

## The Educator's Role

The educator's role is multi-faceted. Initially, there are some very concrete decisions to be made about choice of furniture and materials in view of what is known about child development and the particular group of children entering the program.

Once the centre has been established, the educator has several roles to play.

In the role of **observer**, the educator considers the following:

- Are children following the routines?
- Is the centre working?
- How are children using the materials? What would extend the play?
- What skills or strategies are they applying?
- What do they know? What can they do?
- What are the needs and interests of these children?
- What do I need to document about the learning?

In the role of **active participant**, the educator considers these questions:

- What do I need to model? (social skills such as taking turns; asking for materials; routines such as how to put the materials away; or a problem-solving strategy)
- Should I enter into a role? (For example, should I play a waiter in the restaurant to model language, or play the role of a narrator for *Three Billy Goats* to sustain drama?)
- How can I extend the children's thinking and learning? (What questions can I ask? For example, "What else could you try? What do you think might happen? What happens next?")

*"...Teachers spend time modelling and teaching children routines for the centres. Teachers also observe children at the learning centres and gather assessment information on individual children in order to plan instruction and determine appropriate materials for teaching."*<sup>10</sup>

### Thinking It Through

- What do I value as an educator?
- What message does the organization and the displays give to children and parents?
- How does this learning environment incorporate all areas of child development and meet the needs of all the learners?

### Choice

Giving children the opportunity to make choices fosters their independence and encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. If one of the learning goals for the kindergarten is to develop self-directed learners and instill a love of learning, then children need to be involved in deciding what they want to do.

### Child's Choice vs. Educator's Choice

It may be helpful to track which centres the children choose to visit on a class list or pocket chart. Children's choices indicate their interests and level of comfort. This information can be used to inform practice and guide planning decisions.

### Photo or Graphic of Educator's Recording Chart

A task board, a "must do" approach, or rotating groups of children through centres in small groups, limits children's opportunity to make choices. It also sends a strong message to children about who is in control of decision-making and what is valued in the classroom. Developing children's

Throughout the year, materials should be added, removed, rotated, and refreshed in order to maintain children’s interest and maximize learning. If materials stay static for too long at a particular centre, children will lose interest. Conversely, if materials are changed too often children will not have an opportunity to fully engage with them.

### Example

*At the beginning of the year or when a new learning centre is introduced, the intent of the centre may be quite simple. For example, initially at the modelling centre, the educator organizes the centre with a mat and a container of play dough for each child. Mike’s intent is for children to explore the materials without the use of tools to encourage fine motor control, and to prompt them to develop different techniques. He deliberately chooses not to add things like cookie cutters as he has noticed that children don’t explore modelling but become focused only on cutting out cookies. The chairs are placed facing each other to promote social interaction and conversation. The educator plans to observe the children and model techniques for rolling and creating shapes as appropriate.*

*Later, the educator changes the organization and adds a covering for the table with a communal container for new materials such as plasticine or clay. This gives the children the opportunity to work co-operatively, problem-solve the division of the materials, and decide how many children can work comfortably at the table. The children can apply what they learned about modelling with play dough to the plasticine, and explore the differences of this new material. The educator invites children to represent their ideas, e.g., the characters in a story, a model of the playground or explore techniques for printing. He also selects storybooks that use plasticine in illustrations as a focus point for discussion and motivation for children to explore.*

The materials and props send an important message about what is valued and what is intended for children to learn. When first introducing a learning centre, it is important to introduce materials gradually, moving from the familiar to the novel and from the concrete to the abstract. By beginning with familiar materials, children will gain confidence and be able to participate independently at the learning centre. Children may be more apt to use literacy materials in their play when these have been formally introduced and discussed.

### Possible Situations during Learning Centre Time

Even the most well-planned, purposeful kindergarten classroom is not necessarily problem-free. Children’s behaviour during learning centre time can vary depending on their development (degree of self-direction, self-control, risk-taking, and responsibility), and experience in social settings (degree of acceptance, respect, co-operation, and comfort in interacting with others). Their interests and needs change over time and the environment needs to adapt to them.

When difficulties arise, observation and information are key to making informed decisions.

The following are some questions to guide decision-making:

- When does this situation occur? Does it occur at a certain time of day? At a certain point in the schedule? At a certain time of year?
- Who is involved? Is it usually the same children? Is this a pattern of behaviour?

Next, reflect on:

- How have my decisions and planning influenced what is occurring?
- What needs to change? Be re-taught? Be reinforced? Or be modeled?
- Who needs the extra support? One or two children, a small group, or everyone?
- How can the children be part of the solution?

The following chart outlines some situations which may occur and offers questions educators might reflect upon, as well as strategies to try.

Situations Observed	Reflective Questions	Strategies to Try
Arguing in a centre (aggression with words or actions, exclusion of others)	Is this an isolated instance? Or is it a pattern of behaviour?	Note the time of day, the participants, and the context of the argument.
	Does this generally occur at this particular centre?	Look at the traffic flow to see if there is enough room.
	How many children can comfortably be accommodated in the space?	Reposition the furniture to open up the space, or amalgamate spaces.
	Are there enough materials for children to use, e.g., four shovels for four children?	Discuss the need for accepting other people's ideas / feelings, and how body language and people's faces can offer us information about those feelings.
	Do the children know acceptable ways to express their feelings?	Brainstorm possible solutions to the problems and ways to express feelings.
	Do the children have a model for conflict resolution?	Model and invite children to role-play, e.g., asking for materials, taking turns.
	Are there things that need to be modeled? (For example, taking turns, sharing, asking for a toy?)	

Situations Observed	Reflective Questions	Strategies to Try
<p>Disorganization of centre after use – materials missing/not put away/broken</p>	<p>Are there too many materials?</p> <p>How can I gradually build children’s success in caring for, and organizing materials?</p> <p>Are the materials appropriate for children at this stage of development?</p>	<p>Limit the number of materials, especially at the beginning of the year.</p> <p>Demonstrate how to handle and care for items. After demonstration, have one of the children show how to put things away.</p> <p>Appoint a child each day to ‘inspect’ the centres at the end of tidying.</p> <p>Clearly label storage bins with pictures and words, or mark the contour of the item on the shelving, so children will know where things go.</p> <p>Engage children in reorganizing the centre.</p>
<p>Inappropriate voice and actions used</p>	<p>Do the children clearly understand the behavioural expectations?</p> <p>Who are the children involved and is this a pattern of behaviour?</p> <p>What do I need to model?</p> <p>How can I guide/redirect choices to facilitate productive behaviour?</p> <p>Are the toys/materials leading children into inappropriate play?</p>	<p>Establish classroom/centre expectations. (“Remember...” Chart.) If things aren’t working, re-teach or change. Discuss why loud voices and destructive actions are not acceptable.</p> <p>Sometimes children are not aware of the effect of their voice, so drama activities using the voice in different ways can be helpful.</p> <p>Be specific in acknowledging appropriate behaviour.</p> <p>Redirect use of materials, and acknowledge examples of different ways materials are used.</p>
<p>Running between centres</p>	<p>How can I organize the centres to facilitate and guide effective and appropriate traffic flow?</p> <p>Are the expectations about running in the classroom clear?</p> <p>When does the running occur? Is there a pattern?</p>	<p>Ensure that spaces for centres are well-defined to indicate the purpose.</p> <p>Move furniture, shelving, and dividers to cordon off the space.</p> <p>Eliminate large expanses of space that encourage running.</p> <p>Ensure that children have an opportunity for physical movement and exercise within the day.</p>

Situations Observed	Reflective Questions	Strategies to Try
Wandering, difficulty making a choice, changing centres frequently	<p>Is the child's style to watch and observe for a while before becoming involved?</p> <p>Does the child lack personal or social confidence?</p> <p>Are the choices overwhelming? Does the child not know how to engage in play activities on his/her own and/or with others?</p> <p>Is the child's style to investigate everything first before spending more time on one activity?</p>	<p>Allow the child time to watch before asking him/her to make a choice.</p> <p>Photos of the centres may help children identify where they would like to go, especially at the beginning of the year. This strategy is particularly useful for English Language Learners.</p> <p>Have children share what they did at sharing time to give others ideas of what to try.</p> <p>Invite a child to engage with you and perhaps a few others at a centre to build confidence and comfort.</p> <p>For children who can't make a choice, give them two choices from which to select (Would you like to go to the sand or the puzzles?).</p>
Children choose same centres repeatedly	<p>How can I encourage interest in other centres?</p> <p>Are children uncomfortable/ unfamiliar with other materials/ areas in the classroom?</p> <p>How can I ensure that children are growing in all elements of development?</p>	<p>Recognize that once children build their confidence with an activity, they want to repeat the experience. It is the repeated experience that builds their knowledge and understanding of how the materials work.</p> <p>Go for a walkabout in the classroom, talking about all the centres to ensure that everyone knows where things are and what is available.</p> <p>At the end of learning centre time, stop the children and have half the children visit the other half at their activities to talk about what they are doing, and then switch.</p> <p>Depending on your relationship with the children, invite them to work with you at a particular centre.</p> <p>After observing what is needed, add materials to favourite centres to extend the experience into other areas of development.</p>

Situations Observed	Reflective Questions	Strategies to Try
Centres not being used	<p>Why are children not using this particular centre? What is of interest to children at this centre?</p> <p>Is the centre accessible?</p> <p>Does it need to be changed with new materials added?</p> <p>Is the centre too educator-directed?</p> <p>Is it the time of year? (An ABC word study centre may not be of interest at the beginning of the year.)</p>	<p>Re-evaluate the purpose of the centre and the materials placed there to ensure they are attractive, of good quality, interesting, and age-appropriate.</p> <p>Involve the children in changing the centre, asking for their ideas and help in setting it up.</p> <p>Change the location of the centre if needed.</p> <p>Introduce one aspect of the centre and use it in some way with the group, asking for suggestions.</p> <p>Over time, introduce other materials.</p> <p>Work at the centre with a group of children to engage them and determine their needs and interests.</p>

