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Interview with the Head of a pre-primary school:

- What do you consider to be the keys to an effective learning environment for your setting? What aspects do you pay most attention to?

According to me, the key aspects to an effective learning environment are infrastructure, teaching aids and teaching-learning materials. I pay attention to these three factors constantly.

2. How do you arrange the physical space to create an effective learning environment?

I do not put too much unnecessary furniture in the classrooms. I arrange the desks, tables and cupboards in such a way that children have plenty of space for moving around. I insist that the doors and windows must be left open to allow air and light.

- How do you use communication methods or other strategies to set a positive tone and control the non-tangible aspects of an effective learning environment?

I make the teachers stand near the entrance of their respective classrooms and interact with the parents at pick-up and drop times. Greeting parents and communicating informally can help to establish close relations and rapport with the teachers. Parents hesitate to express their problems if they do not develop a comfort level while communicating with teachers. I instruct the teachers to send notices and circulars and get them signed from the parents.

- How do you make decisions regarding the design of your learning environment? Do you collaborate with others- e. g. other professionals, administrators, parents or children themselves? Or is it more independent?

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I do not exactly seek professional help or advice from parents or administrators. I have informal discussions with all, including students, and probe them with questions to understand their views, opinions and problems. On the basis of these interactions, I take the final decision regarding the design. I try to solve the problems mentioned by parents, teachers and students while designing the environment. For example, the students once complained that they could not use the playground equipments like slides and swings because during afternoons, they became hot in the sun. I changed the place and installed them in a shady spot.

- What design strategies have been most successful in your setting? Have any been unsuccessful? Why?

I have provided drinking water facility in every classroom. The idea was appreciated by all the students. They do not have to walk across the passage for drinking water. I have placed the black board in each classroom in such a way that it is always lighted and all the students can see it clearly. The toys and teaching aids are kept low on the shelves so that small children can access them easily.

I have been unsuccessful in providing constant change in environments. A reshuffling of objects every week will give a new experience to the students. However, it is time-consuming and not practical. I suggest that teachers should exchange classrooms sometimes to introduce change. On the one hand, children like change; on the other hand, it distracts them. Hence, I am unable to decide how much change and how many times is advisable.

- What kind of diversity do you encounter in your setting? How does the diversity of the children with whom you work influence the way you design

the learning environment?

Socio-economic diversity is the main problem. Most of the children are from middle-class families and my intention is to provide them with facilities like educational toys, games and computer facilities which they do not get at home. They are eagerly interested, but students from high income families show no interest as they personally possess many expensive toys and gadgets. It becomes difficult to handle this disparity.

- How does the need to motivate the children with whom you work affect the way you design the learning environment?

The whole purpose of spending time, money and efforts on designing the environment is to motivate the children and sustain their interest. Change helps to reinforce the interest. That is why changing classrooms or conducting a session outside, under the trees is found beneficial and motivating. If children are given a participatory role in deciding what charts to make and where to put them up, it helps to motivate them to think practically.

- What are the biggest challenges you face in designing and maintaining an effective learning environment, and how do you address them?

Financial resources are the main problem. There are also some practical difficulties. For example, keeping some pets like a dog, a caged parrot, canaries and rabbits can enhance the learning environment. It creates interest in the students, it helps to sympathize with mute animals, take care for them and develop a sense of responsibility. However, keeping and maintaining pets is expensive. Sometimes, there is no one to feed them at

night. One cannot depend upon the watchman and the school cannot afford an extra hand for twenty-four hours to look after the pets.

Every kind of experience cannot be given inside the classroom. I would like to take the children for visits to banks, offices, railway platforms, airports, zoos, parks, chocolate factories, ice-cream factories and forests to give them a feel of those places. I try to arrange visits with the help of parents.

However, all parents are not cooperative and are worried about the safety of the children.

- What trends have you observed in the design of learning environments in your setting? Do you think they will continue in the future?

The professionals who approach these days bring proposals for installing computers and projectors. They have a huge collection of CDs and videos. I think this trend of technology will continue. Teachers find it easy to teach with the help of technology.