

Voices from the Field: Ted Bovey



The Classroom Environment

One of the most important topics to examine with classroom programs is the organization and structure of the classroom environment. In examining the classroom environment it's helpful to look at the issue from two perspectives, 1) looking at the physical environment of the classroom as a whole and, 2) looking more specifically at the instructional environment created within specific activities and routines of the classroom day.

In looking at the physical environment of the entire classroom it's useful for teachers to start by looking at their classroom design and the layout of the classroom and the play areas (or centers) within their classroom. Centers should be well designed and clearly defined using shelves or other barriers to close in play areas and define their unique space. Additionally, each center should be clearly labeled with a sign, picture or pictures of the center and the name of the center and also include a way for children to indicate they are playing in the center by using name cards, necklaces with pictures of the center on them, or other kinds of visual materials. Within centers, materials should be clearly displayed with well labeled shelves or bins, so children can easily identify where toys and materials will go during clean up. Finally, when designing the physical layout of the classroom teachers should ensure that there is sufficient room for the classroom to gather together as a large group (say for Circle Time or Story Time) without being over crowded. It's important when gathering as a large group that all children can easily see the teacher and the materials being used and it can also be helpful if children are organized in a way that facilitates the passing out and collecting of props and materials that might be used during your Circle Time, things like bean bags, rhythm sticks, shakers or other kinds of song and book props.

When examining the organization of the Instructional Environment of the classroom we start with the utilization of a daily visual schedule for the classroom. Visual schedules should be accessible and frequently referenced throughout the day to help children understand and be able to answer four key questions that support child engagement: 1) What am I doing right now? 2) How do I know I'm making progress? 3) How do I know when I'm done? And 4) What comes next? This basic idea can be expanded on and implemented within individual activities and routines as well through the use of additional visual materials. One example of this is the use of visuals to support the different activities that occur during the course of your large Group or Circle Times. So, for example, if your Opening Circle time includes a Gathering Song, Calendar, Weather, a Child Choice Song and then the kids get to choose their center and go and play, each one of these routines within Circle Time could have its own set of visual material that are presented one at a time. And if the sequence of these activities is kept consistent every day the children will learn the passage of time by the sequence of activities and the visuals that are being used. This in turn supports their independent engagement through the self-monitoring of their own behavior because they know what activities will occur during the course of Circle Time and they'll know the sequence of those activities. Therefore, they will understand or comprehend how long or how many activities it will be until they'll get to choose their center and go and play.

Thank you very much. I appreciate your time. Good luck!

