

Sep 1st, 9:00 AM

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Citation

Pinciotti, P.A., and Verba, E. (2013) Art as a Way of Learning: An Aesthetic Environment Assessment Tool, in Reitan, J.B., Lloyd, P., Bohemia, E., Nielsen, L.M., Digranes, I., & Lutnæs, E. (eds.), *DRS // Cumulus: Design Learning for Tomorrow*, 14-17 May, Oslo, Norway. <https://doi.org/10.21606/learnxdesign.2013.111>

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Art as a Way of Learning: An Aesthetic Environment Assessment Tool

Patricia Anna PINCIOTTI* and Emily VERBA

Abstract: *This paper introduces a model and tool for creating and assessing aesthetic aspects of early learning environments based on five aesthetic operations: repetition, formalization, dynamic variation, exaggeration and surprise. It discusses the impact of aesthetic decision-making on learning, the brain, and child development. Traditionally, childhood environments have focused primarily on the organization of furnishings, displays, and space, or accessibility for children with disabilities. However, there is a renewed interest in the aesthetics of environments for young learners inspired by an arts integration model and Reggio Emilia. Early childhood education is steeped in child development, health and safety, curricular best practices, and engagement with families. Background in design and aesthetic principles are sorely lacking with regards to preparing accessible, culturally rich, aesthetic learning environments that reflect understanding of how individual children grow and learn in a particular community. Current literature expounds the role of the environment as the “third teacher”, even though teachers have little guidance in viewing, assessing or using aesthetics in developing engaging environments for learning. This model and assessment tool affords multiple opportunities for intentional aesthetic decision making to impact learning in early childhood environments.*

Keywords: Early learning environment, Assessment, Aesthetic operations

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Introduction

Teaching is a complex, multi-faceted profession with teachers engaged in diverse roles throughout their day-to-day work. A primary role of the teacher is to set the stage for student learning. In the classroom, the task is to take into account design elements with relation to space, materials, movement, furnishings, time and student needs, and organize these into a coherent and engaging setting. Our background as educators and designers provide a wide lens to view classrooms and early childhood settings. A model and resulting assessment tool are based on anthropological and brain research, and have been utilized by elementary and early childhood teachers and administrators to evaluate the aesthetic characteristics of learning spaces. Mindful attention to the aesthetic design aspects of environments promotes cognitive connections, social engagement and emotional well-being.

The educational background of teachers is steeped in child development, curricular decision-making and evidenced based practices, as well as strategies on how to work with each child and family to advance learning. A review of elementary (K-6 grade) teacher education outcomes at the state level, curriculum development for teacher education, and texts about becoming a teacher, present only a cursory view of aesthetics in the design of classroom environments. Teacher education at this level offers limited information on aesthetic theory or the elements and principles of design in relation to classroom space. Teacher education at the early childhood level (birth to third grade) includes richer information on classroom environments with the primary focus on aspects of classroom organization to facilitate accessibility, classroom management and movement, and how to arrange a variety of learning experience. There is more rhetoric about the importance of both the indoor and outdoor environment at the early childhood level with many examples of creative ways to organize space. Current classroom-based assessment tools focus primarily on safety, teacher-child interactions, and classroom centers. These measures have significant impact on educational accreditation and the quality designation and accreditation of programs. However, the aesthetic aspects of the classroom are not systematically examined.

There is a growing interest in the design aspects of learning spaces. This is due to a refocus on the whole child at the national level (ASCD; NAEYC) and developmentally appropriate practices (Copple, & Bredekamp, 2009), universal design (Cunconan-Lahr & Stifle, 2007), socio-constructive theory (Connery, John-Steiner, Marjanovic-Shane, 2010), and new understandings in neuroscience (Damasio, 2010; Ramachandran, 2011). Early childhood models which are rich in arts integration, emergent curriculum, and the influence of Reggio Emilia schools (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1998) have invited educators to look more deeply into the relationship between aesthetic concepts, student learning and well-being. Educators have begun to think of the classroom environment as a “third teacher” in the teaching-learning experience and reevaluate their role as a designer in the classroom (Pairman & Terreni, 2001).

The role of “teacher as designer” is an integral aspect of *Art as a Way of Learning*® (Pinciotti, 2001), a professional development framework for integrating the arts into the daily lives of children. *Art as a Way of Learning*® (AWL) professional development strategies are based on current research and expertise of practicing classroom teachers, art specialists, college faculty and community artists-in-residence. This arts-in-education framework was developed in a business education partnership between Northampton Community College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (USA) and Crayola, Inc. *Art as a Way of Learning*® is based on the belief that the arts, as a language, empower

children to construct, communicate and express understanding and meaning. Teachers, art educators and community artists discover ways to enhance knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings in the four *Art as a Way of Learning*[®] program components: *Artistic Literacy, Aesthetic Environment, Creative Collaboration, and Teaching Strategies*.

From its inception, the aesthetic learning environment has been an essential component and integral to understanding how intentionally designed spaces can promote curiosity, exploration, investigation, creativity, and meaning. AWL recognized that classrooms, greeting areas, and outdoor play spaces communicate expectations, ideas and feelings to both young learners and adults. A federally funded grant (PASELA) afforded a unique opportunity to expand conversations with teachers and artists about aesthetic environments, and develop and test a tool to systematically view and evaluate learning spaces (Phillips, Gordon, Pinciotti, & Sachev, 2010). The aesthetic environment tool took a number of forms over the course of three years with teachers and administrators testing its concepts, feasibility, and friendliness. The tool was shared with a group of critical friends, including designers, educational and arts researchers, and artists. The tool has been significantly restructured after their feedback, as well as after reading the work of Ellen Dissayanake (2007). Her five aesthetic operations provided the “missing link” to coalesce environmental design aspects in a more provocative construct. The tool in its current form is ready for a wider audience by those in varied educational settings. A digital application is in development to support ease of use and efficiency, shifting from the analog version to both phone and tablet platforms. This app will allow for intuitive analysis of learning spaces, provide suggestions, and promote connectivity and sharing information and images with other users.

This unique tool examines the sometimes more elusive or subtle aspects of the classroom that may seem hard to define or explain – **the aesthetics aspects of the learning environment**. The AWL[®] *Aesthetic Assessment Tool* is intended to supplement classroom inventories that look primarily at the quality of the curriculum, safety, children’s development levels, and other key aspects of *high-quality, universally designed* early childhood programs. This dynamic tool extends and reinforces the *Art as a Way of Learning*[®] (AWL) belief that the arts as a language empowers children to construct, communicate, and express understanding and meaning. The learning environment acting as a “third teacher” affords opportunities for children to construct who they are in relation to others and materials, and uncover what they know and can do in various spaces.

This AWL[®] aesthetic measure provides a pathway for understanding the elements of an aesthetic environment and how to recognize, assess and create places that promote a sense of well-being, competence, and community. An environment that attends to the aesthetic elements awakens a feeling of belonging and identity, creating a felt sense of competence. Creativity and meaning are promoted and constructed in these exciting spaces. Children’s ideas are supported as they seek to realize the invisible or unexplainable. This AWL[®] tool advances understanding of how decisions related to the aesthetic aspects of the environment will create more intentional, inspiring space for teaching and learning. Using design elements and aesthetic operations, we can assess and create places, shared living and learning spaces, classrooms, centers, and outdoor play spaces to support engaging learning, intentional teaching, and Art As a Way of Learning[®].

Aesthetic Environment: The third teacher

Those who teach young learners often recount early memories of “playing school”. Setting up environments for these teaching interactions was integral to the playful drama. Often how they *set up* the imagined classroom is described in rich detail.

“My kindergarten was a large inviting room, divided roughly into three areas. One area included our cubbies where we kept our stuff, and table and chairs for more pencil-paper work. The center area had a piano with floor space for group time and rest time on rectangular rag rugs. And the third space was a large motor area for playtime and center work. I remember being surprised by the slide in the classroom, enthralled by the piano, and a felt sense of joy and excitement probably from some colorful displays or curtains. The room was filled with light even though it was a basement classroom. We once put on a circus for our parents in the large motor area and the slide took center stage!”

How many years have you spent in classrooms? What do you think of when you recall your first learning spaces? Do you see white boards, green chalkboards or black chalkboards? Do you smell markers or feel chalk, the hardness of chairs, the color or light in the room? Or do you see jungle gyms, trees, dirt or asphalt? Your experiences in learning spaces build your image and feeling of what a learning place can be.

With a strong background in child development, educators know that children learn everything through their bodies, with their senses as portals to this learning. We continuously make connections as we seek out familiar patterns or uncover what is new or novel around us. The body and brain is literally built to make sense of everything encountered in the world. However, as clear as the connection is to design elements and the creation of rich learning environments, the impetus for this to occur on a daily basis has been replaced by a culture of testing. When all learning is focused practicing for *tests* instead of *learning*, the use of movement in space is limited, as is any focus on the special design of a classroom.

What we fail to remember is that we have an inborn aesthetic capacity that is hardwired into our brain/body system. We are aware of a “felt sense” in an environment, and we recognize this through such comments as: “That classroom **felt** so welcoming”, or “children must **feel** so inspired in that place. I had a **sense** this was a good place for children to learn.” **We sense a place with our whole being.** Everyday teachers “set the stage” for learning, whether they are aware of this or not. Ellen Dissanayake (2007) puts forth a theory linking five aesthetic operations – repetition, dynamic variation, formalization, exaggeration, and surprise – to early mother-child interactions. These aesthetic operations shaped the development of a civilization and the rise of culture and the arts. These five aesthetic operations advanced evolutionary success, and are neurologically hard-wired to support how we operate in today’s complex world (Ramachandran, 2011). An environment organized with aesthetic operations in mind demonstrates both social and personal benefits.

The question then becomes: how can educators capitalize on what the body and brain already knows naturally? Are they aware of the aesthetic operations in their surroundings? How can teachers use these powerful, transforming design ideas and aesthetic concepts in learning spaces?

A Sense of Place

Teachers may intentionally prepare an accessible, culturally rich, aesthetic learning environment that reflects understanding of how individual children grow and learn in

their particular community. They can consciously create overlapping “learning zones” that promote child-adult collaborations and advance learning and development on multiple levels. They can rethink and recreate a “sense of place”.

The early childhood environment, including classrooms and outdoor play spaces, communicate a great deal of information, inspiration, and expectation to children and adults. The physical environment, including organization, accessibility, and aesthetic aspects for those who move, play, interact, and work in the space shapes everyone in very significant ways. Aesthetic decisions influence children’s interactions, play, daily routines, investigations, and development opportunities, as well as directly impact curriculum and programs. Learning how to create spaces that sustain attention, generate feelings of belonging, intimacy and competency, while providing opportunities for investigation, collaboration, and learning is a critical aspect of a teacher’s role – *teacher as designer*.

The elements to be considered are:

1) Aesthetic Operations in the space: repetition, dynamic variation, formalization, exaggeration and surprise

2) Design Aspects of the space: lines & pathways, color & light, shapes & objects, smell & taste, texture & temperature and sound & dialogue.

Aesthetic Operations: A common language

The etymology of the word *aesthetic* means to awaken. The AWL® *Aesthetic Assessment Tool* shifts the meaning of the word *aesthetic* from beauty to *awaken*, building a common language for teachers to look at spaces with new eyes.

Therefore, an aesthetic environment:

- awakens the senses, focuses attention, and engages each learner in a perceptually rich and visually cohesive learning space
- awakens each child and adult to the patterns and uniqueness of each other and the world around them
- awakens a sense of belonging, mutuality, meaning, competence, and a caring about important things by those who play and work in the space;
- awakens how *aspects of design* can communicate, guide actions, and inspire curiosity, imagination, and feelings about a place;
- awakens and reinforces the unique role the arts play in development, learning, and sense of well-being.

The five Aesthetic Operations, **repetition, formalization, dynamic variation, exaggeration, and surprise** are evident in our natural world and are an essential inborn capacity of who we are as humans (Dissanayake, 2007). *Picture a place you enjoy, your backyard, a view of the city, forest, ocean, or countryside.* Zoom in on parts of the imagined scene. What is repeated...the shapes of the leaves, the overlapping waves? Is there a balance of textures, shapes and colors? What varies in your scene keeping you interested? How would you describe the essence of this place? What stands out or surprises you?

These same operations vividly seen in the interactions between infants and mothers as they engage in the physical, visual, and verbal exchange of looks, touch, gestures, and words. *Imagine playing peek-a-boo with a toddler.* Through this intimate, playful exchange a toddler sense of self and mutuality is being developed. Interactions in your social and natural world give you a sense of purpose, belonging, and competence.

Engagement in your world with others gives it meaning and help you make what may be invisible, your thoughts and feelings, visible to others.

The five aesthetic operations, occurring naturally in our physical and social world are also evident in every art form. The art of dance, music, drama and the visual arts evolved from the rituals and interactions of daily life long ago in Pleistocene times. Repetition, formalization, dynamic variation, exaggeration and surprise are found in musical arrangements, dances, compositions of paintings, collages, sculpture, and in dramatic stories.

Brain research can explain how aesthetic operations occur in your body and mind, and how these inborn operations help your brain/body system know everything. Neuroscientists clarify how these aesthetic operations also serve you in important ways to make sense of yourselves and create meaning in your life (Rachmanadan, 2011; Damasio, 2010). **These five operations – repetition, formalization, dynamic variation, exaggeration, and surprise – are an intrinsic and natural part of who we are and how we become fully human.**

Designers, architects, sculptors, choreographers, set designers, musicians and artists intuitively and intentionally consider the **five aesthetic operations** in their work. They deliberately arrange aspects of their medium to create compositions and arrangements that awaken something in another. **Teachers who think like designers and artists can intentionally use the five operations to transform daily teaching and learning, making every day a work of art.** (see Table 1).

Table 1. Basic Aesthetic Elements. This chart shows the dynamic relationship between the five Aesthetic Operations and the design aspects of environments.

<i>Aesthetic Operations</i>	<i>DESIGN ASPECTS</i>					
	<i>Line & Pathways</i>	<i>Shape & Objects</i>	<i>Color & Light</i>	<i>Smell & Taste</i>	<i>Texture & Temperature</i>	<i>Sound & Dialogue</i>
<i>Repetition</i> <i>pattern, rhythm, expectation</i>						
<i>Formalization</i> <i>space, balance, unity</i>						
<i>Dynamic Variation</i> <i>movement, variety, contrast</i>						
<i>Exaggeration</i> <i>emphasis, scale, proportion</i>						
<i>Surprise</i> <i>manipulated expectations, novelty</i>						

Teacher as Designer

Early childhood programs are situated in a center that should reflect natural, physical, social, and cultural characteristics, as well as the diversity of the community. The **design aspects** and **Aesthetic Operations** work together in a consistent way, but yield different results based on how the above “situated” factors are realized in your space. To begin this process teachers must **learn to see** and develop abilities to think and work like a designer.

Learning to See: Designing Eyes

The field of design has a significant impact on our daily lives in every way from what we wear, how we live, travel, what we see and hear. The products created by designers are thought of as a “second skin” – your shoes, coat, house, or car. Designers make decisions intuitively and intentionally based on the aforementioned **design aspects** and **Aesthetic Operations**. Teachers can use these same elements to create engaging, inclusive, environments that surround us and create a strong sense of place for learning.

Creating a Sense of Place

Recall a favorite place from childhood, a recent vacation, or a movie or a book you have read. Close your eyes and visualize the place or setting. Examine the details in your mind’s eye – colors, time of day, lighting, season, temperature, sounds, and the objects you see or feel. All of these **design aspects** create a sense of place and time, a feeling and memory of your experience. Senses were awakened to color, light, sounds, textures, temperature, smells, objects, and movements. The **design aspects** of a place are taken into consideration to analyze and interpret each **Aesthetic Operation’s** power to transform your learning spaces.

- ❑ **Color and Light** has a significant impact on how we feel in a place. Color and light create a mood, making a place seem cold or friendly, quirky, peaceful or boring. The **Aesthetic Operations** can assist in creating consistent and thoughtful use of color and light in an environment.
- ❑ **Texture and Temperature** is the most tactile of the **design aspects**, also relating to visual sensation. We often make very quick decisions about a place based on how it feels to the skin and the eye.
- ❑ **Lines and Pathways** create edges and a sense of movement, often providing direction for looking and actions. These are essential **design aspects** that can make a space chaotic or calm. The **Aesthetic Operations** provide a range of ways to vary lines and pathways that communicate how to move and what to do.
- ❑ **Shape and Objects** take into account the overall structure, furnishings, materials, and details of a space. The **Aesthetic Operations** allow for zooming out and zooming in to fine tune spaces and create a sense of overall unity.
- ❑ **Smell and Taste** is the most primitive of the **design aspects**, since they make an impact upon entry to any new place. Subtle, not always obvious, but critical in providing a welcoming and inspiring environment.
- ❑ **Sound and Dialogue** requires attention and are essential for conversation and building relationships. The relationship may be with another or with oneself in nature, but both involve an exchange of listening carefully, responding, and communicating.

The Aesthetic Operations at Work

Since the five aesthetic operations are hard-wired, we need to reawaken teachers' awareness and engage them in the conscious dialogue about how these are realized in their space and the benefits of design decision-making.

Repetition

Upon entering a space, the eye travels from one part to another, searching for similarities, cautious of differences. The brain is always working to find patterns to help make sense of where we are and what we are to do in this space. The environment is literally "read" for clues. Repetition creates an overall pattern, grouping perceptions together. Recognition of these patterns makes us feel like we belong and our surroundings make sense. You know where you are. Repetition of color, shapes, sounds, movements, lines, and texture creates the rhythms and patterns found in nature, daily life, artworks, and your community. Repetition helps you and children identify relationships and recognize routines and expectations. Repetition promotes a sense of mutuality, identity, and competency in your classroom or play space.

Formalization

Formalization mirrors the unity or overall structure and intention of the environment. Formalization creates a visual harmony among the various classroom elements, promoting a sense of completeness and purpose in the learning environment. Viewers' eyes are naturally led from one area of the classroom to another, linking them into a cohesive whole. Just as an integrated curriculum includes a balance of content and learning experiences, an aesthetic environment conveys a balanced effect on our sense of well-being. Attention to formalization relates important messages about "what happens here" – the meaning of this space. Balance among the design aspects (color, pathways, light, sound, textures, scents) and the physical weight and size of objects and furnishings distributed within the environment produces a formal balance in the space. Children and adults feel the completeness, meaning, and sense of mutuality in the space when formalization is considered.

Dynamic Variation

Dynamic Variation is one of the ways to sustain attention over time. **Attention** is the first step in the learning process. Varying the sensory aspects of the classroom create interest and sustains engagement over longer periods of time. **Variation** emphasizes contrast in size and scale (big or little), light (bright or soft), sound (loud or soft), movement (fast or slow), color (dark or light), texture (soft or hard) and levels (high or low). **Dynamic variation** evokes movement and curiosity, denotes a change, or distinction, which makes one wonder "What comes next?". Changes in variation can be a gradual shift in sequence or provide a stark contrast. **Contrast** invites comparisons between similar or diverse objects, elements, levels, or ideas. **Movement** is another way to produce variety in the classroom. This includes *simulated* movement as in the swirls on a pillow or *actual* movement as in a mobile or the blowing of sheer curtains. Children and adults feel **energized** and **competent** in the presence of dynamic variations and can sustain engagement longer.

Exaggeration

Exaggeration requires a focus on the **essence** of an object or space. This is a more pronounced **distinction** than found in dynamic variation. You tune in to differences, but these differences make us stop, look again, re-engage and see more clearly. **Proportion** emphasizes the relationship of one part to the whole or another part. The **size, scale or amount** of color, texture, lighting or smell can be exaggerated or limited. Imagine an all white room with a vase of red tulips. An object is seen more clearly in relation to its surroundings if it is exaggerated. **Emphasis** on one aspect to the exclusion of another creates a **point of focus** in a learning area. Some ways to exaggerate an object or space is to **isolate** it, **change** the scale, **distort** an aspect or **pare** it down. **Simplifying**, editing, or taking away extraneous items is another way to exaggerate, presenting an essential idea in a zen-like fashion. Less IS more! Consider carefully how to present complex ideas or activities by exaggerating a specific aspect, limiting design aspects, or changing the scale or proportions of objects in the space to call attention to it. The *selective use* of **Exaggeration** can effectively highlight **meaning** and purpose in a classroom and encourage creative and critical thinking.

Surprise

Surprise catches one unaware. A surprise can astonish, amaze, annoy or even startle us into paying attention. Surprise brings emotion to the surface of our experience – joy, fear, wonder, laughter and even tears. Surprise changes or manipulates our expectation and puts us on **high alert**. The **surprise** found in a unified space creates opportunities to uncover **new ways of seeing** and feeling while offering new ideas to investigate. “How did that happen?” Surprise can also **make the invisible visible**, or the **ordinary special**. Ellen Dissanayake calls this “**artifying**”, which gives something you see every day new meaning. Surprise often helps you to see what is important again, bringing pleasure and a range of positive interactions among individuals – “*You made my day!*” Children delight in the intermittent surprises they find in nature or within their classroom. Surprises help us care about what is important again. Surprising discoveries are highly **motivating, generate energy and mutuality**, and provide a **sense of wonder** in the everyday.

Design Challenge

When you link teaching with a thoughtfully planned aesthetic environment, you purposefully extend and invite opportunities for children’s learning and engagement. As you set up your classrooms and outdoor play spaces, wonder:

- ❑ How can the design and arrangement of space, light, furnishings/equipment, tools/materials, and storage area work together to create an inclusive, inviting, engaging learning spaces for each child and family?
- ❑ What types of settings, materials and resources promote each child’s sustained learning, imagination and meaning making through the visual arts, math, music, dance, literacy, and other languages?
- ❑ How can aesthetically pleasing, culturally diverse, environmentally friendly, natural materials support each child’s inquiry, sense of well-being and competence within his or her surroundings?
- ❑ What types of implicit and explicit messages and documentation assure that each child’s learning is visible to families, colleagues, early childhood education students, and community members?

You might already be speculating, “How can I capture the **aesthetic quality** of a classroom or a play space? Isn’t beauty in the eye of the beholder”? Agreeing on a **common set of aesthetic elements** facilitates an ongoing dialogue about learning, design, environments, and teaching. Belief in your capacity to uncover aesthetic operations in any setting is important as well.

To develop your “Teacher as Designer” skills we suggest getting a spiral bound, unlined artist journal to keep your inspirations and assessments of spaces in your environment. To awaken your discriminating eye before you start looking at your own spaces, find a picture of a room created by a designer. You can pick any room, a kitchen, bedroom, living room, or print one from one of the many home design websites. Paste it in on the left side of your journal. Begin to look for and label the Aesthetic Operations you see at work in the room. Can you identify all five Aesthetic Operations? Are the *design aspects* evident? Where? Do this activity with your teaching partner and share your thoughts.

Another way to awaken your “Designing Eyes” is to partake in any of the activities listed below. Do you see *repetition, formalization, dynamic variation, exaggeration, and surprise* in the world around you? Practice refines your sensibilities.

- Take a walk outside in nature or go to a park
- Find a painting by a favorite artist
- Go to a flower shop and look at how they combine plants in an arrangement
- Go on line or visit a museum to view artist’s work
- Look through design magazines, comparing the same room (e.g. living room) by different designers
- Look at rooms in your own home to see if the five operations are present.

NOW you are “tuned in” to the five **Aesthetic Operations** and **design aspects** - Ready to assess your learning spaces?

How To Assess Your Environment

Imagine you are a child, entering your classroom or outdoor play space for the first time. Or picture yourself as an architect, curious to see how design affects learning. How fascinating it will be to look at, analyze, and design your learning environments from this new perspective!

With this Art As a Way of Learning® Designing and Assessing Aesthetic Learning Environments tool, you will

- See your teaching space more objectively, through the eyes of a designer who also understands each child and family;
- Discover how your decisions about *design aspects* such as light, color, pathways, textures, and shapes, influence each family and child’s sense of wonder, investigations, and interactions with one another;
- Uncover creative, original ways to furnish, arrange, and prepare your space every day to invite curious, active children that are engaged in learning.

FIRST, zoom in by choosing a learning space – a specific area of your classroom or school – to examine closely. Once you become familiar with the tool and thinking like a designer, select additional areas of your environment to assess and rethink.

NOW you will use a practical tool—called a **rubric**—to assess each area’s **aesthetic elements** and potential. As you analyze the space, you will become more familiar with the **design aspects** and how you can use the **Aesthetic Operations** to transform learning in your environment.

FINALLY, you will identify ways to more intentionally awaken ALL who enter your classroom to a fuller, richer learning experience. Each time you select another area of your space for analysis, you open another door to assure that each child and adult are **learning by design**.

As an **Aesthetic Learning Environment Designer**, you will apply the Aesthetic Operations and design aspects to communicate:

- Your unique approach to encourage each child’s safe and independent inquiry and engagement;
- A spirit of an inclusive place that welcomes diversity and values each child and their family;
- Beliefs about the universality and uniqueness of each child as capable and curious who can represent their learning in a variety of languages including the visual and performing arts, words, and numbers;
- Your support for the idea that learning is multi-sensory and interactive, including the use of assistive technology;
- A “third space” in which each child constructs knowledge about the world through explorations co-constructed with intentional, creative adults.

Impact of Aesthetic Decisions

Much like a like a great meal, the “experience” is more than just the food eaten. The experience is greater than the sum of the parts, since it involves the people, conversation, setting, presentation, and of course the food. In the chef’s recipe, the **design aspects** serve as the cooking ingredients, while the **Aesthetic Operations** are used to determine how much of each *design aspect* to include and the ways to combine them. If all elements are considered and connect for an overall experience, then the result, whether a memorable meal or an engaging classroom, is inviting and pleasing to all of the senses and for all involved. You feel satisfied and happy.

This is true for our early childhood programs as well. The overall “experience” of interacting in this environment is “felt” by adults and children alike. Encounters within an organized, accessible, aesthetic environment are greater than the sum of their parts. This tool will allow you to examine both the individual spaces in your center or classroom as well as the overall “composition” created by those parts. Thoughtful consideration of the Aesthetic Operations and *design aspects* has a powerful influence on how everyone interacts and feels in this space.

The impact of intentionally considering the aesthetic elements has far-reaching benefits for all who work, imagine, play, and learn in any environment. Across all cultures and through time, the mindful, routine use of the *five Aesthetic Operations* within a culture or environment creates:

- **A sense of Mutuality** – a feeling of closeness and intimacy with one another,
- **A sense of Belonging** – an identity as a member of a group,
- **A sense of Competence** – a feeling that there is something important to do and learn here, socially, physically, and cognitively,
- **A sense of Meaning** – gives value and purpose to what has been done in the past, what is happening now, and what could happen in the future,
- **A sense of Artifying** – demonstrates a regard for life and the caring about important things by making the ordinary special and the invisible visible. (Dissanayake, 2007, p. 794.

Intentionality about the aesthetics aspects of a place or environment can become an exciting catalyst for change. Mindful choices based on *Aesthetic Operations* help focus each child's attention, attune us to important aspects of an experience, activate curiosity and imagination and provide opportunities for inquiry, intentional learning and creative engagement. The interaction among each child, the caring adult, and the aesthetic environment creates what is often called a "third space". This dynamic, in-between space is where learning and meaning making are negotiated and constructed within and through multiple learning experiences.

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