



The Environment as an Educational Space

The philosophy of Bear Park Centres is based on the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum- Te Whaariki, with a strong inspirational influence from the educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia, in Italy. By amalgamating these philosophies we commit to empower each child as we co-construct learning theories, acknowledge each child as individual and unique, and recognise the integral part that family/whanau and the wider community play, in the lives of the child. We value the importance of reciprocal and responsive relationships between children, teachers, family/whanau and the community.

In doing this we strongly believe the environment, often referred to as “The Third Teacher”, has an integral role to play. Therefore we have always been aware of the importance of the various spaces and its organisation, and of the visibility of the space and those who live in it.

We continuously discuss, modify and reflect upon our understandings as we view the environment as a living space, a space for the ongoing education of the community. But what do we mean by living spaces, spaces that house an educating community? There

Bear Facts

is no one simple definition, but it means making reference to the values that we relate to the environment here in Bear Park.

Creating a sense of belonging for the learning community is first and foremost. We aspire to ensure our environments reflect the various cultures & ethnicities that make our centre unique. These spaces reflect shared values and aspirations for all children, teachers, family/whanau and the wider community.

We view our environments as a space that holds an educating community, a space that derives its quality and significance from the people within it. It is a great interweaving of relationships made of objects, furnishings, architecture, soft structures (lights, sounds, atmospheres), but above all how these elements relate with and reflect the people in the space, both children and adults. Great thought is taken in preparing the



layout of the classroom, as is the value placed on relationships, and the interaction of children in small groups. We need to ensure the environment is set up to promote exchange in small groups, and therefore providing possibilities for children to listen to others; ask questions, and create an important culture of dialogue. We also understand the importance of the individual child, and the individual identities that make children unique. We believe planning personal and personalised spaces are equally important.

We take great pride in the materials in which we use, and as teachers, we research the possibilities before placing these into the environment. While aesthetics play a very important role in initially enticing children into an area/space, it is the materials and the resources, which provoke thinking; encourage questioning; and fosters dialogue. Bear Park centre environments, value the use of open-ended materials, and limit equipment with predetermined outcomes. We aim instead to provide a wide range of resources, including a strong presence of natural and recycled materials. These types of materials offer enormous possibilities, and encourage the desire to pose questions, provoke investigation, and enhance creative expression.

This year all Bear Park centres have made a commitment through a shared focus, as to how we can enhance our awareness about environmental issues and sustainability. In doing this we aim to further explore the value

and potential of recycled and natural materials, within our Educational context. We continue to reflect on how we utilise materials, proposing new ways to co-exist with our environment. We look forward to learning more alongside the children, about how to respect natural and recycled materials, as an expressive language and a tool for learning.



“One way to rediscover our own creative impulses is to see possibilities in materials. Children possess a natural openness to the potential of materials. When adults become aware of this process, they find ways to watch and listen to the children. Children and adults become collaborators as they discover, collect, sort, arrange, experiment, create, construct, and think with materials. The goal is to allow children to become fluent with materials- as if materials were a language.”

(Topal, C. W. & L. Gandini: 1999)

Both indoor and outdoor environments are designed to be flexible, thus open to modification. We believe that children are

the central focus and are constantly evolving. With this in mind, it is easy to see how the space cannot be pre-planned or pre-packaged, but we can to some extent define it. The learning environment must be amiable, inviting, able to provide orientation, to stimulate, to protect, to encourage research, a space that is able to renew itself, to account for what actually takes place and transform itself according to the stimuli provided by children and adults.

Another core aspect is the idea of the environment as a place that holds, testifies to, and documents the memory, the traces of the educational experience. The documentation is a historical and affective memory viewed as a process, as a seed for future development, for moving beyond the past and preparing to embrace the future. It highlights the processes of the experience and ideas, of children living, learning and working alongside others throughout the learning community.



Here are some questions, that we encourage you to take the time to reflect on, when reviewing the environment and the educational space:

Is the environment a space that communicates? That speaks many different languages? That recognises and gives value to differences? And can guarantee the encounter with others and otherness (interrelations)?

Is it a space that communicates a sense of belonging, and reflects and gives value to the community of learners within (children, teachers, families/whanau?)

Are the resources & equipment set up in a purposeful and provocative way to encourage a sense of wonder, curiosity, independence and challenge?

Are children, teachers, and families/whanau developing a deeper awareness, regarding the potential of natural and recycled materials within our educational context? Are we respecting natural and recycled materials as an expressive language?