

Proud owners

Redesigning outdoor and indoor spaces to better enable children to access continuous provision has benefited children's learning, explains **Jo Dabir-Alai**

At Grove House Nursery School and Children's Centre in Southall, our overall aim has always been to create a context that enables children to deepen their thinking and learning based on current research on how children learn. Our starting point for improving the quality of our practice and provision was an audit of our planning system (see Part 1). Next, we tackled the problems that the planning system had inadvertently created within our learning environment. The result is a new layout and approach to resourcing that give children more control over their play and greater ownership of the environment.

Planning is the working document that helps us to 'make visible' – to see – children's thinking, interests, questions and misunderstandings, and then to decide what we can do to extend or fill any gaps in their understanding, skills and knowledge. Importantly, planning should reflect the 'voice' of each 'unique child'. The environment provides children with the opportunities for self-expression and creativity.

Our old system of planning had led to inconsistencies, contradictions and flaws in the daily resourcing of the environment. So, for instance, the dinosaurs could be in the block play one day, the sand the next day and then not available the following day.

We wondered how a child might feel if, at home, they reflected on their dinosaur play and what they might do the following day, only to come to nursery and find the dinosaurs in a totally different place – or packed away.

- How confusing and disheartening might that be?
- What messages were we giving the child?



- Did we really value children's choices?
- Were we supporting them to become independent learners?
- How could children develop and deepen their thinking if the resources that meant the most to them were unavailable?

This example could have been applied across a whole range of activities, and it prompted us to think more carefully about the learning environment from the child's perspective.

As our planning changed, we recognised the need to reconsider the effectiveness of the environment; how spaces were used, the materials on offer, the systems in place and our role in guiding and scaffolding the learning. In Reggio Emilia, the physical environment is often referred to as 'the third teacher'; to quote Loris Malaguzzi, 'There are three teachers of children; adults, other children and the physical environment.'

Grove House aimed to give children a greater sense of ownership of their learning spaces

LINKING OUR LAYOUT AND PLANNING SYSTEM

We planned the layout of our indoor and outdoor spaces around the core experiences that we wanted to offer children. However, it became clear that to support the children to develop skills and sustain their learning, we needed to de-clutter and streamline the environment, locating resources in fixed areas and developing experiences that supported children's learning styles. Our aim was to develop children's creative and critical thinking through the continued use of core resources and core experiences.

'Core experiences' can provide a curriculum of opportunities for children's self-expression and creativity. Not only does this kind of curriculum stimulate and sustain children's desire to learn, it also supports them to develop the skills needed to express their thinking and understanding through

children's thinking part 2

expressive 'languages', such as talking, drawing, painting, making models, cooking, making music, singing, dancing and moving.

Each core experience promotes learning across all areas of the EYFS, enabling children to develop and progress through repeated experiences that can be differentiated to match or extend children's thinking at each stage of their development.

To be effective, each core experience needs to be presented carefully to children through a rich range of easily accessible resources, so children know where to find the things they need, and also how to return them.

This system of core experiences fits well with our new way of planning, as it allows us to observe children as they decide where to play and what resources to choose. Our documentation of the process reflects the children's 'voice', through their conversations, expressions, movements and feelings, the characteristics they bring to their play and their levels of involvement. We then share this with the children and colleagues to make decisions about how best to support the play – for example, by adding other resources or organising a visit that links with their current interest.

PLANNING AND ORGANISING THE CHANGES

The environment needs to reflect the core experiences that support children's desire for self-expression, so to begin with, we needed to decide on these as a team. We asked ourselves:

- What experiences do we want to include as core?
- What resources are children drawn to or what do they seek out on a regular basis?
- What keeps them engaged and working at high levels of thinking and concentration?
- What materials allow children to really express themselves?

We also tried to view the experiences and resources from the child's perspective. So we asked ourselves, if I were a child at this nursery:

- How would I feel?
- Are there things here that interest me? All the time?
- Can I find them and reach them?
- Can I choose how I play with

these resources?

- Can I return to them and change the way I play if I want to?
- Is there somebody here who can help me to understand when I get stuck?

Once we had come up with our list of core experiences, we mapped them onto a plan of the inside and outside learning environments. We played around with it for a while trying to think about what worked with what – for example, keeping together spaces for quieter play, and having messy-play resources near each other where possible.

At this stage, we made the plan available to the children in the classroom to provoke conversations with them.

CORE EXPERIENCES Over-threes

Indoor areas that we decided on for the over-threes were: ✓ art workshop ✓ block play ✓ role play/home corner ✓ small world ✓ music and movement ✓ science and discovery ✓ malleable materials ✓ book area/quiet area.

Outdoors we decided on: ✓ construction ✓ natural world/gardening ✓ sand pit ✓ mud area/kitchen ✓ climbing and gross motor.

Two to threes

The toddler and infants' spaces have developed over time and they have moved from sharing a room at the beginning of our journey to now having their own spaces. The growth and resourcing of these spaces have evolved and reflect the developmental ages and stages of the children attending, along with their current interests.

Indoors, our provision for this age group now incorporates: ✓ blocks ✓ small world ✓ music and movement ✓ art workshop ✓ water ✓ sand ✓ malleable materials ✓ role play ✓ books and quiet spaces.

Outside, we include: ✓ sand ✓ natural world ✓ gross motor – climbing and balancing.

Under-twos

Indoors, our core provision and experiences include:

✓ sensory – sand and water ✓ blocks ✓ books ✓ music and movement.

Outside provision includes: ✓ sensory – sand and water ✓ natural world.



Other than basic core resourcing, the provision at Grove

→ ABOUT US

Grove House Nursery School and Children's Centre, in Southall, offers 'Outstanding' care and education for children aged from three months to five years old. We have an Infant Toddler Centre where we can take up to 12 under-twos and 30 two- to three-year-olds. We have a 120-place maintained nursery school for three to fives. Most of our nursery children attend part-time. We are within the London Borough of Ealing.

Our approach to resourcing

Each area has a selection of core resources that connect with children's expressive languages and experiences – for example, paint, paintbrushes, glue, tapes in the art workshop; dressing-up clothes in the role-play area, etc. Resources in all areas are open-ended or made of natural materials that reflect the community or the children's home environments. Manufactured toys are provided if they lend themselves to being used in an open-ended way – for example, small-world toys and trains.

Other than basic core provision, resourcing is very flexible and is enhanced in response to the children's interests.

RESPONSES TO THE NEW LAYOUT Practitioners' reactions

Throughout our own learning journey, regular opportunities were built in for the staff team to reflect on what was going well, what the challenges were, and what to do next. This gave us time to discuss changes and 'iron out' any issues. We also created our own



House is flexible and informed by children's interests

reflective learning journal. The team was fully involved in changing the layout and were very positive about the process. Their reflective comments include:

- 'Positive thoughts reflecting on the current planning structure... [and] concept of "less is more".'
- 'When I heard that there will be fewer toys and an allocated area for activities, I was pleased and actually quite excited. I usually don't like changes, but I am looking forward to getting rid of some clutter. I even have a plan in my head - been thinking about it overnight.'
- 'It has been very valuable reflecting on why we do our planning in a particular way - and how useful that way is. I am excited to make the changes in the environment and planning. It is really nice to see everybody feeling excited to make these changes.'
- 'Using natural materials allows children to explore and gain knowledge of what is in the world around them - extending conversation, questioning, looking at the environment.' There have been challenges

which we have addressed as a team openly and honestly; it is all part of the process. A main, and recurring, challenge stemmed from the lack of resources - for example, one practitioner noted, 'Love the space in the art workshop, but more resources needed.'

There were also challenges relating to the use of resources: Do we allow children to take small equipment outside? Do we allow children to unravel whole spools of tape in one go? I will address some of these challenges in the final article of this series.



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MORE INFORMATION

- For more information on Core Experiences, read: Kate Greenaway Nursery School and Children's Centre (2009) *Core Experiences for the Early Years Foundation Stage*, at www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Final%20Version%20Core%20Experiences%20booklet.pdf

Part 1 of this series, 'Deep in thought', was published on 14 October and is available at: www.nurseryworld.co.uk
Part 3 will be published on 9 December.

All the practitioners were involved in the process of change

We continue to face some challenges with resourcing - for example, sometimes knowing which resources best enhance a particular interest or project or finding the time to access the resources is tricky. We may not always get it right, but with continued discussion we are learning and improving.

Benefits to learning

Very quickly children began to respond to the new layout by recognising that resources lived in particular areas. This was reported by several practitioners, with one adding the following comment to our reflective journal, 'Suki noticed at tidy-up time that the watering can didn't belong in the water play area. She said, "Rajal, this doesn't go here, it goes over there... shall I dry it first?" She remembered that the watering can had a place and understood where it had to go.'

Our link officer made the following comment on her visit, 'The enabling environment and continuous provision is outstanding, with high levels of involvement evident across the areas (indoors and outdoors). Two-year-olds were very well challenged and supported in their outdoor climbing and jumping; a new child was supported as he made a first visit with his father. The toddlers were investigating lentils and talking with adults; the calm atmosphere contributing to well-being and building self-awareness and confidence as they played together.'

'In the 3-4+ rooms, children were absorbed and involved in several activities with adults but also playing independently with others and self-regulating their choices - for example, building highchairs in the construction area had been extended by different children and supported by the inspiring documentation on babies.'

Now, children have more ownership of their environment; they are much more engaged in tidying up. They have come to understand and follow the routines willingly, taking pride in looking after the resources.

If you want to get started on similar changes to practice why not begin by looking at your environment from a child's perspective; use this viewpoint to form some of your own questions or use some of those we've used. ■

