Making Thinking and Learning Visible: The Learning Environment
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Narrator: Throughout the video you will hear how full day kindergarten teams across the province are rethinking, removing, and repeating practices to stimulate children's thinking, curiosity, creativity, and engagement.

Team One:

Speaker1: Another team was working on the learning environment, that was a focus of our inquiry, establishing or intentionally introducing materials and experiences into the learning environment. And making it an enabling learning environment. And some teams tried to focus on one learning centre and made the changes there, and then captured it into a class book that could be shared at home, as well. And it was a great way to have the children be a part of literacy, numeracy, putting it all into an authentic context. It helped the children to re-tell the process that they went through, and the feedback was, they could see how engaged the children were, and the talk that came out of the changes that they made to the environment.

Team Two:

Speaker2: Well, I think we've spent the last eight months doing a lot of thinking and a lot of reflecting on our practices in terms of the type of program that we're going to deliver to the children. We've thought a lot about the classroom environment and how to set that up. We have worked a lot on our planning, and our format for our planning, and how we communicate that with each other. We do a lot of talking about the children and about their needs and their abilities, and where their strengths are, where their interests are.

Speaker1: Also rethinking isn't something that happens once, it's a constant process, we're always evaluating, like Kim said, how are things going for the children? Are their needs being met? Where are they right now in the different developmental areas? Where do they need to go next? How is the program meeting their needs? How can we restructure the classroom? How can we look at the flexibility of our roles? Those things are always shifting and just-, but within that rethinking of the program, the children are always first.

Team Two's Classroom:
Speaker2: So with the café, which is newly opened, this is again part of new learning, and new exploration. Typically in the past, we would have decorated that board. We would have planned to decorate the board, put up what we wanted to put up, but it didn’t honour the children’s learning and the background knowledge that they have. So we build it slowly with them over time, and they’ll bring suggestions to the table as to what should be up there. What will help them with their learning.

Speaker1: So our menus are still being created over there, and those are the children’s menus, they decided what they wanted to have available in the café. You may have one menu arriving right now. Is this your menu? Do you want to talk about it? So Deirdre’s made a menu of what she wants for the café. What’s going to be in the café?

Student: Juice, rice, ketchup, cake, peas, spaghetti, ice cream, mango, Popsicle.

Speaker1: Wow. Can you bring those to the kitchen, to the chef and the server, for the customers, so they know what to order? Thanks.

Speaker2: So we’re very intentional in all the decisions that we make. We have an idea of what should be on a menu, but we can’t impose that on the children. One of the things that I was hoping to see was prices, but nobody came up with prices. They haven’t looked at real menus, that would possibly be the next decision that we would have is, do we now need to look at real menus from actual restaurants and compare them to the menus that they created? They may then come up with a plan to add prices to their menu.

Team Three:

Speaker1: I think the whole year has been a rethink.

Speaker2: I think we’re going to keep rethinking.

Speaker1: I think we’re going to keep rethinking. It’s really caused us to be reflective on our practices, on how we interact with the children on the environment, and what we put into the environment. One of the big things that we rethought was our alphabet. We noticed, once we started to get the classroom the way that we wanted it to be, that our commercially produced alphabet didn’t fit.
Speaker2: And I think, also, because we're learning to observe so much more, we noticed children weren't using it, because it was hung so high.

Speaker1: It was very high, and so we decided to create it with them, and they got to choose the pictures that they wanted to put in there, so I think that really gives it more meaning for them. And I think when you co-create your environment with the children, it really has meaning for them, and I think that they learn to respect it more, and they really see it as their environment and their home, in a way. We've tried to make it very homey for them, and bring in elements...

Speaker2: We want them to feel like it's their space, it's not our space. So even this, we've lowered it, we're still rethinking and our colleague has taken it a step further and has co-created a wonderful alphabet, and it's lent itself to just inquiry about letters, and inquiry about alphabet. So it's become a valued resource in the classroom that's used by the children, rather than something that's hung high up that they can't really access.

Team Four, in Classroom:

Speaker3: So in our networking meetings, we've been having lots of conversations about our environment, and looking at things that needed to either be removed from the environment, or added to the environment. And what were some things that ended up happening in this classroom environment?

Speaker1: Well, when we first found out that we had the full day learning program, I knew that we had to have a critical eye, to look around the classroom, to see what we could remove to make a larger area for the children to play. To make the classroom more streamlined so they could sort of move from the centres more easily, just sort of flowing from one to another. And some of the things that we did, one of the first things was, taking out that old teacher's desk. That went out, we never used it anyhow, but that went out.

Speaker3: And, Marie(ph), I think we did that because what we knew was, joining us in the fall was going to be our team partner, and we knew that it wouldn't be right to have a teacher's desk and not. So the best way to welcome our partners in, is to remove the desk.

Speaker2: And it has certainly worked in the classroom, as you can see, the kids have large areas in which they can build, because they certainly like to build. We've moved things out of the way so it's very uncluttered, boxes that would be kept on top of the cubbies for
those theme based items, because we’re no longer theme based and we’re just opened ended materials that the kids can use in whatever way they want, those boxes have all been gone. And so it does give the classroom airiness, brightness, and very uncluttered, and this, we feel, will help the children to learn better, and not to stagnate their learning. That it would actually enrich them, because it’s like an uncluttered environment and it’s like a blank slate, and then they fill it as they come in each morning.

Team One:

Speaker1: And when we stand back, and we make observations to see the reactions of the children, and how they’re manipulating the materials and talking about them, that’s when we realize what we need to take out, to remove, or to introduce next, and the conversation that can happen. So this little fellow had quite a lengthy discussion about his hydro lines that he was designing here. And we start to see how, if the materials allow themselves to be used in many different ways, that we know we’re going to get so much more out of what is in the classroom.

Team Three:

Speaker1: Because we have so many children in the classroom, the result of getting rid of all of the extra things has given the children much more space to move around in, and they’re not on top of each other. When they go to a centre they aren’t stumbling over pieces of equipment, and when they get to the centre, they have a choice but it’s not overwhelming.

Team Four:

Speaker1: I think the big thing in choosing the materials for the centres, looking at the kids and talking with each other to see what we’re both observing, and what we can put in.

Speaker2: Based on the observations we’ve made recently, we've found that having the author's corner right beside the dramatic play area was very distracting for the children. We had the children in author's corner and they would get distracted easily by the noise. So we decided to move the author's corner and put it right beside the
listening centre, which is another quiet centre for children. Now we've noticed that the children stay longer at the author's corner, and they spend more time together, reading books together, or with us.

Team Two:

Speaker2: We've thought a lot about the actual materials that we put in the classroom. Looking at how the children are using the materials, and realizing that sometimes they don't need as many materials as we think they might need. So physically removing the concrete materials. In terms of our practices, as Karen said, we look a lot at what is developmentally appropriate for the children. So whether it is something like calendar, whether we feel that is appropriate for the children to participate in. We also think about what's appropriate for a whole group, versus what's appropriate for a small group or individual. And so in terms of removing a lot of our whole group explicit instruction so that we can look at the small group explicit instruction and meeting the children where they are.

Speaker1: And looking at things to remove, some of that thinking was done before we entered into the program. Really being open to being able to remove things. Again, if you have the children foremost at the centre of the program, and the practices that are in place to look at the different developmental areas, what's in the curriculum, and what doesn't work, don't be afraid to remove things. Try it, see what happens. If it's working fine, the kids will let you know very quickly. So I think removing, maybe just because something's worked before in the past doesn't mean it's the best thing to do in the future. So remove yourself from stereotypes and things being set in concrete. You have to be flexible. The children do have a role to play in changing the classroom. One of the big things, and one of the beauties of the program is, when you have two sets of eyes, two sets of ideas, different backgrounds coming in is, that you may notice something that your partner may not, and by watching the children and how they're using the room, you're seeing how they are using it and how they are not, and how could they use it better, and how could we make the best use of the activities, and what it is that we want them to discover and learn. So changing things up in the room and the layout helps with that.

Speaker2: And often, once we have made a change in the room, we often don't complete the change fully. Obviously, the physical movement of furniture, that is up to us to move, but as to what might go in that learning area, we leave that open, sometimes, to the children. We give them choice of, this is a new area that we have been
discussing, what do you think should be in there? And get their input, then they’re invested.

Team Five:

Speaker1: Well, we had an absolutely blank slate in here. We had not a lot of furniture, at the time, so we started to think about some distinct learning areas in the classroom that would give kids an opportunity to explore, but also help them to understand the purposes of different areas so that they could function independently.

Team Six:

Speaker1: One of the big important things in our classroom is, we made a large outdoor block for us to plan. We are fortunate enough to be able to extend our outdoor time. A big thing for us that we do is, bringing the indoors out, so that’s bringing out sand table out, bringing our water table out, bringing our carpets out with our books, bringing clipboards out. Anything that we have inside, bringing that outside so the kids can explore, and document, and just have everything that they have, all the resources that they have inside, outside for us too.

Speaker2: And they continue that same learning outside, it's amazing. And they love being outside. It's funny when you bring books outside how, how much they want to read them because it's outside. And just even exploring weather outside, and exploring the trees outside, and exploring…

Speaker1: Nature.

Speaker2: …bugs underneath rocks, there’s so much that we can do with that.

Speaker1: And the same also goes, too, bringing the outdoors back in. So they do see snails out there, so bringing those snails back inside. So it's kind of a shared space, I guess you can say, to bring the outdoors in and indoors out.

Speaker2: And not only that, but we try and have as many realistic things in our art area, in our block area.

Speaker1: Dramatic play area.
Speaker2: And our dramatic play area. We grab big pieces of logs and rocks, and pieces of material, and stick those in our block area, and when they create structures, they'll actually make a rock driveway, and then they'll take little twigs and things and create different things, because we have those outdoor objects available to them. So just having a lot of the outdoors inside, as well.

Team Seven:

Speaker2: One of the things we've spent a lot of time talking about and thinking about this year is, the intentional use of materials, and how the materials really support the learning in the classroom. And you two have made some very specific choices about the materials that you provide to children to support and enhance the learning experience for them. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Speaker3: Well, I know Julie and myself during our day with the children, we do a lot of observation, a lot of documenting what they're doing, what they're saying to each other, how they're expressing what they need, and what they need to explore more. We're always jotting down ideas, we're constantly rummaging for new ideas, and just taking the time to sit back and listen, and let the children tell you what they need, and what would expand on their learning.

Speaker1: Definitely. We often talk to the students and then we get together as a team and we talk about some of the materials that either need to be added, or removed from the environment. That's so important, because a lot of times, just adding or removing one item makes that environment a little different for those students and those ideas that are going to either blossom in one way or another. So those materials are so important for them to be able to be engaging, and be able to work with.

Team Five:

Speaker1: Now, one of the things that we talked about last year, as we anticipated the program, we talked about whose classroom is it? What's your perspective on that?

Speaker2: Well, I think that in the beginning of the year, we felt that it was our classroom, and so we were a team that we were going to make all
the decisions. And we very quickly learned when the kids came
everyday that it was actually their classroom. And so we have
constantly shifted throughout the year to reflect their needs, but also
their wishes.

Speaker3: And their requests, and they would come up with things for us, and
it’s like, oh, I never thought of that, that's a great idea.

Speaker2: So by the time we got to January and we had spent a good solid
four months getting to know them, they got to know us, they also felt
they had the freedom to be able to say, we would like to see the
tables moved in this way. We need a bigger area to build. Can we
bring materials to the big carpet? So they took more ownership in
the classroom, and we allowed that to happen.

Speaker3: And we were very open with them, if you feel the need to bring
something, if there’s not enough room, just let us know and we'll let
you know from there.

Speaker2: Same thing with materials; if they need something and they're
creating something, or they're in the middle of a discovery or they're
in an inquiry and they need something, they know that they just
need to come and ask one of us and we’ll find what they need.

Speaker3: Yes, we've had shopping lists made for us by children for activities
they wanted to do. Well, we need this, this, and they actually wrote
us out a shopping list of what they wanted in the classroom.

Team Five's Classroom:

Speaker2: This is our worm compost, newly designed this morning, we've been
outside digging, finding out what is awakening in the soil, over the
last two weeks we've seen big changes. We've been through walks
through the forest.

Speaker1: We went from little tiny aquariums with them playing with them, and
handfuls of worms, and we’ve put the ruler and the scale here, so
they’ve been measuring them, I'll add some math in there, they've
been weighing them and measuring them. And then we thought,
well, maybe they need a bigger home. Let's let them make some
homes, and then we can observe them throughout the next couple
weeks and see what goes on in here. So this morning we counted
all our worms, they made a tally of all the worms.

Speaker2: This has definitely evolved, because in the beginning of the year,
we had things up against walls, and we didn't even have any place
to store all the extra things. But we found that there was a real
interest here, a real opportunity for us to get at some of that real, critical thinking. For kids to tell us why they had done the things they had, and why they included the tools that they did. So we have a sand area, it's not always sand in here, we've had all kinds of things. So we brought snow in, in the winter, we've brought ice in, we've had sawdust in there.

Speaker1: Oh, sawdust, rocks, and what have you.

Speaker3: This is probably the messiest area, so we try and keep it clean for our cleaners.

Speaker2: What we've found is, that when we change the materials, it completely changes the play. And so we're always thinking about, what are they interested in, how can we change their play, and then let's see what happens. And sort of a real inquiry on our part is, to put it out and then say, I wonder what they'll do with it? So right now we have all kinds of things that they've collected during our woods walks, as well as some rubber worms and some animals.

Speaker3: Yes, and they've brought these over themselves from the shelf toys over there, they brought these over and they've been making caves out of them, and homes for the worms and the bats.

Speaker2: Homes for the worms and that sort of thing. We got brave and let them put water in, it can get messy back here sometimes.

Speaker3: This is the messy zone, but it's okay.

Narrator: This team engaged the children in co-constructing the learning environment. By removing materials from the learning environment, the children's learning changed.

Team Seven:

Speaker2: You hit on something really important, and that was, that the removal of some items is sometimes the catalyst or the springboard for a different kind of learning. Can you think about an example that you've done this year where you've removed something and that has allowed other things to happen because of it?

Speaker1: Well, just recently we had a conversation with the students about the computer, and it was just something that they weren't using, maybe just not using a lot of, or they weren't just engaged in it. So we had a conversation with the students and they decided that we
were going to remove that. And then we had a conversation about, if we do remove it, what's going to happen? So then we brought it back to the kids and we said, okay, so if we remove it, what do we want to put in there? And so they gave us a list of different ideas, and we talked about space, the computer used to be just over here, and so that was something that we didn't have a lot of space. So then we had removed the tent earlier on this year, and so a few of the kids said, well, we'd love the tent back. And I said, well, why would you like the tent back? And they said, it's a place where we can be quiet, where we can read with our friends, it's only for two people, it's one of those quiet spaces that we don't have in the class. So they actually observed that, and we thought that was an amazing discovery for them, and a great observation. So we decided to put the tent back in, and the students have been using it a lot. That's some place that they can have that relaxing time, spend time with their friends, that kind of thing.

Narrator: Full day kindergarten teams throughout the province have engaged in professional learning conversations. The next team we meet reflects back on their first year in full day kindergarten, and their rethinking about the learning environment.

Team Eight:

Speaker3: We're constantly listening to the kids, like, oh, did you hear what he said, or did you hear what she said? And that's been the guide to lead us now.

Speaker1: And I know you've rethought that, as you continue to rethink, even reshaping the room, you were talking on the way here. What were you talking about reconfiguring the room?

Speaker2: Yes, we found something wasn't working for us, and even though there's only a few weeks left in the year, we said, for our own sanity maybe we should change this, and it calmed the classroom right down. And they love when you change things around, so it was good for them, and it was good for us, too.

Speaker3: Even the noise level in the classroom went down last week. It just made it more open, and I don't know if it was because it was happier for us, it was happier for them.
Speaker1: But I like how you described the process, because you both talked about that collaboratively. What can we do to that third teacher we call the classroom? And you thought intentionally, perhaps if we do these things, and then you looked for effect. And you just said, there was an impact on student engagement.

Speaker2: Yes, and we found that it worked and so it will stay that was probably for the rest of the year, I would think.

Speaker3: Yes.