Create an Authentic, Inclusive Early Childhood Learning Environment for Teacher Candidates

How can early childhood teacher educators help college students experience a high-quality learning environment? By teaching in a model classroom! These ideas can spark ALL educators to revitalize their teaching environments. Donna Kirkwood and Elizabeth Beavers

“Plainly, the environment must be a living one, directed by a higher intelligence, arranged by an adult who is prepared for his mission.” Maria Montessori (as cited in Lillard, 1972, p. 85)

As the early childhood team—at the University of Houston Clear Lake—awaited the arrival of students for the spring semester, they were filled with excitement. The faculty had spent the last few months preparing a new classroom for their college students and couldn’t wait to see the looks on the teacher candidates’ faces when they finally arrived.

Since the onset of this project, the team members had brainstormed, begged for financial support and donations, ordered supplies, opened and unpacked more than 50 boxes, arranged and rearranged equipment, organized materials, added lots of personal touches (such as teacher-made materials, motivational signs and quotes, and decorations), and labeled everything. As former preschool teachers, the process of setting up a classroom environment was not new, but this time they were awaiting college students and ready for a revitalized mission.

Faculty were ready for a revitalized mission.

Why the Project Started

There are two typical settings in early childhood education at the university level: programs that have lab schools and programs that do not. The beauty of a lab school is that teacher candidates can see and interact with children in their own environment. They then take that information back to their classes to discuss, explore, and evaluate.

Unfortunately, lab schools are difficult to sustain and many colleges and universities are being forced to cut funding for or even close their lab schools (Bowers, 2000; Branscomb & McBride, 2004; McBride, 1996; McBride et al., 2012). In addition to the large financial commitment that lab schools require, the advent of professional development schools and the increasing need for full-time campus child care centers have circumvented the need for campus lab schools in some cases (Branscomb & McBride, 2005; Clark & Huber, 2005; McBride, 1996; McBride, et al., 2012).

But even with a lab school, higher education courses usually occur in classrooms that are used for all subjects and are equipped accordingly. When teaching early childhood education courses, many times discussions focus on how materials are used, how children interact with their environment, and how the environment impacts behavior and learning. Having a model setting where students can see and explore a high-quality environment can provide a frame of reference for learning about the varied benefits of intriguing classroom
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environs and in teaching about all aspects of early childhood education. It is sometimes difficult to adequately convey to teacher candidates how important the environment is when they work with children. Immersing them in an authentic classroom enables students to see the effects on children’s learning first-hand.

The Importance of High-Quality Learning Environments

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the physical environment in an early childhood classroom “reflects the goals, values, and expectations of the program” (2005, p. 9). The design of the classroom

• sets the mood for the interactions that occur,
• shapes the children’s attitudes about school and their growing self-concept, and
• promotes feelings of independence (Greenman, 2005).

A high-quality learning environment has accessible materials that promote growth in all areas of development—physical, cognitive, communication, social, and emotional—and is designed specifically for their learning and care. Further, the classroom itself provides the most effective manner to naturally assess children’s development and learning (Epstein, 2007).

As important as it is to provide a high-quality environment for children, an authentic learning environment is equally important for teacher candidates. Authentic learning requires providing relevant, real-world experiences in a meaningful context. Authentic learning environments in higher education enable students to experience various perspectives, thus promoting critical thinking and reflection. A high-quality authentic environment is one that offers both “cognitive authenticity” and “physical authenticity” (Herrington & Herrington, 2006, p. 3).

Therefore, the team wanted to set up an environment where students would be surrounded by and immersed in best practices.

The Journey to Create a Model Classroom

The journey started in the fall of 2011 when early childhood team members were told that they would be given a dedicated classroom in a newly renovated building. They knew that having their own classroom just for early childhood teacher candidates meant that they would have a place to store teaching materials and that class projects could be built upon week after week. Then the faculty took the opportunity a little further. What if they could get funding to truly set up some learning centers? What if they set it up like a real early childhood classroom? After the early childhood team focused on a shared vision, their minds went wild! They decided to set up a model early childhood classroom for their students and that’s exactly what they did!

After the Dean of the School of Education approved an initial budget, team members met with a local representative from a major educational supplier, other faculty within

Characteristics of an Authentic Learning Environment in Higher Education

- relevant, real-world experiences
- meaningful context
- perspectives that promote critical thinking and reflection
- cognitive authenticity
- physical authenticity
- reflects goals, values, and expectations of program
- research-based best practices

Immerse students in an authentic classroom.
the School of Education, the director of the Center for Educational Programs on campus, and a representative from a major company within the area to seek supplemental funds and materials.

Additionally, when the students found out about the new classroom, they offered to donate items that they had or could collect at conferences. Most items for the model classroom were purchased, but the team found that departments within the School of Education were willing to donate some things. Other faculty members donated many learning materials for the math, science, and literacy centers. After the team knew what materials were donated, they focused on developing a list of items that would be needed to create the model classroom.

Select and Arrange Materials

Early childhood team members were very particular about the items to be included. They did not want to just set up a classroom; they wanted to set up a high-quality model classroom. When discussions focused on the block, dramatic play, or literacy center in classes, they wanted students to be able to see, and feel, and play in centers that were the height of quality.

The team wanted students to discover all the places where they could incorporate reading and writing while exploring in a learning space. They wanted students to see environmental print around the room and well-labeled items on the shelves and organized baskets of intentional materials. The team wanted to provide a setting and varied materials where the students could analyze and think critically and reflectively about teaching young children. They wanted students to know what to strive for in their own classrooms, so the selection of materials was based on the best sources available.

The list of items for the model classroom came directly from the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales (Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2003), NAEYC standards (2005), and Head Start guidelines (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families & Office of Head Start, 2010).

Within the budget, along with additional funds and donated materials, the early childhood education model classroom was configured with eight learning centers set up individually around the perimeter of the room. These centers each include:

- **Labeled child-sized shelves** that are well organized, easily accessible, and arranged to define the area
- **Books related to the learning experience** (books about architecture, building, and transportation in the block center; books about colors, shapes, and famous artwork in the art area; cook books, menus, and books about homes and cultures in the dramatic play center)
- **Varied writing materials** related to the center (phone books, menus, and checkbooks in dramatic play; music sheets and blank paper in the music center; graph paper, blueprints, and blocks with chalk or mirrored surfaces that can be written on in the block area)
- **Resource materials** associated with standards and quality indicators for each center; and adaptation suggestions for addressing cultural, linguistic, and developmental diversity

The individual centers include a variety of age-appropriate materials that promote creativity and exploration at differing levels of ability, and that encourage cooperative play while reflecting diversity, as listed in Table 1.
Also included in the model classroom is an interactive smart board, a teaching station including a computer and document camera, a secure storage space, six round adjustable tables, and access to laptops that students can use in class as needed.

Another concept that the team wanted to convey through the space was the value of organization and accessibility of materials. The materials for children are well organized and clearly labeled with pictures and words so the students know what they are and where they belong (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2007).

Further, these materials are available on each table:

- pens, highlighters, tape, markers, paper clips
- copies of Texas state licensing standards
- NAEYC standards
- guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices
- Division of Early Childhood–Council for Exceptional Children’s Professional Standards
- recommendations and tips for adapting materials and experiences for children with diverse needs

These resources are referenced frequently in early childhood courses and are accessed regularly.

Near the entrance is a designated place for handouts and a place to display flyers of interest to students. The early childhood team explained to students that, just as classroom teachers provide consistency in their environment, the model classroom has been arranged and offers supplies, materials, and experiences consistent with their learning needs in mind. As far as the early childhood
When Students Arrived

Early childhood team members were not surprised that students were thrilled to see their new learning space. It was obvious from their expressions that they felt very comfortable in the classroom. When asked to write one word to describe their first impression of the model classroom, students replied with words such as welcoming, interactive, realistic, perfect, inviting, organized, engaging, special, and intriguing.

In addition to liking the way the space looked, students indicated that they felt a sense of comfort and ownership that they did not feel in a typical college classroom. The classroom encourages students to express themselves more clearly and to experience their learning in a more concrete way. One student said that the room “makes learning for adults more inviting.” Another stated, “I’m excited to dig into learning.”

Authentic Teaching and Learning

Access to a model classroom can enhance teaching and learning in many ways. Here are a few examples of how the environment can provide a meaningful context for learning.

- Model truly creative experiences by urging students to explore the art center freely.
- Use math manipulatives to help students practice assessing children’s mathematical abilities and asking appropriate questions to enhance learning.
- Explore classroom materials and then identify what national and state standards are being addressed during different types of purposeful play.
- Provide students with child profiles (including developmental objectives) so they can plan an embedded learning experience in a learning center.
- Ask students to create adaptive materials based on objectives in sample IFSPs and IEPs that could be infused in centers.

Necessities to Create a Model Classroom

In reflecting on the process of actually creating a dream teaching space, team members identified four key necessities to fuel the development of the model early childhood classroom: dedicated space, imagination, support, and commitment.

- Dedicated Space. The most important component in creating a model classroom is to have a dedicated space and support from the university or college. Everyone who uses the space understands its use, its importance, and its value and works to maintain it.
- Imagination. Without a creative vision of what could be, and an awareness of all the possibilities, the new space would not have been realized. This spark of imagination ignited the creativity and motivation to provide students with the same high quality of learning environment that the faculty members hope that these future teachers will provide to children. Imagination and creativity guided students to offer meaningful environments, materials, and interactions with children.
- Community Support. From the onset, this project received the support of the university. Without this support, the project would not have been possible. The faculty members, the administration, and the staff all worked together to make the model classroom a reality. They provided the necessary resources and support to ensure that the project was successful.

Child-sized shelves in each center are well organized, easily accessible, labeled, and arranged to define each area.
various forms of support from the Dean of the School of Education, other faculty, the nearby community, and local businesses. These partners nurtured faculty efforts, because they knew that it would help teacher candidates to better nurture the children they will teach.

• **Commitment.** Planning, designing, and creating a model classroom is not a short-term project. Collectively, faculty must be committed to maintain the space, equipment, and materials—and have it evolve to meet the curricular and learning needs of students over time. The commitment ultimately is to provide innovative learning experiences within an authentic learning environment.

### Addressing Concerns

Classroom arrangement is a vital consideration of any early childhood program, and creating a model classroom within a college classroom was challenging. Table 2 identifies some of the arrangement challenges that the early childhood team faced, how some of the concerns were addressed, and why some of them could not be avoided.

### Ideas to Maintain and Sustain a Model Room

Just like any classroom, this model classroom is ever evolving. It will need to be modified, refilled, and nurtured through the years. It is full of consumable supplies and materials, which will need to be replaced or updated. In the future, the early childhood team would also like to add more technology and adaptive materials to further support their desire to help teacher candidates

The environment provides a meaningful context for learning. Students simulate authentic assessment by observing each other. They assess the classroom using ECERS. And they identify which national and state standards are being addressed during different types of purposeful play.

### Table 2. Challenges and Solutions for Model Classrooms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>How the Concern Was Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideally, an early childhood classroom would have quiet and noisy areas located so they do not interfere with each other. All centers would be arranged so that activities are not interrupted by traffic. Furnishings would be set up to avoid rough play (Cryer, Harms, &amp; Riley, 2003).</td>
<td>The eight learning centers were necessarily set up around the perimeter of the room. All of the shelves can be moved to simulate an ideal setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An ideal classroom for children would have furnishings for routine care (cubbies, sinks, toilets and/or changing tables, and rest mats) where children and teachers could easily access them.</td>
<td>These are the few areas that the faculty had to compromise and also where the college classroom limited the development of the model classroom due to space and financial limitations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Due to the size of the centers and the limited space in the room, the arrangement of the centers is not exactly an ideal replica of how a classroom would be designed for children.</td>
<td>Initially, the faculty were concerned that this would not provide a realistic example, but found that the circumstances gave students an opportunity to think critically, analyze the space, and plan better ways to arrange centers with children in mind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The room had to offer adult-sized tables and chairs situated in the center of the room for college classes. Doing so facilitates small-group work and conversations.</td>
<td>Tables and chairs are on wheels so they can easily be moved when activities require more space and movement. Tables are adjustable so they can be lowered to child-size.</td>
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learn how to specifically differentiate instruction using assistive and adaptive technologies.

Some ideas for sustaining and enhancing the classroom include:

• Collect student fees to replace consumable supplies.
• Engage in community outreach. Offer low-cost teacher education for local early childhood professionals.
• Seek grants and mini grants.
• Organize fundraisers by students such as book fairs and bake sales.
• Host children’s programs such as summer camps.

This model classroom is already transforming the early childhood team members’ teaching in ways that they had only previously imagined. Students are inspired, are learning in an authentic space, and experience what a high-quality early childhood environment looks like. This new environment is definitely helping to meaningfully accomplish the mission of providing authentic, relevant, and transferable learning experiences to adult students . . . and to their students.

**References**


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