Environment as the Third Teacher in a Primary Setting

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> *Malaguzzi, Regio Emilia*

Tuning in

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Malaguzzi, Regio Emilia.

In the traditional primary classroom, the children look to the teachers almost constantly. Each wants to know, “*What do I do now?*” But we wanted the children to lean on each other more. We wanted the children to recognise the role of the environment and see each other as teachers too. We also wanted to expand our use of conceptual learning across the environment, better leveraging ourselves, to incorporate the ideas researched and documented by Malaguzzi. My colleague, Jessica, and I are teachers of P3 (ages 7-8) at the International School of Billund, Denmark. We posed a question: *What makes free flow in the primary years a better learning environment for children?*

Why free flow?

Jessica and I understood the power of a free flow room – a room in which children lead their learning, making choices about where to go and what to investigate. With determination, we decided to try a playful, free flow room with our students. Wanting to value play in our playful school, we decided to use the words play and learn interchangeably, so that the learners heard the words. We also wanted to allow for full freedom, where the ceiling on learning would be removed, limiting expectations and making anything possible for the children. Sue Gifford and Penny Latham[1] identified many factors as the basis for removing the glass ceiling for learners in a mathematics classroom. We wanted to embody their work and research in our practice.

We were confident that a free flow classroom would allow for holistic learning if the room was organised correctly. We considered what the learning would look like, what our roles would be in the room, and how we would support the children in being accountable for their learning.

[1] Gifford S., Latham P. (2013) Removing the Glass Ceiling on Mathematical Achievement in Primary Classrooms: Engaging all Pupils in Mathematical Learning. The Association of Maths Teachers, Derby, UK.

We decided that learning would be set as stations of focus, with each station being linked to the curriculum: Mathematics, Literacy, Unit of Inquiry, Creation Station, Technology, Collaboration, and Space.

Within the areas there would be a choice of experiences. While the students were exploring, we would include *must-do* activities for them to visit and explore initially, with the hope that this would be minimised later. Could we set conditions for play experiences that were open in nature, allowing the children to choose their resources, the direction and the product of their play, all while meeting the constrictions of academic progress?

Free Flow Fridays were born!

Unit of Inquiry Media investigation - Collecting our class data, sampling flavours, using the "Kim's Chips Battle" created by social media celebrities in Denmark. An inquiry into the power of social media as an advertisement tool.

Having a Go

The children were excited. On Fridays there would be no "lessons" and the timetable would be minimised to only include the breaks and specialists that the class had to attend. They were keen to explore the room and the hands-on, playful learning opportunities that were set up.

When we began, the learning was heavily structured to focus on skills. Technology featured significantly and we realised that we needed to create more balance. We also recognized that we needed to facilitate a discussion, to ensure that the teachers and students all had a shared understanding of the learning in the room. We discussed Effort, Skills, Understandings, and Working Together.

Week 2

With some reflection, we planned from concepts first (a focus of the PYP[4] framework), and knowledge and understanding to scaffold the exploration of the concept. The Concepts selected were explored in the Unit of Inquiry either as Specific Concepts or Related Concepts, ensuring relevance. Breadth came from further exploration of a concept.
We had created more agency for the children within the stations of the classroom, but the learning still had an academically linked focus.

Liam[5] approached a number activity, showing addition and subtraction problems using roman numerals. "Hmm," he said. "I wish I had seen this Math before Christmas break, those numbers [roman numerals] are like the numbers on my grandfather's clock." Ember also linked the roman numerals to those on a clock face. Kaia spotted patterns using the numerical symbols, seeing the I before V as smaller than 5 and I after V as larger than 5. The children naturally created connections, and their learning dialogue was significantly less teacher facilitated. They spoke together, making connections and linking to previous learning.

Another group used the design process without being explicitly taught it in class. The children were creating a marble run—a system of parts designed to allow a marble to run from one end to the other—using material of their choice (they chose LEGO bricks).

[4] PYP is the International Baccalaureate (IB)'s Primary Years Programme

[5] Pseudonyms are used for children's names throughout the paper

Karla: “Finally, the whole thing is coming together.”
Aveline tried again: “It just did it, but now it’s not working.”
Liam: “We need to try again!”
Oliver: “It’s gonna work, we have a whole show! … Wait, does our script work?”
Caleb joined in: “I think we need some rare pieces, 1 by 1 bricks that we need to add to the 6 and 7 to make them diagonal. It needs to make a hill, or the marble won’t roll!”

Jessica and I didn’t join the conversation as the group was problem solving. Instead, we observed the deep learning unfolding. We recorded, focusing on the group work skills demonstrated and the roles they had created for themselves using their individual strengths and their understanding of “system.” This didn’t happen through teacher-led learning; this happened through play – through children working together to deepen their understanding of a system through the experience of creating one. The children hadn’t just created a marble run, they made a script and turned the activity into a show.
They had linked mathematics, science, and literacy together, by themselves. We were ecstatic! This was exactly the learning we were hoping would occur.

Moving Forward

After some sessions we wanted to get feedback from the children. We felt that this new way of learning was rich, deep, and meaningful. It was also exciting and fun, but what did the children think? This was their room, their learning, their journey.

The feedback was gathered through exit cards, on which the children were given 3 prompts that all centred on the word *learn*:

Today I learned _____.
I learned by _____.
Free flow learning _____ because _____.

The responses were varied. Daryna reflected that "free flow helps me because I am free." Another wrote "Today I learned by doing it."
Ember responded, "Free flow helps me learn because it gives me new ways to look at learning."

Others reflected on the collaboration. "My learning is interactive because when I was doing the marble track, lots of people joind our group" and "Today I learned it is hard to working together because it is hard to desid!"

Lucas even recognised his friend as a teacher. "Today I learnd fact family becaus Finn was basicly a techer."

We discussed the feedback. We also reflected that during our observations, we hadn't seen anyone who was disengaged. Even when the children were finding learning challenging, they persevered by asking each other and seeking other routes.

The morning after we had collected the feedback, we wrote Free Flow on the board. As children bounced in, they showed their delight at having the chance to continue their projects and explore stations in other ways again.

The classroom was full of the buzz of learning, even at 7:53 in the morning! Children who typically gave a sigh when Writing was mentioned were *choosing* to write; others who would shy away from traditionally organised Maths activities or seek adult reassurance during set "lessons" confidently approached the Mathematics play stations. The numbers were varied. The learning wasn't easy, but students *chose* to be there, they collaborated with each other, and we had more freedom to work with individual students, probing their thinking, scaffolding their learning, and helping them deepen their understanding.

By empowering the students to be teachers, we had made ourselves as unneeded in the moment as we could. We could individualise students' learning, tailoring to each child's needs.

A conversation with Lucas demonstrated this deep questioning. He had completed a puzzle of a hundreds square, in code.

To begin with, Lucas couldn't *see* mathematics. I gave him a clue—the word "pattern." 20 minutes later he returned, victorious and excited to share!

Lucas: "I did it!"
Me: "How do you know?"
Lucas: "I used patterns like you said. It's the same up and same down. This is "2" and it's all down the way, and then it's this line, its 20 see, this is 2! I saw "0" too, look, this is one number and then 10 is 0. A hundred is here two "0"s! That's how I know!"
Me: "Number follows a pattern! It has a system."
Lucas: "I can see the patterns now. It's super good!"

I noted that Lucas recognized the elements of the number system that were important to order the numbers. He mentioned the movement from one digit to two digits and how he found the number 100 in the symbols. He had conceptual understanding of numbers 1 to 100 as a system, as he could organise symbols using the same system.

Tweaks and More Feedback

Jessica and I further explored the structure of the children's days. Looking at data from the observations and reflections, we knew there were a few final pieces of the puzzle to improve on. We had added reflection time each afternoon and now wanted to have a tune-in session each morning. We would be intentional about our language during the tune-in, as this would then become the language used during the reflection. The children had also mentioned that some of the stations were too busy, so we introduced a peg system, allowing 4 children to a station. This reduced the number of children at a particular classroom zone but also spread the children out so they would select more variety. A timer was added to some stations to support learners' regulation of time.

The feedback from the children was overwhelmingly positive. At the end of week three they reflected using the word *successful*. Oliver said, "Um, I feel like I've been very successful and finding creative things to do like I've been, I feel like I'm very successful with finding stuff that no one might not even think about." Mason and Lucas recognised the collaborative element of learning that supported their success. Kaia, on the other hand, recognised the opposite in herself: "I feel like it's um, better to work on your own, because sometimes you have less ideas but more creational time." She enjoyed the chance to follow her own agency in her own time.

Elias questioned the restriction of the peg system: "I like the pegs but four is very small. Can we make it maybe, um five?" Jessica and I asked the class what they thought, and they generally liked the peg system. Oliver felt that it built in some excitement as they were desperate to work in some zones, while others agreed with Elias.

It was apparent that some stations were busier for longer periods of time. So, we proposed using timers on some of the busier spaces so that these could be revisited later in the day. The responses were mixed but the learners agreed that it could be tested to see if it helped. Jessica and I also made a compromise with Elias. We wanted his voice and opinion to be valued, so we decided to keep the 4-peg system but there could be times when 5 people could play in that zone if they spoke with a teacher.

So what now?

We felt as though the experiment was doing what we hoped it would. Jessica and I had facilitated a classroom with rich, valued play. In our Playful School – where the mission statement is *Play. Learn.* – we were placing play first, and children were helping shape the direction of the play.

To outsiders the "Free Flow" room might look like the easy choice, but the planning is significant. We discovered things that needed to be taught such as the peg system, using a timer, and reminding students about the variety of people they could seek support from when they encountered a problem. This took time and effort. Thinking ahead, we also knew that the set up would need to be tailored to each class dynamic. What works one year may not work for another group of learners because, as with all playful learning, what is playful for one child is not necessarily playful for another child.

When we planned for the station activities, we wanted to ensure that there was choice for the children, that learning was as playful as we could make it, and that it was educationally challenging. We are still working to find this balance. Even though the planning and implementation of "Free Flow" is hard work, we believe that the benefits of this way of learning are numerous, learning is more agentic and holistic, and learners' individuality is more supported.

In Conclusion

So, why is free flow in the primary years a better learning environment for children? Jessica and I agreed: it was rich in experiential learning, and children had the opportunity to access learning at their own pace. They could choose to work collaboratively or individually. The learning was playful—at times the children did not even recognise they were learning! Most of all, teachers AND learners were excited. The ethos of play was at the forefront of their daily lives. We felt like we had truly embraced *Play. Learn*.

- Do you think the environment can be a valuable third teacher regardless of the age of the learner? How might you change the environment in your setting?
- How does taking risks as a teacher have an effect on the learners in the room?
- One of the core practices of learning through play is empowering children to lead their own learning. Where did you see examples of Gilleon and Jessica letting students influence the direction of learning in their classroom?