on children’s growth and development. For this

reason, it is important to have guidelines for designing children’s landscapes.

Guidepost 1

Create an Environment Worthy of Its Inhabitants

As early childhood educators, it is our responsibility to ensure that young children develop into their highest potential. In doing so, we also need to examine and expect the same from ourselves so that in the context of transforming our classroom environments, we are also changing and transforming ourselves as educators. Just as with children, we personally must strive to reach beyond our limits and embrace our true potential. We must welcome change and the opportunities it brings . . . for in doing so, we recognize the unique and diverse attributes of each child and adult who makes up the human landscape of our classrooms. We must create an environment worthy of its inhabitants.

Guidepost 2

Meet the Basic Needs of All Children in Their Environments

Young children are in the process of becoming their best self. Full of life, innocence, and wonder, children bring their whole selves and basic needs to our classrooms. Meeting these critical and important needs in their first

learning environment is a remarkable opportunity for early learning professionals. Because we are ultimately responsible for shaping our classroom environments, it is important to create spaces where children feel welcome, included, secure, and experience a sense of belonging.

Guidepost 3

Provide Authentic Play Places for Young Children

Children are born creative beings and inherently wired to play. Their most natural state of being is playing. Each classroom moment is an exciting creative play opportunity for children to learn about their immediate worlds. It becomes important, then, to regard the landscapes of our classrooms as blank pallets—somewhat like theater stages—where children perform and act out their daily lives. The children are the performers and we are the stage directors. It is our responsibility, as effective stage directors, to offer authentic props and materials designed to transform children’s creative play into intricate stories of their lives.

Guidepost 4

Connect Children to Community

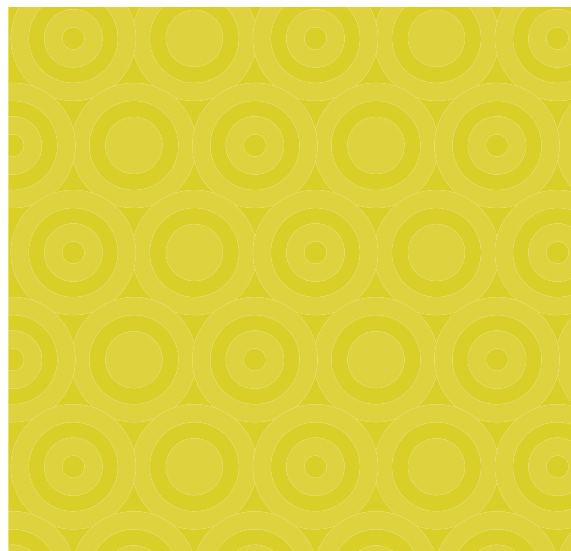
Children are a reflection of their communities. Children’s lives are enriched by understanding they

are an important part of their local neighborhoods and communities. This important understanding has a positive impact on how children view their own abilities to influence their worlds. If we believe this to be true, then it is critically necessary to create a strong connection between the classroom and children’s neighborhoods, communities, and the people who live within.

Guidepost 5

Naturalize Children’s Environments

Nature is the natural teacher for all of humankind. Children’s connection to nature is primary, timeless, and sacred. As educators, we must tap into this innate enthusiasm about the natural world. Providing ample outside time as well as infusing natural elements indigenous from your community into the classroom strengthens and stimulates children’s physical, cognitive, and emotional growth. It is our definitive responsibility to diligently and continually cultivate children’s personal relationships with the land, which will sustain their energies, wonder, and memories for a lifetime.





Alexander Graham Bell Montessori School (Wheeling, Illinois)

The Classroom Tapestry

An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet regardless of time, place, or circumstances.

The red thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.

—Ancient Chinese proverb

Tapestry of Life

There is an invisible thread of life that connects us all. It weaves in and out among us to create a unique tapestry of beauty and diversity. Beginning with the child and radiating out to the family, school, and community, this invisible thread joins us all together. This thread entwines everything and everyone—creating a tapestry of interdependency and interconnection impossible to unravel.

Imagine this tapestry with many threads of various colors weaving in and out—forming patterns of colors and shapes—creating a beautiful piece of art. Traditionally, a tapestry is woven on a loom where there are two sets of interlaced threads, those running parallel to the length and those running parallel to the width. As the colored threads are woven back and forth, the combining colors create new colors and shades. Each single colored thread

connects with another thread to create a pattern. They are bound together; they all connect.

Life is much like a tapestry. Life is filled with people, places, experiences, and relationships—all interwoven with many cross threads binding us all together. Just as a tapestry is filled with fibers and



Creative Care for Children (Santa Barbara, California)

layers of various textures, so is the world in which we live. Some of the fibers are rough; some are smooth. The threads are of many tones of colors—all beautiful and all unique. Some colors complement, while others dramatically clash. Yet when intricately woven together, the differences disappear and the tapestry's lavish beauty appears. Eminent psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner understood life's tapestry and the importance of interconnectedness when he proposed the human ecological theory of children's development.

Similar to the assortment of threads in an intricately woven tapestry, the lives of young children also include numerous and varied threads or environments such as family, school, peers, and community. The ground on which we walk, schools we attend, and retail establishments in the community we frequent are all common denominators. The relationships we have with each other within these physical locations are the connecting denominators. It is the interconnectedness of these threads that create the tapestries of young children's lives.

Bronfenbrenner's Tapestry and Its Threads

The general framework for this book is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, which involves interrelationships between humans and their environments. Surrounded by these complex systems of relationships, the child's

development is affected by multiple tapestry threads. These interrelated threads include—but extend beyond—home, school, and community environments in which young children live. Bronfenbrenner’s model provides the whole picture of the developing child by taking into consideration the powerful influences of five systems in which relationships and interactions form patterns that affect human development. These systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Woven together, they become the tapestry of life.

- **Microsystem.** The child’s interactions and relationships with people or objects in the immediate environment make up this system. Positive and supportive interactions are naturally important to a child’s growth.
- **Mesosystem.** This system refers to how two individuals or groups immediately affecting the child interact with one another. Nearest the child is the family system. The family is an ever-changing social system in which members continually adapt to address one another’s needs. Many life transitions, such as the birth of a child, a new job for the mother, and beginning school, all contribute to interactions that can affect a child’s development. Also likely to influence development are the educational or care systems, including the relationships within and among these environments. Communication between the

child’s family and school is an example of a mesosystem. The quality of the positive communications and relationships between school and home supports the growth and development of the child. When these links are strong, there is likely to be more growth in all



Community Play School (Baltimore, Maryland)

developmental areas, including the child's academic competence.

- **Exosystem.** The exosystem refers to environments in which the young child is not always an active participant, but is affected in one or more systems or

environments. This system includes social services, school and community boards, parents' employment, extended family, and mass media. A parent, for example, may work in a family-friendly company that allows flexibility in work hours so a parent can attend



Early Learning Children's Community (Lansing, Michigan)

center or school functions, provides employer-supported child care, or offers extended school care.

- **Macrosystem.** The macrosystem setting consists of the society and subculture in which the child belongs. The macrosystem includes belief systems, socio-economic status, patterns of social interaction, and lifestyles. Examples of macrosystems include the country of the United States, ethnic ancestry, socio-economic factors, urban or rural living conditions, and religious beliefs. These larger characteristics of society influence the child's development. A child, for example, born to a family living in poverty in a rural area experiences life in a much different way than a child born to an affluent family living in New York City.
- **Chronosystem.** The chronosystem includes the transitions experienced during a person's lifetime. A classic example is divorce, which is a major transition for the parents and the child. Although the divorce definitely affects the parents' relationships, the breakup also potentially affects the child's behavior and social-emotional development. The chronosystem includes historical experiences and present-day experiences as well. As an example, parents in the 1940s were concerned about polio, but today's parents may be more concerned about public and personal safety.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory includes many different systems thought to impact children's development, and he believed that these systems or

circles of influence act in tandem. Each system has an invisible thread that winds in and out among us—from one environment to the other—just like a beautiful tapestry. Like the artisan who focuses on the tapestry's intricacies and patterns, it is equally important for teachers creating and designing classroom landscapes to focus on the intersection and powerful influences of the threads in children's lives.

Newmark's Five Critical Emotional Needs of Childhood

The child is at the center of this tapestry of life envisioned by Bronfenbrenner. As young children develop, their environments and accompanying experiences become embedded in the architecture of their brains. According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child's 2011 research, children who have positive emotional experiences have a greater sense of belonging. Whether at home, in the community, or at school, children need to feel that they have an authentic role to play in these environments. This means children must be viewed and listened to as important people with individual and important needs, according to teacher educators Ellen Lynn Hall and Jennifer Kofkin Rudkin.

In the book *How to Raise Emotionally Healthy Children: Meeting the Five Critical Needs of Children . . . and Parents Too*, Gerald Newmark highlights the critical emotional needs of young children.

- **Respected.** For children to feel respected, they need to be treated in a courteous, thoughtful, attentive, and civil manner. Children crave to be considered as individuals who are deserving of the same courtesy and consideration as others.
- **Important.** Children need to believe they are an important force in the world. They must be of these opinions: I have value. I am useful. I have power. I am somebody.
- **Accepted.** For children to feel accepted, they need to be assured that they have a right to their own feelings, opinions, ideas, concerns, wants, and needs. Regardless of their physical or cognitive capabilities, children are their own unique individuals.
- **Included.** Children need to feel that they belong, are part of the environment, are connected to other people, and can make important and significant contributions to their group.
- **Secure.** For children, security means creating a positive and consistent environment where people care about one another and show it through their actions and words. Although the physical structure exists for children to feel safe and protected, there is enough flexibility and freedom for children to actively participate and influence the world in which they live.

We know children do not develop in a vacuum. Rather, their development is connected to many different systems. All these different systems or

environments—such as family, school, and community—interconnect to create the tapestry of young children’s lives.

As a teacher, you might be wondering how you can create an environment that reflects Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of child development. What can you do to promote interrelationships and magnify connections to the classroom with parents and the community? How can you use Newmark’s five critical needs to redesign and strengthen your classroom’s tapestry? You will find many creative and meaningful ideas in the sections that follow.



Community Play School's Core Values

Because children deserve to . . .

- Be emotionally safe
- Be known as individuals
- Show all emotions
- Feel brave
- Have authentic relationships
- Be children
- Have privacy, materials, choice, and responsibility
- Have respect
- Be heard
- Wonder
- Have empathy/compassion
- Have supervision
- Feel powerful
- Be capable

We . . .

- See them as human beings with aspirations, shortcomings, abilities, and feelings
- Trust that children do things for valid reasons
- Create curriculum together
- Approach each situation individually
- Support and nurture them
- Guide them
- Give them time and space
- Give them freedom and responsibility
- Give them interesting provocations
- Provide a variety of approaches

We believe . . .

- In materials and environments that create wonder, choice, ownership, privacy, and idleness (environmental)
- That children construct their own knowledge of themselves, others, and the world, through experience, time, and space (cognitive)
- In building strong relationships and connections between children and adults (and within themselves) (social-emotional)
- In children's physical well-being (physical)
- In the importance of child development and intentional interactions with individuals (role of teacher)
- That childhood is in danger and in need of protection (advocacy)

Strengthening Your Classroom Tapestry

Bronfenbrenner's model and the critical emotional needs outlined by Newmark focus on the child first and foremost, and then consider the influences of other elements or threads in a child's life. For example, one of the ways children can learn about respect is to know how it feels to be respected by observing parents

or teachers treating each other in a respectful way (teacher and family thread). When the teacher allows children to design their own spaces, it helps them feel important (teacher and child thread). Accepting children as individuals in their own right with their own uniqueness as well as representing families in the classroom environment helps them feel accepted (child and family thread). Bringing in artifacts and natural



objects from the local community or neighborhood offers opportunities for children to experience and understand their immediate world (child and community thread). These personal contributions and collaborations help children feel included. Security means the teacher creates a positive environment where children can be children, and their differences are not only accepted but rejoiced and celebrated. In a secure environment, enough structure exists for children to feel safe and protected, yet the environment provides opportunities for challenges, choices, and taking chances (teacher and child thread).

To create a strong classroom environment, it is important to be aware of each of the important threads in your classroom. Incorporate Bronfenbrenner's model and Newmark's five critical emotional needs into your classroom's tapestry. By intentionally including their theories and ideas, you can weave a beautiful tapestry taking into consideration the interrelationships of humans and their environment as well as the critical needs that must be met for children to succeed. Take a look at the following ideas for strengthening your classroom's tapestry with the child, family, and community threads.

Child's Thread

Welcome stones. Each child has a unique stone to call his own, which helps the child feel important. As a parent and child enter the classroom, they find the child's name on one of the stones and place it in the basket. Placing the stone in the basket symbolizes the transfer from the family to the classroom. The child feels secure and included, knowing that he is part of a larger group of children who have also placed their stones in the basket.



The Nature Preschool at Irvine Nature Center (Owings Mills, Maryland)



Child Development and Learning Laboratory at Central Michigan University (Mount Pleasant, Michigan)

Invitation to come in. Placing a collection of interesting and intentionally organized materials in a location visible from the classroom's door sparks a child's curiosity. Igniting children's motivation to come in, these evocative objects send a message of welcome to entering children, making them feel secure in the transition from the home to school.

Hint: Consider including an invitation area as part of your permanent classroom arrangement. Positioned near the classroom's entry, this area could be a small table, shelf, or rug. Emulate children's museums by offering objects that draw young children like magnets and trigger their active engagement and natural



Milgard Child Development Center at Pierce College (Lakewood, Washington)

curiosity. By continually refreshing the objects and making the area feel new, you can ensure that the invitation area always pulls in children.

My house. Including photographs of children's homes in the classroom creates a classroom connection and sends a message to children that they and their families are important and respected. Placing a framed picture of a child's home in the construction area, for example, encourages children to design and construct their classmate's home from the blocks and building materials. Having framed pictures of children's homes in the writing area promotes conversation, story making, and journal entries. Displaying an image of a

child's home near the easel also encourages children to re-create the home with paints.

Collaborative artistry. Give children a chance to be artistic in a shared way and have their work displayed. This child was one of the artisans who felt important and included as he carefully selected and then wove ribbon, beads, and colorful strands of thread through the chicken wire, which was invitingly placed on a nearby table. After children experienced the textures and colors of the weaving materials, the beautiful tapestry was displayed on the classroom wall for all to see and enjoy.



Children's Choice (Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada)

I'm here! Children feel important when they are asked to find their names as part of the morning ritual. By sticking their names in the pumpkin, children have an active and visual way to feel included. Accomplished with the help of parents, this activity helps children transition from the security of parents' arms to the pre-school classroom.

Hint: After the pumpkin has been used for a while, it becomes poked full of holes. Try placing the pumpkin outside to see what creatures might come visit and check it out.



Chippewa Nature Center's Nature Preschool (Midland, Michigan)

Transitioning activity. You can position a basket of shells (or pinecones, rocks, or leaves) outside the classroom door. Before entering, the child selects a shell, brings

it into the classroom, and places it in another basket just inside the door. This daily ritual helps children feel secure and included in the classroom community.



Little One Family Center (Boston, Massachusetts)

Family's Thread

Family puzzles. To honor the uniqueness of children and families, you can offer a blank puzzle piece to adults and children to create drawings showcasing their personalities. Each piece displays the adult's or child's creativity using vibrant colors, playful characters, and abstract drawings. The individual pieces can be put back together to form a unified picture highlighting a sense of community among all the families and children in the center.



Early Learning Children's Community (Lansing, Michigan)

You belong. Soft lighting, a sheer fabric drape, an inspirational quote, and natural elements are inviting and cozy as children and their families are welcomed into the classroom, helping them not only to feel included and secure, but to believe that they belong right here in this beautiful spot.



Our memories. Children and families write down their favorite memories of the school year, which are posted in the hallway. Displaying notes from children and their families in an area where

parents gather creates a sense of belonging. Children and parents see themselves and others represented, which gives a feeling of acceptance of each child's individuality.



Nature's Way Preschool (Kalamazoo, Michigan)



Tiny Tot Preschool (Houston, Texas)

Make it a family affair. Acknowledge all the men in your children’s lives by requesting they bring in a man’s tie—it doesn’t matter if the tie belonged to grandpa, dad, uncle, brother, neighbor, or friend. Everyone will feel important and part of the ceremony as they honor the special man in their lives. Use women’s scarves for a similar display of honor.

Hint: For displaying ties, buy a piece of lattice (either plastic or wood) at the local home improvement store. Plastic is lighter and easier to hang, but wood is more authentic. Using heavy-type glue, affix small pieces of wood to the lattice’s back and then mount the lattice to the wall. The wood pieces make the lattice stick out from the wall, making it easier to hang



College of the Canyons Early Childhood Center (Santa Clarita, California)

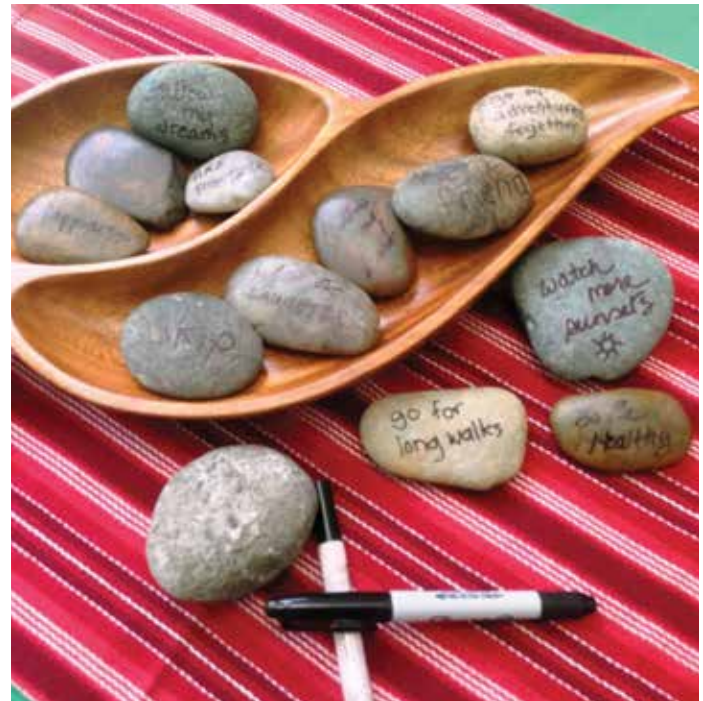
and display the ties. You can try adhesive strips for damage-free hanging.

Family mobile. Provide wood paint stirrers, and ask children to create a colorful wooden slat to represent their families or selves as part of the classroom community. Drill a hole in the top of each paint stirrer, string them together on a tree branch, and suspend the mobile from the ceiling. When completed, children feel accepted as a part of a larger community in their classroom and at the school. Children felt respected and important when this masterpiece was displayed

at a college campus art gallery. The whole community could see the children's beautiful expressions of art.

Wish rocks. Give families the opportunity to express wishes and dreams for their children. Collect stones from the beach, river's edge, or garden shop, and place them in the entryway along with pens for writing messages. Display the wish rocks in a beautiful container such as a wooden tray or apothecary jar. Children are immediately attracted to their parents' wish rocks, and they find joy in handling them.

Hint: Select stones that have smooth surfaces (such as river rocks) and an open area for writing.





United States Air Force Child Development Center (Germany)

Community's Thread

Community culture. New Orleans is known for Mardi Gras and its famous beads. Because beads are so popular in New Orleans, most families have strings of beads tucked away in a closet or junk drawer. Recognizing beads as part of the community's culture, a center capitalized on their popularity. A note asking for bead donations was sent home to the parents, and children brought in a treasure trove of shiny and colorful beads. Children felt important and accepted as they collaborated to make a collage that truly reflects their local community.

Hint: What's important or interesting in your community? Is it jazz music, ethnic food, art galleries, an evergreen forest, a

lake, pumpkin patches, the ocean, a skyscraper, an automobile assembly line, grape vineyards, a bowling alley, a historic park, cow pastures, a field museum, a pig farm, a bridge, a symphony orchestra, a flower garden, waterfalls, a railroad station, a button factory, a horse ranch, a steel plant, a tourist attraction, celery flats, a general store, a blueberry festival, beach art, walking trails, the Kentucky Derby, a basket weaver, a corn field, a canyon, a bee farm, a rodeo, a farmer's market, a pottery store, a seaport, windmills, a brick making factory, or the luggage capital of the world? Look around your community with a new perspective—find something interesting, historical, imaginative, and captivating. And figure out how to bring some of these interesting facets of the community into the lives of children in your classroom.





Bellaboo's Children's Play and Discovery Center (Lake Station, Indiana)

City blocks. It is easy to bring the local community into your classroom. You or the children can take photos of their community's buildings including schools, police or fire stations, the library, doctor or dentist offices, animal hospitals, pharmacies, hospitals, and even their own homes. Display the community's images as inspiration for this project. Provide wood pieces and paint, and let the children paint the town! The artisans feel important and included when their neighborhood establishments become a significant part of the classroom.

Hint: Purchase a 2- by 4-inch piece of wood at the local home improvement store. This is a common size of wood, so it should not be difficult to find. You might be able to persuade someone at the store to cut the wood into various lengths, including a few triangle shapes for building roofs. If children use tempera to paint the wood pieces, find time when children are not in the classroom and spray their work with clear acrylic paint to seal the paintings.



The Adventure Club (St. John, Indiana)

Community classroom names. This classroom artwork highlights the cityscape and all the buildings and factories in the area. What do your children know about? What is a famous spot or common area for families to gather? Select a classroom name reflecting your community. It could be based on a neighborhood name near your school or an area of the city or town that has a lake, river, or mountain.

By representing and acknowledging the local community and neighborhood in the classroom, you help children understand that they are a part of something bigger than their own home and family. They feel accepted because they share the recognition and knowledge of these landmarks with their classmates. And they feel a connection with the past and present as these common community landmarks are reflected in

their everyday play and learning.

Hint: You could have classroom names reflecting the geographical terrain such as Rocky Mountains, Hudson River, Painted Desert, Grand Canyon, or Niagara Falls. Classrooms could be named after local wildflowers (bluebonnets or violets) or native tree species (birchwood or hickory). Or consider naming classrooms after interesting community monuments or local businesses.



Local treasures. Children who collect artifacts and other local treasures become familiar with the local community's natural world. Displaying local flora and giving opportunities to manipulate and experience these beautiful objects helps children recognize, for example, types and names of plants growing in their neighborhood, community, or region of the country. When they bring these items into the classroom environment to share, they may discover that other children found something similar. With this recognition, children feel accepted as important members of the classroom and community.



Milestones (Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada)



Chippewa Nature Center's Nature Preschool (Midland, Michigan)

My town. These images from the local community were taken by the teacher and attached to blocks with clear contact paper. When children bring in images from places of interest near their homes and these are mounted on the blocks and placed in the block center,

they relate to the images and feel that they are part of a larger group.

Hint: You can use a glue sealer (such as Mod Podge) from the local craft store to attach images to blocks for increased durability.

City blueprints. Check with a local architectural firm to see if they will donate old blueprints to use as a construction base or for wrapping cardboard boxes for city buildings. Children feel important and valued when they receive real-life materials for their projects.

Family blocks. For a weekend project, send white cardboard blocks home for children and parents to create as a family. Do not give them specific directions on what to do with the blocks. Just tell them to have fun, use their creativity, and create a block representative of their family. These family blocks make great additions to the home-living, block, or dramatic-play centers. The blocks can also be used as a strategy for denoting children's arrival into the classroom. When



Community Play School (Baltimore, Maryland)



Chippewa Nature Center's Nature Preschool (Midland, Michigan)

a child comes into the classroom, she can find her family's block and put it in a special place to celebrate her arrival. Children feel included and accepted as they recognize their own family among the collection of family blocks displayed. Children see all the different types of families (blended families, various ethnicities, and extended and single-parent families) living in a community and begin to understand that they are part of a bigger whole.

We Must Begin

It has been said that the environment communicates values. If we are to value children's basic needs, then it is critically important to strengthen the connections

Community Blocks

by Rebecca Kreth

Our idea for creating community blocks came to be one day while observing our young Native children learning about community members. Our curriculum had scripted notes and photos showing people dressed as what is commonly seen as a firefighter, law enforcement officer, or mail delivery person. These commercially purchased images of community helpers did not accurately reflect our children's lives. Children's interest appeared to be distracted when the teacher asked them to identify each community member. Perhaps this was because our Native children have their own community to which they belong (such as tribal health buildings, the school, and offices). These community buildings are all located on ancestral lands, surrounded by the natural beauty of the area, and connected to tribal histories, celebrations, and traditions.

As a teaching team, we decided to photograph the children's beautiful surroundings, including the building structures, mountains, waters, bridges, trains, restaurants, and natural landscapes. We then found woodworkers in the area who donated

their block ends from construction of cabinetry and shelving. We collected blocks of all sizes and shapes, and then glued and sealed our photos to the blocks of wood. After we had collected and made approximately twenty blocks for each classroom, we presented the blocks to the children, and they were immediately enthralled. They exclaimed, "That's where my mom works!" "That's my school!" or "That's where I go to the doctor!" Children were able to engage in conversations about their community from a place of knowledge and meaningful experience. These blocks have stayed in the classrooms and continued to engage the children in learning not only about their tribal community but the larger urban community in which they live.

Many children in our classrooms are from a growing number of different cultures; they are looking for connections, seeking to belong, integrating their authentic communities into an understanding of the greater world. As educators of young children, it is important to be mindful of the place and history of all children.

between our classroom and children's families and their communities.

We cannot underestimate the power and influence of our classroom environments on children's growth and development. And we cannot overlook our responsibilities to craft environments reflective of our children, their families, and the communities in which they live. Make the commitment to change. Begin.

Begin by critically evaluating your classroom. Assess the strength of the threads connecting children, families, and communities by answering the questions on the What's Your Classroom Tapestry? questionnaire. Once you have determined its strength, use some of the ideas presented in this chapter to create a beautiful tapestry. Make Bronfenbrenner and Newmark proud!



What's Your Classroom Tapestry?

Use this questionnaire to determine if your classroom offers some of the threads (child, family, or community) of Bronfenbrenner's tapestry, and provides opportunities for children to feel respected, included, secure, accepted, and important.

Directions: Select A, B, or C for each item listed below.

A = Strongly agree

B = Agree

C = Strongly disagree

_____ 1. There is space provided near the classroom entryway that includes at least two welcoming features (such as bench or chair, basket of books, framed photographs of families, or table lamp with soft light) giving children and parents a comfortable place to transition from home to school. (Threads: child and family. Basic needs: feel accepted, important, included, and secure)

_____ 2. At least one transitioning activity (such as welcoming stones) helps children transition from home to school. (Threads: child and family. Basic needs: feel accepted, included, and secure)

_____ 3. There is at least one evocative object, provocation, or invitation to engage children that

is visible from the classroom entryway, which is specifically designed to help children transition from home to school and to capture their attention and curiosity. (Threads: child and family. Basic needs: feel accepted and included)

_____ 4. There is at least one element or visual image (such as community blocks or cityscapes) reflecting the local community in the classroom. (Threads: child and community. Basic needs: feel accepted and included)

_____ 5. There are at least three locally found, natural elements (such as seashells, pinecones, or tree bark) accessible to children for exploration, which are frequently refreshed and changed. (Threads: child and community. Basic needs: feel included)

_____ 6. There are displays and learning materials specifically designed to honor both teachers' and children's families and uniqueness (Threads:

child, family, and community. Basic Needs: feel respected, important, and accepted)

Scoring:

This tool helps assess the strength of your classroom's tapestry. Remember, the commitment to Bronfenbrenner's tapestry of life and Newmark's basic needs is an ongoing process of learning, so there are no correct answers.

If you responded frequently with an *A*, you are well on your way to a beautiful and strong classroom tapestry meeting the needs of all those connected to your classroom.

If you responded frequently with a *B*, you may have some additional threads to weave into your existing classroom tapestry.

If you responded frequently with a *C*, you may want to consider implementing the ideas in this



chapter to begin weaving the various threads of life into your classroom tapestry.

TRANSFORM ORDINARY CLASSROOMS INTO REFLECTIVE AND MEANINGFUL ENVIRONMENTS

An early childhood classroom should reinforce and enhance young children's sense of belonging and connection to their environment, each other, their families, their school, and their community. ***Rethinking the Classroom Landscape*** invites educators to reevaluate the traditional classroom, with inspirational examples showing how to weave elements that reflect each center's community into the classroom activities, design, and decoration.

Colorful photos from diverse early childhood classrooms illustrate easy-to-implement ideas that educators can use immediately. All of the ideas are based on five guideposts to help create environments that vividly connect children with their surrounding flora, fauna, geography, topography, and past and present community.



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