

## **The Environment as a Teacher:**

### **Creating a Positive Classroom Community to Support Meaningful Learning Experiences**

*Rebecca Bootes, early childhood/elementary education teacher candidate*

#### ***Background***

The Reggio Emilia approach to developing a successful learning environment is one that greatly inspires the focus of my research. Their schools and classrooms are examples of environments that work to genuinely engage students in the joyful processes of learning and development by embracing the idea of the environment as a teacher. This focus on environment highlights an understanding that it plays a role in fostering strong relationships, inviting curiosity and shaping students' identities. "Thinking about the environment as a communicator and shaper of values can stir up a new sense of the significance...When teachers and parents find themselves in environments that are beautiful, soothing, full of wonder and discovery, they feel intrigued, respected, and eager to spend their days living and learning in this place (Carter, 2007)." When intentional thought is put into the learning environment students are led to these same feelings, and develop a greater sense of purpose in school and in life.

The classroom environment is one of the most important factors relating to student achievement. It is the setting where student learning happens. This environment is one that affects student academic achievement as well as their personal and social development. A student's well being is a reflection of the student's experience with the overall school learning environment. This environment includes the physical domain, social system (relationships between administrators/educators/students), sense of community (morale/safety) and norms among peers (Talis, 2009). It is necessary to student achievement that the learning environment remains flexible allowing itself to be modified for the needs of the present students and teachers. (Carter, 2007).

### ***Portfolio purpose and significance***

The purpose of this work is to examine and support the important role that the environment plays in the education and development of elementary aged children. I aim to better understand how a positive classroom environment—one established with mutual respect and trust, where students take responsibility, share control and ownership—and sense of community can contribute to meaningful learning experiences. The goal of this portfolio is to identify key characteristics of a positive classroom community and the effects one has on the academic and personal development of elementary aged children. The work will also serve as a road map of my own professional growth; through research, observation and the development of a personal teaching philosophy. Ultimately this portfolio will serve as a testament to my dedication to improving the field of education, documenting my learning on my journey to becoming a certified early childhood and elementary teacher. Creating a portfolio is most appropriate in that it effectively documents my progression, throughout the entire process, from start to finish. Having a completed portfolio of this caliber will also benefit my professional advancement and post graduation employment.

This portfolio will be valuable to me as an individual, while also offering insights relevant to the field of education. Currently it seems that our education system is in crisis. There is a feeling of unrest among teachers, students, and administration. The world is advancing and adapting, while our education system remains virtually unchanged. Communication skills and the ability to work in diverse community groupings are now more important than ever, with improving technology rewriting the way we function as a society. As a future educator, it is important to me that I understand how to effectively teach my students and prepare them for a

world that is evolving so quickly. I take the liberty to assume that this must also be true for my peers as well. In a system that is quick to trade in dreams of shattering the glass ceiling for the reality that some children will be left behind I feel that it is my responsibility to challenge this stagnation. With this portfolio, I challenge those who fail to see the potential of all students, who fail to understand the power of optimism in our work with children, who fail to realize that academic success is tied to the personal relationships we create in the classroom.

It is my commitment as an educator to continue to innovate and dream. I believe this portfolio will reinforce the idea that joy, humor, and optimism without doubt remain essential classroom qualities. It is significant to the field of education because it will spark hope for future educators and may offer some practical solutions to many of the struggles that our education system currently faces. It may be naïve or overambitious of me to hope to accomplish all of this with a simple portfolio, but I believe in the power of optimism. I believe in the power that the teacher has in creating a positive classroom community and all that this might accomplish.

### ***Portfolio components and artifacts***

This culminating portfolio that I create will focus on two major components. Each component will include artifacts that relate to the overall purpose of my work and specific aspects that I would like to highlight. These artifacts will be a combination of work samples and my own reflections. In addition, I will also include the necessary items expected to be found in a professional teaching portfolio, such as lesson plans and a teaching philosophy statement. My goal in developing each component is to collect and present evidence of all that I have learned exploring the relationship of positive learning environments and meaningful learning experiences.

The purpose of the first portfolio component will be to present the background research. It will serve as a point of reference for the components to follow. This artifact's main goal is to provide evidence that supports the overall portfolio topic. This information will be given in the form of a research report/journal. It is not a report in the traditional sense—but more of an ongoing research journal of experiences, knowledge, and growth. The report will refer back to information that I have collected from readings and additional materials that were used in my initial, and continuing, research on the effects of the environment on student development. I will use a journaling format to refer to my own personal experiences and reflections exactly as they happened. I feel that a research journal will best demonstrate all that I learn and practice as it occurs in real time. It will also offer me an authentic opportunity to implement techniques discussed by the research and reflect on their usefulness in direct relation to the current experience.

I plan to maintain this research journal throughout my learning experiences in the summer and fall of 2017, as well as a portion of spring 2018. I will keep a record of my experiences that allows the reader to observe my thoughts and witness firsthand the effects of the learning environment. The journal will provide insight on the intentional work, challenges, and great benefit of developing such an environment for students. As this journal will likely contain an overabundance of information I plan to revisit it from the first entry upon its completion. I will then select and refine entries that I feel contribute to the overall message of my portfolio. These entries will be selected based on their quality and relevance to this portfolio topic. One portion of the chosen entries must document an experience with a consistent group of students over at least one quarter (9/10 weeks).

The second component will demonstrate all that I have taken away from these learning experiences. One of the accompanying artifacts that I present will be a self study which includes a teaching philosophy that I have developed throughout this portfolio process, and observations on my experiments into the effects of using positivity and optimism to become an effective educator. This artifact will be an opportunity for me to share my insights and experience on creating positive classroom environments with other educators. The goal of this self study is to aid in supporting the effect that a positive classroom community has on student success. The inclusion of a teaching philosophy serves as my commitment to the field of education and a promise to future students. It signifies that I stand behind the power of optimism in our work with children, and fiercely believe that their academic success is directly linked to the personal relationships we create in the classroom.

The second artifact presented will be the documentation of a three week learning experience that I create for the students at Linapuni in my final field placement through UH Mānoa's College of Education. I will work with these students through the first half of the school year in the fall and winter quarters, focusing on building relationships and developing a positive classroom community. This initial process will lead to the spring quarter where I will use what I have learned to develop a unit of study for the class. This unit will be a learning experience developed through working with the classroom teacher, my mentor, and my own understanding of the students and their needs. It will be tailored specifically to them both academically and personally.

The artifact to document this learning experience will include the written unit plan with specific lessons, materials, goals and student learning objectives. I will also include student work

samples and additional forms of documentation that might become evident. In addition to the written unit plan I will include a brief collection of strategies and activities from the learning experience with an audience of parents and teachers in mind. Inspiration for this comes from suggestions found in Dishon and Moorman's book *Our Classroom*. This collection would be a way for teachers and parents to begin to foster this sense of community in their own homes and classrooms. The collection would include strategies, plans, and activities that I have found in my research or developed myself and practiced in the classroom with success. I would like the collection to be as accessible as possible for parents and teachers everywhere and will include an online version of the document as well.

Each of the components to be presented support the overall message of this portfolio. They showcase my learning and growth and emphasize the knowledge that currently exists on the importance of positivity and student achievement. The components demonstrate how a positive classroom environment and sense of community can contribute to meaningful learning experiences.

### ***Ethics statement***

This research project will be conducted in full compliance with research ethics standards in place between UH Mānoa's College of Education and Hawai'i's Department of Education. It will focus mainly on direct observation and my own personal experiences, fully respecting the confidentiality and anonymity of research respondents. This portfolio work is for my own professional and personal growth and development.

### ***Timetable***

Summer 2017: (focus on component one artifacts)

- Submit portfolio proposal, Hanahau'oli work experience, begin work on research journal (first component), continue ongoing research (readings etc.).

Fall 2017: (focus on component two artifacts)

- Linapuni field work begins, continue work on research journal, finalize ideas and begin work on second portfolio artifact(s) (blueprints, collecting materials, etc).

Winter 2017: (focus on component two and three artifacts)

- Ongoing field work at Linapuni, continue work on research journal, finalize work on second portfolio artifact(s), begin drafting final portfolio components unit plan, self study and strategies collection.

Spring 2018: (focus on component three artifacts and finalizing all others)

- Field work at Linapuni comes to an end, finalize work on research journal, design and implement unit plan learning experience (collect documentation), finalize work on self study, finalize work on strategies booklet, complete all components still needing work, present at Honors Showcase.

### ***Resources and materials***

Other than the opportunity to work directly in early childhood/elementary classrooms no additional resources will be necessary. The in-field learning experience at Hanahau'oli and Linapuni Elementary School are opportunities made available with thanks to UH Mānoa's College of Education. The classroom teachers and students that I work with at each location will serve as valuable resources to this portfolio work.

### *Student's role*

Over the course of the last two years I have spent time working with mentors in a variety of educational settings. I have spent time observing and practicing methods used in the preschool and elementary school settings. I have worked directly with students in special education, general education, and inclusive classroom settings. Spending time in these learning environments I began to develop an understanding of intentional teaching and environmental design while I formulated explorative questions of my own.

At Kūhiō Elementary School I worked with preschool and kindergarten students with learning disabilities. I was involved in developing engaging curriculum appropriate for a variety of learners and becoming familiar with available school resources to best support student learning. This was my first experience seeing the impact that the environment had on student development. I developed my initial understanding of the environment as a teacher during this time, through interviews, research, and direct observations. This work was done in conjunction with my enrollment in Kapiolani Community College's teacher training courses on educating diverse learners in the elementary school setting with Veronica Ogata as my mentor.

As a student of the College of Education, I have engaged in a range of methods courses that have provided me with important foundational knowledge to conduct this research. These included courses such as ITE 312: Introduction to teaching elementary education and ITE 417: Foundations in early childhood education ages 3-8. ITE 312 provided me with formal instruction on building relationships with students and creating a positive classroom learning environment. ITE 417 introduced the works of Loris Malaguzzi (Reggio Emilia) and Maria Montessori (The Montessori Method) whose educational approaches greatly influenced the focus of my research



and tie directly to this portfolio's; goals. This learning, in conjunction with field experience at Mililani Waena and Hanahau'oli, has inspired the work that I will present through this portfolio.

This summer I will have the opportunity to teach a junior kindergarten summer school class at Hanahau'oli, an independent elementary school here on O'ahu. I will be involved in setting up the classroom environment and developing curriculum for each of the 6 weeks. The summer school unit of study will focus on books and developing a love of learning in students. Activities will be designed with the whole child's development in mind. A learning environment will be developed to celebrate student achievement and reflect the learning atmosphere at Hanahau'oli. This experience will translate well into my final field placement at Linapuni Elementary School. I will be a part of a first grade class at Linapuni which is where the majority of my documentation and artifacts will be collected. I will be partnered with the classroom teacher for the entire school year engaging in a variety of lessons, activities, and instruction. This will lead up to a solo teaching experience and the development of a three week unit.

The components that I present will be developed by me personally. Each component has been developed intentionally to build on my relationship with the organizations and individuals that I have partnered with already or aspire to work with in the future. The design, execution, and synthesis of each component of this portfolio will be done by me. I hope that the overall presented product will directly influence my future career goals and development as an educator. I would also like to give appreciation to and acknowledge the assistance and guidance provided by my mentor Jane Dickson-Iijima. She has helped to oversee my research, ensuring that my portfolio work is a genuine and honest demonstration of what I've learned.

## *Literature review*

*To Become a Teacher* edited by Ayers (1995), is a book of essays with the intention of providing solution oriented guidance to new teachers through advice and collected experiences. It is a compilation of written works from a variety of experienced educators and philosophers. The book is organized into three major sections that demonstrate an understanding of the work teachers and students do when co-creating “places of ecstasy and poetry and gentle joy” (Ayers, 1995, p. xi). Contributors offer insight and share personal narratives on the current state of education systems, teaching as a profession, and hopes for future.

Sapon-Shevin’s essay *Building a Safe Community for Learning* (Ayers, 1995) reiterates the importance of decisions made by teachers in the classroom. She is explicit in stating that every decision a teacher makes has an impact on student learning and the overall atmosphere of the classroom. In her essay Sapon-Shevin stresses the importance of safety when creating a sense of community:

Safety: the safety to learn and to fail; the safety to show oneself fully and be appreciated or at least supported; the safety to succeed and the safety to be imperfect; the safety from humiliation, isolation, stigmatization, alienation from the group. This is the essence of community (p. 102).

As the artifacts within this portfolio are developed, it is important to reiterate that the teacher’s ability to establish a learning community in the classroom is dependent on, and made easier by, the intentional creation of genuine learning communities outside of the classroom as well (Ayers, 1995, p. 21). The community that I’d like to develop and explore through this portfolio work

should focus on the classroom community as a second home for students, another safe place that they might find themselves in.

A teacher has an opportunity to develop the ability to see students for who they are, and are meant to be, to then create a learning environment that will nurture and challenge each child in the classroom. A teacher can inspire and encourage the individual learner to make connections from the known to the not yet known (Ayers, 1995, p. 60). Raywid's essay *A Teacher's Awesome Power* (Ayers, 1995) speaks of just that, the power that a teacher potentially has to help students:

It is the teacher who determines the roles of every person in the room and the expectations that will govern every interaction...whether the general tone of the classroom will be relaxed and informal, friendly and supportive...And this decision has profound implications for students and what is expected and required of them (p. 79). Creating a classroom environment that focuses so much on safety when building this sense of community is important, as communities provide us with opportunities to show ourselves fully (Ayers, 1995, p. 104). When the time is taken to build relationships with students and create a community within the classroom, students feel supported and with no limitations to their accomplishments.

*The Architecture of Happiness* is a book examining architecture and its relationship with humankind that helps one to better understand the role that the physical environment might have on students. While Alain de Botton's book was not related to education explicitly, many of the ideas he put forward support the importance that the physical environment has on our development. I hoped to explore the question, 'What role does the physical environment play on

personal development?’ Botton claims that physical environments have a way of influencing our moods and the types of decisions that we make, “An ugly room can coagulate any loose suspicions as to the incompleteness of life, while a sun-lit one set with honey coloured limestone tiles can lend support to whatever is most hopeful within us” (Botton, 2006, p. 12-13). While the environment is not a dictator on what we think or the decisions we make, it does influence us indirectly in ways we don’t often notice.

How does this relate to education? The architecture of the school, the arrangement of the classroom, the lunchroom, playground, hallways, bathrooms and various other place that students find themselves in affect students and teachers. What message are we sending to students in each of these areas? Are they messages of support and inspiration? Or do they inhibit learning, confuse students, and stifle hopes and dreams. Botton’s work supports the theory that people, and in turn students, will possess some of the qualities of the buildings that they are drawn to or find themselves in. He suggests that someone who can, “be seduced by libraries with shelves filled from floor to ceiling with books that emit a sweet dusty smell...will be committed to infusing their whole lives with the values embodied in the objects of their appreciation” (Botton, 2006, p. 10-11). This supports the value and importance of taking great care to shape the environment that students will find themselves in. The classroom space makes a difference, from the colors of the walls, to the organization of furniture, the addition of plant and animal life, to the varying objects and tools available for use.

With the amount of time that students spend in the school environment we can compare the qualities of a school or classroom to those of a house. Botton describes a house as a guardian of identity, “Houses can invite us to join them in a mood which we find ourselves incapable of

summoning” (Botton, 2006, p. 17). It is important to then recognize that people, which includes students, will possess qualities of the buildings that they are found in. With the school environment we can help students to discover their individual identities and develop positive moods in response to learning. The point in comparing the school to a house is to demonstrate the importance of the school environment, and the possibilities of what one might accomplish when thinking meaningfully about the message and qualities that we would then like to instill in our students. The classroom has the potential to become, and should become, a place students feel comfortable calling home.

Botton goes on to explain that the desire to have a place to call home is to both physically and psychologically respond to a vulnerability. These places that we “honor with the term home” share outlooks that are similar to our own, “Home can be an airport or a library, a garden or a motorway diner (Botton, 2006, p. 107)”. When the classroom becomes a home for students it has taken into account the students’ individual similarities and differences. It acknowledges the students as individuals with distinct personalities and experiences. The classroom builds on this knowledge of the students and becomes a place where they feel comfortable, even when they are at their most vulnerable.

The book, *Our Classroom: We Can Learn Together* focuses on specific strategies and a particular way of thinking in order to achieve an intended goal. The term ‘Our Classroom’ is a term coined by the authors that describes a type of classroom atmosphere; one where ownership of the classroom doesn’t solely belong to the teacher, but to the students as well. In an *Our Classroom* environment it is claimed that students “feel more potent, have more control over their school lives, and feel a greater sense of ownership of the environment” (Dishon &

Moorman, 1983, p. xi). As the classroom becomes a sort of second home to them they become more invested in the activities and learning that takes place there from day to day.

Many teachers hope to aid students in the task of learning and help inspire them to enjoy the highs and lows of this process (Dishon & Moorman, 1983, p. 10). Parents and educators alike all want students to enjoy the process of learning. How do we teach students to learn and enjoy the process of learning then? This is where things get tricky. There is no prescribed list of ‘101 things to do to teach kids how to enjoy learning,’ such a list wouldn’t work for teachers or students. Instead Dishon and Moorman offer suggestions that have been implemented in classrooms of three Michigan school districts throughout the *Our Classroom* project. With these suggestions come answers to real concerns and questions asked by educators. The authors encourage teachers to then apply these strategies in their own classrooms, to adjust as much or as little as necessary.

As humans we are unique individuals; we adapt things, ourselves, whatever necessary to best fit our individual needs. *Our Classroom* does a great job addressing that in relation to both teacher and student by offering examples of struggles that real teachers have faced and a variety of suggestions that have been shown to be helpful. The term *Our Classroom* is one that symbolizes a classroom environment that many educators hope to establish. This is where we begin to teach students to enjoy learning. They must first love the environment that they find themselves in and the people that they are surrounded by. The book, *Our Classroom* aims to help educators “discover how we can best help ourselves and children in the time and space we have available” (Dishon & Moorman, 1983, p. 3). Through group validation techniques, using

students as the data base, and working towards a common goal Dishon & Moorman demonstrate just how this sense of unity can be established.

### *References*

Ayers, W. (1995). *To become a teacher: Making a difference in children's lives*. New York City, NY: Teachers College Press.

Botton, A. D. (2006). *The architecture of happiness*. New York City, NY: Vintage Books.

Carter, M., (2007, July/August). Making Your Environment "The Third Teacher." *Exchange*, 22-26.

Dishon, D., & Moorman, C. (1983). *Our classroom: We can learn together*. Merrill, MI: Personal Power Press.

Teaching And Learning International Survey. 2009. *Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments: First Results from TALIS*. Ischinger..