

# The Literacy Caravan

## Professional Development in a Unique Environment

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In cities and towns across the United States early childhood educators file into college classrooms or hotel conference rooms and passively take a seat in one of the ordered rows where they remain through the day. They come for continuing education and training meant to improve their skills and practices in the preschool classroom. Some presenters give PowerPoint presentations; others rely on overhead projectors, slide projectors, or video presentations. Everyone has handouts. Ironically, many of these very workshops and courses focus on how to create interactive, interesting, and purposeful environments in which young children can thrive, not simply survive.

We know that carefully designed environments support children's exploration and learning. Yet the physical environments in which teachers are expected to learn are typically anything but carefully designed. We encounter cold metal chairs in stark rooms, possibly a chalkboard, but seldom a window. Although referred to as "participants," teachers in these workshops often do no more than listen and look.

In 2001 the Connecticut State Department of Education Division of Early Childhood and Special Education partnered with Weston Woods Institute, a nonprofit agency, to develop the Literacy Caravan program. The goal was to deliver early language and literacy development workshops to early childhood educators across the state in an interactive, purposefully designed, multimedia learning environment. To meet this goal a unique mobile facility was designed, making use of what is known about active learning environments for children and applying those concepts to adult learning spaces. The designers set out to create an innovative learning environment for teachers, so that they ultimately could create and sustain a similarly exciting learning environment in their own classrooms.



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## Hypothesis and rationale

Just as the definition of a quality early childhood program is debatable, so is the definition of quality teacher training. The developers of the Literacy Caravan hypothesized that a planned training environment would be demonstrably better than a typical college classroom for motivating teachers to make changes in their early childhood classroom environments and their teaching practices. They agreed with Garmston, who asks, "How do schools sustain innovation?" and suggests, "Initially, of course, they must experience innovation" (2002, 62). With displays, a variety of media, materials with which to interact—in short, a model literacy environment—the project would increase (1) educators' interest in the information being delivered, (2) their confidence in their ability to create similar environments for the children in their classes, and (3) their motivation to make the necessary changes to improve children's experiences.

In *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Gladwell says, "The power of context is an environmental argument. It says that behavior is a function of social context" (2000, 150). This author's examples of studies showing hurried seminarians disregarding a stranger in need and clean subways acting as a catalyst for reducing the New York subway crime rate show how environmental influences can have a tremendous impact on the behaviors of the people within a context.

The Literacy Caravan project's goal was to create an environment that would serve as a visual model and be contextually motivating. Additionally, the project originators believed that a space created specifically for professional development would send a message to the participants that they are valued and that professional development is valued. Participants were not asked to sit in child-size chairs for after-hours training in an early childhood classroom nor forced to travel to a college classroom across town. Instead, they met with a presenter at a convenient location in a facility designed for them. "When your audience enters the presentation room, what they initially see and hear begins their learning experience" (Garmston 1997, 156).

## The caravan environment

The specially outfitted 35-foot-long RV (recreational vehicle) hardly goes unnoticed as it travels down the road or sits in a school parking lot. The exterior is painted with life-size characters from well-known children's books such as *Corduroy*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *Leo the Late Bloomer*. The effect is an invitation to participants to enter a unique learning environment.

Inside the carpeted interior, music greets participants as they begin to look around. They notice a projector for showing computer, VCR, and DVD images and a sound system with speakers throughout. Colorful curtains cordon off areas such as the driver's seat and a storage area. Collapsible tables, which can be extended for use, are stored flush to the walls for more space, depending on the planned activities. A generator provides power for audiovisual equipment, computer, heat or air conditioning, and lights. The vehicle's underside storage compartments hold materials and supplies.

The Literacy Caravan is organized much like an early childhood classroom, with tables and chairs arranged around learning centers. In the listening, art, reading, dramatic play/storytelling, writing, and housekeeping centers, bulletin boards display examples of children's active engagement in corresponding activities. Each center has specific items to encourage interactivity and discussion.

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Children's writing at various stages of development hangs in the writing area, displayed along with a variety of paper and other writing materials. On the bulletin board are illustrations of print, script, foreign alphabets, and people writing letters, books, and lists. Fancy pencils and interestingly shaped pads of paper are available, and blank booklets with colorful covers invite participants to write. The alphabet is part of the tabletop display.

In the reading area, posters depict a variety of people reading in different situations, and color copies of the covers of classic children's books and newly published stories draw teachers' attention. Myriad sizes and shapes of books on display shelves, tabletops, and library boxes tempt potential readers. In the storytelling area, puppets await hands to bring them to life and bulletin boards with Velcro-backed manipulatives encourage participants to play. A megaphone on the table invites participants to step up and speak to the crowd.



Musical instruments made of nuts from South America hang in the listening center, along with CD covers of multicultural music and books about sounds and song. Over in the housekeeping area are real phone books, cookbooks, message pads, food coupons, and product packages plus children's books about food, including *Let's Eat, Potato Pancakes All Around: A Hanukkah Tale*, *Bread and Jam for Frances*, and *Chicken Soup with Rice*. A block area contains architectural magazines, letter blocks, and books like *Changes, Changes*, which depicts block people creating and recreating with blocks, and *I Read Signs*, a photographic collection of street signs.

### What we are learning

Since the start four years ago, early childhood educators throughout Connecticut have talked about the experience of being on the Literacy Caravan. Comments range from how roomy the vehicle is inside to the wealth of ideas they have gained just by looking at and participating in the activities. Some teachers talk about the videos, the group excitement, and how conveniently books are organized in relation to training topics and for transporting.

After four years of collecting anecdotal information showing the positive impact of Literacy Caravan training, with the support of Nova Southeastern University we developed a study to quantify the benefits of this learning environment purposefully designed for early childhood educators. Participants for two groups of 10 each were identified for training. All were women and had similar education and previous experience in early childhood education, and each had worked with Latino children in settings in which they were a majority of the class population.

Each group of teachers participated in a series of six language and literacy workshops: (1) Creating Effective Learning Environments for Children, (2) Storytelling and Oral Traditions, (3) Literacy through Play, (4) Phonological Awareness, (5) Print Awareness, and (6) Scribbling, Drawing, and Writing. They met every other week, alternately during the morning and afternoon. All of the workshops included modeling of read-aloud, music, video, and hands-on activities. The trainer was a bilingual educator with training in the content areas of the workshops. The setting of the workshops was the only different factor: one group met in a conference room at a preschool and the other aboard the Literacy Caravan.

The most immediate, striking result of the study was that attendance on the Literacy Caravan was higher than that recorded for participants at the preschool conference room. Literacy Caravan participants arrived on time more often than did those in the conference room sessions. In both settings the participants appreciated that the workshops had been created with culturally authentic Latino materials, including books, songs, oral stories (*cuentos*), tongue twisters (*trabalenguas*), sayings (*dichos*), and riddles (*adivinazas*).

Evaluation surveys reflected positive comments by all participants, but Literacy Caravan participants made more mention of the setting itself. They noted that learning centers served as models for what they could do in the actual early childhood classroom.

Study results showed an overwhelming acceptance of the Literacy Caravan as a valuable learning environment. Participants reported excitement each time they came on board. The uniqueness of the setting seemed to put educators at ease and dissipate any apprehension related to the educational training activity.

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### Trainers' evaluations

The Literacy Caravan trainer reported being much more comfortable delivering the workshops in this setting. Since the unit is mobile, trainers bring the books and materials they need, and they can access Literacy Caravan materials that may not have been anticipated for a workshop.

In other settings, presenters typically deal with the difficulties of setting up training sessions. They bring as many materials as possible and then have to organize and display items on available tables, windowsills, or chairs. At one such training venue, a VCR player and a small-screen TV might be on hand; at the next setting there could be a VCR projector and a large TV screen. The setting might have tables at which groups can work together, or equally likely, participants might have merely a chair (and a writing surface only if they brought one with them).

A mobile environment with plenty of storage space allows a trainer to adapt the learning environment to the topic and to easily retrieve additional materials. Presenters develop a setup routine that is comfortable, convenient, and constructive. Trainers' increased confidence in delivering Literacy Caravan workshops translates to a more comfortable learning situation for participants.

## Implications for practice

What a learning environment looks like matters to the participants. The physical environment has an impact on learners, whether they are conscious of it or not. Attractively designed, interesting, and purposeful settings send a message to learners that they and learning are valued. Adults construct knowledge through their interactions with their environment, just as children do.

One of the obvious advantages of the Literacy Caravan is that training travels to the participants, not the other way around. In a field where often there is a shortage of teacher substitutes to make release time for training possible, the Literacy Caravan is able to arrive on-site and stay as several small groups of educators participate in identical trainings. Another advantage is the small group size that the 35-foot RV mandates.

These advantages, combined with the model learning environment, result in a powerful tool for enhancing the early childhood experiences of young children by improving the learning experiences of their caregivers. Three major characteristics or essential dimensions of a learning space are openness, boundaries, and an air of hospitality (Palmer 1993). The Literacy Caravan's planners considered each of these dimensions and more in creating a purposefully designed learning environment. The results from this project can encourage other professional development designers to look at the setting as well as the content to attain optimum learning outcomes for educators.

## Conclusion

The environment of a literacy caravan is unusual and can be expensive to replicate (fully outfitted, more than \$100,000 in donated funds). But the lessons learned from our project can have an impact on continued learning for teachers everywhere. Imagine smiling teachers singing with the music, playing with the materials, learning new techniques, exchanging ideas and experiences, and taking newfound enthusiasm back to share with children in their classrooms!

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