Transforming Early Childhood Environments

By Margie Carter and Deb Curtis

The late Anita Olds, to whom we dedicated our book, *Designs for Living and Learning,* wrote:

> "Children are miracles.
> Believing that every child is a miracle can transform the way we design for children's care.
> When we invite a miracle into our lives we prepare ourselves and the environment around us.
> We may set out flowers or special offerings.
> We may cleanse ourselves, the space, or our thoughts of everything but the love inside us.
> We make it our job to create, with reverence and gratitude, a space that is worthy of a miracle!
> Action follows thought.
> We can choose to change.
> We can choose to design spaces for miracles, not minimums."[1]

Anita's words certainly resonate with us when we think about "challenging realities" in our context in the United States and Canada. With her opening phrase, "Believing that every child is a miracle" Olds provokes us to consider what we believe about children and to examine how our beliefs are influencing our provisions for them, for instance, in the way we allocate resources, how policies are set forth, and how we design spaces and programs for children's care and education. As we travel about visiting most all of the fifty states of America and parts of Canada, the evidence before us belies a belief that children are miracles. Rather, we see our very youngest of citizens increasingly robbed of their childhoods—this precious time in the life cycle to be wrapped in softness as they venture forth in their families and communities, consolidating their identities through relationships and encounters.

As we watch young children explore, rearrange and wonder about the world, we get a glimpse of this concept of miracle. The definition of miracle in the dictionary offers not only a reference to "events that appear supernatural and inexplicable by the laws of nature", but also describes a miracle as that which "excites admiring awe, astonishment, surprise, admiration; a marvel." *This* image of children could hardly be shaping the institutional settings where American children are spending the bulk of their waking hours. If you view children with admiring awe and astonishment, would you schedule their time into tight little boxes to cover teacher agendas and learning outcomes? Would you strive for teacher proof curriculum if you were working with miracles?

You may have heard about the political agenda for education in the U.S. framed as No Child Left Behind. Who could argue with this idea? But with closer examination we see the real focus of this policy is Leave No Child Untested. Aside from the underlying political and economic motives shaping educational policies for young children around testing, standardized curriculum, and school funding tied to teacher success with these outcomes, what do such policies say about our valuing of children, childhood and the process of teaching and learning? We might ask the same question about the ever exploding line of educational products we are urged to buy in behalf of helping children get ahead, master skills, and become successful workers in the world. Whose interests are these products serving and how will they help us design our programs for the miracles that come through our doors each day?

In our teacher education work, we find ourselves continually guiding teachers to think beyond regulations and to consider their values in creating environments for young children. We want them to find a grounding for themselves so that they don't get continually caught up in the changing winds of political policies and regulations. We want teachers to place the significance of their work in relationship to the words of psychologists Donaldson, Grieve, and Pratt who write,

> "Early childhood is a period of momentous significance for all people growing up in our culture. By the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers, and as language users, and they will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their own worth."[2]

This is a profound notion, one that is rarely emphasized in teacher development programs or the educational policies of our country. Is this true in your context as well?

Of course there certainly are important voices in our profession who overtly try to shape early childhood professional development in this direction. For instance, our American colleague Ron Lally is quite articulate about the impact of child care policies and practices on identity formation in infants and toddlers. He reminds us that,

"more is happening than tender loving care and learning games—values and beliefs are being witnessed and incorporated. The way you act is perceived, interpreted, and incorporated into the actual definition of the self the child is forming."[3]

1. Curtis, D. and Carter, M. *Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments,* St. Paul: Redleaf Press, 2003
2 Donaldson, M., Grieve, R., and Pratt, C. *Early Childhood Development and Education: Readings in Psychology.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
3 Lally, R. "The Impact of Child Care Policies and Practices on Infant/Toddler Identity Formation, *Young Children,* Washington D.C.: November 1995.

How can we help teachers grow from this understanding into practices that view children as miracles, as national treasures, as a calling to enrich our humanity?

Why focus on environments?

It isn't necessarily helpful to all teachers to have quotes thrown at them, or even readings assigned to them. If we take seriously Gardner's notion of "multiple intelligences"[4], teacher educators must find multiple ways to foster the construction of deep understandings. A simple, yet powerful way we have found to help teachers begin to transform their sense of this work has been through a focus on the environments they create for children. We first want to openly acknowledge the limitations, if not dangers, in choosing the environment as a starting place, in part because our profession is overwhelmingly female and women have a propensity for home decorating. Creating learning environments with this mindset would be a very superficial approach to thinking about their work. This concern caused us to be cautious in writing our book, *Designs for Living and Learning*, because we feared it had the potential of focusing teachers on window dressings rather than the profound nature of an environment to transform our sense of ourselves. But we resonated again with Anita Olds, a psychologist turned architect, who reminds us not only that children are miracles, but that

> "Our thoughts, as reflected in our designs, in turn shape children's beliefs about themselves and life."[5]

This same sentiment was once expressed by Winston Churchill who said,

> "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us."[6]

As we've seen teachers refocusing their environments in programs around our country, the truth of these sentiments becomes self-evident. Provoked to go beyond regulations and a narrow focus on arranging their spaces in learning centers, and guided to think through the elements of nourishing, respectful, and engaging environments, teachers not only transform their physical spaces, but the vision and experience of the people in them. This, in turn, has a ripple effect, with transformation occurring in the wider landscape of their lives and communities. For instance, when asked to describe their feelings about the beautiful new child care building Chicago Commons built in their impoverished urban neighborhood, parents described it as "a beacon of hope for the community". And indeed, as one of our favorite American authors and poet laureate, Maya Angelou, says,

> "Every human being needs a place that is furnished with hope."

So, if we are to design our environments for miracles and furnish them with hope, what are the elements that we need to keep in mind? We need a different starting place than a regulation book. Our suggestion to early childhood centres is to start with the children and their families as the foundation for thinking about environments. We then go on to explore how to incorporate elements that will honor and engage children, families, and teachers in meaningful relationships and learning. Here's how Lella Gandini author, faculty member, and Reggio Children liaison, summarizes their intentions in designing spaces.

> "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 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."[7]

To bring this attention to detail in focus in our teacher education work, we ask a series of questions to guide the design of program environments. For example:

- How will our environment create connections and a sense of belonging for the children and adults in the program?

- If children have a right to be powerful and inventive, how can our space and materials be designed to encourage this?

- How will our environment keep children's senses alive and their love of nature growing?

- If we see children as miracles, how can we provoke their wonder, curiosity and intellectual engagement?

- Because, in the words of Loris Malaguzzi, children have a hundred languages, and a hundred hundred more, how can our environment give them multiple opportunities for expression?

With dialogue around such questions, we can identify the elements of physical and social-emotional environments that reflect a respect for childhood and the people who care for and teach our youngest citizens.

4 Gardner, H., *Frames of Mind*: *The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Tenth Anniversary Edition, New York: Basic Books, 1993.
5 Olds, A. *Child Care Design Guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000
6 Brand, S. *How Buildings Learn: What happens After They're Built*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994
7 Gandini, L. The Story and Foundations of the Reggio Emilia Approach. In Teaching and Learning: Collaborative Explorations of the Reggio Emilia Approach. Edited by Victoria Fu, Andrew J. Stremmel, and Lynn T. Hill. Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2002.

What are key elements for the environment?

Working with questions like the above, teachers discover a number of transformations they can make as they incorporate the following elements.

- Cozy and homelike to build relationships

When your environment has a cozy, homelike feel that brings out strong connections among the people there, they will experience a sense of belonging and security. Throughout your building you can create a sense of softness in your selection of color, furnishings, lighting, and materials. You can add specific features that represent the interests, families, and cultures of the children and staff. Indoors and outdoors you can create places for people to comfortably gather, get to know each other, and find avenues for further connections. Providing opportunities for people to build relationships, to collaborate and demonstrate what they know can guide your selection of equipment and materials.

- Flexible space and open-ended materials

Children come to our programs with active bodies as well as active imaginations. Creating multilevel spaces inside, as well as on the playground, gives children different ways to explore spatial relationships with their bodies. Modular furniture that can be turned and stacked in different ways will provide more flexibility than when everything is designed for a single use. Offering open-ended materials in a variety of areas will spark children's imaginations and speak to their desire to continually rearrange and combine materials for exploration and inventions.

- Natural elements that engage our senses

When you contrast something as simple as a shelf of plastic baskets with a shelf containing natural fiber baskets, the different sensory experience is immediately apparent. There are many ways to incorporate plants, water, natural light, herbs, and fresh air into your building. Landscaping should get as much attention on your playground as the equipment and toys you place there.

- Objects to provoke wonder, curiosity, and intellectual engagement

Children are intensely fascinated with the physical world and how it works. You can simultaneously honour childhood and promote a love of learning by adding different kinds of engaging discoveries to your environment. This is especially effective when you include things that provide a sense of mystery and wonder so that children become curious about how they work, where they come from, and what can be learned by manipulating them. Examples include things that play with light and its relationship to color, or things that reflect,

sparkle, spin, make sounds, and move. You can use natural light, air, projectors, and other simple technology to build these features into your environment. Create nooks where you can place intriguing objects to keep those brain pathways growing and expanding.

- Symbolic representation, literacy, and visual arts

Beyond the limited notions of reading and writing materials, consider a wide range of other materials including magazines, newspapers, charts, diagrams, reference and instruction books. Include materials that support children growing up in a multicultural, multilingual world. Literacy involves unlocking a system of symbols and codes and this should include a variety of materials related to the visual arts. Provide opportunities and materials for children to represent their ideas using a different media.

- The social-emotional and organizational climate

The physical environment has a strong influence on the social emotional environment of our programs, and so does the organizational climate that is created. This includes how policies and procedures are developed and enforced, the agendas, processes and voices available for meetings, the work environment for staff, and partnerships that are created with the children's families. It doesn't work to create a beautiful environment that is merely a window dressing. Looking closely into programs we need to see families helping to shape the culture of how things are done and teachers having time to meet with each other and the children's families. The organizational climate should be full of excitement about what the children and adults are learning, with time to reflect on that and collaborate on designing next steps. The airwaves should be full of joy, stories, and discoveries, creating an environment that reflects the best of who we are together.

Conclusion

The way we view children, what the Italian educators of Reggio Emilia call "the image of the child", is reflected in our larger cultural/political/commercial environment. This in turn, significantly impacts how the teaching and learning process is viewed and the way physical environments for young children get designed. As educators of young children, we must be vigilant around this issue, mobilizing our critical thinking faculties, as well as our power to make a different set of choices based on how we see children. This is the challenge Anita Olds brings to us in her words "action follows thought". If, in fact, we choose to design spaces for miracles, we will begin to change our sense of our work, the experiences we have with children and their families and potentially, the larger context for how children and the work of early childhood education are viewed.

Margie Carter has been a preschool and kindergarten teacher and a child care director. When she is not traveling to consult and speak, Margie is a field instructor for Shoreline Community College. Margie writes a regular column in *Child Care Information Exchange*. Margie is the producer of a number of early childhood training videos.

Deb Curtis worked in Head Start and child care programs for thirty years. In addition to her college teaching, Deb returned to teaching young children in the Seattle area eight years ago, first with preschoolers, then with before and after school children, and most recently with toddlers. Deb began collaborating with Margie fourteen years ago and they have co-authored six books together. For more information: www.ecetrainers.com .

Connections Resource Library

Bergman, R. & Gainer, S. (2002) "Home-Like Environments", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 147: 50-52. CCCNS No. A-080-Ber/CCIE

Billheimer, W.& Lewis, G. (2004). "Transforming Environments Through Self-Reflection", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 157: 49-51. CCCNS No. A-080-Bil/CCIE.

Brouette, Scott (2004) "Aesthetics in the Classroom Setting", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 155: 42-45. CCCNS No. A-080-Bro/CCIE.

Carter, Margie (2001). "Ideas for Training Staff: Rethinking Our Environments", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 142: 54-56. CCCNS No. F-133-Car/CCIE.

Carter, Margie (2006). "Rethinking Our Use of Resources Part 2 - Space, Attitude, and Attention", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 167: 18-20. CCCNS No A-150-Car/CCIE.

Carter, Margie & Curtis, Deb (1998) *The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing & Improvising in Your Center*. St. Paul, Minn.: Redleaf Press. CCCNS No. A-150-Car.

Curtis, Deb (2001). "Strategies for Enhancing Children's Use of the Environment", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 142:42-45. CCCNS No. A-080-Cur/CCIE.

Curtis, Deb (2004). "Creating Invitations for Learning", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 157: 38-40. CCCNS No. A-080-Cur/CCIE.

Curtis, Deb & Carter, Margie (1996). *Reflecting Children's Lives: A Handbook for Planning Child-Centered Curriculum*. St. Paul, Minn.: Redleaf Press. CCCNS No. G-050-Cur.

Felstiner, S. (2004). "Emergent Environments: Involving Children in Classroom Design", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 157: 41-3. CCCNS No. A-080-Fel/CCIE.

Gandini, Lella (1994). "Not Just Anywhere: Making Child Care Centres into 'Particular' Places", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 96: 48-51. CCCNS No. A-080-Gan/CCIE.

Greenman, Jim (2005). *Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments That Work, Revised Edition*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, Inc. CCCNS No. A-080-Gre/05.

Greenman, Jim (1998). *Places for Childhoods: Making Quality Happen in the Real World*. Redmond, WA: Child Care Information Exchange. CCCNS No. A-080-Gren.

Isbell, Rebecca & Exelby, Betty (2001). *Early Learning Environments That Work*. Gryphon House, Inc. CCCNS No. A-080-Isb.

Lindstrom, M. (2004). "Thinking Inside the Box: An Architect Looks at New Models for Children's Space", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 155: 38-41. CCCNS No. A-080-Lin/CCIE.

Malaguzzi, Loris (1994). "Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins", *Child Care Information Exchange*, 96: 52-61. CCCNS No. F-100-Mal/CCIE.

Whitehead, L.C. & Ginsberg, S.I (1999). "Creating a Family-Like Atmosphere in Child Care Settings: All the More Difficult in Large Child Care Centres", *Young Children*, 54(2): 4-10","A-080-Whi/YC.

Zeavin, Carol. (1997). "Toddlers at Play: Environments at Work," *Young Children*, 52(3): 72-77. CCCNS No. H-090-Zea/YC.

This edition of CONNECTIONS is sponsored by ~