

Consider the Walls



Patricia Tarr

As a university professor in a teacher preparation program, I regularly visit kindergarten and primary classrooms to observe student teachers. One spring day, as I observed a student teach a science lesson to a group of 25 first-graders, my gaze wandered around the room.

From a small chair in a corner, I counted 19 different, decorated, scalloped borders segmenting portions of the bulletin boards lining the walls. The boards were filled with words: a word wall, class rules, calendar, alphabets, numbers, shapes, and colors, and a plethora of cartoon people and animals, each with a message and at least 50 of them with horseshoe-shaped smiles rather like a capital *U*. Blue-and-white snowflake borders hemmed in a group of winter paintings—white paint on blue paper—adding to the visual busyness. St. Patrick’s Day mobiles created from brightly painted rainbows and black-line masters hung from the ceiling just above the children’s heads. Rainbows, leprechauns, and pots of gold jiggled before my eyes. Almost mute amid the visual din were children’s drawings and written work on the walls.

I wondered what it would be like to be a child in that classroom day after day. Would I refer to the texts on the walls? Would I daydream or tune out to escape the cacophony of imagery? As an adult, I wondered about the messages embedded in the extensive use of smiling cartoon figures and stereotyped designs. I wondered

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how long the images had been on the walls. At what point would the texts and images fade from consciousness? I pondered the impact of this visual environment on children who have difficulty concentrating and staying focused on their work.

This classroom is not unique. Commercially produced borders, posters, and informational materials have become part of an accepted visual culture of North American early childhood classrooms. It is assumed that scalloped borders (which even line some of the bulletin boards in the faculty of education where I teach), commercial alphabets, and posters for shapes, numbers, and colors are essential components of a kindergarten or primary classroom.

Teachers who take a different approach may even feel pressure from other teachers or parents to decorate so that their room looks like a classroom should look. One teacher who begins her year with very little on the walls told me that her principal had tactfully inquired about her classroom walls. She assured the principal that the walls were deliberately bare, awaiting the rich work the children would soon be creating.

As I began to think in more depth about classroom walls and to explore some of the literature on environments, I found little that directly relates to wall space other than how-to-books on creating attractive bulletin boards. The *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures of the National Association for the Education of Young Children* states, “The environment should be attractive, colorful, and have children’s work and other pictures displayed at children’s eye level” (NAEYC 1998, 49). While these standards are designed for preschool and kindergarten rooms, not primary classrooms, in my experience, kindergarten programs typically contain the same

commercial materials as this primary classroom. *The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* gives positive ratings to classrooms in which “most of the display is work done by the children” and is relevant to their current experiences (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer 1998, 14). Highest rated on the scale are displays that feature work in which children select the media or the subject and create a personal response rather than a formula response.

At face value, the classroom in my example was colorful and did have current children’s work displayed at a child’s eye level. The room might have been rated satisfactorily according to these standards. What seems to be missing from these criteria are guidelines that help teachers consider the purpose of displays, evaluate commercial materials, or think about classroom aesthetics.

The Reggio Emilia approach stresses the “environment as the third teacher” (Gandini 1998, 177). Reggio-inspired teachers are beginning to look more critically at their classrooms and reconsider all aspects of teaching environments, including the purposes of display and classroom aesthetics. For example, following her visit to Reggio Emilia, Hertzog wrote, “I can strive for more aesthetically pleasing environments in our classrooms. I can ask teachers to examine their classrooms for clutter” (2001, 7).

This article critically examines classroom walls from four perspectives: reading the environment, walls that silence, the purpose of display, and aesthetics. I offer some suggestions for teachers to consider when purchasing materials and in planning how to use classroom walls to enhance the educational setting.

Reading the environment

Classroom environments are public statements about the educational values of the institution and the teacher. Arrangement of space—including desks, tables, materials available, and what is displayed on the walls—conveys messages about the relationship between teaching and learning, the image of the child held by the teacher, and the expectations for behavior and learning within that setting (Simco 1996; Gandini 1998; Rinaldi 1998). More specifically, there is the question of the value of commercially produced materials on classroom walls and whether educators understand the messages they convey (Shapiro & Kirby 1998).

The message I read in the classroom described above was that there was a great deal of information to be

consumed by children through a transmission model of learning. It was clear that children were expected to know specific kinds of information—numbers, colors, shapes, and so on—that may or may not have had any relationship to what this particular group of children actually knew or was relevant to them at this time. The displays read as a standardized—and unquestioned—assortment of materials that ought to be in the room. I also suspect that the majority of these first-graders had learned much of this long before they had entered this classroom; it is precisely the kind of lessons that many two-, three-, and four-year-olds learn in their homes or preschools.

The atmosphere created by so many cartoon figures with smiling faces spoke to me about the intended atmosphere for learning. I assumed that the intent was to create a fun atmosphere—a cheery, colorful environment, where children’s attention would be captured by these smiling figures and their messages. However, what I saw were cute and trivialized images of children and childhood. The stereotyped images suggested a dumbing down of the environment based on adults’ conceptions of what children like.

Where such imagery is part of the educational environment, children learn to value and accept stereotyped images as part of classroom culture (Rosario & Collazo 1981), even though the displays may not be part of the explicit curriculum. These images serve to perpetuate a distinctive cultural aesthetic of school—think of designs of school buses, apples, little school-houses, and so forth (Tarr 2001). Such images do not honor children’s potential to respond to the world’s rich and diverse heritage of art forms (Feeney & Moravcik 1987; Tarr 2001).

Neither do didactic commercial products necessarily reflect children’s real interests; they often do not invite engagement, wonder, or imagination, making them that much easier to be ignored at the conscious level. The image of the learner embedded in these materials is that of a consumer of information who needs to be entertained, rather than a child who is curious and capable of creating and contributing to the culture within this environment (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 1999; Rinaldi 2001; Tarr 2003).

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Walls that silence

In that first grade classroom, I was struck by how the displays of children’s work were lost amongst the many visual images on the wall. The snowflake designs on the borders surrounding the winter paintings made it difficult to appreciate the quality of the individual chil-

dren's responses to painting a winter scene. Likewise, the scalloped borders and cartoon figures overpowered the penciled texts; rather than honoring children's words, they rendered them invisible.

Work that follows formulaic schemas, such as prescriptive worksheets or the St. Patrick's Day mobiles hanging from the ceiling, stifles the true capabilities of young children and consequently silences imagination and creativity. So too does the mass of commercial stereotyped images silence the actual lived experiences of those individuals learning together. An overload of commercial materials leaves little room for work created by the children—another kind of silencing. Finally, children are muffled when what is displayed does not accurately reflect who they are in terms of gender, culture, and ethnicity but rather in stereotyped ways.

Purpose of display

The challenge for early childhood educators is to think beyond *decorating* to consider how walls can be used effectively as part of an educational environment. In Reggio Emilia the walls display documentation panels of projects that children are engaged in. These become the basis of ongoing research and dialogue between the children, teachers, and families. Panels of photos, artifacts, and text make "learning visible" to participants and to outsiders (Rinaldi 2001).

Documentation differs from display in that it includes explanatory text and children's own words, helping the viewer understand children's thinking and their processes rather than just end products. Documentation is ongoing and part of planning and assessment. It encourages children to revisit an experience and to share a memory together. It can provide opportunities for further exploration or new directions (Gandini 1998).

Here are some questions teachers can ask themselves:

- What is the purpose of the materials I am putting on display? Who is the display for? The children? Families? Other visitors?
- What image of a learner is conveyed by the materials displayed?
- Does the display honor children's work or has the work become simply decorative by being cut up into shapes contrived by an adult?
- How can the walls reflect the lives, families, cultures, and interests of the learners within?
- Do the posters invite participation and active involvement or passive reception of information (Shapiro & Kirby 1998)?
- What is the atmosphere of the classroom? How do the materials on display contribute to this atmosphere?
- What are the assumptions about how children learn, and how are these



reflected by the classroom walls?

Kindergarten and primary teachers are under increased pressure to support literacy development. Literature in this area suggests that teachers create classrooms that are rich in print, incorporating such things as word walls (Houle & Krogness 2001), signs, labels, bulletin boards, and more. However, Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp caution that “More does not mean better. In a room cluttered with labels, signs, and such—print for print’s sake—letters and words become just so much wallpaper” (2000, 38).

If a word wall, alphabet, or other material is intended as a reference, is it located where children can actually use it? Perhaps alphabet strips for desk use are more helpful to children than alphabets hung high above their heads (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp 2000). If this applies to alphabets, could it also apply to other didactic materials, such as number charts? Could the wall space be used to better educational advantage?

Another question that should be asked: “Is the information on posters and charts accurate?” Tracey (1994) argues, for example, that children should use mathematically correct terminology from the beginning, replacing words such as *diamond* and *oval* with the terms *rhombus* and *ellipse* (although *oval* and *diamond* may be the common terms used on posters marketed for young children). Similarly, there are many variations of tints and shades of color—is a chart illustrating primary and secondary colors too simplistic a description?

Do children have any input into the design of displays? British educator Penny Hegarty (1996) links children’s involvement in creating classroom displays with curriculum goals in the area of visual literacy and visual communication. Not only might children be involved with selecting work that goes on display, they also can be part of the process of creating the display.

Finally, are commercial materials a wise investment? Teachers frequently spend their own money on materials to decorate their classrooms. Rethinking what is put on the walls may help teachers make thoughtful choices and save money.

Aesthetics

Feeney and Moravcik (1987), concerned about the aesthetics of classrooms, suggest that one of the ways that educators could enhance the aesthetic education of young children is through the design of the environment. This idea has been taken up more recently in literature from Reggio Emilia, particularly in *Children, Spaces, Relations: Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children* (Ceppi & Zini 1998), that looks closely at

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educational environments that support children’s learning through conscious use of design elements of light, color, texture, sound, and smell. Curtis and Carter (2003) spotlight North American classrooms that have consciously used these design elements to engage children’s curiosity

and wonder. Their *Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments* is an excellent reference for any teacher wishing to reconsider classroom aesthetics.

While much of the early childhood literature suggests that rooms for young children be colorful, color is too often used for its own sake rather than deliberately chosen to enhance a particular area or to create a sense of unity throughout the room. Walls painted in neutral colors create a sense of calmness and allow other features in the room to stand out. Observe how color is used in homes, commercial buildings, public spaces, and museums. Consider what makes a particular place attractive and interesting. Notice how color is used to create a supportive environment for objects and images on display.

Children’s work usually shows to best advantage on neutral walls or against backgrounds that do not compete with the work. Brightly colored borders or picture frames often detract from children’s work. In the first grade classroom observed, there was no empty space to allow the eyes to rest. The feeling was of visual chaos and clutter. A balance was needed between filled and empty spaces. The winter paintings



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would have been much more visible and enjoyable had they been displayed without the snowflake borders and cartoon figures. Some empty space between each piece would have allowed viewers to see each work as a single entity as well as part of a larger group project. A cleaner palette also would have freed space for some text that described the winter project and included children's voices about their experience.

Conclusion

I am not suggesting that teachers should never purchase commercial materials. Many art reproductions and visuals are of educational value and appropriate to hang in a classroom. I am, however, encouraging teachers to step back and critically examine the quality and quantity of commercial materials on their walls to determine whether they actually contribute to children's learning or whether they ultimately silence children. We should respect children as active, curious learners with ideas to communicate.

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