

Seeds of Partnership Website Video Descriptive Text Transcription High Quality Early Learning Environment, HQELE

Key Element: Furnishings

Furnishings Overview

http://www.seedsofpartnership.org/hqele/video/furnishings_overview.html

The following is a text transcript of the High Quality Early Learning Environment, HQELE, Key Element: Furnishings, Furnishings Overview.

Furnishings Overview

(Description: A panorama scan of teachers kneeling on floor cleaning and arranging furniture in classroom)

When we first setup the classrooms, literally, when this place was built we ordered the durable goods you see. The chairs, the tables and the shelves as sort of the foundations of our classroom. And we did that based on age of child, class size and ratios. We then ordered a second layer of materials that were more of the blocks, the paint brushes, the manipulatives, the things that children would use in their play. Finally, we added a third layer of materials, more consumables, whether the chalk or the paints or the paper. Then we had teachers visit each other's classroom and give each other ideas about that. I asked them to do a wish list: "Now, what else would you add to your classroom?" And they produced these wonderful lists of additional items. At which point, I just put them aside said, "Thanks, I'll hold onto those." They're like, "What you're not going to buy them." "No, not right now." Let's wait, let's wait and see how your children use the classroom in the next three to four weeks. So, after the first month of school, I gave them their lists back and I say, "Now, reimagine your lists." And there were things they crossed off, there were things they added, there were things we reduced because we had no budget for those. But it wasn't until the children used the space that you know how well you've done. The mark of our planning isn't how good it looks to us, it's how well it's used and what learning is coming from the child's perspective. We want things to be beautiful.

(Description: Teacher Sarah sitting on couch in classroom)

This is a place that children come and a lot of them are here from 8 in the morning until 4:30 at night. This is their home away from home, five days a week and they deserve to have a space that is beautiful. And if I walk into a room and I think to myself, "Would I want to be here five days a week, all day long?" And if I wouldn't, then there's something I need to change because I value these children and I want them to know that.

(Description: A panorama scan of the classroom physical environment)

So, we've used nice natural materials, like light colored woods that look calming and natural. Our classroom has a lot of blue and we like to keep, in the background, some nice soft music playing to just help it feel like an inviting warm space. The ambience is very important so that children know that they're valued. In terms of the furnishings, it's really important, the space as you come in here and these are these huge rooms that can be somewhat overwhelming so it's really important to consider the different inter-centers and how to use those furnishings to court off little areas.

(Description: Teacher Sarah sitting on couch in classroom)

In the science area for example, we have three different shelves that keep it into one spot so it's contained but also, it's not too tight of a space.

(Description: Photo of science shelf in classroom displaying science materials)

You can move, you can access most of the shelves easily, you can pull out the chairs and push them back in with plenty of space and there's still room for people to walk behind you that's just one, really simple example that sometimes you just might not think about but you want to consider:

can I actually be in this space? Can I walk through comfortably? Also, you want to make sure there's not a huge space for running because inside that may be something that they have to face.

(Description: Teacher Sarah sitting on couch in classroom)

We have a space specifically in our room just for gross motor exploration because we have a lot of children that are sensory seeking and so we brought out a tumbling mat.

(Description: Photo of children sitting on chairs in front of tumbling mat)

And we established a way for them to sit on these chairs and wait a turn and they take their turns, stand up, one friend at a time gets to jump on the mat, tumble, and everyone gets to stand around and cheer for them

(Description: Photo of child jumping on tumbling mat)

and be excited for them to get that energy out. Having materials and furnishings in classrooms that are movable

(Description: Teacher Sarah sitting on couch in classroom)

is really important and helpful when establishing an environment that is good for the children. We meet at our weekly meetings and talk about the environment: How is it working? We added this to the science area, is there enough space? Can they get to it? Are they using it? We look at that and then if, the sensory tub's not working there, let's move it or in the art area, it's too crowded. How can we expand it? Let's change the shelf. Let's pull this out and move this in and we try to do this based on observations, how children are using the materials is it appropriate or inappropriate, that's a big give away. A lot of times too, some of the behaviors that we see that are challenging are a direct result of our environment. And when you can make those observations and then have the benefit or furniture that is easily movable without bringing an entire team in, just takes one or two teachers to be able to change the environment, the benefit is amazing to see the ways that children's behavior can change. These community play shelves, I don't know if you noticed, the wheels are underneath it and when you pop those, you don't have to lift it very hard to pop those out.

(Description: Picture of shelving with wheels)

Then you can roll those all over and then just pop them back down.

(Description: Picture of shelving with wheels locked and covered)

That's made to move around; that's not made to stay in one place. Furnishings are really critical because

(Description: Teacher Laura sitting on couch in classroom)

they can definitely bring comfort to children. I think it's really important to kind of know your children and know where they come from when you're selecting furnishings, so that when they come to school they feel like this is a place that I understand and I recognize. I think we take that into consideration when we choose the furnishings and we choose things that feel very home-like and comfortable for them. And that don't distract them from what they will be doing in an area. So, having things just very naturally toned

(Description: A panorama scan of classroom furnishings)

and so that you can see the materials on the shelves is so important. And having elements like they would see at home, a fish tank, could be something that they see at home and they feel comfortable with here.

(Description: A panorama scan of classroom. A fish tank sits on the shelving)

It could be seen just as part of the furnishings but it brings learning into the classroom. But also, just for the children that's something they'll go to and they'll want to see and it feels good to them. So, for furnishings, I think those are the most kind of critical things, thinking about

where the children come from? And when they look at the different areas, what it feels like to them for their experiences that they've had.

(Description: Teacher Laura sitting on couch in classroom)

If it's totally, if you look at different kinds of materials and furnishings that you can have out sometimes it distracts them from what they really want to do in a particular area. It might be visually distracting or even taking into account their sizes so that it feels comfortable for them to sit on it. Just this sofa I'm sitting on is so low. It's a little bit lower so it's easier for them to get on and off of it. So just that kind of stuff, just taking those things into consideration. Even just having, plants and things, as part of the furnishings,

(Description: A picture of a classroom area with a soft chair and shelving. Plants are placed next to and on top of the shelving.)

brings this natural element into the classroom and softens it and makes it something that is visually appealing to them and so we think very carefully about what shelves might need a plant to make it look inviting

(Description: A plant sits on top of a table with chairs around it)

and something they'd want to interact with and be at.

(Description: Teacher Laura sitting on couch in classroom)

The nice thing with what it is, it's nice a durable and if you take care of it, you can keep it looking the way when you get it, plastics and things like that it's a little bit harder, I think, to keep it looking nice you can't refinish it and it just kind of gets. So, if you spend the money and invest in the quality wood materials it lasts longer. It looks better longer.

The center is not brand new, it's newer compared to a lot of other centers but if you would look, I don't think you would think there's a lot of old furnishings here. I think from people who are looking from the outside in think this is a new looking center because of the things that we've chosen. And the natural colors are really an important aspect of how the furnishings were chosen so that the children bring the color and their artwork brings the color to the classroom the materials they're using brings the color to the classroom and when they look it's not visually overwhelming.

(Description: Center Director seated in front of a large window)

I think, in teaching about environments there is a lot that defines what should be in your space and early childhood environments are by nature quite inherently different than the learning spaces we define for older children: Why they are? Should they be?

(Description: Photo of early learning classroom environment learning activity centers)

our physical environments, we do have a bit of a template.

(Description: Center Director seated in front of a large window)

We begin with sort of defining space by more of the more durable pieces, whether shelves or tables that reflect ages of children, reflect group size, reflect what we want them to do around table with chairs, invites children to engage across from one another with materials in shared ways. Chairs that are scaled to their height allows them to feel in control and stable for the work they do. We've tried to stay away from plastics and more colorful types of materials in favor of more natural materials, hardwood chairs and tables to the extent possible.