

ECCP7007

How does a ceramic cup demonstrate a positive learning environment for children in early education.

A positive early learning environment is safe, nurturing, responsive and rich with real experiences. Montessori philosophy has influenced my practice and shaped how I create a positive learning environment within the new curriculum for Wales. I have been inspired by the approach's commitment to providing real objects and experiences, and I feel this ceramic cup symbolises this in a tangible way, which is why I will use it to help me illustrate what I view as valuable in a practice that works to support children's learning - a holistic, child centred approach that empowers children to feel they have agency and influence in their own world.

First of all, I find this particular cup aesthetically pleasing, which is something else I align with the Montessori approach on, Montessorians believe an aesthetically pleasing environment creates a visual order that promotes calm, and invites the child to enjoy and maintain it, Maria Montessori is quoted in Pironi, (2017) to say "beauty inspires the gathering together and gives rest to the tired spirit."

Using real items helps a child perceive fragility and gives them a chance to learn that some things require care and respect. They also learn about personal responsibility, and how to behave if something is damaged or broken "who can I tell, I should help to clean up, can it be repaired?" the child has a chance to see themselves as a carer rather than a consumer of things and take pride in being responsible – these are transferable skills that help create ethical informed citizens, taking responsibility for the environment they feel a part of.

In contrast, Plastic toys function in a way that passively teaches carelessness, that our actions have no consequence – a cup/ car/ doll all feel the same and when they are thrown, they bounce. The ceramic cup is more consequential, and the breakage may be final – but is that a bad thing, when the play fosters experiential learning, tethering imagination and reality in a way that holds potential for a wide range of ideas of where to take their play, while allowing deep understanding of concepts important to the future cognitive development without it feeling like they are being taught, because the learning is self-directed as a natural result of their play.

I would like to expand on how I feel the cup symbolises a positive learning environment.

By building Trust and respect - Offering a real breakable cup tells the child "We believe You are competent and capable enough to handle a 'grown up' cup" this incidental act, embodies respect for the child's independence and ability, encouraging, responsibility, confidence, fostering autonomy and self-esteem naturally. confidence in their abilities is not created by generic praise, but by being given the time and space to demonstrate

competence, the message is made real, internalised by the child and teaches them to trust themselves and promotes Article 12 of the UNCRC, by showing our respect for them.

Creating authentic experiences- many early years settings favour the use of plastic crockery to avoid breakages and potential harm to children who come into contact with the sharp edges, While it is important to negate hazards, plastic used in dining and play has its limitations allowing children to use real and breakable items teaches them to value and care for their resources. There are many pros for having plastic crockery, especially in busy nurseries that are operating with the minimum staff who do not want to worry about the risk posed by breakages, however, what are children missing out on being rushed through mealtimes at settings who see play as a purely recreational treat, rather than meaningful learning time where an enabling adult is present, physically and mentally, to scaffold and guide the child using a fragile item?

Understanding consequences - adults as well as children will break fragile items from time to time. If this cup is used inappropriately for example - if it is thrown into a basket at tidy up time instead of being carefully put back on the shelf- it could become damaged, This could be perceived as 'bad behaviour' or a dangerous thing to do that would warrant discipline, however how would the child understand the natural consequence of throwing a cup without experiencing it ? How would that child recognise the familiar sound of a smash that fills adults with dread without hearing it? or recognise the potential for the rounded edges of a cup to become sharp and dangerous without seeing it? Cooke, Press, and Wong, S. (2025). discuss how educators can be limited in thinking about risk taking as a focus in outdoor learning, but bringing fragile items can bring an element of risky play into the indoor environment to help children develop their hazard perception, especially regarding the home environment, where an article by Gibbons (2020) says 55% of accidents in Wales occur.

The broken cup becomes an opportunity to observe how to calmly and responsibly clean and care for our environments and care for each other. I believe If we show trust in the children we serve, they will rise to the challenge, making mistakes along the way and learning also, that they are not something to avoid out of shame or fear.

These elements of a positive learning environment are reflected in the new curriculum for Wales.

A positive learning environment is one that Supports the whole child by attuning to their **physical, emotional, social, creative** as well as their **cognitive** needs through holistic play-based learning. A child centred pedagogy places the interests, autonomy, stage and pace at the heart of the practise. Authentic resources, with natural qualities serve as more than playthings according to Srisaila and Amuthavalli (2025), who discuss how these items can link children to traditional crafts and cultural knowledge, I feel this relates to Cynefin, an idea that is emphasised in the New Curriculum for Wales to promote a sense of belonging NDNA

(2022). Adams (2022) says promotes a dialogue between children and the 'more than human' world.

I would like to share how this cup demonstrates the above-mentioned areas.

Physical - It supports a child's physical development by challenging them to handle an object that maybe heavier and trickier to manipulate than ones designed specifically for children. Carrying and manoeuvring, filling and emptying the cup will help develop their muscles and motor control and develop their bilateral coordination, which Verma, Jain and Meena (2025) explain is not only important for balance and coordination but plays a significant role in the development of academic readiness.

Creative - Even a mass-produced ceramic cup will feature a variety of physical features to help children refine their creative language and create a foundational understanding of texture, colour, weight, and proportion, that cannot be perceived through looking, alone. Experiencing the tactile nature of this cup by exploring it with their hands, Can help children to project their abstract ideas into creative expression. Furthermore, children can explore their creativity by finding uses other than drinking from the cup - it can become a vase for wildflowers, a cave for a dinosaur or a noise making device when tapped with a pencil.

Social - A child could practise their social skills by offering their friends tea in the cup, they can role play interactions they see in their daily lives and use this type of play to develop their social language and communication skills, this in turn, builds towards them becoming caring and responsible members of the community, learning and understanding societal norms and how to care and respect for one another even in the early years, Morizio *et al* (2022) argues, this is a fundamental step to becoming an emotionally healthy, integrated member of society.

Emotional - it can Even support the emotional development of children- again the trust and belief in a child conveyed by allowing them access to real world items they may consider 'adult' will show them that they are respected, And that we believe in them and their abilities, this will foster a sense of pride and intrinsic belief in these children that will help them to feel confident to try in other areas. Upset caused by potential spills and breakages is a natural consequence of using fragile resources, but making mistakes and being given the chance to try again can build resilience and Develop empathy for peers who make mistakes (Ornaghi, Conte, Grazzani, 2020), especially with the support and guidance of a patient adult.

Cognitive - This cup can be used to support learning across all areas - it can be used to explore mathematical concepts such as size and weight, they can explore cause and effect by filling and pouring from it, Children can practise their problem solving skills by putting other objects inside and trying to dislodge it if it gets stuck, and language skills can be developed by talking about the qualities of the cup and sharing ideas inspired by it, for instance, this cup has a picture painted onto it that has inspired children to question who did it what

is it and describe things they have painted themselves. In fact, the 6 areas of learning set out by the Welsh Government (2026)

- **Expressive Arts**
- **Health and Well-being:**
- **Humanities**
- **Languages, Literacy and Communication:**
- **Mathematics and Numeracy**
- **Science and Technology**

Can be accessed via the cup, which is also developmentally appropriate tool for whatever child is using it - it does not dictate to the child how to use it, it is literally an empty vessel ready to receive and adapt to the style of play the child wants, an open ended resource and not a specific tool for a specific purpose, you just have to be open to its possibilities, articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC are upheld by allowing children to access education that helps them develop their unique skills in their preferred way.

An enabling adult will prepare the environment to invite the child to interact with the cup, observe and allow the child to make sense of the resources as they see fit – noticing how they use it and being present enough to guide when they sense frustration or to protect from harm, The child absorbs the information and sensory feedback provided by their play and the words and actions modelled by the adults and peers, and uses that information when they return to the activity, the role of the adult is to enrich that environment and extend the play to challenge the child so they can master their emerging skills. An example of this could be, a child takes the cup to the sand tray – instead of the adult taking it and putting it back in the home corner, they observe them scooping and pouring the dry sand – so they add water and cutlery to the sand to change the way it behaves and how the child's actions affect it, here the adult upholds article 6 of the UNCRC, giving the child a chance to develop in a way that is most beneficial to them as individuals.

Ceramic over plastic already has an obvious environmental advantage, however I feel the more beneficial environmental impact, is how having access to real and precious things will ultimately shape their perception of the world around them and give them a meaningful relationship to their environment that could become the foundation of broader societal concepts that affect our lives, Ozgen, Z. (2023) supports this with their research that connecting with nature had a positive effect on children's ethical development and ecological appreciation.

Adams, D. (2022) argues that modern western society has caused us to become separate

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from the land, this disconnect has contributed to the destruction of it. I feel even small children are capable of grasping complex and even frightening ideas, and they deserve to grow up informed and prepared to act in the best interests of their community, and that begins with a foundational learning that can be expanded on when they are ready. The Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) requires government entities to consider this and make better decisions to ensure children today that have a positive impact on their futures.

Conclusion

The cup is a familiar object to the child – however, a real and breakable item, may be ‘off limits’ to them even in their own homes – but in a positive learning environment, with reassurance from an enabling adult, the child will become empowered to use it in their play (Clark, 2022). It can be a source of challenge as they master skills, adjusting their approach to holding and manoeuvring it as they experiment with the weight at different levels of fullness, and controlling the speed by how they tip and pour from it – these challenges provide important and tangible feedback that will serve them later in life (Çakır, Altun and Yalçın, 2022), even in simple tasks such as cooking activities – which is really tricky not knowing how to manage the flow of the ingredients having such different properties – this is something adults can fail to appreciate and can intervene to prevent mess/waste, not allowing the child to have a meaningful and autonomous experience, Sairanen, Kumpulainen and Kajamaa (2022) describe this as interrupting a child’s flow, which hinders their learning.

I appreciate that my views are subjective, and corroborated by my personal experience working with children – I would like to invite any questions you may have, and if I have time – there is a quote I would like to share that was too lovely for me to paraphrase – it is from Zhai (2022) talking about his observation of a Montessori classroom, that describes the everyday joy I feel working in early years education.

“Every child radiates a vibrant, upward-striving life force. Their eyes, hands, feet, ears, nose, and mouth are their earliest and greatest tools for understanding themselves and connecting with the world.”

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