APA Citation:

Ritchie, S., Crawford, G. M., & Clifford, R. M. (2009). *FirstSchool learning environment: Supporting relationships.* Issues in PreK-3rd Education (#3). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, FirstSchool.
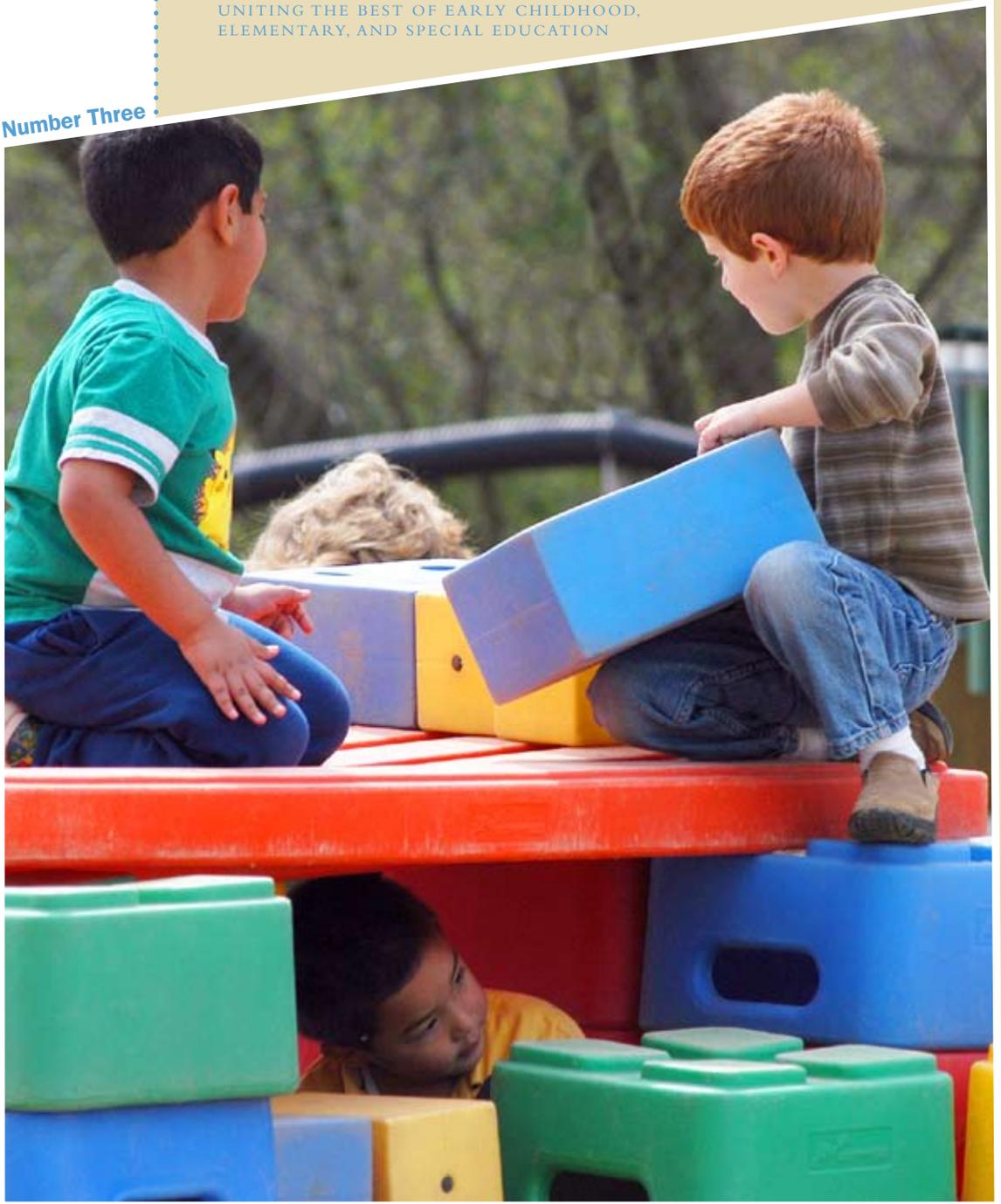
www.fpg.unc.edu/~firstschool/assets/LearningEnvironments.pdf

First School

UNITING THE BEST OF EARLY CHILDHOOD,
ELEMENTARY, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Number Three

Issues in PreK–3rd Education

FirstSchool Learning Environments
Supporting Relationships

Sharon Ritchie, Gisele M. Crawford, and Richard M. Clifford

The physical environment of a school community provides more than shelter and work space. It conveys values and messages about who is welcome, what is important, and how children learn. School is a place where children, staff and families spend much of their time, where routine needs are met, relationships are developed, skills are learned, abilities are enhanced, and attitudes towards learning, society and our environment are formed.[1]

An optimal indoor and outdoor environment for children should be designed to support the development and maintenance of positive relationships and partnerships throughout the school community; maximize children s learning opportunities; and promote and maintain health and wellness for all members of the school community. This brief discusses how indoor and outdoor learning environments can support positive relationships.

Positive Relationships and Design

The development of positive relationships among and between education professionals, families, and children is foundational to all work with young children. Research demonstrates that positive and supportive relationships are essential for growth and development and that children's early experiences have lasting effects.[2] For both children and adults, the cognitive and social development that promotes learning occurs in an interactive context.[3] Positive, prosocial environments are characterized by mutually reciprocated relationships, respect, and cooperative work.[4]

Designing an environment that promotes such relationships must address the following questions:

- How are relationships fostered by our indoor and outdoor environments?
- What barriers to relationships are apparent in our design?
- How does a facility promote family and community engagement?
- How does technology support interdisciplinary work?
- How do we use the skills and talents of staff to enhance the environment?
- How do our values and beliefs influence our design?
- How does a facility welcome and honor all staff, children and families?

The following sections explore these questions.

Relationships Among School Staff and Children

Trust between teacher and child plays a vital role in the child's learning and development. Research has consistently demonstrated a link between positive teacher-child relationships and children's social, emotional, and intellectual competence.[5, 6, 7, 8] When a child trusts her teacher, she is more open to new experiences and ideas and is more comfortable engaging in learning and exploration. Learning through exploration requires that children have the ability to organize their emotions and behaviors, and feel confident in an adult's availability and ability to help.[9, 10]

Children will benefit from opportunities to interact with teachers and peers in a variety of settings. The use of small group instruction and cooperative peer groups facilitates learning. Lou, Abrami, and Spence report on the positive effects for children's learning when they were in groups of three to four members.[11] Children also benefit from cooperative work with larger groups of peers and may benefit from collaboration across grades. Allowing students to have unstructured play time as well is essential to their development socially, physically and cognitively.

Designing an environment that promotes positive interpersonal interaction and socialization between children and adults means creating spaces indoors and outdoors that are comfortable, accessible, welcoming, conducive to work and play, and support one-on-one as well as small and large group interactions. Indoor spaces should be interesting. Windows that overlook wildlife habitats, cozy spaces surrounded by books, work areas that have tools and resources that help children explore are spaces that will spark interaction and exchange. These spaces should allow for varying sized groups and permit different uses. The placement of indoor spaces in relation to one another can support the school's chosen configuration, such as multi-age groupings, and children's access to same age peers.

The outdoor physical environment provides the stage for action and stimulates children's active play and learning.[12] Children can test their abilities in an environment that offers many types and levels of challenge and stimulation. Being outdoors helps children grow up closely connected to nature. By being exposed to trees, plants, and other natural materials, children can independently discover nature and its processes. The outdoor environment should engage children's sense of inquiry, stimulate their imaginations, invite exploration, and support their developing competencies. Limiting outdoor playgrounds to gross motor activities and manufactured equipment falls far short of the potential of outdoor areas to be rich play and learning environments. Children need tools, open space, and multiple opportunities to observe, explore, and interact with nature. The outdoor area should contain a variety of play and learning settings with constructed or natural elements that encourage physical activity, arts and crafts, scientific and mathematical exploration, dramatic play, conversation, relaxation, and solitude.[13]

Relationships Among School Staff and Families

The National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) emphasizes the importance of family and parental support in children's school success. Their objective is for every school to engage parents in a partnership that supports academic learning at home and shared decision making in schools.[14] "To gain greater reciprocity between education professionals and families would be of enormous benefit in our vision to empower the full potential of children." [15]

Building design can promote respect for learning and a sense of belonging, ownership and pride for all members of the school community,

CLASSROOOM CLUSTERS SUPPORT RELATIONSHIPS

[created with Douglas Burns, Ron Reagan, and Alan Schlossberg
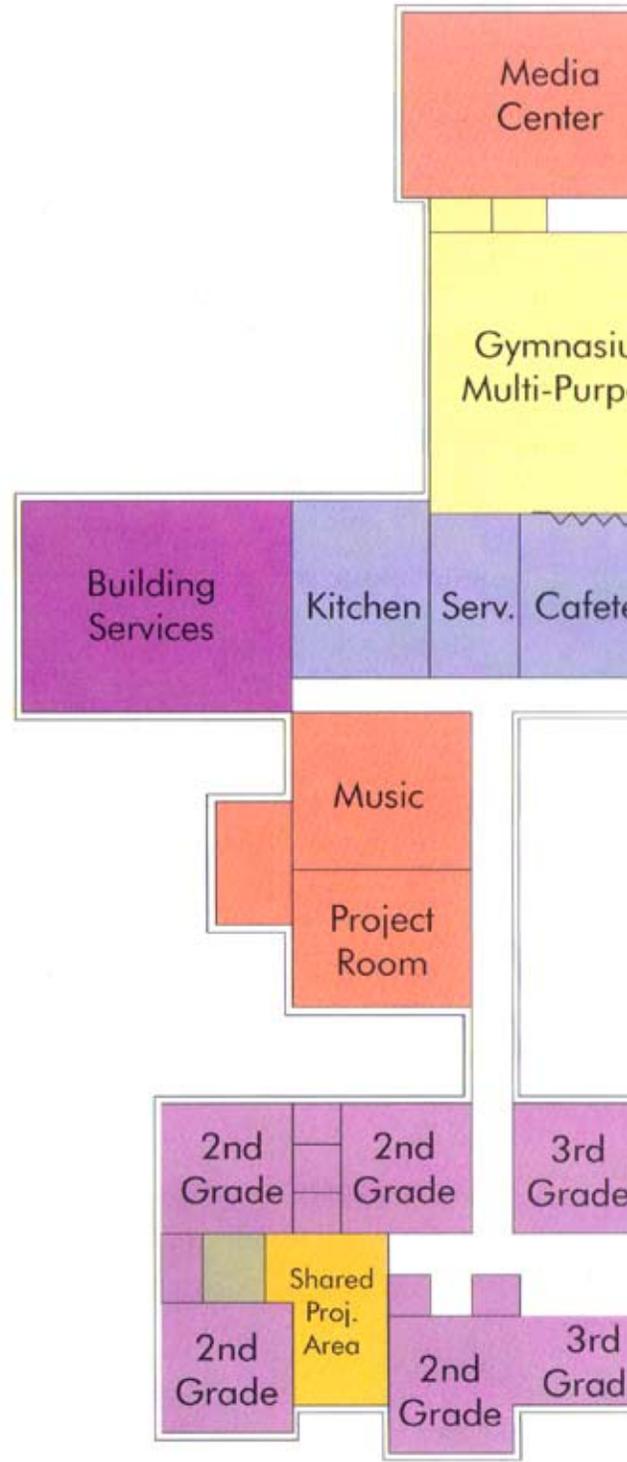of the architectural firm of Perkins Eastman]

The classroom cluster was designed to create small learning communities. This approach makes the school feel more inviting and gives each age group a sense of arriving at a destination. Three or four classrooms are clustered around a central open room or shared project area. The pre-kindergarten cluster is located adjacent to the family suite at the front of the school to facilitate family and staff relationships.

Pre-kindergarten and Primary 1 classrooms are designed to meet the needs of any grade from pre-k through first, permitting multi-age classrooms or multi-grade clusters.

The pre-kindergarten cluster includes a small dining room. Children help themselves to family style meals delivered from the main kitchen. In addition to providing a cozy space to eat for the youngest children, the separate dining room relieves the pressures of noise and crowds typically encountered in school cafeterias.

Classrooms can be expanded by opening a large oversized door to extend the classroom into the shared project area. The shared project area can be used for multi-purpose events for individual classes or several classes working together. Students and staff from other classrooms can easily interact, thus promoting a community environment. The shared project area is easily transformed into a play area, story time space, reading nook, construction area, science area, cooking area, and children's theater area.

The classroom design incorporates direct access to the outdoors, controlled day-lighting and has operable windows for natural ventilation.

Lobby

Admin. Suite

Shared Support

Family Resourc.

Learn. Spec.

Small Dining

3 Year Olds

4 Year Olds

4 Year Olds

3 Year Olds

Shared Proj. Area

3 Year Olds

4 Year Olds

Shared Proj. Area

4 Year Olds

um ose

eria

Kinder-garten

Kinder-garten

1st Grade

1st Grade

Kinder-garten

Shared Proj. Area

Kinder-garten

1st Grade

Shared Proj. Area

1st Grade

3rd Grade

Shared Proj. Area

3rd Grade

including families. A beautiful, sensitively organized environment has a major impact on the sense of belonging, the comfort and safety, and the capacity of all participants to be responsible and productive. The design should be accessible and welcoming, and a place where families can learn more about their children's classrooms and teachers, access a variety of resources (including technology and tech support), and have the opportunity to meet and talk with staff and other families.

Unless there is clear thought put into making a school friendly to adult family members, they may feel uncomfortable entering a strange and imposing space. Having spaces specifically designed for their use helps to let parents and other family members know that they are a welcome part of the school community and encourages them to become active in the life of the school. While the school must be designed to provide security for children at all times, this does not mean the spaces cannot be friendly to both children and adults as they enter the building. Indeed, a sense of safety is essential to a welcoming atmosphere.

School buildings should include a family resource suite as dedicated space for parents, siblings, and other family members. It should be a warm and inviting space, similar to one's own home. The suite should include a living room furnished with chairs, tables, and couches; kitchen and laundry with washer and dryer; coat closet; a small conference/tutorial room; a counselor's office; and a family specialist office centrally located and near the school entrance. It is a place where parents, teachers, staff, family, and students interact in a friendly and social environment. It also serves as a resource room for parents and includes computers, network access, books, and magazines.

In addition, within the school there should be an indoor or outdoor central gathering space. Display areas of varying kinds throughout the classrooms and shared spaces should celebrate the diverse community of students, staff, and families through child and adult art, photos, murals, and other media formats.

Space for support services to children and families also should be incorporated into the school. These may include counselors, psychologists, social workers, therapists (e.g., speech, occupational, and physical), health care, special educators, and remediation specialists. Each of these professionals will require office and service space. Attention must be given to their accessibility and proximity to one another, to children, and to family members for optimal engagement and efficient communication.

In a large school community, the population may be divided into homes' in an effort to enhance relationships with a more manageable number of children and families. Each 'home' team works toward consistency and a continuum of academic and social development both within and across grades. Options for collaboration at the 'home' level embrace the full spectrum of the interactions ranging from individual child and family consultation to team interactions. The goal of this approach is to promote collaboration that integrates services based on the unique needs of child and family rather than the availability of services.

Relationships Among School Staff

Opportunities for open discourse and honest reflection allow education professionals to enhance their instructional practices and improve learning experiences for children. Unfortunately, teachers are not always taught or encouraged to participate in such dialogue or to gather and use data to modify their practice. In addition, there is often a lack of collegial support in teaching and no consensus on how to put recommended practices into use. In recent years, Professional Learning Communities have been increasingly recognized as promising

frameworks for meeting these professional development and practice challenges.

Professional Learning Communities for educators are facilitated through both accessible space and the use of state of the art technology. In FirstSchool, school staff have personal and professional spaces that provide them places to plan, work and meet in small groups. There are spaces for other professionals who spend time at the school, such as community health professionals and social workers, to conduct their work and collaborate. State of the art technology supports professionals in multiple ways. Technology can maximize the sharing and storage of resources and materials for professional staff and family members; provide the means for regular communication with multiple disciplines, community stakeholders, university faculty and family members; and support professional development within and across schools by providing opportunities for members of the school community to view and reflect upon their students, their work and the work of others.

The design should value all members of the school community. This includes custodians and cafeteria and office workers. Custodial and service-related spaces need to be conveniently located for maximum efficiency, and demonstrate respect for staff through appropriate work and personal space.

Building Positive Relationships from the Ground Up

Designing an environment that promotes a sense of belonging, ownership and pride for all members of the school community requires collaborative work. Communities planning new schools must engage a broad range of stakeholders in ongoing inquiry into how the principles outlined here can reflect their community's unique context. A carefully designed environment promotes the development and maintenance of important relationships and partnerships throughout the school community.

Notes

[1] National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2005). *NAEYC early childhood program standards and accreditation criteria: The mark of quality in early childhood education.* Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

[2] Bredekamp, S., & Copple, C. (1997). Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

[3] Pianta, R. C., & Walsh, D. J. (1996). *High risk children in schools.* New York: Routledge; Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language.* Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

[4] Wesley, P. W., & Buysse, V. (2001). Communities of practice: Expanding professional roles to promote reflection and shared inquiry. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 21*(2), 114-123.

[5] Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team. (1995). Cost, quality, and child outcomes in child care centers: Public report. Denver: University of Colorado.

[6] Howes, C., Smith, E., & Gallinsky, E. (1995). *The Florida childcare quality improvement study: Interim report.* New York: Teachers College Press.

[7] NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. (1999). Child outcomes when childcare center classes meet recommended standards for quality. *American Journal of Public Health, 89*(7), 1072-1077.

[8] Whitebook, M., Howes, C., & Phillips, D. (1990). Who cares? Childcare teachers and the quality of care in America. Final report of the National Child Care Staffing Study. Washington, DC: National Center for the Child Care Workforce.

[9] Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and loss: Vol.1.* Attachment. London: Hogarth.

[10] Grossman, K. E., Grossman, K., & Zimmerman, P. (1999). A wider view of attachment and exploration. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), Handbook of attachment theory and research (pp. 760-786). New York: Guilford.

[11] Lou, Y., Abrami, P. C., & Spence, J. C. (2000). Effects of within-class grouping on student achievement: An exploratory model. *The Journal of Educational Research. 94*(2), 101.

[12] Moore, R. C., & Wong, H. H. (1997). *Natural learning: The life of an environmental schoolyard. Creating environments for rediscovering nature's way of teaching.* Berkeley, CA: MIG Communications.

[13] De Bord, K., Hestenes, L., Moore, R., Cosco, N., & McGinnis, J. (2005). *Preschool Outdoor Environments Measurement Scale (POEMS).* Lewisville, NC: Kaplan Early Learning Company.

[14] National Education Goals Panel. (1998). *Ready Schools: A report of the Goal 1 Ready Schools Resource Group.* Washington, DC: Author.

[15] Phillips, C. B., & Bredekamp, S. (1998). Reconsidering early childhood education in the United States: Reflections from our encounters with Reggie Emilia. In C Edwards, L. Gandini & G. Forman (Eds.), *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach – advanced reflections* (2nd ed., pp. 439-466). Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing Company.

First School

UNITING THE BEST OF EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

For more information

The increasing interest in PreK–3rd public schools means local and state administrators need tools to help them plan appropriate facilities. The *FirstSchool Design Guide* developed by the FPG Child Development Institute, Perkins Eastman, the FirstSchool Facilities Committee and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill walks communities through a collaborative inquiry process and shares sample plans and design specifications for optimal learning environments for children ages 3 through 8, their families and the educators who serve them. For more information about technical assistance with facilities planning, contact Sharon Ritchie: 919-843-2779 or ritchie@mail.fpg.unc.edu