

Exceeding Expectations:

WHY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR ALTERNATIVE PROVISION NEED TO CHANGE.

Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Alternative Provision are in the spotlight as exclusions in English schools rise and more pupils are being pushed out of mainstream education. Children who attend schools outside of the mainstream generally do so because they have complex social and emotional needs that cannot be met in a regular school, which often leads to environments designed to cope with 'behaviour' rather than focusing on their needs. What you end up with are places that are purely functional and somewhat dispiriting, that betray a lack of belief in the young people who attend them. This needs to change.

Teacher and Educational Consultant, Annabel Bates, has worked extensively in non-mainstream schools. She explains why environments are so important, "We all feel and work better in nice environments. We should be creating the nicest environments for those who face the greatest challenges and have the furthest to travel in their learning; spaces that nurture them and show they are valued. People would far rather come into a warm, homely environment that is comfortable and inviting – it's human nature, not rocket science. If you create the right environment and get the kids involved in looking after it the incidents drop through the floor. I've worked in schools where we had pot plants, pianos, paintings on the wall – just like you'd have at home – and the difference it makes is extraordinary."

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ANNABEL BATES
TEACHER AND EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT

Over the last year or so we've been working with a number of PRUs - and mainstream schools working hard to enable children with additional needs to stay within their learning community - to look at how their environments might evolve so that they play an active role in helping meet the needs of all students, and their teachers, enabling them to learn more effectively and enjoy being at school.

“What I rapidly came to understand, spending time with children and staff in alternative provision settings, was that it's absolutely not the children's fault that they are there,” explains learning spaces designer, James Clarke of Spaceoasis®. “They are not 'naughty kids'. They are children facing enormous challenges who have been let down because most mainstream schools simply don't have the tools or the environment to support them. I feel very strongly that good design can help create a beautiful environment that helps these children feel valued and supported. The ideas here are, I hope, aesthetically lovely as well as practical. Furniture in any school environment has to be good quality, tough enough to withstand the inevitable knocks and scuffs, and alternative provision is no different. What I hope is different is that these ideas could make a child who is having a tough time feel that someone really cares.”

Here we share some of James's ideas.

THE NEUROSCIENCE BEHIND WHY ENVIRONMENTS MATTER

Our physical environment influences how we feel and how we behave. The reason people prefer light, spacious environments, fresh air and natural materials is because we are hardwired to respond to good design and naturalistic environments. The sense of calm people experience in natural spaces is an innate, human response. Over the last 30 years, neuroscience

has figured out more about how our sensory processes work and can accurately predict how we will respond when presented with certain environmental cues. We wanted to explore how to harness this knowledge and apply it to PRUs to help pupils manage their feelings and behaviour so they can focus on learning.

01 A PLACE OF SANCTUARY

If it all gets too much, or if a teacher feels a child needs some time away, it might help if they could go to a sanctuary space. This is a room with naturalistic elements to create a calming environment. Neuroscience research has shown that natural environments have a calming effect that improves cognitive performance, so this room is replete with naturalistic finishes. The back wall is a mural of lavender fields, the floor cushions look like pebbles but they are manufactured from soft felt, and the floor itself is astroturf which is tactile, you can stroke it while sitting on it. This is a space with no hard corners or loose furniture so it's a safe space, designed to help reduce stress and anxiety, that looks beautiful.

There is a temptation to regard this kind of space as a 'therapy' room, but it's important not to use labels with potentially negative connotations or to dictate how this kind of space is used. While it may be used for therapy, it could also be a 'chill out' room, a relaxation, meditation or mindfulness space. By labelling it a 'therapy' room you run the risk of children not wanting to use it because of the potential stigma attached to being 'in therapy'. »



02 KEEPING IT CASUAL

If you're feeling edgy or wound up the last thing you want to do is sit formally in a four-legged chair, you need to pace, fidget or slouch. This informal seating area includes upholstered stools that you can sit on or even lie across, toadstools for perching on and a Ewe-Sit sheep stool that is tactile and fun. This area is for when teachers need a less formal space that feels more relaxed.

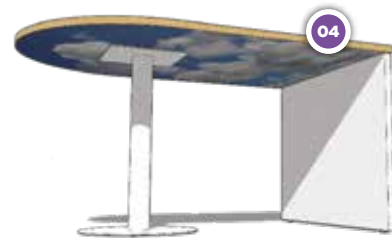


03 OFF THE SCALE

Children often find it hard to articulate their feelings, they don't have the vocabulary or the experience to explain what they are feeling or why so they scream or act out instead. Some children find it hard to regulate their feelings, their emotions simply overwhelm them and they don't know what to do. Rather than expecting someone to talk when they are in the middle of a storm, what if they could stand somewhere that indicates their emotional state? A simple scale on the floor where one end is 'I'm feeling fine' gradually moves up the emotional register until at the top it is 'I need immediate support', so if a child is standing at that end of the scale you know immediate intervention is required. Children can be encouraged, upon arrival or at set points during the day, to 'check in' their emotional state so staff know who is feeling vulnerable and may need additional support. When it's not being used for gauging how people are feeling, the number line makes a great learning resource for maths or for measuring how far your science experiment's elastic band car can travel.

04 SAFE SPACE

Children like dens, tents and enclosed spaces because they make them feel safe. If they are feeling scared (even if that fear is expressed as anger) it can help to give them a snug, safe space for them to retreat to. Providing somewhere enclosed, that feels safe but is still easily visible to staff is tricky, so we added graphics to the underside of the dining booth tables to create a retreat space that feels private but is open to the shared area. You could choose different graphics for each table such as a sky, stars, a leaf canopy - images that are natural and soothing work well here.



'I FEEL VERY STRONGLY THAT RESPECTFUL DESIGN CAN HELP CREATE A BEAUTIFUL ENVIRONMENT THAT HELPS THESE CHILDREN FEEL VALUED AND SUPPORTED.'

JAMES CLARKE METRIC EDUCATION

05 DINING IN

Eating together is one of the best ways to develop social skills and to build relationships. These dining booths with fixed leather-upholstered seating and D-end tables enable pupils and staff to enjoy a meal together and can also be used for one-to-one chats or small group work. For children with chaotic home lives this may be the only time they sit down at a table and eat with other people. For teachers, having an informal dining space provides somewhere for interaction that feels relaxed and social, which may encourage a deeper level of conversation that wouldn't take place in a more formal setting. Leather upholstery may seem extravagant but it's incredibly hard-wearing and means nice spaces don't become tatty. If spaces are allowed to become 'tatty' they, and the people using them, feel neglected which reinforces negative feelings. It's very important to keep spaces looking and feeling fresh and 'cared for'.

06 SAFE SEAT

On occasions it may be necessary for two staff to sit with a student and hold them until they are calm enough to safely return to the class. The Safe Seat is designed to accommodate three people snugly so there is little room for manoeuvre, with a high back to prevent tipping and a small gap between the bottom of the seat and the floor so that it can't be levered over with a foot. While the seat has been designed with functionality in mind it looks like a stylish piece of furniture that people would be happy to use under normal circumstances so there is no stigma attached to it.

07 AESTHETICS MATTER

For people who have been excluded from mainstream education, being in a learning environment that doesn't look the same as a normal school can help, because it's less likely to trigger learned responses to an environment where they struggled. A PRU environment doesn't need to look or feel 'institutional', in fact it's even more important to create a welcoming space people actively enjoy, to encourage attendance. Being in an attractive environment makes pupils feel good about themselves and positive about coming to school. ■