

OPTIMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN EARLY LEARNING

Definition

Effective teaching and learning are only possible when an Optimal Learning Environment is in place. In Optimal Learning Environments, instruction addresses the needs of every learner with ever-present attention to equity and continuous academic, social, and emotional growth. Educators prioritize knowing their students, have deep understanding of developmentally appropriate teaching and learning, and collaborate with each other regularly to maximize student success.

Optimal Learning Environments are based on the belief that every student can achieve high expectations. Teaching is strengths-based, culturally responsive, and personalized to ensure students learn and develop. Kind, caring, and respectful relationships among adults and students cultivate a sense of belonging and identity, and the social and emotional elements of learning are understood to be integral to academic success and personal well-being. In early learning, teachers support learning and development through a balance of play and thoughtfully planned lessons.

Optimal Learning Environments are supported by a positive school climate and provide intellectually and emotionally safe, engaging classroom communities that are personalized and co-constructed by students and adults to support the success of each and every learner.

Domains



Create Emotionally, Intellectually, and Physically Safe Environments

- Create positive **relationships** that are kind, caring, and respectful
- Nurture **self-awareness, identity development, and sense of curiosity**
- Emphasize **effort, supported risk-taking,** and strategies for academic, social, and emotional **growth**
- Support **safe and engaged interactions** with co-created procedures, routines, and classroom design
- Encourage developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant strategies for **expression of emotions** and **problem-solving**



Implement Equitable, Culturally Responsive, and Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum and Instruction

- Provide relevant, engaging, and **developmentally appropriate learning experiences** with a balance of **teacher- and child-led** learning
- Create an inclusive community where the progression of **child development** and all aspects of **diversity and learner variability** are understood, expected, and welcomed
- Engage learners in **productive struggle** to support **perseverance, agency, and curiosity-driven learning**
- Foster **cultural competence** and curiosity to seek others' **perspectives**
- Facilitate expression of **reasoned, evidence-based arguments, thoughts, and ideas**



Meet the Diverse Needs of Every Learner

- Leverage **individual strengths** to support academic, social, and emotional growth
- Create **multiple pathways** to learn and demonstrate learning
- Promote **self-directed, engaged** learning opportunities with teacher **feedback** and support
- **Scaffold instruction** for every learner through practices such as **modeling, small group instruction, sequenced questioning, language modeling, practice opportunities,** and **timely feedback**

Characteristics

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Glossary



Cultural Competence

Awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about difference and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families

(Source: National Education Association)



Culturally Responsive Teaching

Process of using cultural information and brain-based processes to encourage academic mindsets and nurture independent learners; involves commitment to:

- develop self-awareness and examine cultural frames, implicit biases, and assumptions to address systemic barriers to learning for culturally and linguistically diverse students
- build safe and engaging, relationship-based classroom communities
- support students in processing information and offer authentic challenges
- provide cognitive scaffolding and metacognitive reflection opportunities

(Adapted from: Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain)



Identity Development

Process of children beginning to create a self-concept made up of their attributes and characteristics

(Adapted from: Me, You, Us)



Learner Agency/Self-Directed Learning

Empowerment of learners to be active in their learning, following their curiosity, playing to learn, and building on their prior knowledge; involves self-awareness, self-management, problem-solving, moving toward greater independence from adults, and choice in how to engage and express learning



Learner Variability

Approach to instruction based in cognitive science findings that there are no "average learners"; 100% of individuals have different ways to learn



Multiple Pathways

Use of instructional materials and strategies to proactively address barriers and support learning that incorporates a variety of methods to:

- **engage** students (provide choice, align with student interests) and promote ability to monitor their own learning
- **represent** information/content to anticipate student needs and preferences
- **express and demonstrate** understanding

(Adapted from: udl-irn.org)



Personalized Instruction/ Personalized Communities

Instruction and classrooms intentionally designed to support learner strengths and academic, social, and emotional needs based on knowledge and understanding of student culture, learning differences, preferences, values; students have choice in how to pursue/demonstrate learning



Productive Struggle

Effort and use of strategies to engage and persist within the Zone of Proximal Development; should:

- lead to understanding
- make learning feel attainable and effort seem worthwhile
- promote student empowerment and agency, sense of hope, development of social, emotional, and academic skills, and increasingly independent learning



Scaffolding

Providing temporary supports and steps to allow every learner to succeed; includes guidance and feedback on smaller, manageable tasks as students develop



Self-Awareness

Developing a sense of knowing and understanding what one is experiencing, including feelings, thoughts, needs, behaviors, values, judgments, and biases



Sequenced Questioning

Intentional questioning to support gradual understanding