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Think, Feel, Act

Empowering Children in the Middle Years



Environments That Support Engagement and Expression

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We cannot help but be interested in our own good ideas: they give us a little boost of pleasure. “The having of wonderful ideas” (the expression is Duckworth’s, 2006) is a guaranteed way to keep us involved, intent, and in love with the possibilities of a project. Such is *engagement* – *wanting* to do something, that is, making a commitment of energy and focus to a chosen direction of activity. *Expression* is the work of the body – hands and feet, head and heart – to create something outside ourselves by engaging with the world around us. It could be a conversation, a shared feeling in the smile between an infant and her sibling, a drawing or design with blocks, music on an instrument, or making up a play, creating a dance or a delicious meal, throwing a ball and watching it go, or repairing a broken machine. Engagement and expression are two of the four foundations for learning, alongside belonging and well-being, articulated in *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 7).

Children describe anything they are told to do as work, and anything they *want* to do as *play* (King, 1979). When we play, explore, or create out of the authentic side of our being, we cannot help but be fully engaged. We have commitment to those things we ourselves decide to do. What is also clear is that multiple opportunities to use our creative side lead to high satisfaction, excitement, strong motivation, and, ultimately, contentment as human beings. John-Steiner, Connery, and Marjanovic-Shane put it beautifully:

Thought, emotion, play, and creativity as well as the creation of relationships are an integrated whole. When some aspects of this totality are broken apart, learning and development are diminished (2010, p. 3).

A Positive View of the Child, a Positive View of the Educator

The Ontario Ministry of Education presents a view of the child as competent, curious, rich in potential, and capable of complex thinking (Callaghan, 2013, p. 12; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 14). Children are superbly capable of making meaning of their own experience (Wien, 2014). They appreciate having a choice to express that meaning, to share their interests and ideas for what to do after school. Incorporating multiple means for representation, action, expression, and engagement helps ensure that all children can be engaged in meaningful ways (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Educators¹ are equally curious, resourceful, rich in potential, and capable of complex thinking in reflecting on their programs, and educators also have rights to participate in expressing their creative side.

Connecting with Families

Educators have long understood that children “thrive in programs where they and their families are valued as active participants and contributors” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 4). Mohawk elder Marlene Brant-Castellano notes that Indigenous children are born into a web of relationships in which they unquestionably belong, whereas children in schools and mainstream settings must make a place for themselves in rule-governed institutions (Praamsma, 2017). The Ministry of Education asks educators to create participatory structures of belonging, as a matter of course, for all children

1. The term “educator” has been used throughout this brief to refer to all who work with children and families in middle years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, before- and after-school programs).

and families. After-school and recreational programs can focus on listening and understanding children, and respond with empathy and attunement to children's interests and life experiences at home and in their communities. An emphasis on relationships allows adults to be participants – co-learners with children – a situation in which everyone has a voice. Documentation can be an important tool for building the participatory structures that help educators to become co-learners (Wien, 2013). When documentation is shared with family members, they can become co-learners as well.

After School, What Do 9- to 12-Year-Olds Require? Freedom, Independence, and Opportunity

Children in after-school and recreational programs outside school require environments that complement but differ from those at school. Such programs offer experiences based in every child's freedom to have ideas, freedom of thought and movement, freedom from confinement, and freedom from adult control. Children who are 9 to 12 years old require more privacy, independence, and opportunity than younger children to determine their activity without adult intervention (Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Huston & Ripke, 2006). And after school, they want more outside time and opportunities for vigorous physical activity, free of indoor constraints. This does not mean they do not require support or strong relationships. Their energy still requires channelling in positive ways, with choice of activity and easily accessible materials. But the capacity of children to take control of their own efforts is an essential aspect of their growth, well-being, and serious engagement with the world (Manning, 2006); after-school and recreational programs are environments where this capacity can find strong expression.

Expression is the capacity for children to try out their wonderful ideas in a safe and inclusive environment through the design and making of interesting projects in various art forms (visual, dance, music, drama, digital, etc.), based on children's interests and abilities. Designing through art forms, movement of the entire body, problem solving, elaboration of detail, anticipation of consequences, and meeting social limits on actions – all of these are part of expression and contribute towards building engagement, because they arise from the deepest parts of the psyche and connect to children's sense of identity. Such engagement and expression also support self-regulation and the construction of positive relationships across social groups (Clinton, 2013; Shanker, 2013).

How Do We Create Learning Environments That Support Engagement and Expression?

Three key factors in all learning environments are the organization of space, the organization of time, and the use of repetitive routines, or scripts for action. First, let's recognize that after-school programs and other recreational programs often take place in spaces that are not optimal for children's and caregivers' use. Such programs often have budgetary strictures and operate in the corners of the day, under time constraints. These factors can quickly throw programs into scripts for action that "get by" but are not optimal.

Questioning Our Scripts for Action

Scripts for action are repetitive routines that we use to get ourselves through daily life – for example, how to get dressed in the morning, how to drive a car, where to shop for food, and how to wash our hair. After-school and recreational programs have many such routines: how to get children inside and outside, and how to offer snacks, make materials available, or offer time in the gym. Transitions are a prime example of scripts for action, repeated the same way day after day.

Taking Scripts for Action for Granted as Normal

The repeated patterns of such routine tasks become automatic to us. And once such scripts are established, we take them for granted as normal, "the way things should be done". We seldom think of changing them until something disrupts the script.

We all need scripts for action; they are absolutely necessary to get us through the day. They help us because they free us to think of other more important things, but they can also hinder us because we forget to think that something could be done in a different, more creative or meaningful way. It's interesting for us to ask, What am I taking for granted in this situation that I could imagine doing differently?

Given these parameters, it is intriguing to ask ourselves how we can move towards richer, more supportive contexts for 9- to 12-year-olds that allow them to create with joy.

Helpful Conditions of the Setting

Providing a Calm, Uncluttered Space

A clean, uncluttered space in a neutral palette offers calmness and tranquillity, helpful starting points before and after school (see Callaghan, 2013; Lewin-Benham, 2011, pp. 66–79; Shanker, 2013, pp. 12–21).

A well-organized space with accessible materials and the opportunity to be outdoors at will offers children choice of activity and freedom of movement.

Documentation of children’s presence – for example, in photos of them in activity, in their words in print that reflect what they think and say, in their drawings, paintings, designs, and plans – supports children’s sense of belonging and offers families assurance that their children are cherished (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012).

Access to the outdoors and inclusion of natural materials indoors keep children closer to the natural world, its rhythms, and the contentment, healing, and sense of connection that nature provides (Cobb, 1977; Wagamese, 2012; Wells & Evans, 2003).

Providing Unhurried Time

Children 9 to 12 years old in after-school and recreational programs require free time as a complement to the intensity of their school days – time to decide what they will do, to relax, to play, to be themselves and not be subject to further requirements from adults beyond, of course, the need to respect social limits in treating others well. Time should be loosely structured and flexible, and provide ample opportunities for choice of activity, for rest, and for older children’s own pace of activity to dominate.

Providing Conditions That Allow Children to Generate Ideas

Malaguzzi, as one example, argued that “once children are helped to perceive themselves as authors or inventors, once they are helped to discover the pleasure of inquiry, their motivation and interest explode” (Gandini, 2012, p. 44). Settings that welcome children and their families and offer participatory structures for being together, and in which educators are viewed as co-learners, open up spaces for new ideas to occur. Offered below, in the next few sections, is one example of how something new, emergent, and creative came about in an after-school program for older children. The full story appears in Wien, Sampson, West, and Bigelow (2014, pp. 105–117).

Opening Up a Taken-for-Granted Script for Action

Matthew Sampson was walking children from school to the child care setting, and two older boys complained that their homework assignment would be “so boring”: “so boring” was their taken-for-granted script for homework. Sampson suggested that perhaps they could make it “fun and exciting”, altering their flat affect towards a task to be done with the idea that they could generate something new. The boys caught this change in feeling; when back at the centre, they began to create characters and then draw them. As they drew, they became more and more excited.

The boys “were flooded with ideas” and “decided to create a ‘post-apocalyptic zombie newscast’ in comic book form” (Wien, Sampson, West, & Bigelow, 2014, p. 106). They kept drawing for several days after school, and other children joined them, adding characters, each with its own room (a piece of paper) to live in on a submarine. The first two boys taped their drawings together, and soon other “rooms” were taped to those edges. Three weeks later, the homework assignment was long completed and the drawing was still expanding. So many papers were taped together that the whole was too large for any table, and more and more children had flocked to the activity. The children were creating their own “zombie world”.



Providing Materials That Support the Ideas



In this after-school program, it is important to note that paper, drawing pencils, tape, and scissors were all easily accessible, as was a large table where the children could draw together, in a small room that the centre used as a studio.

Listening to Children’s Ideas, Expressing Interest, and Relating to the Ideas without Trying to Control Them

About four weeks into the drawing efforts, difficulty arose for the educators in the centre. The children began to mass produce a zombie army – trucks, tanks, jets, parachuting turtles, grenades, bombs, machine guns, sharks that spewed money, and so on (Wien, Sampson, West, & Bigelow, 2014, p. 108). The violence in the drawings upset some of the educators in the centre. Sampson and co-worker Justin West, however, saw that the violence was contained in the drawings and that the children’s impulse to create together was so strong it was building

a culture of cooperation among the many children now participating. But the children's generation of war settings and events created continuing tension for the centre, sparking ongoing, unresolved discussions and reflection for months.

Connecting Children's Activity to Community Places

West, a student at the local art college, arranged for visits between art students and the main older boys who created the zombie world. Both adults and children could share their drawings and paintings during these visits, which culminated in the zombie world creation being shown for a week, alongside West's paintings, in the college art gallery, which was open to the public. Families attended, and the acknowledgment of the children's work, in the art gallery, was an affirmation for all concerned.



Facilitating through Indirect Means Instead of through Direct Instruction

If educators think of pedagogy as the study of ways of learning and teaching, they can see that facilitating through indirect means is one way to support a love of learning, creating, and relationship building. Malaguzzi argues that “the central act of adults, therefore, is to activate, especially indirectly, the meaning making competencies of children as a basis of all learning” (Gandini, 2012, p. 55). When educators provide the conditions that allow others to have their own wonderful ideas, their engagement and the expression that follows become deeply meaningful and memorable. Zombie world continued for over a year, infecting the entire centre, making those involved wonder about the children's concept of a zombie (ideas leapt from aliens to military personnel).

Goleman (2006), a renowned researcher of social intelligence, points out that “a simple sign that a child feels he has a safe haven is going out to play” (p. 178); peer play also has significant benefits, such as learning “how to negotiate power struggles, how to cooperate and form alliances, and how to concede with grace” (p. 178). With their zombie world on paper, these after-schoolers had created their own “outside world” of play, a safe haven that they were free to inhabit imaginatively and alter at will.

How Does Learning Happen? “asks educators to be attuned to what children know, what they wonder about, and their working theories about the world around them. Educators engage with, observe, and listen to children. They discuss with other educators, as well as with children and families and caregivers, the possibilities for children's further exploration in increasingly complex ways.

All are co-learners, constructing knowledge together” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 15). It is this learning together that so helps build community among children, educators, and their families.

Questions for Reflection

- Which interactions with children are most meaningful to you? Why? How can these interactions be expanded?
- How might you alter your environment so that it is less cluttered, clearer in organization, more inviting to families, and more participatory and relaxing, so as to reduce stress?
- How might you open up the organization of time so that there are no obvious transitions (wait-time with nothing to do), less adult control, and more freedom to choose for older children?
- How might you open up tight scripts for action that determine activity too rigidly? Here are a few ideas that others have found helpful:
 - encountering unusual materials (what happens if educators bring in a typewriter, an egg beater, a digital photo tablet, rolls of duct tape?);
 - asking the children to propose a group project;
 - watching for a “windhorse effect” (Wien, 2014), that is, activities that generate a whirlwind of positive, excited energy in which children cannot wait to create, participate, and be part of their community, as in the example of zombie world.
- What have you found works to open up scripts for action in your setting?
- If you can see a possibility, can you find a way to make a part of it a reality?
- Can you find at least a dozen contexts in your environment that invite children to be creative, to play with ideas, feelings, and others, to design and make, to explore and have fun? When creating a context – an environment for an activity – it is helpful to consider the following five aspects:
 - a space or “landscape” in which the activity might occur
 - the necessary materials arranged in view for use
 - ample unhurried time
 - someone who documents when something meaningful occurs
 - a display of documentation for review, discussion, and study with families and others

Expression of ideas is a powerful motivator to others, conveying the message that it is possible to have ideas, play with them, and make something out of them. Such expression makes us calm, happy, and gratified, and keep us engaged in our world.

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