

Waking the 'Third Teacher': the Whys and Hows

Te Whāriki: Principle to Practice

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Many teachers regard the learning environment as a living space or entity that invites, provokes, and responds to learning. The learning environment of the 'Reggio Emilia' philosophy is referred to as the 'third teacher'. Susan Fraser reminds us that,

One can understand why the educator's in Reggio Emilia have termed the environment the third teacher because of the power environments such as these have to inform and shape the kind of learning that will happen in the room. (2000, p.53)

Like many teachers in early childhood settings in Aotearoa, New Zealand, I have been considering the potential and power of the 'third teacher', the environment. The early childhood setting environment is a powerful influence on all learning and teaching that happens 'here'. However, many struggle to 'wake up' the sleeping giant.



Waking the giant is challenging. But like most sleeping beings it can be tussled, uncovered, shaken, and awoken. When awake, this giant is powerful and informs the kind of learning that happens in our early childhood education settings.

The sleeping giant is an environment where 'compliance' and 'minimums' rule. Tony Wagner (2001, p.5) reminds us that, "we have a 'culture of compliance' that aims at minimums not dreams for children and ourselves as teachers." In providing early childhood educational environments we are guided by the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 and Education (Playgroups) Regulations 2008, the Licensing Criteria for

Early Childhood Care and Education Centers 2008, Playground Safety Standards, Health and Safety checklists, the Basic Equipment list and the sixteen areas of basic play.

These 'guides' aim at minimums for children and ourselves in an early childhood education environment. To dream for children and ourselves in the early childhood education environment and to wake the sleeping giant we must look further for inspiration and dig more deeply in to Te Whāriki. We will also be influenced by the Reggio approach, Montessori, Froebel, Steiner and Pere.

Many teachers have made moves away from the traditional ways of working. Where environments were once structured with what we might call the 'toy box' approach or a 'one hit wonder' entertainment approach, perhaps with several table top activities set for the session or the day. To one where we now see early childhood education settings providing rich learning centers, each stocked with well organised materials in labeled baskets on shelves where children make choices and often plan for their own learning. These settings are seeking to wake the sleeping giant!

Why Wake the 'Third Teacher'?

A culture of compliance and minimums leaves the giant sleeping, whereas, creating an expansive learning environment wakes the giant. An environment where the third teacher is awake is a place for dreaming for all participants. It is an environment where adults are engaged with, and in children's learning. As Professor Alison Gopnik puts it,

What children observe most closely, explore most obsessively and imagine most vividly are the people around them. There are no perfect toys; there is no magic formula. Parents and other caregivers teach young children by paying attention and interacting with them naturally and, most of all, by just allowing them to play. (2009, p. 4)

It is the disposition to learn that is most powerfully modelled by the adults around. I believe that the space,

environment and resources around children also provoke and invite the kind of learning that is most valuable in the 21st century.

In *The Hundred Languages of Children*, Leila Gandini quotes Loris Malaguzzi,

We value space because of its power to organize, promote pleasant relationships between people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective and cognitive learning. (1993, p.149)

Space, the learning environment, has the power to influence all learning and teaching that happens in every early childhood environment. The learning environment supports, facilitates and informs all kinds of valued learning. Through the Principles of Relationships/Ngā Hononga, Empowerment/Whakamana, Family and Community/Whānau Tangata, and Holistic Development/Kotahitanga, and the Strands of Belonging/Mana Whenua, Wellbeing/Mana Atua, Explorations/Mana Aotūroa, Communication/Mana Reo and Contribution/Mana Tanagata, Te Whāriki wisely supports the valued learning by making direct links to learning dispositions and being disposed to learning. (See figure 1.)

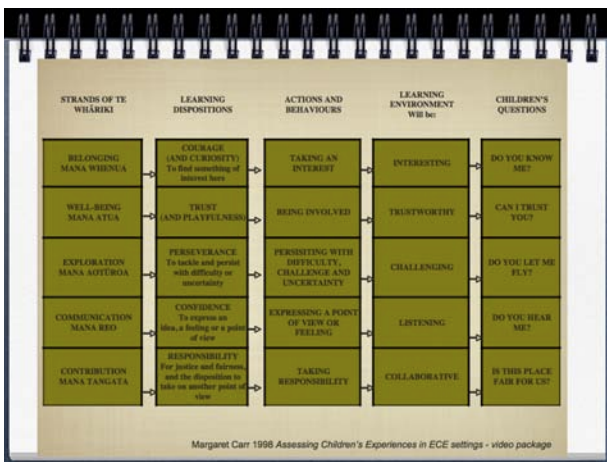


Figure 1

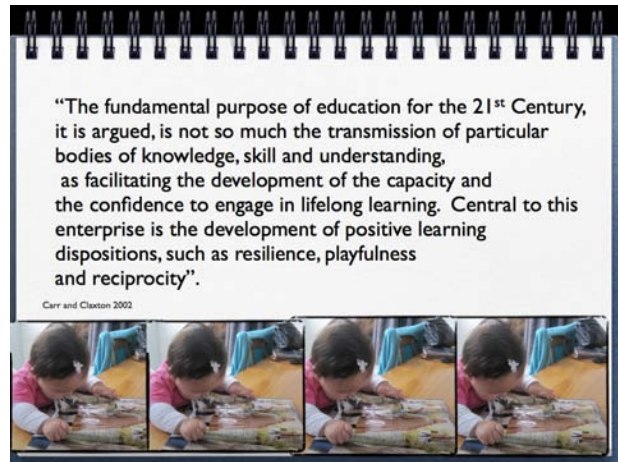
Te Whāriki (1996, p.45) describes an environment where;

Dispositions to learn develop when children are immersed in an environment that is characterised by activity, contributing and collaborating, communicating and representing, and exploring and guided participation.

As Carr pointed out when she made connections across the Strands of Te Whāriki in figure 1 the environment that supports dispositional learning will be Interesting, Trustworthy, Challenging, Listening and Collaborative.

The kind of learning we have come to value and foreground for the 21st century in New Zealand is being disposed to learning or learning dispositions.

Learning dispositions contribute to working theories about self as a learner. By the time this early childhood period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social thinkers, and as language learners, and they will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their own worth. (Carr et al. 2004, bk.10, p.4.)



The Learning Environment

Early childhood education learning environments may support or prohibit the kind of learning that is valued in Te Whāriki and the 21st century. Carr and Claxton (2004) and Claxton (notes taken during workshop 2010) describe four kinds of learning environments:

Prohibitive or discouraging – an environment where a learning behaviour is disabled:

A prohibiting environment is one in which it is impossible or dangerous to express a particular kind of learning response. A tightly scheduled programme, where children move from one routine to the next in rapid succession, makes it impossible for children to persist and to be engaged over any length of time. Some classroom activities prohibit students from collaborating. (G. Claxton, notes taken during workshop, November 2010)

Permissive and Affording – an environment where a learning behaviour is allowed:

One which provides opportunities for the development of a range of learning attributes, but they may not be sufficient for all children. (G. Claxton, notes taken during workshop, November 2010)

Inviting or encouraging – an environment where learning is welcomed:

One that not only affords the chance to ask questions, for example, but clearly highlights this as a valued activity. Asking questions or working with others is made attractive and appealing to students. (G. Claxton, notes taken during workshop, November 2010)

Expansive, Powerful or Potentiating– an environment where a learning behaviour is actively stretched and strengthened:

Those that not only invite the expression of certain dispositions, but actively 'stretch' them, and thus develop them. It is our view that potentiating environments involve frequent participation in shared activity (Rogoff et al., 1993 p. 533) in which children or students take responsibility for directing those activities, as well as adults. (G. Claxton, notes taken during workshop, November 2010)

In an Expansive Learning Environment learners systematically stretch their minds and build their learning muscles. They are learning environments that are deliberately designed to strengthen, broaden and enrich the learning related dispositions of those who participate in them. Dispositions to learn are cultivated over time in an expansive learning environment. (G. Claxton, notes taken during workshop, November 2010)

We see a disposition, such as curiosity or courage, to learn grow and expand over time;

Strengthening – becoming more robust and second nature, i.e. lessening prompting and encouragement

Broadening – becoming more widespread, i.e. varying contexts and domains

Enriching – becoming more sophisticated, i.e. developing expertise

Balancing – developing fluidity between dispositions and along dispositional dimensions, i.e. developing 'flexpertise' – to orchestrate or balance their own use of disposition (Carr & Claxton 2004, Claxton, notes taken during workshop, 2010).

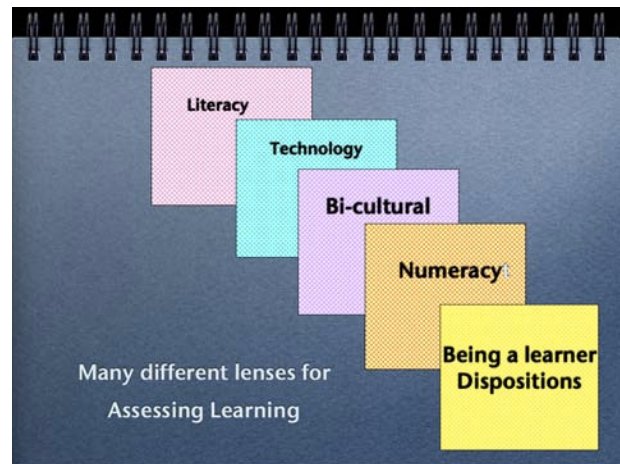
Teachers in an expansive learning environment have the option to orchestrate the resources and activities in a way that creates an inviting and potentiating environment for all of the students. Teachers wanting to strengthen the readiness, willingness and ability to collaborate provide invitations and provocations for learning in such a way that collaboration (curiosity, persistence, playfulness, or courageousness etc.) is necessary and attractive. We become more or less disposed to learning. Learners can

be supported and encouraged to being disposed to learning in certain ways - or not!

Guy Claxton (2010, p.27) says a lesson plan or learning environment has to have two complimentary objectives:

One relates to the content; the skill or knowledge the teacher wants her students to acquire. The second relates to the 'learning muscle' she wants them to strengthen.

Teachers use many lenses or screens to recognise and analyse learning. Often these lenses act in tandem and unison with each other. A few possible lenses are illustrated in figure 2.



Often dispositional learning is foregrounded and skills and knowledge learning is included. This 'recognising' of learning informs the response the teacher makes. It informs teaching intention. Teachers work with formal and informal formative assessment that analyses dispositional and skills and knowledge learning.

It is imperative that teachers 'split the screen' and build a learning environment that invites and provokes the stretching of dispositional learning muscles, while supporting knowledge and skills learning.

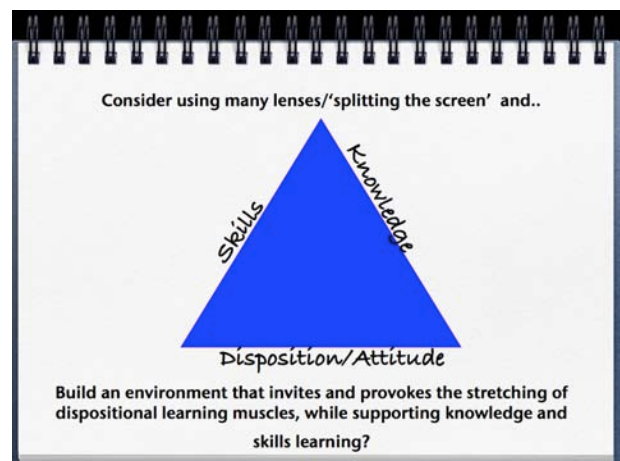


Figure 3

The strength is in the base of this teaching and learning triangle (see figure 3). This is the 'disposition to learn' lens or screen. Teaching intentions for dispositions, knowledge and skills become visible in the learning environment when teachers build strong provocative environments that stretch the children's learning muscles.

How to 'wake' the third teacher

In an expansive learning environment dispositional learning muscles are stretched and knowledge and skill learning is actively supported. When teachers consider having the learning environment as the wide awake 'third teacher' they are mindful of their teaching intentions. An expansive learning environment is full of provocations and learning invitations that foreground being disposed to learning in positive and expansive ways.

Consider building an environment where dispositions to learn are considered necessary and attractive. Expansive learning environments are spaces where it is teachers' intention to provoke the stretching of dispositional learning muscles and support knowledge and skills learning.

What might be the teaching intention provided in these invitations? Consider dispositional, knowledge, and skills teaching and learning.



Sybille Haas

What might the teacher's teaching intention be in this picture?



Sybille Haas

What knowledge or skills learning may be invited or supported with this learning invitation?



Sybille Haas

When teachers consider having the learning environment as the wide awake 'third teacher' they are mindful of their teaching intentions.

When creating or building the centre's expansive learning environment **consider your own sense of design, comfort and aesthetics as you work to create a learning environment full of learning invitations.** Teachers' own passions, strengths, interests and dispositions walk through the door into the learning environment everyday. These things influence the learning environment. The move away from an institutionalised or 'classroom' environment to one of home-likeness is important.

Leila Gandini (as quoted in Curtis and Carter, 2003, p. 13.) reminds us that:

The environment is the most visible aspect of the work done in schools by all protagonists. It conveys the message that this is a place where adults have thought about the quality and the instructive power of space. The layout of the physical space is welcoming and fosters encounters, communication and relationships. The arrangement of structures, objects, and activities encourages choices, problem solving, and discoveries in the process of learning. There is attention to detail everywhere - in the color of the walls, the shape of the furniture, the arrangement of simple objects on shelves and tables.

It is important to give attention to detail in the early childhood environment because of the importance of the message the environment conveys to all participants around the learning that is valued in the setting.

Teaching Intention = Learning Invitations, Provocations and Opportunities

Teachers are constructing environments where learning is provoked and invited, and opportunities are many.

Teacher intention is visible - learner intention is provoked and invited. The main teacher intention made visible and valued in an expansive learning environment is dispositional. The teacher intends for dispositional learning to take place by the invitations and provocations that are available to children as their 'vehicle' for the acquisition of the disposition to learn. Being disposed to learning in positive ways is directly linked to the Te Whāriki Strands of belonging, wellbeing, exploration, communication and contribution. Te Whāriki states that in supporting the disposition to learning the learning environment will be interesting, trustworthy, challenging, listening and collaborative (Carr 1998, see also figure 1 of this article).

Expansive learning environments strengthen, broaden and enrich the learning related dispositions of those who participate in them. They reflect values and shape identity. These considerations illuminate the ideas raised in figure 1.

When creating an expansive learning environment consider:

Belonging - Connections - Courage and Curiosity - finding something of interest here. The environment will be interesting.

Wellbeing - Trust and Playfulness - being involved. The environment will be trustworthy

Exploration - Persisting with difficulty, challenge and uncertainty. Natural materials that engage the senses. Wonder and intellectual engagement The environment will be challenging.

Communication - Confidence to express an idea feeling or point of view. Symbolic representations, literacy and the visual arts. The environment will be a listening place

Contribution - Responsibility for fairness, justice and another's point of view. Flexible space and open-ended materials. The environment will be a collaborative space.

Continuing to wake the third teacher - creating an expansive learning environment

There are many inspirations for creating an expansive learning environment. You may like to visit other early childhood education settings, read books (see suggested reading), watch DVD's etc. Creating an environment in response to individual or groups of children's passions, interests and strengths, and one where our own passions interests and strengths are visible is a good place to start.

What might the Principles and Strands of Te Whāriki look like in practice when weaving and creating an expansive learning environment?



Pigeon Mountain Kindergarten

BELONGING - MANA WHENUA

Creating connections and a sense of belonging, taking an interest - supporting courage and curiosity - trying something new - resourcefulness.

Consider:

- Relationships - People, places, things and time. Who is here everyday?
- Children and their learning made visible. Can I see myself here? Do you know me? For example: Learning Stories, portfolios, displays of documented learning, photos of people who spend time here.
- What does our environment say about our children, family and whānau?
- Connections; Who are we connected to and how do we support connections?
- What do I find familiar here?
- What is here that reflects where I come from and where my friends come from?
- Comfort, cosiness and homelike-ness. As Jim Greenman (2006, p.99) puts it: "Comfort provides the

security for fledgling scholars to tackle the demands of sustained concentration.”

- Have we paid attention to detail in the colour, textures, furnishings, lighting and materials?
- Are there places to be together and places to be alone?



Taupo Kids Community Childcare Centre

WELLBEING - MANA ATUA

Wellbeing and building trust and 'being involved' - supporting trust and playfulness - relating and resourcefulness.

Consider:

- Cosy space for loving, caring and sharing.
- Beauty, aesthetics, and softness.
- Sensual and tactile experiences of the world.
- Children's ability to access suitable and inspiring resources to plan for and construct their own learning.
- Keeping materials 'open ended' - playing around with things.
- Opportunities to feel the power of their ideas and bodies.
- Sparking children's imaginations and speak to their desires to rearrange and combine materials for exploration and to test working theories.
- Provision of materials and resources that support children to see, touch and investigate.
- Opportunities for relationships with people, places and things.
- Offering connections between learning inside and outside of the setting e.g documentation/learning stories.



Laughton Kindergarten

EXPLORATION - MANA AOTŪROA

Opportunities to explore - building perseverance, tackling difficulty and working with uncertainty - resilience.

Consider:

- Opportunities to return to an activity time and time again and construct learning over time.
- Children's investigations using their senses - smells, sounds, textures.
- The gifts of Papatuanuku - Aotearoa, New Zealand's unique natural environment and gifts.
- Natural environments that engage the senses
- Outdoors experiences.
- Provoking wonder, curiosity and intellectual engagement.
- Light, colour, reflection, sound and motion.
- Treasures that sparkle and shine.
- Elements of magic and wonder.
- Displaying treasures, for example in nooks and crannies with light and dark.
- Coloured glass beads in the sunshine.



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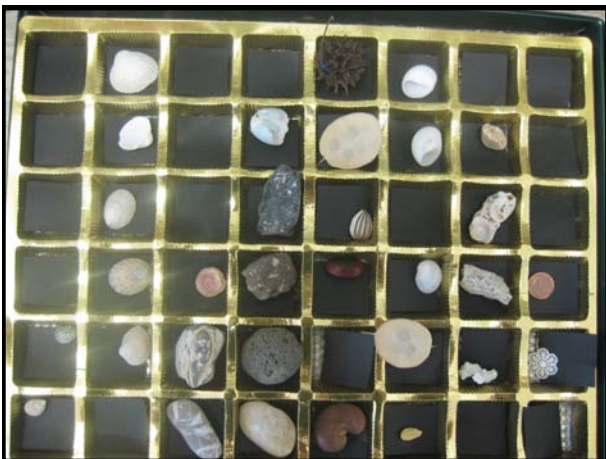
Kathryn Delany



Greerton Early Childhood Centre



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Sybille Haas

COMMUNICATION - MANA REO

Opportunities to communicate - building on confidence to express an idea, feeling or point of view. Listening, observing and expressing - reflectiveness.

Consider:

- Engaging children in literacies, symbolic representation, mathematics, the visual arts and ICT.
- Providing diverse and engaging literacy experiences.
- **QUALITY, QUANTITY AND VARIETY** of resources provided.
- Mixing media.
- The expressive arts.



Laughton Kindergarten



Sybille Haas



Northwood Kindergarten



Laughton Kindergarten

Contribution - Mana Tangata

Opportunities to contribute - building on taking another's point of view - collaboration - kindness, justice, fairness, responsibility and relationships - reciprocity.

Consider:

- Children's own choice and interest.
- Autonomy.
- Places and resources to work together with others.
- Space for collaboration and co-construction.



Taupo Kids Community Childcare Centre

The invitations and provocations teachers provide or respond with in the learning environment capture children's interest and provoke joy in learning and support trying out theories about how the world works. The 'things of interest' here support the acquisition of the disposition to learn or not.

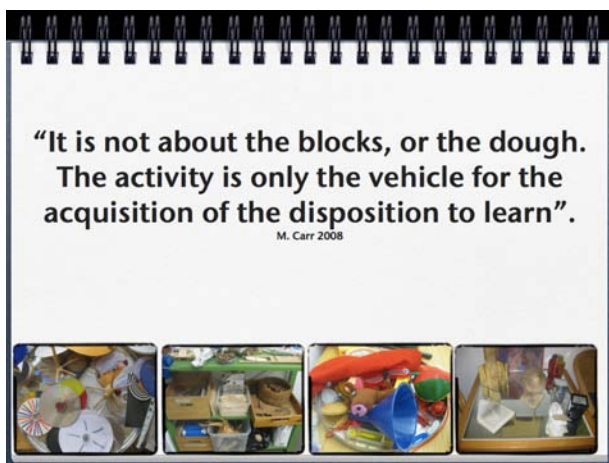
In creating an expansive learning environment, keep in mind the role and impact that times, routines, and cares have on learning, as children require long uninterrupted periods that respect their desire to investigate, enquire and be curious.

More than the physical space it includes the way time is structured and the roles we are expected to play. It conditions the way we feel, think, and behave: and it dramatically affects the quality of our lives. The environment either works for us or against us as we conduct our lives (Greenman, 1988, p. 5).

The early childhood setting must support not just the acquisition of a learning disposition but strengthen the dispositional muscle over time. As Carr and Claxton (2004, p.88-89) explain, using the disposition of persisting as an example,

In our view, 'persistence' is not something that a learner 'acquires'. Instead, we see growth as a change in the likelihood that they will respond to difficulty in certain ways: by sticking with it; voicing doubts and digging below the surface, for example. These responses are then modified by a range of adverbs: an individual engages in them more or less frequently, or appropriately, or skillfully. It is the strength of these tendencies, we suggest, that changes over time, and which teachers influence, knowingly or not, through the kind of early years setting or classroom milieu which they create.

Dream of and create an exiting, richly resourced, child-initiated and EXPANSIVE learning environment that foregrounds children's dispositional learning and exposes passions. It is up to you!



Reflective questions:

- If, as Margaret Carr (notes taken during workshop, July 2008) says, "It is not about the blocks, or the dough. The activity is only the vehicle for the acquisition of the disposition to learn", what dispositional learning is being invited for the many children in your learning environment?
- Does this dispositional learning grow and expand?

- How can we go about creating an expansive learning environment?
- Consider Jim Greenman's question (2006, p.25) "How does it feel to live and work here all day, day after day?"

References and recommended reading:

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