

Clarify Your Learning Culture

How clear are you about the kind of learning culture you want to create? Can you articulate this to others? Your intentional teaching starts here, in gaining clarity about what you hope to build with children and families.

Visualize the best day in your setting. You may not have had it yet! Imagine what it would be like if educators, children, and families were learning and collaborating at their optimal level. What does it look like when children are thriving in your setting? Write words and phrases from your mental image to help you articulate this.

I see children . . .	I see educators . . .
I see families . . .	I hear these words . . .

What kinds of learners do you hope to support? What dispositions and qualities do you hope to instill, support, and nurture?

What could this look like?

Disposition or Quality	What It Could Look Like
Example: resilient	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Children are comfortable with mistakes or approximations.• They pick themselves up from disappointments and have strategies for joining in again in different situations.• Children are comfortable with some struggle in their learning. They don't give up when they need to put in extra effort or at first don't succeed.

Relationships

Teaching is one of the most relational professions in the world. Although they are a critical component of our pedagogy, sometimes we don't give a lot of thought and intention to relationships.

Educator-Child Relationships

Write a list of the children in your current class or primary care group. Can you do this from memory? If (like me), you miss someone initially, reflect on why this might be. What can you plan to do this coming week to spend more time with this child and nurture your relationship?

Return to the list of children. Next to each name, write something about them as a person. By this, I mean not as a student or even as a learner. Who are they as a person? What is something you know about their family or friends? What do you know about their likes and dislikes? Do they have a passion? Do they have pets?

Reflect on the children who are difficult to write something next to. Plan ways to learn about and spend more time with these children. For example, spend lunchtime or snacktime with them, chatting about their lives.

Child-Child Relationships

Take a week to observe through the lens of child-child relationships. Watch children engage and interact as they arrive at school. Watch them as they play at recess time. Observe them as they find a place to sit in the meeting area or decide where they want to work and play.

What child-child friendships seem strong? Which appear to be emerging? Is there anyone who doesn't seem connected to other children? How can you support this child to build relationships? For example, consider how you can support the child to enter into play with others, removing yourself once the play has taken off.

Is there a child who will only interact, play, or sit with one particular person? Consider how you can support this child to build new relationships, but in a natural and authentic way rather than forced. For example, do you know another child who shares a common interest? Maybe they both have a pet cat. You could invite them to have lunch with you and talk about their pets (and share a photo of your pet if you have one). Or ask two children who you think could potentially form a friendship to help you with a chore or job for the class or preschool, such as collecting the mail, setting up a story table, or choosing new materials for the sandpit.

Educator-Family Relationships

This exercise is similar to our reflections on the educator-child relationship. Write a list of families from memory. Can you write the parents' first names (if culturally appropriate)? Now write something that you know about each family next to their name.

Were any families difficult to recall in your mind? Why might that be? What strategies can you put in place to remedy this? It could be as simple as a five-minute telephone call home for no other reason but to connect and let them know you want to have a strong relationship and work together for the benefit of their child.

Rituals of Identity and Belonging

What do you see as rituals in your current teaching?

Ritual	Purpose	Intentions
Example: Sing a “hello” song each morning.	To build a sense of belonging to a group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• At the beginning of the year, to help children learn each other’s names.• To continue to sing “hello” songs occasionally throughout the year to strengthen the connection among children.

Will your learning culture be strengthened by new rituals? What could you introduce and why?

Remember that rituals are like routines with heart. Rituals anchor the day and bind people together in a sense of belonging. Routines are what we do without thinking or without clear intentions. What feels like a routine now? What are you doing because you’ve always done it?

Are some routines driving the day without a sense of purpose or intentionality? Can these be changed or replaced or enhanced? Can you bring more intentionality and meaning to these routines?

Record your ideas here. (You don’t have to have something in every section, but the more you fill in, the more you can consider all possibilities.)

Rituals for ...	Notes and Actions
Identity as a group	
Celebration	
Transition	
Other rituals	

Language of Agency

What language do you already use intentionally? Why? How does it build and honor children’s agency in their learning?

Words	Intention

Praise versus Encouragement

Reflect on the words you use to give feedback to children. How do they make the learning process visible?

What words will you intentionally choose to give feedback and encouragement, rather than “good job” praise? Refer to the ideas in chapter 4.

Nonverbal Language

Reflect on how often you require children to raise their hands to speak.
Could this be accidentally stifling some children’s voices?

When can you try a No Hands Up strategy? How will you introduce it in a small way and build on success? (For example: use pop-stick names initially so that children know this is a time when they don’t need to raise their hands and wait to be chosen, or teach how to Turn and Talk with a partner.)

Environments for Agency

Temporal Environment

Write down the flow of your typical day. How many minutes are spent in teacher-initiated or teacher-directed experiences and how many in child-initiated or child-directed pursuits?

Teacher-Initiated/Directed	Child-Initiated/Directed
Approx. minutes:	Approx. minutes:

What does this reveal about the balance of experiences? Will you make any changes to ensure most of the time is spent providing opportunities for children to use their agency and initiate their own learning?

Physical Environment

How can you deinstitutionalize your space?

Deinstitutionalizing Considerations	Reflections and Plans
Lighting	
Furniture and desks	
Commercial charts	
Color	
Texture and natural materials	
Clutter and storage	
Walls	
Other	

All-Access Pass

How can you ensure children have access to materials when and where they need them?

Materials	Reflections and Plans
Mark-making tools (markers, pencils, paint, and so on)	
Tape, scissors, and glue	
Loose parts	
Symbolic play props	
Paper	
Other	

How can you ensure children have access to water and bathrooms when their bodies tell them they need it?

Learning Contexts for Agency

We can think of the characteristics of contexts for agency as each being on a continuum. This is far more helpful than seeing a learning context as either having agency or not. Choose two or three learning contexts that you plan, prepare, and propose to children. Reflect honestly about how each characteristic helps the context provide opportunities for children to use their agency and initiate their own learning. There are no right or wrong answers. If I used this continuum at another time, thinking of a bookmaking context in a different site, I might mark it differently. This is a tool for reflection, evaluation, and goal setting, not a pass-fail test.

For example:

Symbolic Play Props		
Context: Bookmaking		
Complex		
None	Some	A lot
Inclusive		
None	Some	A lot
Social		
None	Some	A lot
Active		
None	Some	A lot
Process-focused		
None	Some	A lot

Context:		
Complex		
None	Some	A lot
Inclusive		
None	Some	A lot
Social		
None	Some	A lot
Active		
None	Some	A lot
Process-focused		
None	Some	A lot