

# University of Montana Journal of Early Childhood Scholarship and Innovative Practice

---

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 1


---

5-25-2017

## BUILDING A RICH, AESTHETIC PLAY-BASED ENVIRONMENT FOR PRESCHOOL

Dana Lozier  
dana.lozier@umontana.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/ecsip>

 Part of the [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Other Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#), and the [Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons](#)

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

### Recommended Citation

Lozier, Dana (2017) "BUILDING A RICH, AESTHETIC PLAY-BASED ENVIRONMENT FOR PRESCHOOL," *University of Montana Journal of Early Childhood Scholarship and Innovative Practice*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/ecsip/vol1/iss1/1>

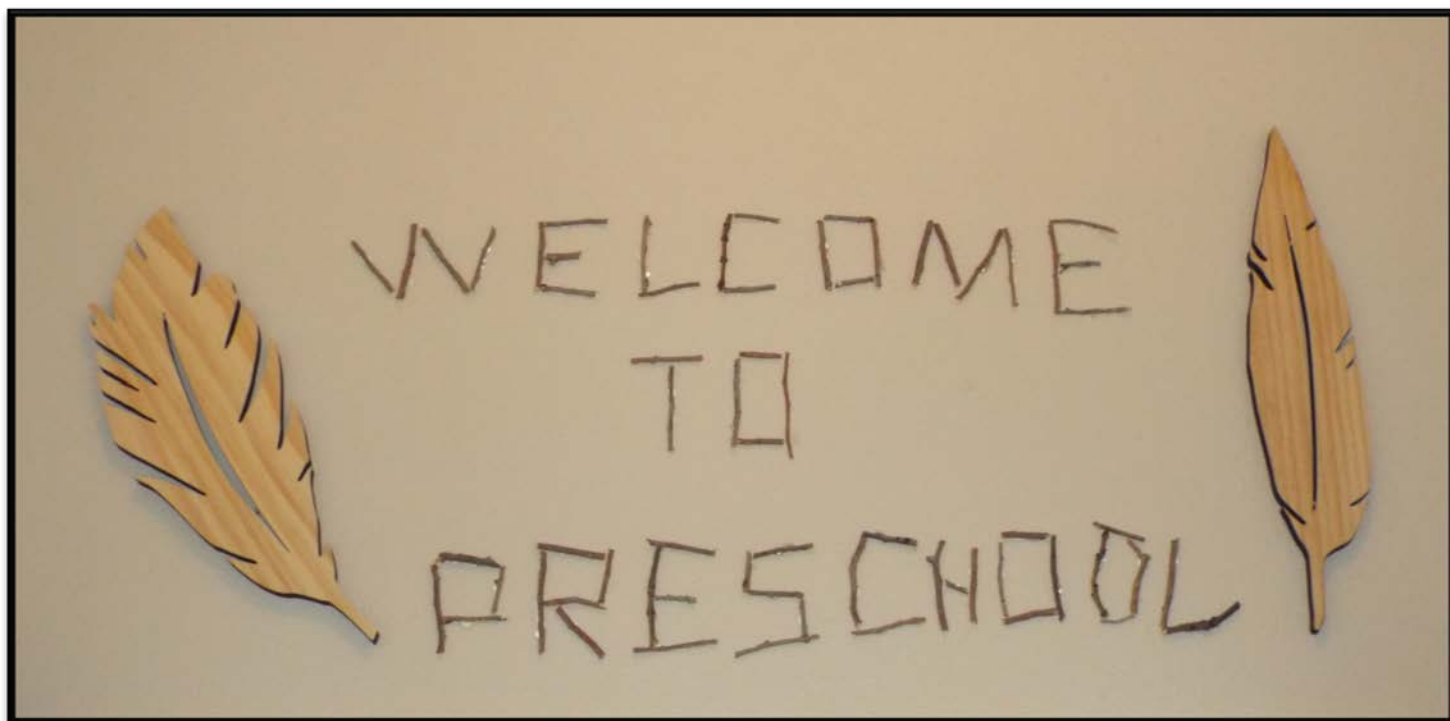
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Montana Journal of Early Childhood Scholarship and Innovative Practice by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

# BUILDING A RICH, AESTHETIC PLAY-BASED ENVIRONMENT FOR PRESCHOOL

## Dana Lozier

*Dana Lozier has been a teacher for 18 years in elementary, middle, and high school. She has taught in inner city Philadelphia, Florida, and at Antilles School, a private academy in St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. She recently designed and opened the Missoula Early Learning Center, which serves 70 children ages 6 weeks to 6 years. Dana is both the director of the program and the preschool teacher. Additionally, Dana is finishing coursework for an Ed. D. in Curriculum and Instruction with a double emphasis in Early Childhood Education and Mathematics.*

At Missoula Early Learning Center we believe that children's imaginations and enthusiasm for learning grow when stimulated by a well designed *play-based environment* and *project-based, emergent curriculum*. Children ages three to five, learn in unique ways. Our play-based learning centers are based on the research of theorists and early childhood professionals. Our learning centers have been carefully designed to promote children's abilities and allow children to safely and securely practice newly acquired skills as well as synthesize newfound knowledge. Well-designed play-based environments help to promote positive behaviors and keep children motivated to continually learn and discover independently and with guidance. Play provides a vehicle for children to put knowledge and skills into action.



Our rich environment was thoughtfully designed. We looked critically through the lenses of a child's eyes as we designed innovative centers, a play planning board, the circle area, and even the signage throughout the classroom. As we designed the environment we repeatedly asked ourselves, "would a child feel welcome, enjoy playing, and unknowingly develop and practice skills?" Additionally, we made an effort throughout our center to develop a calm and peaceful atmosphere. We were attentive to adding the aesthetic details that would offer a beautiful and serene environment for young children. We chose muted colors on the walls and sage green for our accent color for curtains and furniture. Most of the furniture is wooden or metal, giving the center an earthy feel. We made our own sound panels out of wood and burlap to soften ambient noise as well. The entire environment is welcoming and peaceful.

As we planned each learning center throughout the classroom, we developed signage that a child of three to five years of age could easily understand. Each center has an eye-catching sign that sends a message to the child about the purpose of the center. Our engineering center sign displays bike wheels and tools, an obvious message that building and creating happens there. Our dramatic play sign is a hand painted fancy hat on a piece of thin wood, denoting a fun place to dress up and imagine. We knew that we wanted the children to have the responsibility of choosing and planning their play experiences, so each center needed to be distinguishable from the others.



The play plan board is central to helping children thoughtfully plan where they would like to play. Children are responsible for choosing where they would like to play. Each child has a small wooden tab labeled with their name in which they exchange for another painted wooden tab to match each center sign that serves as a token for entry into a center. That token also serves as a reminder to them of their responsibility to clean the center before leaving it. The play plan board allows teachers a one stop glance to see where each child is playing and with whom they are playing. The play plan board also limits the number of children in each center without teacher assistance. Children have the autonomy they deserve when they can navigate their classroom with confidence.

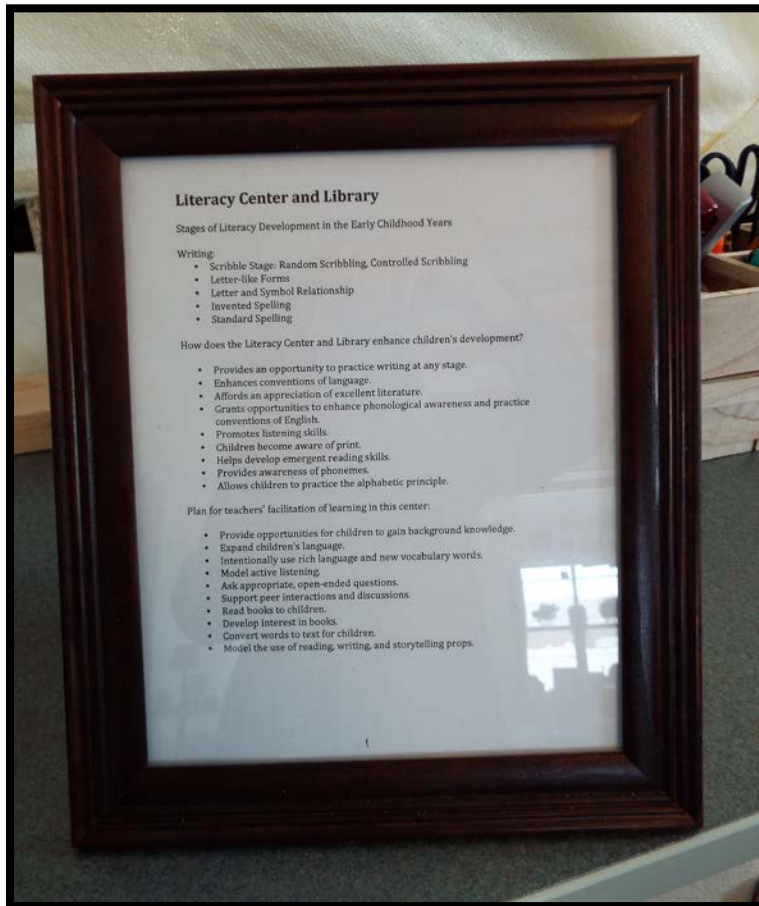


We created center spaces with obvious borders, using shelving. We envisioned the popularity of certain centers and planned for larger spaces in the Engineering and Dramatic Play centers for example.

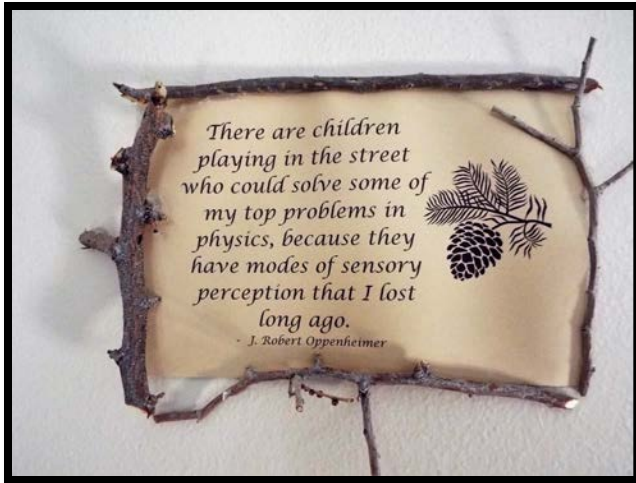




In each learning center, we included neatly framed signs for adults as well. These signs provide the blueprint for learning in each center. Each sign gives adults information concerning how a child will use the center appropriately and practice skills; essentially giving the instructions for a well-informed play-based curriculum to evolve. We provided these signs to inform and guide less experienced teachers who may need confidence in guiding play. The signs deliver information to parents who may have questions regarding play and how the environment provides opportunities for children to practice developmentally appropriate skills. Additionally, we use these signs to foster professional development opportunities for staff. Each month we analyze one or two centers by reading these signs, analyzing the purpose of the materials provided within the learning center, and questioning whether the learning center is meeting its potential. We also question whether we are providing high quality support to children as they play in those particular centers and set goals to extend or encourage play further if necessary.



Throughout the program, we posted positive, thought provoking quotes neatly framed by twigs, at adult eye level. The quotes are meant to inspire adults to view the environment as a canvas of potential learning experiences. The quotes serve to refresh our understanding of what it means to be young, intrigued and awed by the world around us. Many of the quotes prompt us to reconsider the incredible power of play and the ingenuity of the children who are allowed to do so freely.



We made a conscious effort to include literature in every learning center. We wished that children would explore books on many subjects as well as learn new information and skills. We wanted children to know that reading occurs everywhere in our world, not just in a library center. Every learning center has at least eight books on a related subject. For example, our Health and Snack center includes fiction and non-fiction books about food. Our Engineering center incorporates books on construction and vehicles. Unsure if the children would use them, we even created a basket of books on various sports in the gym. To our delight, we noticed that the children grew to explore all the books throughout the program. In the gym, a beautifully illustrated book on gymnastics fascinated a large group of children. They would pour over the pages and began to try the stretching exercises that were draw. They began to challenge each other to learn how to do a headstand. We observed the children helping each other lift their legs to balance on the mats against the wall. When one child learned how to get into a tripod, he taught the others. None of us helped the children, but they did not ask for help either. They adopted this gross motor skill challenge as a group-learning task. We were simply proud to watch it unfold and know that the exploration was completely child-directed and inspired solely by the power of literature.



We believe that a high-quality learning environment should make learning visible. In every center, we post laminated photos of the children playing within that learning center. These pictures are meant to continually inspire play and provide concrete tools for teachers and children to help plan future play. The photos can also be used to inspire reluctant children to play in certain areas. For example, we make a point to include many pictures of the boys dressed up in the dramatic play area as well as the amazing structures that the girls have created in the engineering center. By displaying these visual reminders, we are able to help children extend their previous learning or feats such as building a sturdier, more complex, or bigger structure.



All of these points of continuity enhance the aesthetics of the classroom. The classroom is not only highly functional, it is easy to navigate and rich in materials and learning tools. We are mindful of reducing clutter on shelves and in the children's cubby area. In addition, we originally took our time to create aesthetically pleasing labels that were durable enough to withstand constant use by little hands. These signs have lacquered on photographs of the contents of the baskets. We simply drilled holes through the ends and attached them with thin jute rope. They are sturdy and the children can easily identify the contents of all the baskets throughout each learning center.





A more detailed account of each center provides greater insight into how much preparation and thought it entails to create an environment such as this. With the creation of each learning center, we considered the culture of the families within the community. We also thought of ways in which we could incorporate multi-cultural items throughout the learning centers. Each learning center was carefully organized and designed to be, simultaneously, unique and cohesive with the environment as a whole.

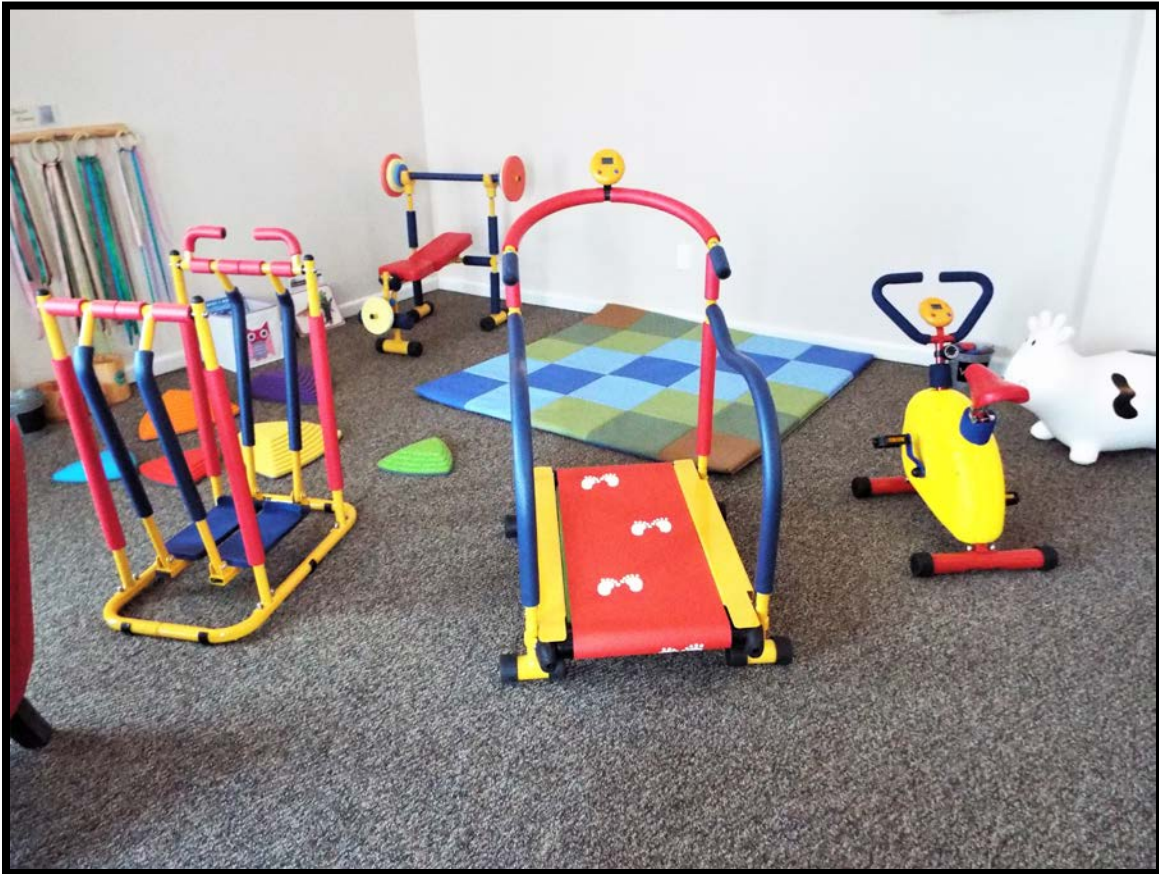
We live in a fairly progressive town in western Montana. We are surrounded by beautiful mountains, which contribute to the active lifestyle of many of the families we serve. Our community is highly health conscious so we knew that aspects of our program needed to reflect this athletic, healthy community. Families enjoy our healthy menu and the constant activities planned for the children. Additionally, we spend nearly four hours outdoors when temperatures permit. In Montana, we believe that there is no bad weather, only bad clothing. This commitment to teach children early about eating healthy and staying active and fit led us to create a Health and Snack Center as well as a Gym.

Our Health and Snack Center has food group puzzles and games, activities, and stuffed vegetable character dolls. We also keep laminated cards of all the foods that we eat on this table in our lunchroom. We use these cards as recipe cards so that the children can make their own snack. In doing so, the children get to practice math skills such as measuring. Each child has the responsibility to 'tab into' the Health and Snack Center during morning and afternoon center-play sessions to create their snack and enjoy it. We felt that it was important for children to learn to pay attention to their own body cues. The children check their name on a class list when they have eaten. The children enjoy making their own snacks and carrying them to the table. We also use these food cards in a sorting activity before lunch. We chose a child to act as the teacher and they find the cards of the foods that are being served at the meal. They acquire the help of the other children to help them sort the foods into two categories: foods to eat with silverware or foods to eat with our hands. This serves as a reminder for the children while eating, or a visual reference for teachers to remind children who struggle to use silverware for some foods. Our Health and Snack Center allows the children to develop excellent manners and responsibility for preparing, eating, and serving their own foods.





As we designed our gross motor area, we agreed that many children might need to utilize this area in case of inclement weather. Many of our families use a gym in the winter months to stay fit. We thought it would be fun for the children to have similar equipment in a specialized miniature gym. We purchased sturdy, child-sized gym equipment and mats to promote physical fitness. The children love the equipment and they get quite a great aerobic workout on the stationary bicycle, treadmill, and the elliptical machine. Our gym is located in a separate room in the back of our facility. The space is shared with the music center. We planned this specifically due to the fact that music contributes to a good workout and promotes dance in this wide-open space. We made homemade dance ribbons in the gym as well. The children have animal yoga cards and free weights to help them plan their workout as well.



Our gym serves a dual purpose. The equipment that we purchased is fairly easy for adults to move. We have a large closet that we can place the equipment in to clear the entire room. The room serves as a quiet place to meditate and do group yoga during our mindfulness circle time. The children practice mindfulness each day before naptime. We have incorporated many aspects of mindfulness into this 15-minute meeting period. We created some activities to rotate through during our Mindfulness Circle: guided meditation, silent meditation, laughing yoga, mindful tasting, mindful listening, mindful observing, kindness chats, and a gratitude circle. The children enjoy Mindfulness Circle so much that they have requested to lead the circle time as the teachers on many occasions. Their meditation periods have grown from only a few seconds to about three minutes of still silence.

Our program incorporates musical activities in each unit of study that we create. We have a beautiful space for children to create music and act out plays and musicals. When designing the music area, we knew we wanted a stage, with real curtains to pull for the opening of any show. We designed an inexpensive alternative to building a full stage. We ordered satiny red curtains and hung them on a retractable clothesline in the corner of the room. The children have access to many clothing items to create their own costumes. They enjoy taking turns being the director of a show when playing in the music center.



We felt that it was important to have many interesting instruments available for the children to experiment with. The children have access to a full-sized electronic piano, two guitars, and a myriad of rhythm instruments. We incorporated ethnically diverse instruments from a steel pan, to a lyrical harp, to an accordion, to a marimba. During units of study we often make a new instrument to add to the Music Center. Homemade instruments are inexpensive and teach children about the construction of instruments. During a recent unit on Chinese culture, the children created bead drums. As a reminder of the unit and the music that was celebrated during that unit, we placed the extra drums in the Music Center for the children to continually incorporate into their play.







Children need an art studio to experiment with all forms of artistic endeavors. The Art Studio in our program is beautifully situated by a large window, over a tiled floor. The open, airy feeling gives inspiration to the children and natural light bathes the entire area. The children have access to a four-station easel and often invite friends to paint together. We have created baskets of curious items that could inspire a young artist to create. The children have access to a large table to spread the art supplies upon to make their masterpieces. When they have completed their work, we hang their art on our beautiful drying rack. We found an antique ladder in a barn, cleaned it up, and hung it from the ceiling over the art area. From the ladder we hung wooden coat hangers with clothes pins attached. Once art is dry, we ask the children if they would like to display it or take it home.







Displaying child created artwork helps build children's confidence in their abilities and talents. Art can be beautifully displayed in many ways. We love to display art in similar ways to exhibitions at a museum. When artwork is displayed in a tasteful way, it teaches children to appreciate the effort of artists. Often we frame our art with mattes on the wall or we hang them from homemade hangers made of sticks and jute. We also display adult artwork for inspiration. For each unit of study, we include a display of related artwork. During a recent unit on Chinese culture, inspired by interest in dragons and a former classmate from China, we had many beautiful photos of prints, vases, sculptures, and Chinese artifacts on display. We worked together to create a life-sized dragon for dancing. We were able to place the entire dragon on top of the drying rack as the paper maché dried over the course of a few days. Art studios are an integral part of any preschool program. The space should be beautiful, organized, and inspiring.











Our Library is adjacent to our Literacy Center. The Library contains books on our current topic and many of the children's favorite books. Our large selection of books promotes multicultural learning. We pepper the library with fiction and non-fiction selections. We avoid adding books that promote cartoons or other commercial characters. The library is highly popular and the children take great care of the books. We often borrow public library books to expand the contents of the books on our current topic of study. We also incorporate a few stuffed animals that are theme related to snuggle with while reading.





The central focus of our Literacy Center is a small wooden desk. The children can sit quietly and write in their personal journals or create letters for their families. We supplied the drawers of the desk with envelopes, paper, pencils, letter stamps, and other supplies. There are a few children's first dictionaries available. We provide a basket of beautiful letter rocks for the children to spell their names and other words.





Preschoolers need a place to retreat when they are feeling overwhelmed and want to relax. We created the Peace and Quiet Center as a serene space where children can withdraw and regroup. We bought a canvas teepee that fits a few children comfortably. The children have stuffed animals to snuggle with and soft pillows to lie upon. Coupled with our focus on Mindfulness, they use this spot to calm themselves and refocus their energy. The children have developed self-regulation skills that help them make the decision to enter this area when they are frustrated.



Our Dramatic Play Center is quite large and filled with fascinating props. We use empty recycled containers of food that fit well into our small wooden kitchen. The recycled spice jars are left unwashed so that the children can enjoy a sensory experience when they pretend to cook. We are able to include a diversity of foods that many cultures enjoy when we collect these containers from our families. We provide many realistic pots and pans, tea sets, muffin tins, silver platters, silverware, and cookware. It is important that children feel the real weight of objects. They learn to care for the porcelain and glass items, and rarely break any learning tools.





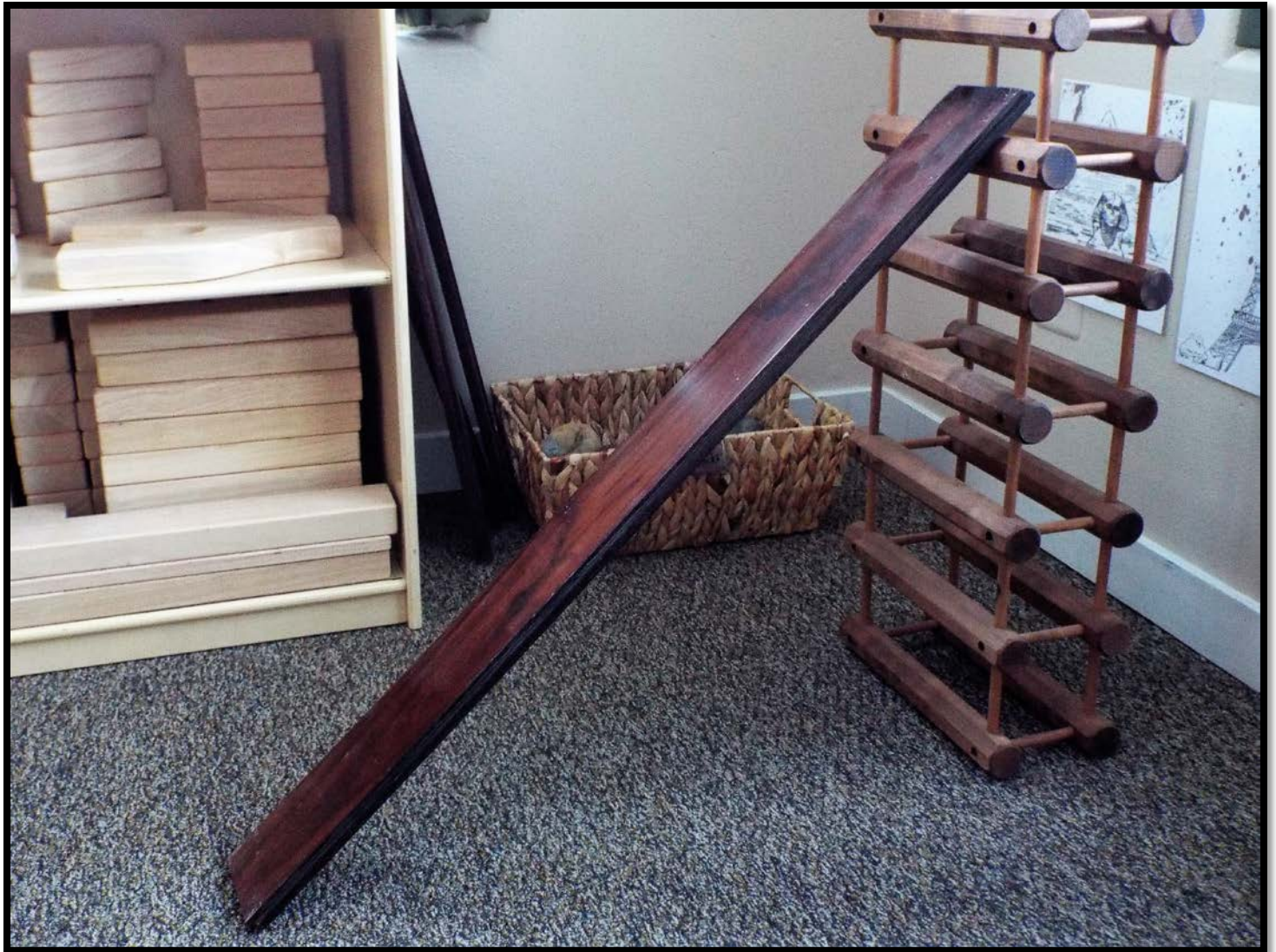




In lieu of creating a traditional Block Center, we chose to create an Engineering Center. This learning center includes a toolbox with real tools, loose parts, gears, and other random gadgets. We attempted to make all the building materials natural building materials, such as miniature clay bricks, wooden unit blocks, rocks, and wooden ramps. We place recycled cardboard tubes in a large basket for the children to build marble ramps. There are a few baskets of marble, granite, and porcelain tiles, laminate flooring samples, and Formica counter top samples. The children enjoy incorporating these loose parts within their structures.







Another calm area within the classroom is the Science Center. Our Science Center has rich materials to explore. We usually have at least one realistic diorama of an environment set up to explore animals and habitats. We have baskets of seashells, gems and rocks, plants, and other natural items. The Science Center has a large window that opens into our garden and bird feeders. The children enjoy watching the birds eat from the feeders. We even have a pair of ducks that fly by the back window quite often. The children use the binoculars to look further, past our garden. We have created a photo journal of the animals that we have seen pass our school. Often, we include natural items that the children are allowed to explore with multiple senses. During our unit on Chinese Culture, we placed Tamarind in a small wooden bowl for the children to feel, smell, and taste if they wished. These items serve as provocations, captivating the children and leading them to further investigate their ideas.





Many preschool programs provide a manipulative area. At our center we created a Fine Motor Skills Center. There are weaving looms, a wooden fishing game, beads and string, pipettes for manipulating water droplets, and small tractors for rolling. We have a basket of nuts and bolts and other items that build the small muscles in children's hands. During the Chinese culture unit, we provided chopsticks with bowls of 'yarn noodles' and Chinese take-out containers to fill. This prompted us to try to eat with chopsticks during lunch on stir-fry day. Although this center is small, the children enjoy it immensely.







We provide a small learning center with developmentally appropriate games and puzzles. The children work on following procedures and rules for games. They enjoy putting puzzles together. This is a lovely floating center because we can ask the children to play at a table or in the circle area, or in a space that is not crowded. There is a designated shelf, but not a designated space to play.



The sensory table is faux wood and filled with interesting contents. We attempt to change the contents to match the thematic unit, however, sometimes we place items that are intriguing just for the children to explore. During an insect unit, we placed grass, soil, rocks, sticks, and plastic model insects in the table for children to play with. Many of them enjoyed smelling the grass and feeling the soil in their hands.



Creating a beautiful environment is a joyful experience. It is rewarding to see children appreciate the rich experiences that a well-planned and thoughtfully created preschool classroom can offer. A meaningful environment confirms a preschool teacher's intentionality. When we teach with the intention to provide amazing play-based learning spaces, all children benefit and fall in love with their school.