Illustrative Pack for ECCE Diploma

Inclusive Learning Environments for Young Children

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Abbreviations/Acronyms

CPUT   Cape Peninsula University of Technology
CSD   Centre for Social Development (CSD) Rhodes University
DHET   Department of Higher Education
ECCE   Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD   Early Childhood Development
HEI   Higher Education Institute
NGO   Non-Governmental Organisation
NWU   North West University
TREE   Training and Resources in Early Education
TVET   Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UFH   University of Fort Hare
UFS   University of Free State
UKZN   University of KwaZulu-Natal
UNISA   University of South Africa
UP   University of Pretoria
UWC   University of the Western Cape
WIL   Work Integrated Learning
Wits   Witwatersrand University
WSU   Walter Sisulu University

Introduction

This illustrative pack focuses on inclusive learning environments for young children.

As teacher educators, we believe that it is crucial for all of us to:

- Realise that inclusive education begins with us. We must therefore, acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes to model meaningful implementation of inclusion.
- Reflect on our practice and question if our classrooms (real and virtual) constitute inclusive learning environments.
- Critically assess our ability to accommodate diverse student teachers.
- Model inclusion by supporting all students and ensuring that all of them enjoy access, participation and achievement. If they experience it, they will be empowered to pass it on to the young children whom they will teach.
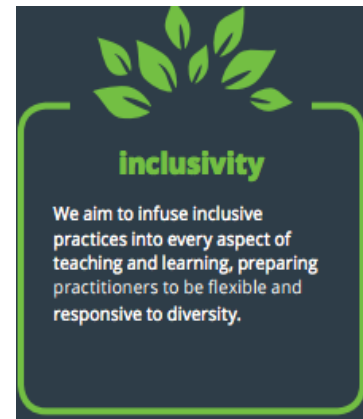
In this illustrative pack, we present an overview of inclusive learning environments for young children from birth to 4 years. We explore how teacher educators can guide student teachers in understanding how to design inclusive learning environments.

In an inclusive learning environment, teachers embrace and support the diverse needs of all children. They respect children's differences and build on their similarities (Department of Education, 2001: 17). Inclusive learning environments are characterised by three essential elements: access, participation and achievement for all (Florian, 2015).

The young child is a unique individual who is part of a family and a community. This illustrative pack promotes the view that teachers should consider every individual child's strengths, needs and interests when designing the learning environment. As teacher educators, we need to support student teachers to think about practical ideas to address barriers in the learning environment so that all children can learn and realise their potential.

As teacher educators we have to think about our own inclusive knowledge and practice, and encourage student teachers to think inclusively. The ideas and activities in this pack can help you to do both of those things.

Use this Illustrative Pack to deepen your own understanding of inclusive learning environments, but you can also use it to support your work with student teachers to deepen their understanding.

Inclusive learning environments for young children

The early childhood learning environment includes much more than just the physical environment. It includes the temporal environment, the atmosphere and emotional climate, health and safety, social interactions and relationships among all the people in the environment, as well as inclusivity (access, participation and achievement for all children).

Figure 1 illustrates the complexity of the ECCE learning environment.

1
Physical design and resources: indoor and outdoor

2
Temporal: sequence and duration of activities and routines

4
Health and safety

Early Childhood Learning Environment

3
Atmosphere and emotional climate

5
Social interactions and relationships

6
Inclusivity: Access, Participation and Achievement
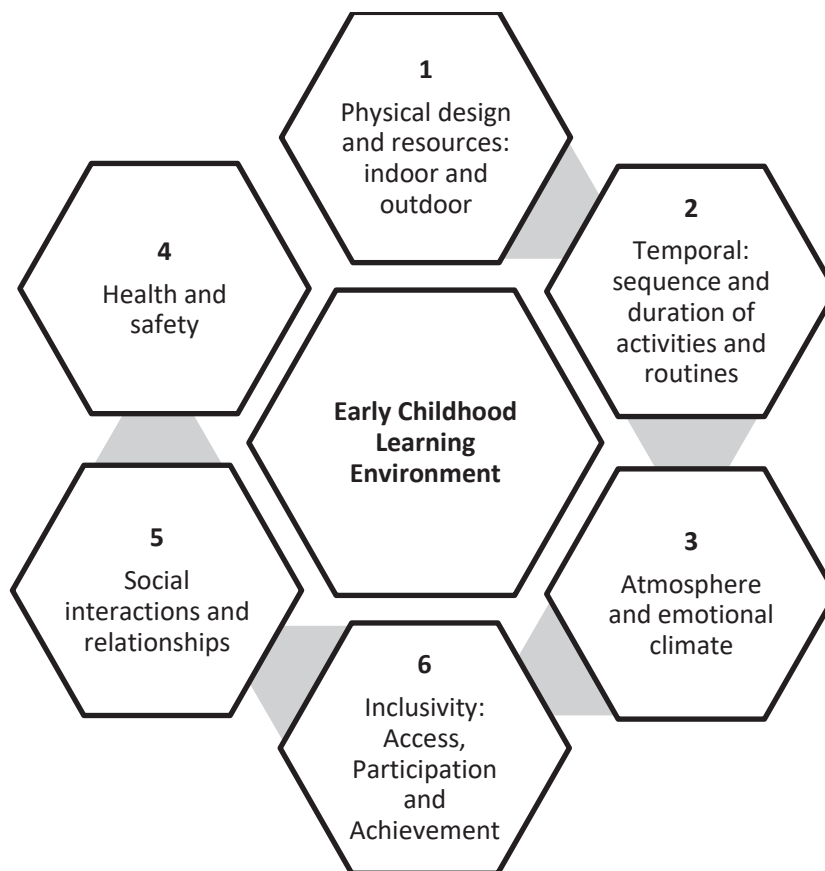
Figure 1 The ECCE learning environment

In this illustrative pack, we focus on inclusivity, how that relates to areas, and consider how (student) teachers can make the learning environment inclusive for all children and promote inclusion.

What is an inclusive learning environment?
We define an inclusive learning environment as an environment that welcomes all children and their families. There are three essential elements of inclusivity as seen in Figure 2:

ACCESS	• All children feel welcome and included. •All children feel safe and secure. •All children and their families enjoy respect.
PARTICIPATION	•All children participate actively in all activities. •The teacher differentiates the learning environment to facilitate participation. •Barriers to participation are addressed.
ACHIEVEMENT	•All children achieve the learning outcomes at their own pace. •All children develop holistically, to their full potential. •All children experience success.

Figure 2 Elements of inclusivity, derived from Florian (2015)

An inclusive learning environment must actively promote all three elements of **access**, **participation** and **achievement**. It is vital that ECCE teachers understand that an inclusive learning environment is a non-negotiable part of the holistic ECCE learning environment.

Activity 1: Inclusion and diversity

1. Look carefully at Figure 3.
   a. What do you see?
   b. Look again. What similarities and differences do you see?
   c. How long did it take you to notice?
   d. What do the differences mean?
   e. Do you agree with the statement? Why or why not?

Figure 3 Diversity
Source: Adapted from *"Diversity"* by *Carol (vanhookc)*. *CC BY-NC-SA 2.0*

2. Table1 lists the characteristics of a learning environment. Carefully study the table and Figure 1.
   a. In the second column of Table 1 (#), write down the number from Figure 1 that is relevant to each characteristic. Discuss each one with a colleague/fellow student until you agree.

Table 1 Characteristics of a learning environment

Characteristics of a learning environment	#	Access	Participation	Achievement
Relationships between children and adults				
Positive interactions among people in the ECCE learning environment				
Awareness of how attitudes, beliefs and values influence young children's development and learning				
The feeling of welcome and trust				
How ECCE staff represent, respect and accommodate diverse children				

Inclusive learning environments

and families				
Promote positive behaviour in young children				
The young child is an active participant who experiences belonging in the environment				
The ECCE teacher's attitude, professionalism and interaction with children, their parents and colleagues determine the quality of the learning environment				
The indoor and outdoor physical environment that promotes learning through play and exploration				
Safety and cleanliness complies with the requirements for a health certificate and ECCE centre registration				
The daily programme accommodates cultural, linguistic and developmentally diverse children				
The learning environment is adapted and differentiated to be inclusive				
Resources promote inclusivity and learning for all children				
Activities celebrate diversity as a resource				
Teachers view children as capable of selecting their own activities, making choices and decisions				
Sufficient space is available for all children to move around freely				
Assistive devices are available if children require them to facilitate their inclusion				

Inclusive learning environments

Activities integrate the Early Learning and Development Areas (ELDAs)			
Children who need learning support, receive it			

b. Make a mark next to each characteristic (in the relevant column/s) to indicate whether that characteristic promotes **access** and/or **participation** and/or **achievement**.
c. Discuss it again with your colleague/fellow student to see how much you agree or disagree with each other.
3. Critically reflect on the implications of the completed table for your professional knowledge and professional practice:
   a. What does this mean for my own professional knowledge and practice as a teacher educator?
   b. What does this mean for my own professional knowledge and practice as a teacher?

Discussion on activity
Every ECCE learning environment is diverse. Inclusion is based on the viewpoint that diversity should be celebrated and embraced as a resource. Refer to the Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (Department of Education, 2001) and highlight the reasons why inclusion is important during ECCE. For example, through early screening and the accurate identification of barriers to learning, teachers and parents can access early intervention and support. This leads to improved outcomes for children who experience barriers to learning.

Activity 2: Access, participation and achievement

1. Watch this reading video.
2. While you are watching, make notes based on the following questions:
   a. What language does the teacher read the story in?
   b. How does this influence access, participation and achievement for children who are linguistically, culturally and developmentally diverse?
3. Discuss your responses to the questions with a fellow student.
4. Critically reflect on the implications for your professional knowledge and professional practice:
   a. How can I promote diversity amongst young children?
   b. What does this mean for my own professional knowledge and practice as a teacher?
   c. How would I do this activity differently?
5. What additional activities and creative ideas can you think of for promoting diversity in ECCE?

Discussion on activity

An inclusive learning environment provides young children with mirrors (young children learn more about themselves) and windows (young children learn more about others). The aim of the activities should be to promote identity and belonging, and to guide students to understand how this relates to access, participation and achievement. For example, all children should have access to ECCE and they should feel welcome. If children have a feeling of identity and belonging, it will foster their active participation in learning which will enhance their well-being and holistic development.

Notes to teacher educators

Reflect on the implications of access, participation and achievement for your own professional knowledge and professional practice as a teacher educator:

- How can I promote diversity amongst student teachers?

- What does this mean for my own professional knowledge and practice as a teacher educator?

- How can I model inclusive teaching for student teachers?

Theoretical framework to promote access, participation and achievement

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) argues that children learn (achieve) through many opportunities (access) to hands-on involvement (participation) and experiences. Similar to Florian (2015), Vygotsky's emphasis is on access, participation and achievement.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also suggests that parents, caregivers, peers and the community at large are responsible for progress in higher-order functions (Wenger, 1998). Learning is an inherently communal process that occurs through interacting with others. Therefore, learning is integrated into an individual's understanding of the world.

Vygotsky's theory of child development also introduced the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the gap between what an individual can do with assistance and support, and what they can do independently. Moreover, with assistance and support (mediation and scaffolding) from more knowledgeable people, children gradually increase their knowledge and skills.

If we apply these ideas to inclusivity in learning then we see that for inclusive teaching we have to consider:
- Social interaction;
- The importance of knowing every child's zone of proximal development;
- How to employ scaffolding during classroom practice with children;

- Language and its influence on cognitive development; and
- Culture.

Diversity in practice

Think about the topic *Me and my family*. Inclusivity demands that students accept a broader understanding of family. Children from diverse families need to be embraced in every ECCE setting.

Activity 3: Diverse families

1. Read about what the Ingqungqulu ECCE Centre did with parents to raise a discussion in the centre about different types of families at the centre.

> **Ingqungqulu ECCE Centre case study**
>
> The teachers of Ingqungqulu ECCE Centre have been working with parents and guardians to create a safe and secure environment that enables children to play actively, exploring and learning across the curriculum. The aim is to create an inclusive, open ethos where families can contribute to their children's well-being. Parents and children were invited to bring their family portraits to the centre. The diverse family portraits were displayed in the centre and presented a rich learning opportunity for the staff, children and their families to learn more about one another. The adults and the children participated actively and everyone gained a deeper understanding of the diverse family contexts and backgrounds of the ECCE centre, its children and their families.

2. Create a family portrait – *Me and my family* – using pictures, words, mindmaps and symbols.
3. Share your family portrait with a fellow student or in small groups.
4. After sharing, have a general discussion about:
    a. Who am I?
    b. How does my family background influence my identity?
    c. Whom do I belong to?
    d. Who are the members of my family?
5. Do a guided critical reflection using the following questions:
    a. What did I learn?

   b. What made me uncomfortable?
   c. Why did it make me uncomfortable?
   d. How can I overcome my discomfort?
   e. How will I ensure that my ECCE learning environment is inclusive?
   f. How will I teach sensitive topics in my ECCE classroom?
   g. How does stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice influence my perceptions about diversity?
6. Critically reflect on the implications for your professional knowledge and professional practice:
   a. How will I nurture a respect for diverse families in young children?
   b. What does this mean for my own professional knowledge and practice as a teacher educator?
7. From your experience of the family portrait activity, how would you facilitate a similar activity with children and their families?
8. What additional activities and creative ideas can you think of for promoting respect for diverse families?

Discussion on activity

Diversity can be a sensitive issue for children and adults. We need to be critically reflective and challenge our assumptions and beliefs (see also the PIECCE pack on *Being and becoming a professional in ECCE*). We also need to find ways of having conversations with children and caregivers to be aware of and responsive to diversity in ECCE spaces. Respect is a key value that facilitates access, participation and achievement for all children.

In South African communities the family takes many different forms. Figure 4 illustrates some of the possibilities. Think about these kinds of families. Which of them are similar to your family portrait? Which ones have you never heard of or had experience of? Find someone who has a different experience to you, and talk to them about their family.
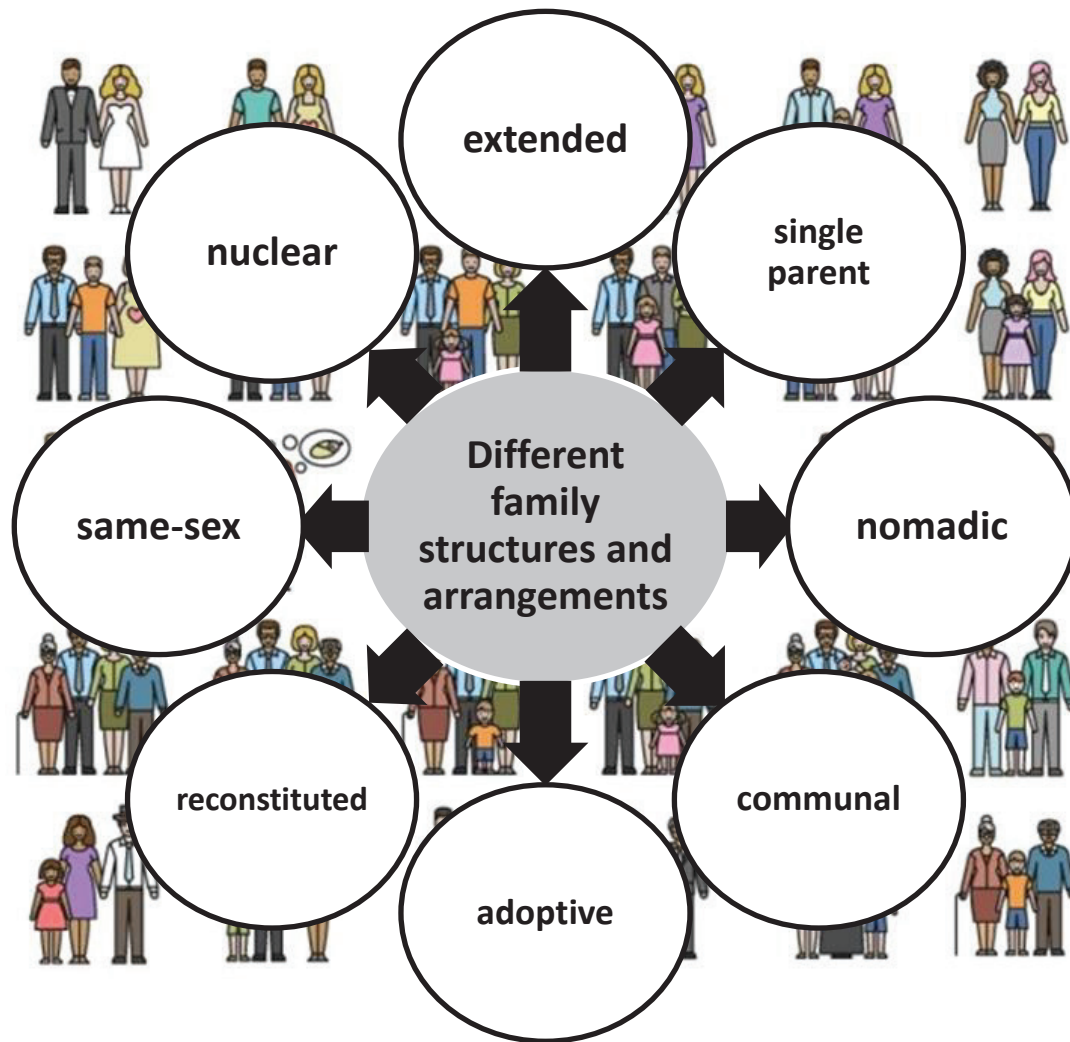
Figure 4 Different types of families, Redrawn from freepik.com and
https://www.uidownload.com/free-vectors/types-of-families-463252

Discussing diversity

Using storybooks can be a creative way of introducing sensitive conversations to young children. We can even use storybooks to raise sensitive issues with student teachers and parents.

In the next activity you will prepare for reading a children's storybook about diversity. You can use this as preparation for an activity that you do with children during your WIL.

Activity 4: Picture books about diversity

1. Choose your own children's story about diversity, or one of these stories:

    Picture book 1:
    A Handful of Buttons by Carmen Parets Luque (2019).

    This book promotes respect for diverse types of families and asks children to think about what makes people a family. "Not all families are the same. Each family is different, unique and special…"
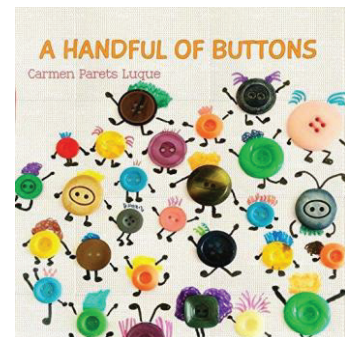
    Picture book 2:
    It's OK to be Different by Sharon Purtill (Author) and Sujata Saha (Illustrator) (2019).

    This rhyming picture book introduces children to diversity and promotes kindness. It teaches children to celebrate being unique and diverse. This promotes anti-bullying and advocates that children should be kind to people who are different from themselves.

2. Prepare for reading the story with children:
    a. Read the story yourself.
    b. Use a table like this one, to write down questions *you* can ask children about diverse families during or after the story. Write down questions you think *children* will ask.

Name of the story:	
Questions you can ask:	Who am I?
	How does my family background influence my identity?
	Whom do I belong to?
	Who are the members of my family?
Questions children might ask:	

3. Role play reading the children's stories with fellow students, using the questions you have prepared to have a conversation about the diversity issues in the story.

Discussion on the activity
In this activity, you have seen how you can use a storybook to raise sensitive issues with young children. You can use the same storybooks and methodology with parents. Remind yourself about how to prepare for using a storybook, how to read with young children, and reflecting on the reading afterwards.

> **Preparing to read with young children**
> These are some of the questions we thought of ask small children. What others did you think about?

Name of the story:	
Questions you can ask:	Who are the members of your family?
	Who are you?
	Whom do you belong to?
	How is your family the same as and different to your friend's family?
	Do all families have to be the same?
	Why are some families different from others?
Questions learners might ask:	

Think about how you will answer your own questions. Think about what questions children will ask and how you will answer them. This will help you to prepare for a discussion after reading the story. You do not have to only ask the questions that you prepared. You can ask questions that come into your mind while you are reading.

Reading a story with young children

1. Introduce the story to your children:
   a. Show children the cover, discuss the title, identify the author and illustrator.
   b. Discuss the cover picture.
   c. Name parts of the book – cover, pages and back cover.
   d. Ask children predictive questions, such as *What do you think the story is about?*, or *Who do you think is the main character of the story?*
2. Read the book out loud carefully, fluently and with enjoyment.
3. Encourage children to ask and answer questions.

During the reading

It is possible that while you are reading the children will ask the questions you prepared. Be careful to respond to the questions as you go and encourage the learners to ask questions. You know your children best and you will respond to their questions and discussions appropriately. For example, you are sensitive to the child who lives with his granny, or the child whose parents are in a same-sex marriage.

If your questions have not been answered during the story, you can ask your questions after the story. Make sure you give children time to answer questions. Remember that you want the children to explore the ideas, so don't be too quick to come in with your own ideas. Rather help to keep the conversation going between the children and help to make sure that all the children who want to share their ideas have a turn. Remember that they don't have to always agree with each other.

After the reading

After reading a story with children, reflect on:
1. Did the learners enjoy the story?
2. What did the learners enjoy about the activity?
3. What did the learners not enjoy?
4. How well did the learners answer and ask questions about the story? What was easy for them, and what was not so easy?
5. Do you think the children grasped the message you were trying to convey? How will you know?
6. What will you change or improve next time?
7. What opportunities can learners have to do this activity independently?

Stop and think

When you have access to the internet watch the videos in the list below. While you are watching think about and write down:
1. What issues do they raise for you as an ECCE teacher?
2. How do they challenge your current thinking?

List of videos

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWg-ZrV3wPk&t=84s
  This video focuses on how ECCE teachers could support cultural and linguistic diversity in early childhood. The ECCE staff demonstrate how they embed children's home culture and languages in their daily routines
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJn5neFlCq8
  Michael Henley demonstrates the five steps that ECCE teachers could follow to create culturally responsive playrooms for young children.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztWv-inB938
  In this video, puppets teach children about different families and the meaning of diversity.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTqC4U_98Xo
  In this video, children tell their stories about their different types of families. Students discuss how they could present activities on different types of families in their ECCE playrooms.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIm_H01Z6Ss
  'The Family Book' by Todd Parr and read by Sherry. This is about diverse families and children will be able to connect with many different types of families.

Notes to teacher educators

Watch these videos yourself. You can use videos to guide students to critically reflect on relationships and interactions they see in the videos, and on their own beliefs and values about inclusivity and diversity. The process is similar to using storybooks. Prepare questions beforehand to raise the issues you plan for students to discuss and engage with.

Do the final activity to help you think about the impact of an inclusive learning environment on children's behaviour.

Activity 6: Managing behaviour in inclusive learning environments

1. Read the following case study about a newly qualified ECCE teacher, Sally.

> **Case study: Sally's behaviour**
> Sally is a newly qualified ECCE teacher working at an early learning centre for young children from birth to 4 years of age. Sally comes from a conservative cultural background where adults expect children to listen to their elders at all times and not to question what adults say or do. Children are encouraged to be obedient at all times and misbehaviour is harshly punished.

Most of the children in Sally's group are encouraged at home to always ask questions even if it means challenging what adults (including parents and teachers) say and do. Most of the children in Sally's group are outspoken and assertive and easily share their views about their peers and about Sally.

Sally feels uncomfortable when the children challenge her. In addition, children easily become rowdy when they are bored and want to be 'entertained' by Sally all the time.

The manager of the ECCE centre is of the opinion that the children are not difficult to manage and she has advised Sally to adapt to the classroom environment. Sally is of the view that most of the learners are rude and undisciplined because their parents have spoilt them.

1. Identify and discuss the factors that you think influenced Sally's opinion that most of the children are undisciplined.
2. What factors do you think influence the children's behaviour?
3. Can we expect all children to behave according to a standard list of 'good' behaviour? Why do you think so?
4. What could Sally do to promote an inclusive learning environment in her playroom?
5. How does positive behaviour in an inclusive learning environment promote access, participation and achievement?
6. Reflect on and discuss what you have learned from this case study about developing an inclusive learning environment for young children.
7. Critically reflect on the implications for your professional knowledge and professional practice:
    a. How can I promote positive behaviour amongst young children in an inclusive learning environment?
    b. What does this mean for my own professional knowledge and practice as a teacher?
8. What additional activities and creative ideas can you think of for promoting positive behaviour amongst young children?

Readings and References

Suggested further reading for teacher educators and students

1. Gestwicki, C. 2017. Developmentally appropriate practice: curriculum and development in early education. 6th Ed. Boston, MA: Cengage.
   This resource contains sections dedicated to developmentally appropriate learning environments for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.
2. Gordon, A.M. & Browne, K.W. 2016. Beginning essentials in early childhood education. 3rd Ed. Boston, MA: Cengage.
   Chapter 8: Creating environments; Other relevant topics include: Families and teachers; An essential partnership; Developmental and learning theories.
3. Isbell, R. & Isbell, C. 2003. The complete learning spaces book for infants and toddlers. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.
   This resource contains extensive practical activities for children aged birth to four years.
4. Selmi, A.M., Gallagher, R.J. & Mora-Flores, E.R. 2015. Early childhood curriculum for all learners: integrating play and literacy activities. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
   Part II: Planning and designing a classroom for learning through play.
   Chapter 6: Planning for effective learning.
   Chapter 7: Designing high-quality centers for learning.

Suggested journal articles

1. Bennett, S.V., Gunn, A.A., Evans, G.G., Barrera, E.B. & Leung, C.B. 2018. Culturally responsive literacy practices in an early childhood community. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46: 241–248. [DOI] Available at: 10.1007/s10643-017-0839-9.
2. Brodzeller, K.L., Ottley, J.R., Jung, J. & Coogle, C.G. 2018. Interventions and adaptations for children with autism spectrum disorder in inclusive early childhood settings. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46: 277–286. [DOI] Available at: 10.1007/s10643-017-0859-5.
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1. Department of Education. 2001. *Special Needs Education: Building an inclusive education and training system.* Education White Paper 6. Pretoria: DoE. [Online] Available at: https://www.education.gov.za/Resources/Legislation/WhitePapers.aspx.
2. Florian, L. 2015. Conceptualising inclusive pedagogy: the inclusive pedagogical approach in action. *International Perspectives on Inclusive Education*, 7: 11–24. [DOI] Available at: 10.1108/S1479-363620150000007001.
3. Vygotsky, L.S. 1978. *Mind in society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
4. Wenger, E. 1998. Communities of practice: learning as a social system. *Systems thinker*, 9(5), 2–3. [Online] Available at: http://scholar.google.co.za/scholar_url?url=http://skat.ihmc.us/rid%3D122718786681 9_1140452997_15052/communities%2520of%2520practice_wenger.doc&hl=en&sa =X&scisig=AAGBfm26LtLPF4FSrhdgb3C1PGWX_0MnSQ&nossl=1&oi=scholarr