

advancing holistic learning environments through guided play

by Brett Macht and Amy Green



Since there is no one-size-fits-all approach to learning, it is critical that the physical environment does not constrain potential curriculum delivery. Treating educational spaces with as much flexibility as possible gives the opportunity to support diverse pedagogy within a single space. For early childhood education centers, flexibility is particularly critical for guided play.

what is guided play?

Guided play is a form of curriculum delivery that can strongly support the academic and socio-emotional development in young children. This is done by finding a balance between traditional, direct instruction, and free-play in early childhood education. Guided play gives framework to a subject or topic while providing children with various learning styles the ability to process the information.

Guided play effectively uses a scaffolded environment to enhance the learning experience. Within scaffolding, guidelines are identified to assess, relate, manage, and assist (I. Silver, 2011). When integrated with the overall direct instruction, guided play is used to evaluate current knowledge, connect new content to what students already understand, establish manageable tasks to attain new knowledge, and give the teacher the ability to assist throughout the process.

“TELL me,
and I forget.

TEACH me,
and I may remember.

INVOLVE me,
and I learn.”

– Benjamin Franklin



When a teacher interweaves daily activities into a common theme, it creates differentiated learning experiences and reinforces the overall subject. Instruction is delivered through lecture-style storytelling and reinforced through student-led exploration in teacher-created, subject-specific play stations. The teacher's tactful, scaffolded approach enables children to engage with the subject across a variety of learning environments. Research suggests that scaffolding within guided play promotes deeper understanding and supports knowledge development (2. Lillard et al., 2013).

As opposed to sole, rote memorizing, involving students through multiple delivery methods, at an early age, can lead to more effective learning. Through holistic, guided play, children are given agency to direct their own learning, within a gentle framework driven by a learning goal. This environment gives teachers the ability to monitor, guide, and facilitate on a per pupil basis towards that learning objective.

Careful selection of fixed elements in academic spaces supports easy reconfiguration between lessons and topics. This opens up a variety of instructional and play station options for any given curriculum series. When spaces can quickly change and adapt to various layouts, teachers have more flexibility in presenting their curriculum. The built environment should support flexibility and guided play delivery methods that actively engage students.

If teaching students
about agriculture is the
instructional goal,
a teacher may consider
combining a farming
story time with farm play
stations.

the rosenthal education center (rec)

Along with world renowned Neutelings Riedijk Architects, emersion DESIGN was tasked with the design of the REC, which is devoted to the education of children within the Cincinnati Art Museum. emersion's team worked closely with the Art Museum to create a space that changes dramatically every quarter to provide hands-on art classes to children of all ages.

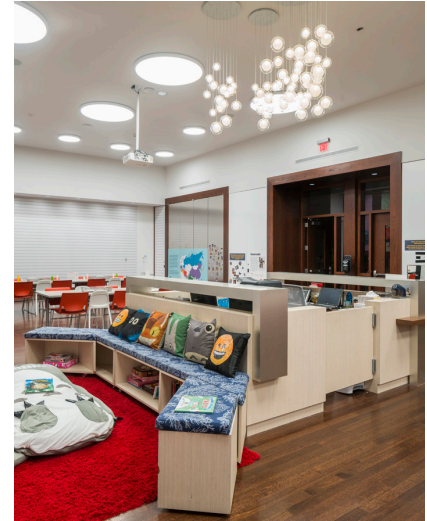
Each new theme directly correlates to the current exhibit at the art museum. The REC features a hidden art supply storage area behind full-height magnetic markerboards doors. Opposite the storage area are four stainless steel lower panels and two upper gypsum boards that all mimic wood-framed art. This area acts as the medium to apply themed wall décor and display interactive art exhibits. The space also features additional storage cabinets with a counter and sink, racks for drying art work, a high definition video projector, mobile tables and chairs, built-in iPads, custom reconfigurable benches that double as book storage, and a vibrantly colored curtain to break the large space into two smaller spaces. Aside from adding aesthetic value the curtain was selected to help minimize noise when the space was full of children at play.

Central to all of this activity is a custom millwork desk utilized by a learning and interpretation employee hired to gently guide the children through their play and art making. Children within the space are encouraged to interact with the various exhibits and to create. The magnetic markerboard doors are often set up to support a drawing or matching activity. On the opposite wall, materials are adhered to the stainless-steel panels to encourage hands-on art producing, light boxes, weaving, and other types of exploration. The mobile benches are often arranged in a way to facilitate the weekly reading activity; these benches provide a small and enclosed feeling spot, in a spacious room, to snuggle up with a cushion and read one of the many books provided.

The creativity and versatility of this space, allows the Cincinnati Art Museum to achieve its goal of offering a highly educational, creative, and immersive guided play experience.

references

- Silver, D. (2011). Using the 'Zone' Help Reach Every Learner. Kappa Delta Pi Record, 47(sup1), 28-31.
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