

## **Creating Engaging Centres in Play and Personalised Learning “Open” and “Closed” Experiences**

Some key goals for children’s learning are to promote in them the ability to think laterally and creatively; to be able to self initiate, to explore the properties and elements of things, to problem solve, to take risks, to think deeply, to construct ideas and meaning, to utilise their own understandings and discover new ones, to become interested in endless possibilities and opportunities and to become increasingly intrinsically motivated to learn, to find out, to try, to have a go and to develop resiliency.

An important aspect of the learning environment is to ensure that children have regular opportunities to construct, to create, to explore and to investigate in purposeful ways. The environment requires a great deal of planning by the teacher and needs to be set up with clear intention and purpose. It should be carefully and strategically arranged in ways that foster and develop skills such as problem solving, self initiating, decision making, deep level thinking, risk taking and constructing meaning. With play based curriculum, the nature of what resources are provided and how those resources are set up is extremely important.

There are two general terms that can be used to define how authentic play based curriculum learning environments and centres can be set up (or not set up) to promote the above skills. These terms are known as either “open” or “closed” experiences. Explanations of open and closed experiences for the purposes of this fact sheet are related to the Investigations sessions and the children’s own discoveries and use of resources.

Every day the learning spaces will be filled with the richness of literacy, numeracy and oral language. The environment is print rich, with children’s own planning, thoughts and ideas displayed alongside books, posters and labels. Discussion of learning intentions, (which are displayed each morning for the children and on a parent information board), the conversations with focus children and the tasks given to reporters and photographers provide many opportunities for intentional and purposeful links back to literacy and numeracy.

Creative and open-ended learning centres are an integral and essential element of authentic play based curriculum. We scaffold, highlight skills and make links to literacy, numeracy and all other curriculum areas through our planning, our tuning in and reflection and our work with the children during investigations, not through setting up closed activities which inhibit the children’s own creativity, imagination and thinking.

## Open Ended Experiences

Open-ended experiences are related to:

- Process not end product.
- Skill and understanding not cloned artefacts.
- Children leading, constructing, creating, imagining and engaging rather than the teacher directing outcomes during investigations.

An open ended learning centre provides a range of materials, resources and tools through which the children are able to use their own imagination, skills, ideas, creativity, prior experience and thoughts.

Example 1: **A collage area** would have a range of paper, boxes, masking tape, icy pole sticks, gum nuts, feathers, pine cones, wool, material, straws, cotton wool, leaves. There would be no instructions, orders, suggestions, cut out stencils or expectations from the teacher about how or what the children would have to make. In other words it would be completely up to the children. The teacher may change some of the materials at times, add in a tape measure, place a clipboard and pen or some other provocation but no written instructions would be provided.

Example 2: **A science or nature table** may have a range of magnets, microscopes, magnifying glasses, texts and posters. It would not have instructions on exactly what the children would be expected to do, how to do it and what the predetermined outcome would have to be. Rather, the materials would invite the children to explore, to experiment, to make their own discoveries. The teacher would use the language of discovery, the children might add to that but there would not be a preconceived expectation.

Example 3: **At the drawing area or painting area** there would be range of mediums to draw and experiment with. Children would not be given something pre drawn or stamped. There would never be colouring in sheets or stencils. Children are encouraged to create their own drawings and paintings.

## Closed Experiences:

- Pre determine how and what the child must make or create.
- Stifle and inhibit thinking, imagination and motivation.
- Perpetuate a belief in learning that everyone is the same, thinks the same and has to be the same. For example, the cloned daffodil, the cloned Easter basket
- Do not reflect diversity or personalised learning

### Examples of Closed Learning Areas

Example 1: **A collage area** has pre cut out or pre drawn shapes of a particular object (perhaps a horse or dinosaur). All the children have to colour it in – in a worst-case scenario there are instructions on what colours to colour in specific parts of the objects body. Some teachers claim that this teaches how to follow procedure but there are many other more open ended and creative ways to teach procedure than that!

Example 2: **A science or nature table** states that the child has to use the magnifying glass to identify specific objects in a particular order, then categorise them, then list them, then .....

Example 3: **At the drawing or painting table** instructions are given such as, “Think about something that has 4 wheels and takes things to shops, then draw something that you think this might be.” Or, “See what you might be able to paint using 3 colours only and then label all parts of your painting”. Or, “ In painting today, paint something related to our discussions about autumn and use only autumn colours”. It is unlikely you will engage a learner or encourage them to explore the richness and wonders of painting if you limit them to 3 colours or make them label everything they do!

| Examples of Open vs. Closed Experiences             |                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                     | OPEN                                                                                                                                                        | CLOSED                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>In general</b>                                   | Materials and experiences that can be used in a range of ways                                                                                               | Tables with games or experiences that are adult directed or have only one rule, one outcome, one expectation or one way of doing things |
| <b>A numeracy resource table</b>                    | A full range of tools for numeracy that children can use in any area for any purpose                                                                        | Teacher directed tasks and worksheets, e.g. “Find the patterns in these teddy bears”                                                    |
| <b>A literacy resource or writers workshop area</b> | A range of print, paper, postcards, sticky notes, note pads, pencils, pens, envelopes, dictionaries, clip boards and iPads for the children to use as tools | A table with match the word, or write this sentence during Investigations                                                               |

## Open and Closed Questions

Not having closed experiences doesn't mean that the teacher is not guiding, scaffolding, extending or teaching. The teacher will always be making explicit the learning and skills that the child is demonstrating through their open-ended investigations. At times, there may be some comments, sentences or questions written around the learning space by the teacher but these would be open ended, not prescriptive and not closed.

### For Example:

**At the Tinkering Table** there may be a list of all the items in the tinkering areas and the order in which they are put away. The instructions might say something like: "*When you have finished check like a real construction worker that you have.....*" There might just be a photograph of the tools in place when not being used.

**At the Sensory or Collage Area** you might ask "What do the materials feel like?" "What words could you use to describe these things?" These kinds of questions are just additional provocations for the teacher or parent to use in their conversation with the children. It does not become a compulsory aspect of being at the collage or sensory area.