

# Making Your Environment “The Third Teacher”

by Margie Carter

*“In order to act as an educator for the child, the environment has to be flexible: it must undergo frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain up-to-date and responsive to their needs to be protagonists in constructing their knowledge.”*

Lella Gandini (1998)

The Italian Schools of Reggio Emilia are acclaimed for the stunning environments their educators have created, and they provoke us to recognize the instructive power of an environment. This is not a new concept, but in their schools we see vibrant examples of learning environments that dazzle our senses, invite curiosity and discovery, and most importantly, foster strong, respectful relationships. Reggio educators seem to have a different notion about the role of the environment in educating children, for unlike the typical U.S. early childhood classroom, their walls aren't covered with alphabet letters, calendars, and job charts. Nor do you find commercially produced bulletin board displays, labels on every shelf and surface, or rules posted. What could they be thinking?

In the name of early education, homogenization and institutionalization are sprouting up everywhere in early childhood programs across the United

States. Our programs have been developing what author and Harvard educator Tony Wagner (2001) calls “a culture of compliance” aimed at regulations, not dreams for children and ourselves. For instance, teachers in a Head Start Program told me they were dinged “out of compliance” because they had a replica of the solar system hanging from the ceiling, not at the children’s eye level. A child care teacher described how the children’s enthusiasm for using the block area to create “the tallest building in the world” quickly waned when her director arrived with a reminder of the rule not to build higher than their shoulders. These and many other stories tell me that we are not working with the idea Gandini suggests above, creating flexible environments that are responsive to the need for children and teachers to construct knowledge together. If we want our environments to be teachers in this way, it’s time we do some careful reexamination to see how our standards and rating scales have begun to limit our thinking, and how commercial and political interests are shaping more and more of what we do.

In my opinion, if we are to embrace the idea of the environment as a significant educator in our early childhood

programs, we must expand our thinking beyond the notion of room arrangements and rating scales. We must ask ourselves what values we want to communicate through our environments and how we want children to experience their time in our programs. Walk down the halls and into the classrooms of your program. What does this environment “teach” those who are in it? How is it shaping the identity of those who spend long days there?

When Deb Curtis and I were writing *Designs for Living and Learning* (2003) we found ourselves in a dilemma. We were eager to share photos of the inspiring environments we had begun encountering and working with programs to shape. But, we feared people might just flip through the pages looking for “decorating” ideas and bypass the text explaining the underlying concepts and principles the photos represented. Indeed, we have

Margie Carter works as a teacher educator in various settings across the U.S. and Canada, often consulting on environments drawing on her book, *Designs for Living and Learning*. To learn more about her work and publications, visit [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com).



continued to invent training strategies to engage teachers in constructing their understanding of the environment as the third teacher in their room.

**Strategy:**  
**Bring words to life**

Depending on their learning style, people take different paths to bring words to life for their everyday teaching practice. I like to find inspiring quotes and have teachers pair them with their own visual images or ideas about how these words might be reflected in an actual environment. For instance, offer a selection of provocative quotes about environments, such as the following, and have your staff choose one to either draw a representation of what it means to them, or create a collage of magazine pictures.

- *First we shape our buildings. Thereafter they shape our lives.*  
Winston Churchill
- *More than the physical space, (the environment) includes the way time is structured and the roles we are expected to play. It conditions how we feel, think, and behave; and it dramatically affects the quality of our lives.*  
Jim Greenman
- *Our thoughts as reflected in our designs, in turn shape children's beliefs about themselves and life.*  
Anita Olds
- *The environment is the most visible aspect of the work done in the schools by all the protagonists. It conveys the message that this is a place where adults have thought about the quality and instructive power of space.*  
Lella Gandini
- *Every person needs a place that is furnished with hope.*  
Maya Angelou

**Strategy:**

**Eliminate as well as supplement**

An environment that is crowded or cluttered may obscure the values you have in mind. Try to gather some sample pictures of the contrast between cluttered, harsh, or boring environments and well organized, thoughtfully planned ones and go through them one by one with some questions for discussion (see box on adjacent page). For instance, if you were a child, what might your experience be in this environment?

**Strategy:**  
**Explore values for your environment**

Use some of your staff meeting time to identify the values that you want reflected in your environment. Pass out a set of blank index cards and ask teachers to use one for each value that they want to be influencing their work with children. Collect these, and together organize them into groups with common elements. Then, to move these values from abstract ideas to practical examples, assign each group of cards to a dyad or cluster of teachers with the task of using the back of the card to outline or sketch how this value might be specifically reflected in the physical environment and also in the social emotional environment created by your policies, routines, and rituals. Consider values for the adults as well as the children. Keep the following ideas in mind to prompt your staff should they need it.

*Values for children:*

- being a home away from home
- connecting children to their families
- helping children to be powerful and active
- providing softness
- being a steward of the natural world
- seeing oneself as a capable learner
- recognizing and being curious about

different perspectives

- forming mutually interesting and respectful relationships

*Values for adults:*

- feeling valued and respected
- having tools and time to do what is needed
- being intellectually stimulated and engaged
- providing opportunities to collaborate and grow professionally
- experiencing oneself as part of a caring, learning community
- finding strong relationships with children, their families and co-workers

**Strategy:**

**Set goals and address barriers**

Showing teachers inspiring early childhood environments usually generates one of two responses: either excitement about making changes and adding lots of new things, or a litany of comments like “the licenser would never allow that; my kids could never handle that; we don’t have that kind of money” and so forth. Help your staff work with the notion that in many cases, “less is more” and we want to be creators, not consumers when we set up our learning environments. After looking at examples of inspiring resources (Curtis & Carter, 2003; Greenman, 2006; Harvest Resources, 2006; Isbell & Exelby, 2001), give teachers worksheets, such as the one above, to identify their values, goals, and barriers to overcome.

**Conclusion**

Despite my concern that a focus on the design of learning environments could mislead teachers into a home decorating, superficial window dressing mindset, I’ve found that when we continually emphasize that the environment is actually a powerful teacher, early educators are provoked to

If you were a child, what might your experience be in this environment?

Study each picture with the following questions in mind:



- *What does this environment tell you the teacher values and expects of you?*
- *How do you think you might behave if you spent your days in this place?*



- *What is in this environment that helps you focus and be intentional about your use of time?*

- *What support and guidance might you need to benefit from this environment?*



get beyond notions of Martha Stewart. Thinking about the environment as a communicator and shaper of values can stir up a new sense of the significance of early care and education work. When teachers and parents find themselves in environments that are beautiful, soothing, full of wonder and discovery, they feel intrigued, respected, and eager to spend their days living and learning in this place. Aren't these the very feelings we want the children to have?

**References**

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Greenman, J. (2006). *Caring Places, Learning Spaces*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press.

Harvest Resources. (2006). CD Study Guides: *Leave No Child Inside, Visionary Infant and Toddler Program Environments, A Study of Early Childhood Program Environments, Giving Children More Languages*. Seattle: Harvest Resources.

Isbell, R., & Exelby, B. (2001). *Early Learning Environments That Work*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Wagner, T. (2001). *Making the Grade*. New York: Routledge.

Worksheet for Considering the Environment as a Third Teacher (developed by Ann Pelo and Margie Carter)				
	Value: create connections and a sense of belonging	Value: Engage the senses, invite physical play	Value: provoke curiosity, intellectual engagement	Value: _____
Aspects of our environment that support this value:				
Aspects of our classroom environment that undermine this value:				
Changes we will make to bring this value more fully into our environment:				

## Worksheet for Goal Setting and Addressing Barriers

(developed by Margie Carter and Deb Curtis)

Goals for next Monday	Goals for next school year	Goals for next three years	Barriers to overcome	Support I need
Things to add:	Things to add:	Things to add:	In me:	Specific support to ask for:
Things to eliminate:	Things to eliminate:	Things to eliminate:	In the environment:	
Things to change or rearrange:	Things to change or rearrange:	Things to change or rearrange:	In our policies:	Specific education or training to seek out: