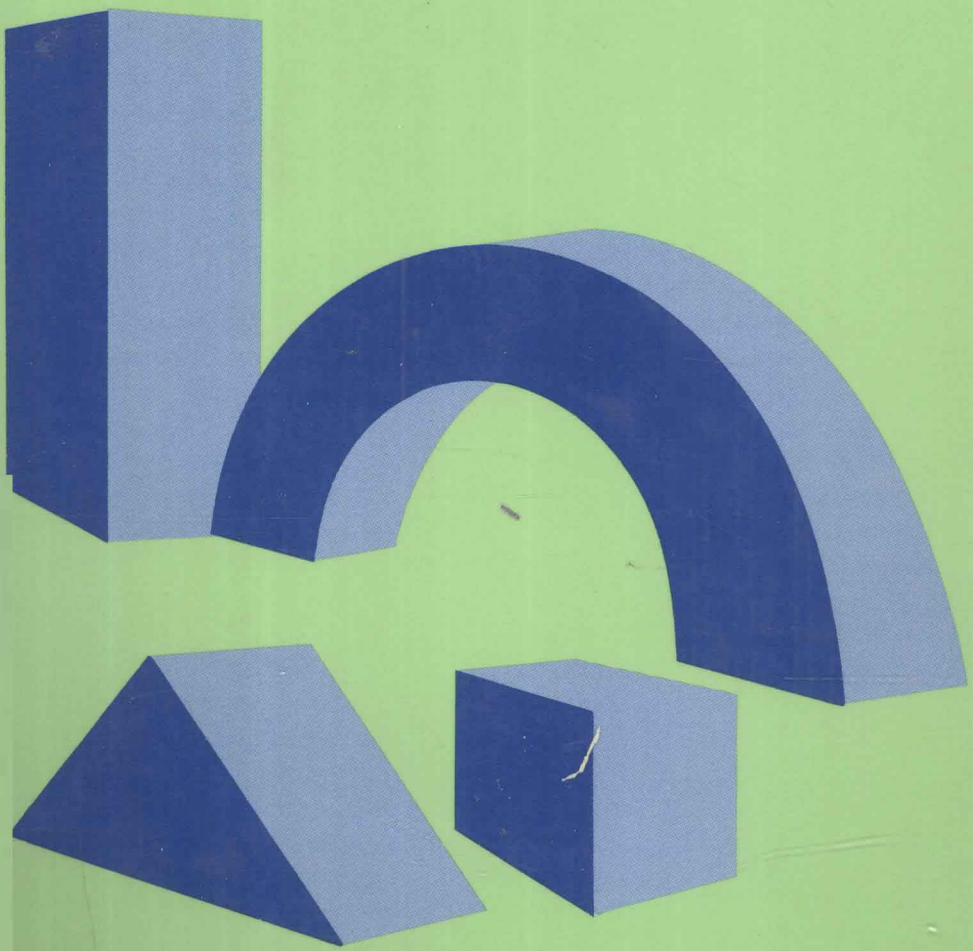
THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

AN INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY



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THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: An Instructional Strategy

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An
Instructional Strategy

Dedicated to
Lorraine Suina and Eleanor Warren
Mavis Martin and Lucy Laughlin

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FOREWORD

The prominent literature of education today, especially the new genre associated with "effective schools," has a defensive character; it tends to support a narrow view of schools and their possibilities with achievement as measured by outcomes on a range of standardized tests characterized as the overarching mission of schools. Formula driven, the roles of teachers, principals, and students are circumscribed by precise, rather confining definitions. While there is a good deal of attention in this literature to the need for high expectations, "effective schools" are described for the most part as minimalist settings. It is not an inspiring literature. It doesn't challenge individuals in schools to be thoughtful, creative in their uses of materials and settings, to view classrooms and schools as educative morally and aesthetically as well as academically, as places where fragile human relationships are cemented, where language learning and communication have meaning beyond simple constructs, where a wide variety of community connections and continuities are affirmed as well as challenged, where divergence of thought and action are valued and the present lives of children acknowledged and respected. *The Learning Environment,* by Joseph Suina and Catherine Loughlin is qualitatively different and for that reason is particularly attractive to me and others with whom I work.

The Learning Environment is about the use of space writ large; active rather than passive metaphors dominate its pages. It captures much of what John Dewey implied when he encouraged teachers to be "students of teaching," persons who developed and maintained a reflective capacity, becoming in the process clear about their intentions and able to make independent judgments about their classrooms. Suina and Loughlin quickly dismiss the architecture, textbooks, size of tables or

chairs, or the number of chalkboards and bulletin boards as critical determiners of the environment. They focus their attention instead on teacher thought and decision making. They tend to ask in response to a teacher's concern about children's lack of independence, for example, what have you done to encourage independence? Do children know where the materials they need are stored? How are they organized? Are the materials easily accessible? In response to a concern about children's lack of interest in science or reading they might ask: What kinds of materials do you use? How varied are they? Where are they placed in the classroom? How are they displayed? What else is near them? How visible are they from different parts of the room? Where does science fit in the daily schedule?

Most of us know that when we observe an object carefully from a different perspective, we often see it differently, gaining in the process fresh understanding. We know also from our experience that our interests, moods, openness to new ideas, and willingness to engage particular materials are often influenced by environmental factors. Why then are we so encumbered, as Suina and Loughlin suggest, by "habitual ways of seeing and thinking about classrooms" that we fail to see the myriad alternative possibilities? Shaking that encumbrance is a major object of this book and it accomplishes that end by integrating in a consonant manner a progressive philosophical position about teaching and learning with concrete, real classroom examples about "arranging the environment." To assist teachers who wish to begin an examination of their classroom environments, the authors provide large numbers of thought-provoking illustrations as well as several interesting and helpful methods for teachers to use in "checking their environment" and relating the environment to learning and behavioral concerns.

I began this foreword by commenting negatively about much of the contemporary literature of education. *The Learning Environment* is an important contrast; it helps reaffirm in a practical, understandable manner the critical importance of the teacher and the professionalism inherent in the teacher's role. It places before us a vision of what is possible for children and their learning when teacher intelligence is engaged and respected.

I have appreciated my interactions with the authors over a number of years as they have formulated their ideas and tested them with teachers in large numbers of classrooms. I am pleased that they have brought their efforts together in this wonderful book.

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PREFACE

The arrangement of the environment significantly influences those who occupy it, as has long been recognized by professionals in fields other than education. Every year department store owners, museum curators, optometrists, and countless managers of public and private organizations spend millions of dollars on environments that are designed to produce some desired attitude or behavior on the part of their occupants. Schools and classrooms can benefit from the same careful attention to environment, yet current notions about effective physical environments for classrooms seem to begin and end with the architectural design and basic furnishings. The essential space and necessary number of desks, chairs, books, and shelves are carefully provided. After that, most of the attention given the environment focuses on making and maintaining an interesting and pleasant setting for work.

Until recently, arrangement of the classroom environment has not been widely appreciated as a tool to support the learning process. The literature and teacher training specifically designed to examine the use of the environment in sound teaching practice have been limited to specialized fields of education such as Montessori and other early childhood programs. Since few other teachers have been helped to appreciate the influence of environmental organization, learning environments tend to be arranged in uninformed ways. However, classroom environment is much more than a place to house books, desks, and materials. Carefully and knowingly arranged, the environment adds a significant dimension to a student's educational experience by engaging interest, offering information, stimulating the use of skills, communicating limits and expectations, facilitating learning activities, promoting self-direction,

and through these effects supporting and strengthening the desire to learn.

This book offers both a conceptual framework and practical guidance for arranging the learning environment. It will give classroom teachers and future teachers in elementary and early childhood settings a better understanding of the effects of the teacher-arranged environment in which they spend their days with children. Through its text and illustrations, it presents practical information and procedures for making the learning environment supportive. Examples and drawings of environmental arrangements from real classrooms and step-by-step environmental assessment activities will help teachers examine their own learning environments and their effects on classroom behaviors and events. Principals, teacher supervisors, and other school personnel who assist and evaluate teaching will also benefit from viewing the learning environment as an instructional strategy, as shown and described in this book.

We wish to thank all the teachers who invited us into their classrooms and centers to see the learning environment at work, to observe children responding to environmental messages, to sketch and photograph environmental arrangements, and to think together about effective environments. We hope that, as they recognize their own learning environments in these pages, they will remember those visits with pleasure, as we do.

CONTENTS

Foreword xiii

Preface xv

1. The Learning Environment: A Conceptual View 1
   - The Architectural Facility *1*
   - The Arranged Environment *4*
   - Environment as a Tool *5*
     - Predicting Behavior *5*
     - Environment as Teacher *6*
     - Management Tasks *7*
   - Tasks of Environmental Arrangement *8*
     - Spatial Organization *8*
     - Provisioning for Learning *9*
     - Materials Arrangement *10*
     - Organizing for Special Purposes *11*
   - Building a Conceptual View of Environment *12*
     - Subject Matter and Behavior *12*
     - Designing Activities and Offering Materials *13*
     - Learning Materials and Material Holders *15*
     - Child Environment and Adult Environment *16*
   - Environmental Analysis to Solve Problems *17*

SECTION I: ORGANIZATION OF SPACE

2. Finding Space for Learning 21
   - The Too-Small Classroom *21*

Visualizing Classroom Space 24
Seeing Teacher Space as Learning Space 25
Looking Beyond the Real Classroom 26
Visualizing More than Four Corners 27
Discovering Small Unseen Spaces 30
Old Ideas About Room Arrangement 32
Thinking It Must Be All the Same 32
The Middle of the Room 34
Thinking About Seating First 36
Thinking About Carpet as Boundaries 37
Thinking Furniture Must Be Parallel 38
Thinking Built-ins Are Special 38
Space from the Child's Perspective 40
Looking from the Child's Eye Level 41
Observing Space Use 42
Seeing Oneself in the Child's Place 42
Checking Your Own Environment 43

3. ORGANIZING SPACE IN THE ENVIRONMENT 47
The Space in the Middle of the Room 47
Classroom Space and Behavior 50
Places for Activity 51
Potential Units 52
Making Use of Potential Units 54
Activity Units 58
Space for Movement 60
Surrounding Space 60
Paths 62
Dead Space 65
Defining Spaces in the Environment 67
Checking Your Own Environment 70

SECTION II: PROVISIONING FOR LEARNING

4. A BASIC FRAMEWORK FOR PROVISIONING 75
Which Provisions? 75
Six Categories for Provisioning 78
Raw Materials for Many Activities 79
Different Kinds of Raw Materials 79
Contributions of Raw Materials 82
Tools for a Variety of Functions 82
Different Kinds of Tools 83
Contributions of Tools 85

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Information for Learning 86
Different Kinds of Information Sources 87
Contributions of Information Sources 90
Containers for Storing and Arranging 90
Different Kinds of Containers 90
Contributions of Containers 91
Individual and Group Work Spaces 93
Different Kinds of Work Spaces 93
Contributions of Work Spaces 93
Display 95
Different Kinds of Display Facilities 95
Contributions of Display Facilities 98
Provisions in a Dual Role 98
Checking Your Own Environment 99

5. PROVISIONING FOR MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES 102
The Trader 102
The Possibilities of Variety 104
Language 104
Thinking and Concepts 106
Skills 107
Creativity 110
Selecting Materials for Holding Power 111
Reflecting the Community 114
Finding Learning Materials 117
Trading 117
Loaned Materials 117
Bargain Shopping 118
Donated Materials 119
Checking Your Community's Resources 120

SECTION III: ARRANGING LEARNING MATERIALS

6. ARRANGEMENT AND DISPLAY 125
The Games Shelf 126
Holders and Organizers 128
Providing Visual Access to Materials 131
Making Materials Visible 133
Focus on Materials 135
Differentiating Similar Materials 137
Providing Physical Access to Materials 139
Arranging for Reach Level 139
Arranging for Easy Carrying 139
Facilitating Return of Materials 143

Display to Clarify Activity *145*
Checking Your Own Environment *147*

7. Distribution of Materials 149
A Classroom with Centralized Storage *149*
Materials Distribution and Management *154*
Decentralizing Learning Materials *155*
Getting Materials and Work Spaces Together *156*
Smoothing Routines and Transitions *159*
Distributing Materials in New Ways *161*
Grouping Diverse Materials *161*
Grouping Materials to Engage Interest *163*
Distributing Material Groupings *165*
Combining Materials for Complexity *167*
Checking Your Own Environment *170*

SECTION IV: ORGANIZING FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

8. Promoting Literacy 175
If I Didn't Make Them, They'd Never Write *175*
Arranging for Reading and Writing *178*
Opportunities for Recording *179*
References Where They Are Needed *180*
Places to Research and Write *182*
Things to Talk, Read, and Write About *183*
Displaying the Written Word *187*
Appreciative Display *187*
Readable Display *188*
Keeping Print Current *190*
The Functional Use of Print *191*
Posting Essential Information *192*
Communicating and Sharing in Writing *194*
Labeling *194*
Literature Experiences *198*
Highlighting Books *202*
Creating Literature *203*
Checking Your Own Environment *204*

9. Supporting Children with Special Needs 208
The New Children Are Coming *208*

Environmental Barriers and Supports *212*
Spatial Organization *212*
Provisioning for Learning *214*
Materials Arrangement *215*
Special Arrangements for Special Needs *216*
Organizing for Physical Problems *216*
Reducing Visual and Auditory Stimuli *219*
Offering Maximum Visual Information *221*
Arranging for Limited Vision *223*
Meeting Varied Achievement Levels *227*
Checking Your Own Environment *228*

Appendix: Environmental Problem Solving 233

Bibliography 241

Index 245

CHAPTER 1

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
A Conceptual View

For many years the school architect was considered the creator of the learning environment while the teacher was seen as housekeeper, arranging, provisioning, and decorating. Teachers considered the learning environment as a kind of scenery for teaching and learning, a pleasant yet inert background for classroom life.

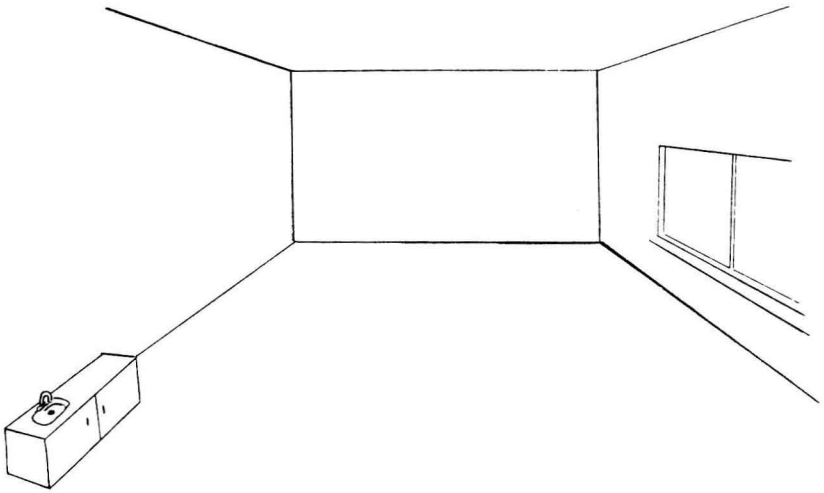
However, there is another way of looking at the learning environment and the teacher's role in creating it within an architectural facility. This view recognizes the teacher-arranged environment as an active and pervasive influence on the lives of children and teachers throughout the school day. In the processes of teaching and learning, the physical environment arranged by the teacher has two functions. It provides the setting for learning and at the same time acts as a participant in teaching and learning.

The Architectural Facility

The physical learning environment has two major elements, the architectural facility and the arranged environment. These two interact to strengthen or limit the environment's contributions to children's learning. Each is essential and each influences children's behavior and learning, but the architectural facility and arranged environment have different functions and characteristics.[1]

The architectural facility provides the setting for all the interactions among people and materials that will occur in the learning process. It

[1]*Catherine E. Loughlin, "Understanding the Learning Environment,"* Elementary School Journal *78 (1977): 125–31.*



Architectural facilities establish basic spaces of the environment.

establishes the basic space of the environment and organizes access to external spaces and resources. The architectural facility determines basic conditions of light, sound, temperature, and intrusion or separation between groups of people. It provides qualities like color, texture, level, and softness or hardness to the spaces that can be arranged for children's learning.

Today's school facilities tend to offer flexibility in space divisions and in access to indoor and outdoor areas for learning. Some offer considerable variety in the shapes, textures, levels, and sizes of spaces designed for learning. Contemporary school architects consult carefully with educators, community, and students to gain insights for effective design. Whenever possible, facility designers and curriculum planners work together to develop plans for the program and activities of the school's curriculum and for its architecture.[2]

Most architectural facilities are designed to meet school-wide purposes and needs, although there are sometimes special facilities designed for smaller units. Creative architectural designs for clusters or single classrooms depart from enclosed, rectangular, hard-edged, straight-row visions of the learning environment. Many offer soft and hard, curved and angled, smooth and textured, many-leveled surroundings, often flowing between indoor and outdoor spaces without barriers. Sometimes

[2]*Anthony S. Jones, "A New Breed of Learning Environment Consultants," in* Designing Learning Environments, *ed. Phillip J. Sleeman and D.M. Rockwell (New York: Longman, 1981), pp. 46–48.*

the specialized facility designs include furnishings, many fixed and some movable.[3]

School designs based on studies of current and projected program styles offer settings that are harmonious with those programs. In such facilities the development of the teacher-arranged environment is well supported by the setting, provided the teacher's plans and methods closely resemble the programs that were studied.[4] However, even with the closest possible match between facility and program style, the architectural facility can fulfill only some of the functions of the physical environment for learning; it is not, in itself, the learning environment. This is because architectural facilities are generalized and within the time frame of the school year tend to be static.

Architectural facilities are designed in terms of a generalized prediction of behaviors, activities, functioning levels of students, teaching purposes, and teaching styles associated with the planned curriculum. As the environment is put to use, a variety of teachers, each with a specific group of children, inhabit spaces within the facility. Each teacher has an agenda with its own set of behavior expectations, learning experiences, routines, skills to be practiced, and knowledge to be acquired. For each, the pattern is specific and related to the unique group of learners involved. The development of the arranged environment, so as to fit the specific children and the specific program, will be easier in a setting harmonious with the teacher's agenda than in a setting that conflicts. In even the best of facilities, however, teachers must further develop the generalized environment for specific purposes and groups.

There is considerable variation among architectural facilities in the proportion of fixed and movable features, and in the amount of flexibility offered. Yet within that portion of the facility in which an individual or teaching team works with children, the architectural environment tends to remain basically unchanged through the school year. Free-standing lofts are too heavy to be shifted often, movable walls aren't changed on a weekly basis, and folding partitions are treated like walls even when opened. Although children's competencies, skills, and interests change a good deal in the course of a school year, the architectural facility isn't easily changed to make day-to-day, immediate, short-term adaptations in spatial organization and material distribution patterns. Such adaptations are necessary responses to the continuous change of needs and activities associated with children's growth. The architectural facility

[3]*Anne P. Taylor and George Vlastos,* School Zone: Learning Environments for Children *(New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1975), pp. 58–61.*

[4]*Etta Proshansky and Maxine Wolfe, "The Physical Setting and Open Education," in* Learning Environments, *ed. Thomas G. David and Benjamin D. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 31–48.*

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