What Does Planning Look Like in an Early Learning Environment?

The curriculum for Kindergarten in Alberta is found in the Kindergarten Program Statement. Learner expectations in the early literacy, early numeracy, and citizenship and identity learning areas are the outcomes for Kindergarten in English language arts, mathematics and social studies in the Program of Studies: Elementary Schools. Learner expectations in the environment and community awareness, personal and social responsibility,physical skills and well-being and creative expression learning areas are integrated and focus on the early learnings in science, physical education, health and the fine arts.

The shift from the traditional model of curriculum with its lists of goals and objectives to that of an emergent curriculum, requires a change in the format of the planning. The planning for an emergent curriculum requires that the teacher begins with interests and experiences of the children and

“invites the children to pursue their ideas and theories, challenge ideas, explore, invent, create and play in active ways that engage children’s senses and whole body movement.” Play, Participation and Possibilities: An Early Learning and Child Care Framework for Alberta, 2015”

The teacher’s observations, documentation and reflection on what the children know and can do then guides further curriculum decisions.



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**Planning tools:**

Reflection and Planning Guide:

<http://www.childcareframework.com/resources/ReflectionAndPlanningGuide.pdf>

Webbing Templates for Planning:

<http://www.frfp.ca/professional-resources/program-planning-and-resources/Program-Planning-Blank-Templates/>

**Emergent Curriculum:**

“Each word of the phrase emergent curriculum has an important point to make. *Emergent* emphasizes that planning needs to emerge from the daily life of children and adults in the program, particularly from the children’s own interests; it reminds us that spontaneity always has a place in the settings where young children play and learn.”

Jones, E. & Nimmo J. 1994*. Emergent Curriculum*. NAEYC. Washington, DC

“In early childhood, curriculum content is integrated, emerging from children’s fascination with the world. When educators notice children’s interest in exploring nature, people, places, and objects as well as print, stories, numbers, shapes, and patterns, and when they name the connections between these experiences and early literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, music, and art, they are co- constructing early learning curriculum with young children and making the curriculum visible to others.”Makovichuk, L., Hewes, J., Lirette, P., & Thomas, N. (2014). *Play, participation, and possibilities: An early learning and child care curriculum framework for Alberta*. Retrieved from [www.childcareframework.com](http://www.childcareframework.com)

**The Early Learning Environment: The Message the Environment Sends about Behavior and Learning: The Environment As The Third Teacher**

What is implicitly communicated through the physical, interactional and structural (times and routines) aspects of the environment translates into engagement, behaviors and learning.

The way spaces and materials are organized cues values and appropriate behaviors. Organization and clear boundaries provide a sense of order. Modifications to the environment to facilitate access to the tools of the real world prompt children to independently take responsibility for the organization and safety of their own learning environment. Natural objects communicate a value of nature. Natural lighting and natural colours create a more peaceful setting for learning and allow the focal points to be on the documentation and sharing of child created artifacts.

The classroom environment needs to address the social, emotional, physical and cognitive needs of the developing child through diverse spaces from quiet spaces which may include library, listening centers, and private spaces to noisy spaces with music, movement, construction and project work. Whole group, small group and individual spaces provide opportunities for problem solving, social interaction, communication, conflict and its resolution, explicit instruction and for quiet reflection. A stage or puppet theater supports dramatic play, storytelling, fantasy and puppetry. Daily access to a messy play space designed for hands-on, minds-on sensorimotor and exploration with water, paints, sand and alternate mediums is second only to the importance of daily scheduled outside experiences. A balance of real and open-ended materials and novel versus familiar objects promotes cognitive development and builds a fluid learning environment moving between provocations and extensions of learning.

The learning environment needs to be a safe place where children are empowered to assume a sense of agency as active contributors to their own learning experience.

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| **The Early Learning Environment: The Message the Environment Sends about Behavior and Learning: The Environment As The Third Teacher** | | |
| **We believe:** | **The environment we create:** | **Comments:** |
| **The physical environment sends messages about behavior and learning. A classroom environment should meet the social, emotional, physical and cognitive needs of the developing child.** | * The learning environment offers choices. * Spaces provide multiple opportunities for problem solving. * There are social spaces for social interaction, communication, conflict and its resolution and language development. * There are quiet spaces that may include library, listening centers, private spaces. * There are noisy spaces that may include music and movement, construction, and project work spaces. * There is a stage/theatre for dramatic play and storytelling, fantasy. * Spaces have been designed for sensorimotor, hands-on, minds-on experiences. (Typical messy play areas may include water/sensory tables, painting easel. * There are daily outside experiences planned daily. * There are adequate spaces to maximize choice and minimize conflict. Rule of thumb- one-third more work spaces than the number of children. * Spaces offer children choices to be with others or to be on their own. |  |
| **A balance of real and open-ended materials and novel vs familiar objects promotes cognitive development.**  **Natural objects in the environment help children learn the value of nature and appreciate it.**  **The way materials are presented to children will determine how creatively they can use them. The way a space is aesthetically organized can assist concentration and can increase motivation to work in creative ways.** | * There is a balance between real object versus open-ended materials. * Some objects are a part of the environment on a regular basis and some are brought in to spark interest or in response to student interests. * Tools are real. i.e child sized shovels for digging * There is a wide range of materials to see, touch and engage with. * Natural objects and neutral colours are used to create a more peaceful setting for learning. |  |
| **The primary goal is that children become independent, self-regulated learners.** | * Modifications allow children to access items/facilities and to use them independently. * The environment prompts children to take responsibility for the organization and safety of their learning environment. i.e child size broom and dustpan, classroom is clearly organized. The organization of the classroom tells children where things go. |  |
| **Children thrive in a safe, healthy and nurturing environment.** | * Objects in the classroom are displayed in an aesthetically pleasing way. * A space has been created to parallel a calm, comforting home environment, creating a sense of security at school. (i.e. a rocking chair, sofa, soft lighting) * There is a balance between an environment that promotes exploration and experimentation and one where children are safe. * Spaces are hygienically clean. |  |
| **A rich learning environment has built-in learning opportunities.** | * The environment provides opportunity for children to learn from other children as well as the educators in the room. * The environment encourages constructive collaboration. * There is a large gathering space for whole-group work and discussion located near white boards, easels and interactive board. * There are flexible re-configurative spaces for small group collaborative work and inquiry. * There are spaces where children can talk, listen, read or write. * The environment provides resources and time for investigative play, manipulation of objects and materials and experimentation. * The environment nurtures concentration, creativity and motivation to independently learn and explore. |  |
| **The environment should promote each child’s sense of agency as an active contributor to their own experience.** | * Displays of children’s work involve children in what is displayed and how it is displayed. * Displays of children’s work acknowledge and honor and the efforts of all children. * The environment is flexible and responsive. Changes are made as children’s needs and interests change. |  |
| **Clear boundaries offer children a sense of order.** | * Areas of activity are defined for the children. There are visible boundaries indicating where the area begins and ends |  |
| **The way spaces and materials are arranged provides clues as to appropriate behaviors.** | * There is relationship and flow between activity areas. Quiet areas are located together and away from noisy areas. Pathways allow children to move freely between areas |  |
| **Clutter communicates something to children- what is implicitly communicated plays out in student engagement and behavior.** | * There is purpose behind the choices. Clutter has been removed. |  |

Evaluating Play

*“Evaluating play is useful for program assessment, for communication and for help with the learning process.” (Gandini and Goldhaber 2001)*

As educators our image of children affects everything we do with them. Observation, documentation, reflection and interpretation will help us to interpret children’s play.

Our role includes listening and supporting children in a way that encourages pursuit of individual ideas. Questions to consider while observing children at play could be:

* What else can they do?
* What else can be used?
* What else can they learn?

Some methods of documentation that are effective in emergent programs include the following:

* Anecdotal files are a quick and effective tool to document skills, behaviors, social/emotional interactions, etc.
* Displayed photographs of the children at work or play are a point of reference for students, educators and caregiver to re-visit past experiences.
* Digital audio files effectively document conversation and speech delivery.
* Digital video files effectively capture whole projects and evaluate student learning /teacher delivery.
* Displaying samples of the children’s projects, photographs and “Learning Stories” (visit childcareframework.com) will illustrate to observers that the children are not only “playing” but play is helping them to learn.
* Student portfolios are essential in documenting the progress of children’s learning. They are visual indicators of student growth and are useful for others to view, understand and support the child’s learning.
* Including parents to engage in their children’s learning skills is vital to assessment and can be encouraged through written or verbal communication that documents their child’s progress.

Documenting children’s learning while they are engaged in activities that they are highly interested in is very important. As teachers and supporters of children we need to be aware of each child’s interests and observe how their learning skills increase as they focus on what is meaningful to them.

**Sources for Play Evaluation**

Early Years Evaluation (EYE)

<https://www.earlyyearsevaluation.com/index.php/en/>

HighSchope’s Preschool Child Observation Record

<http://www.highscope.org/file/Assessment/StateAlignments/COR%20to%20KDIs_Aug2010.pdf>

Learn to Play

<http://www.karenstagnitti.com>