



Original Contribution

**SPACE IN THE KINDERGARTEN AS
AN INTERCULTURAL PHENOMENON**

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ABSTRACT

The space in which they live creates an indelible mark on the personality development of children. Children have the need to actively interact with the world around them in a sensor-motor and verbal manner and this includes the people, objects, nature and art. They have the need to be in an interestingly organised social and object-spatial medium, which could evoke emotional and intellectual associations, satisfy their natural needs, provoke their curiosity, communicability, individuality, and creativity.

The ideas for the organisation of the space around the children are valid not only for the kindergarten, but also for the school environment. In this paper the author has studied the specific features of the space in the kindergarten where there are children of different ethnic backgrounds.

Key words: space, social skills, respect of culture

INTRODUCTION

The components of the environment in the kindergarten bring about the intensive social-emotional, intellectual, aesthetic and physical development of the children. This is the reason why the latest achievements in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, medicine, ergonomics and architecture have to be integrated with a view to building up of an optimum environment for children (1 – 5).

METHODS

A variety of methods has been used in the study and they include: observation, discussion with the children, questionnaires with parents and teachers, experiment and sociometry.

The modern understanding about the environment in a kindergarten is that it is not an elementary physical category; it is not only a living medium, in which children spend some time. It is a culturally determined

pedagogical complex, in which the children and their teachers live and work.

In the social, psychological, pedagogical and physical sense the environment in the kindergarten is a place for active life, play, studying and working. Therefore, whether the lives of the children, the teachers and the parents would be good or bad, calm or tense, interesting or dull, would, to a great extent, depend on the structuring of the environment. It is often deemed that the environment in the kindergarten is a static, architectural concrete space whose function is mainly to allow for comfortable living conditions. In reality the space and its interior are not a one-sided design pattern but a pedagogical composition in which and with which the child interacts.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The environment in the kindergarten and in the primary school has some important functions.

Firstly, it is a personality development and socialising function. The organisation of the environment for the children in the kindergarten room /classroom can either make the social interaction with people and objects easier, or more difficult. It is important that

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the environment allows for communication and cooperation among people of different age, different gender, different ethnic descent, child-child, child-group and child-adult as a condition for emotional comfort.

There is a reasonable interrelation among the objects in the environment, between the natural and the social media help, the personality of the child in the orientation and in the maintenance of internal balance in the constantly changing patterns of life. The more intensive the contacts among the children and with adults become, the quicker is the development of their procedural thinking - the quicker they will analyse, build up algorithms, will look for modes and alternative variants for solution of problems and will develop divergent thinking.

The children will gradually develop a sensitivity for things in life through their experience in the environment; they will develop an understanding of some social-moral mechanisms and normative categories, rights, obligations and an understanding of the differences among people with which the basis for civic society education are founded.

Secondly is the psychological aspect. Here the favourable arrangement of kindergarten environment stimulates the positive activity of all psychological phenomena comprising sensations, perceptions, mental pictures, thinking and imagination. The environment allows for the development of the personality identification. Adequate ideas about himself/herself and others as personalities are formed with their own manifestation, gender, ethnicity and status. Positive attitudes, moods and mutual experiences are evoked in the sense of being able and willing to play and work together.

Thirdly is the communicability aspect. It is not possible for the child to have the wholesome experience of his/her childhood without the communication with peers and adults. That is why it is important that conducive environment be provided to stimulate and facilitate the interpersonal contacts and activate the expressive and the verbal communication. An environment with fewer or no barriers will provide unique opportunity for a lively dialogue among the children, with adults and with elements of the objects medium. Any environment that isolates people from one another is a condition for their closing up, separation and contraposition. It is necessary that the environment be organised in such a way that it fosters the development of quick communicative reflexes, a lively interest in

others, and a better understanding of the world around.

Fourthly is the cognitive component. The environment in the kindergarten integrates different aspects of the knowledge about the world around and is a source of information about the people, the things and the phenomena. If the environment is structured in such a way that it provokes the curiosity of the children and thirst for new knowledge, then it becomes a generator of ideas and maintains a high level of emotional and intellectual activity. The plausible relationships among objects in the environment help the child to venture into the zone of the abstract thinking, to unveil the mystery of cognition and to discover new cultures. It is widely accepted that two important aspects of the mental activity depend far too much on the organisation of space in the following way: the capability to perceive and process information. Gradually, space becomes a stimulating context for the typically cognitive and investigative behaviour (Cornelius and Kessler, 1995).

The fifth aspect is creativity. The futurists among the researchers believe that the century after the year 2000 will be the century of modern technology, information and spirituality. That is why the originality of thinking will be appreciated very much, as well as new ideas for problem solving; a new understanding of previous problem situations, and accepting difference as a natural manifestation of variability in the world, in imagination and in creativity will come to awareness.

Creativity as a basic human ability is directly linked with sensations and cognition. The children need to make full use of their senses through multifarious activities and contacts with objects, materials, events and people to be able to build up an understanding about the world. This active interrelation turns into a basis for cognition which, in its part, nourishes imagination. According to the comments of Cornelius and Kessler creativity is one of the ways in which people interact with their environment.

The next is sport and movement. Movement is crucially important for every child. Satisfying this need will be contingent upon its integration into the organisation of the environment of the kindergarten room with its layout and objects. It is obvious that the availability of a zone of sports halls and a gym will solve the problem. In such cases some part of the interior is organised as a special place for sports activities, without

jeopardising the general atmosphere. This is effectively achieved by careful harmonisation of these physical activities with other competing needs of the child.

Next is the aesthetics. The environment in the kindergarten could affect the development of aesthetic thoughts and tastes in children. As a culturally pedagogic complex it has aesthetic information and exerts direct influence on the children and adults. The rational organisation of space, the rhythm, the contrast, the proportions and the original space solutions develops a special culture of perceptions and forms a taste for the aesthetic and a striving and desire in children to make the world around them a more beautiful place.

Utilitarian: beauty is not a self-oriented aesthetic category. It acquires meaning when it carries spiritual completion and when it is connected with the world of the rational practicality. The colourful varied formulation of the environment has got not only aesthetic but also a definite utilitarian function. A rational solution of the environmental organisation means that the objects, the volumes and the sizes are interrelated according to the laws of utility and beauty. This develops a taste in children and constitutes their experience. The taste is subject to multiple intensive influences - traditions, cultures, trends of fashion, gender and age, individual features and everyday life needs. It is obvious that there is a tendency towards mean values between the aesthetic and the pragmatic, which does not allow the imposing of extreme priorities. However, the evolution of taste is connected with accumulation of experience, which is transferred to new situations and new environments. It is important that the children acquire concrete experience to organise their own space, and they develop skills to reorganise trite space arrangements. The harmony between new and old, mono- and poly-functional, traditional and modern, familiar and unfamiliar, develops original and at the same time pragmatic thinking.

The multi-functionality of the environment in the kindergarten is a favourable prerequisite in the strategy of the teacher because it helps the latter build positive relationships among the children, notwithstanding their ethnicity, gender, or social status; it allows the teacher to make the daily lives of these children more interesting and their games more exciting.

The organisation of the environment in the kindergarten depends also on the

conditions in the town or village where the kindergarten is located. These conditions include factors that border on the demographic, ethnic, ethnographic, geographic, historical, social and economic. When creating the kindergarten environment all the factors of place, time, people, ideas and resources are taken into consideration.

In addition to the above, it should be borne in mind to keep track of some of the following universal requirements that are closely linked to the organisation of space and which usually bring about emotional, social and intellectual comfort.

1. Richness of content, density, and functionality.

This is achieved through saturation but without overcharging the environment with very many different materials in the zones (nooks), corners and centres meant for performing different activities. They are arranged in accordance with the external and internal logic of the activities and their variations. Their specific features (instruments, mode of working, integration, volume, etc) require closeness or distance from one another. Sometimes the problem behaviour of the children could be due to unfavourable modelling of the environment, or inappropriateness of neighbouring zones, which usually introduces suspense and makes communication and cooperation pretty difficult.

The specific character of the activity – quiet or noisy, clean or “dirty” (according to Plackrose), drawing, modelling, and others – overly depends on the availability of the bathroom. There are special requirements of the nook with respect to nature, especially if it contains certain plants and animals.

Sometimes slide or film projection is used as teaching aid. This situation is facilitated by sufficient sitting arrangement and the necessary dark ambience. Such an environment is achieved through very light furniture, allowing for mobility and any necessary improvisations.

An important content in the organisation of the environment is the ethnic situation of the kindergarten group. An eye-catching organisation of a corner with some objects of the life and culture of the Gypsy population will provide comfort for children from this population and will stimulate the emotional and intellectual interest of the rest of the children.

In addition, the density of furniture could be formed by the vertical zones in the

kindergarten room – the walls. Integrated into the thematic composition with the special corners, they are a convenient and appropriate place for marking important dates – birthdays, name days, historical events, and holidays; they are also useful for hanging calendars, maps and children's drawings. The walls become the focus of attention for the children with the arrangement of numbers, letters, phrases, or support signals (pictures). Their format depends on whether they have been arranged at the level of the children's eyes or higher than that.

The posters with multi-coloured code orientate the little children in time and space; they remind the children about events, finished activities, started activities, or forthcoming activities. It is possible to provide knowledge and to provoke the curiosity of the children through posters, theme corners and collages like, "My Body", "The Tree of Seasons", "Who is Who?", "The Wonders of the World", etc.

Finally, it is noteworthy to state that the content, the density, and the functionality are in direct dependence on the age characteristics of the group and on the level of development of the children.

2. Openness and potential for integration

The openness and the potential for integration of the environment stimulate the natural contacts and cooperation among the children working as a team (in small groups). Prerequisites for stimulating the children's interest in different activities are created, close or distant from each other in nature.

The boundaries among the different corners are necessary because they help to underline the specifics of the corresponding activity; they stress the individuality, concentration and the full living through the preoccupation with an activity. At the same time, however, the children should not have a feeling of being closed up or isolated. This effect is achieved by low-level furniture, easy-to-overcome barriers, stylised panels, transparent curtains, etc. This is a way to preserve integration in an activity, or social plan, while communication among the children and with the teacher is being facilitated.

3. Dynamics and variability

Preschool age is sensitive, exigent, searching and questioning. That is why there is no perfect environment. Even the most interestingly modelled environment cannot

keep the attention of the children alert for a long time. The children get bored, if it is not altered or enriched still the more.

There are static and dynamic elements co-existing in every kindergarten room. The non-stop movability of the environment makes orientation difficult, and will affect the feeling for ease in a known environment. The static environment, on the other hand, will make the children tired, annoyed, and will not appeal to their fantasy. That is why it is necessary within certain moderation to introduce new elements. The seasonal-thematic principle allows for different variations. The knowledge of the children about the yearly cycles, about the specific nature of every season, about the place and role of man, about his connection with nature, about the calendar of holidays, etc, is being widened.

The variability has to be sought not only in the direction of general organisation, but also in the corners themselves through enriching them with new materials and instruments which will be oriented to new topics and ideas. Interesting associations are developed in children as a result of the integration between automated toys and traditional ones made from different materials, between the fixed and the mobile mechanisms and between the modern sets and the traditional natural means. The aim is to develop not only a taste for the modern and the contemporary in the children, but also to keep their interest and feeling for nature. The observations show that when the environment helps the children to integrate with nature, art and the other people, this challenges their intelligence, their social and intellectual sensitivity and their will for their own discoveries.

4. Safety

Safety is among the most important requirements for the organisation of the environment in kindergarten rooms. The aim at greater originality and variability should not endanger the health and life of the children. Besides keeping the safety rules in technological facilities, the environment has to be with optimum visibility and accessibility. It should facilitate the potential for the teacher to know at every moment where the children are, what they are doing and who they are with. Furniture location should not impede cleaning, disinfection and hygiene in general.

Besides the physical aspect of the environment, it has to be safe in a

psychological aspect as well. It should not be overwhelming, depressing or overloading; it should not make the thinking of the children homogeneous, or create monotonous mood. For the 3-7 year-old children, it is necessary that they live in an environment that is stimulating, developmental, and positive in attitudes.

5. Intimacy and credulity

The environment has to be with homely cosiness, warmth, calmness and smaller sizes. The harmonious coexistence of colours, the few contrasts and the rational division of the interior will tune the children to credulity in their environment. The opportunity for the children to alter, discuss, and organise themselves is part of the process and a result of the individual development. When the adults are organising their environment they have to keep in mind the children's need to share their intimate experiences, and that is why it should be favourable for intimacy of communication; it should support the children's self-confidence through provoking their curiosity, trust, questions and answers and a feeling for success.

6. Aesthetics

The environment in kindergarten rooms forms aesthetic taste and an attitude to the world when there is harmony between form and content, balance between thoughts and feelings and between intellect and imagination. This involves abandoning the aim for absolute perfection and completeness, staying with the not fully spoken and the sketchy. This is an opportunity to leave space for completion, addition, new ideas and untraditional solutions.

Lounges and corridors are an organic part of the space in the kindergarten; they are part of the whole. They are formed and decorated in the same way as the kindergarten rooms, according to their role. Lounges and corridors are appropriate for giving information to the parents, with themes like the following: *"I celebrate ..."*, *"I already know..."*, *"The most interesting for me is..."*, *"I need ..."*, *"I think that ..."*.

The environment in the kindergarten includes the kindergarten yard. For the wholesome development of the children there have to be open spaces, swimming pool, sheds, places for withdrawal (like caves, nests, etc.), etc. A basic requirement is that the whole organisation of the environment and the connections among the separate rooms and

zones create an atmosphere of communication and self-confidence in the children.

The kindergarten teachers should stimulate the positive attitude of the children to their environment towards making them love it, feel it supportive and wanted. And their involvement in its design and organisation will bring about this.

Besides the teachers and the children, it is feasible to involve the families of the children in the organisation of the environment. The presence of people with different experience, age, profession, knowledge and preparation allows for exchange of ideas, finding balance between fantasy and pragmatics and between the traditional and the unconventional.

Finally, the pedagogic approach to the design of the environment will provide enriching experience for everyone, including teachers and parents who are interested in making the lives of the children richer, more interesting and exciting.

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