

Reflecting, Discussing, Exploring Questions and Follow-Up Activities for Environments That Inspire

Susan Friedman



The photo essay “Environments That Inspire” depicts early childhood environments from across the United States as well as some U.S. Department of Defense schools in Europe. These settings provide early childhood educators some fine examples of classroom and outdoor spaces in which children learn, grow, and develop. This series of thought questions can help you reflect on and provide insight into the environments shown in this essay as well as your own environment for children. If you have an example of an environment that inspires you, we are interested in knowing about it. Please e-mail us to tell us about it at sfriedman@naeyc.org.

General thought questions on classroom environments

1. In your view, what are the most important factors when planning or designing an indoor or outdoor environment for young children? Which of these features did you see depicted in this article?
2. What are some simple ways a teacher could evaluate and improve his or her classroom environment?

Things to try in your own classroom

1. Take photographs of your classroom or outdoor area at different times of the day over a series of different days—both including children and without. As you look at the photographs, what do you notice about your environment? What do you see the children learning? What might you change in your environment to enhance their learning?
2. Try an experiment. Change one thing in your indoor or outdoor environment. Observe the children before and after the change. Do they use the space differently? Will you keep the change or reverse it?

For more information about the classrooms depicted in these photographs, see “Environments That Inspire” at

<http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200505/04Friedman.pdf>

NAEYC staff member **Susan Friedman**, MEd, serves as editorial associate for *Young Children* and coordinator of *Beyond the Journal*.

Expanding on the article “Environments That Inspire”

Examine the groups of photos that follow for ideas to create engaging places for children and their families.

Places for exploring art



© Bonnie Blagojevic

Photos © Susan Friedman



As you look at these environments where children can explore art materials, what similarities and differences do you see in the four spaces? Look at your own classroom and outdoor area in comparison. What do you notice about the spaces you have available for children to explore and experiment with art materials? What do you think contributes to a well-designed space for children to explore art materials?



© St. Louis Reggio Collaborative

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Early literacy—Books



© Jennifer Halley



© NAEYC

These photos depict children reading or interacting with books. What do the physical spaces say about children and books? When you reflect on your own classroom, what message do you think the book and reading space arrangements send about reading?



© Stars & Stripes

Early literacy—Writing



Photos © Donna King



One of the photos features a writing area and mailboxes. What does this display say to the children about writing? How are the writing materials arranged in your classroom? What do you think your arrangement of the materials conveys to the children in your classroom about your expectations for writing?

Flexible space



© NAEYC



© Ann Pelo

Look at the dramatic play area at Hilltop Children's Center (above) and the flexible boundary for infants at Fort Meade Child Development Center (left). Why do you think these two areas were designed with flexibility? How does the flexibility support children's explorations and learning? Do you have a need for a flexible area within your classroom? What would you use it for?

Outdoor spaces



These photos show some unusual uses for the outdoor area. What are your thoughts on unusual materials, projects, or activities that can take place outdoors? How might children benefit from doing these activities outdoors?

© Deb Curtis



Involving families

Many teachers and administrators say that family involvement is an important part of their program. What ways do the spaces shown in these photos incorporate families into the environments? How do you do this in your program? Which methods do you find to be effective? How do families respond?



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© Donna King

Open-ended materials



© Deb Curtis



How do these spaces and materials support children's open-ended exploration? What's more important for open-ended exploration: space? materials? both?

tree
tableHouse
Area

Stage

Places for exploring art



Early literacy—Books

Photos from (top right) Child Development Center III, Fort George G. Meade, Fort Meade, Maryland; (top left) Giessen Elementary School, Department of Defense Dependents Schools, Giessen, Germany; and (right) Vilseck Elementary School, Department of Defense Dependents Schools, Vilseck, Germany.



Photos from (top right) Outdoor Nursery School, Chevy Chase, Maryland; (top left) Indian Island School, Old Town, Maine; (bottom left) Clayton School's Family Center, Clayton, Missouri; and (bottom right) Child Development Center II, Fort George G. Meade, Fort Meade, Maryland.

Early literacy—writing



Photos from Children First, Durham, North Carolina.

Flexible space



Photos from (left) Child Development Center III, Fort George G. Meade, Fort Meade, Maryland; and (right) Hilltop Children's Center, Seattle, Washington.

Involving families



Outdoor spaces



Photos from (left) Outdoor Nursery School, Chevy Chase, Maryland; and (right) Burlington Little School, Seattle, Washington.

Photos from (top) Child Development Center II, Fort George G. Meade, Fort Meade, Maryland; (middle left) Illesheim Elementary School, Department of Defense Dependents Schools, Illesheim, Germany; (middle right) Martin Luther King Day Home Center, Seattle, Washington; and (bottom) Children First, Durham, North Carolina.

Open ended materials



Photos from (left) Burlington Little School, Seattle, Washington; (top right) Martin Luther King Day Home Center, Seattle, Washington; and (bottom right) Hilltop Children's Center, Seattle, Washington.

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Art
Area

table top

tree
table

House
Area

Stage