CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION IN DESIGNING THEIR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the scholarly literature regarding the early learning physical environment with a focus on how young children can actively participate in designing their learning environment. The physical environment of the learning space is an important component in the quality of children’s early education experience; yet traditionally children have not been involved in its creation. Moreover, the physical environment portrays educational values as well as societal perceptions about the image of the child. After the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, a new paradigm emerged in children’s education. Theories advanced by the new sociology of childhood (e.g., James & Prout, 1997) promoted a view of children as active citizens who have valid ideas about our world. This approach emphasized listening to children’s voices as a means for increasing children’s participation in processes that affect their lives. Drawing from these theories, this paper argues that one factor that amplifies children’s competencies and self-worth is the possibility to participate in designing environments that reflect the value of multiple voices and the image of the child as a competent member of society. Based on a literature review, I outline ways in which researchers, architects, and educators have involved children in designing spaces. I then offer early childhood educators points to consider as they move towards including children’s voices in the design of the learning environment.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Image of the Child: Theory, Research, and Practice</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale and Significance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding question</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Paper</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Sociology of Childhood</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Children’s Voices</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Learning Environment</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Role in Designing Their Learning Environment</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators and Researchers Studies</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designers’ Perspective</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: CONNECTION TO PRACTICE</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to Children as Teachers’ Ethical Responsibility</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledging Diversity</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using A Hundred Languages</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection of Children’s Voices</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational Brochure</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to the Guiding Question</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Informational Brochure</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cover Page and Back Page:</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Page</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preview</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In this capstone paper, I will explore possibilities for young children to participate in creating their learning environments. As well, I will explore theories and practices that support educators who wish to involve young children in designing their learning environments. The physical environment of the learning space is an important component in the quality of children’s early education experience. It reflects educational values, such as the image of the child (Tarr, 2004), while it affects the child’s imagination and experiences (Holt, 1974).

Throughout the paper, whenever the terms learning environment or learning space are used, they refer to the physical spaces where learning occurs for children. The physical environment is regarded as the combination of architectural design along with the arrangement of furniture and equipment, and it can be either indoor or outdoor space. In early childhood contexts, these spaces may refer to kindergarten classrooms, pre-schools and child care centers, and other informal early learning spaces.

The New Image of the Child: Theory, Research, and Practice

At the heart of this project is a focus on young children’s agency and their capacity to be active participants in making decisions that affect their learning and developmental experiences. To this end, I have selected the “new sociology of childhood” as a theoretical framework. This theoretical perspective has a critical edge in terms of how it revolutionized contemporary views on children and childhood. Allison James and Alan Prout (1997) challenged traditional views of childhood, such as the idea that children are undeveloped, innocent, powerless, and dependent on their family to make choices. Instead they pioneered critical theory in childhood studies, claiming that children are active citizens of society. This approach views children as co-
constructors of knowledge, identity, and culture. As such, children are seen as having valid ideas and opinions about our world. Therefore, this approach holds the view that children should have the right to express their ideas in regards to what affects their lives. In response, the new sociology of childhood scholars emphasized listening to children’s voices and enhancing their agency in social decisions (Woodhead, 2006). This theory frames this paper well by valuing children’s agency and active participation in decisions regarding the physical environment where learning happens for and with children.

Additionally, the idea of children’s freedom of expression and their right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives was inscribed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was signed in 1989 (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). According to Articles 12 of the UNCRC:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Since the ratification of the UNCRC, Article 12 has had implications in different areas concerning early childhood education, such as policy, research, pedagogy, and practice. For example, in 2003, MacNaughton and Smith carried out a study for the government of Australia with children in prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms. They consulted 137 children regarding their ideas about their well-being. The study revealed that different aspects of
children’s surroundings mattered to them and that they were able to express their views and needs regarding things that meaningfully affect their lives and well-being, such as having a caring and safe environment in their family, childcare, and community. In another study, they collected and documented the views of 58 prekindergarten children about classroom gender-related practices. The data showed that gender mattered to children and that children wanted to be in a space that valued gender-related differences (MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007).

At the pedagogical level, the Reggio Emilia approach is an example of an early childhood program that has promoted children’s right of expression both in its philosophy and practice. This approach views children as rich, active and competent people who express themselves through a “hundred languages” (Clark & Statham, 2005). This means that children’s views can be expressed not only by verbal or written language, but also through a “hundred” other media such as movement or art. Accordingly, there are a “hundred” ways for listening to children’s voices; for example, by observing and interpreting children’s drawings (Moss, 2006). Reggio Emilia’s pedagogy is known as “The Pedagogy of Listening.” A term coined by Carlina Rinaldi (2001). Rinaldi explains that everyone, including children and adults, need to be listened to by others in order to make meaning and to exist as a member of a community. In other words, learning is seen as a collaborative process between adults and children as they both need to express themselves and to be listened to by others in order to find common and new understanding of knowledge and phenomenon.

The focus of this paper; namely, listening to children’s voices about their learning environments, is in line with the growing interest in listening to children’s voices and having their views taken into account in various levels and contexts of society.
Rationale and Significance

During my Masters program in Early Childhood Education, I became aware, and at the same time fascinated by, this relatively new movement that considers young children as competent and active beings who can be viewed as decision-makers of their own lives. However, my experience as a preschool teacher has taught me that despite the fact that the quality of young children’s educational experiences is highly dependent on the physical layout of the learning environment, whether it is the color of the walls and furniture, the classroom design, or the appropriateness of the space for children’s need of movement, children hardly ever had the chance to impact the design of their learning environment. For instance, children were more engaged in classroom activities when they were able to move freely in the space. Also, I often saw children changing the arrangement of the classroom furniture and equipment for different games. They became frustrated or disappointed when they were not able to make the change that they wanted. These observations along with what I learned about the importance of listening to children’s voices, made me wonder about the significance of involving children in creating their classroom environment through listening to their ideas about what aspects of the space they would like to change and why they would like to do so.

After exploring the existing literature on the relation between the learning environment and children’s learning, I realized that what I had observed in terms of the impact of learning spaces on children’s learning and development aligns with what researchers found in their studies. For example, Lippman (2010) argues that the design of the physical environment supports students’ learning. Upitis (2004) focuses on how the architecture of educational environment affects learning. Tarr (2004) discusses the early childhood classroom arrangements and displays and how these reflect what is valued and important for children and their education.
Some researchers have gone as far as claiming that in order to create the best environment for children’s learning we have to consider children’s perspectives (Clark & Statham, 2005). Educators can learn from children’s perspectives about how to create responsive environments as children come with diverse interests, competencies, cultures and backgrounds. However, there is a relatively small number of studies that examined children’s participation in creating their learning environment. Most of the studies about early childhood environments are based on adults’ perceptions about what makes the best learning environment for children. In other words, most studies do not reflect children’s voices and ideas about their classroom physical environment. In addition, several studies have focused on school age children perspectives about their physical environment (e.g., Adams & Ingham, 1998), while fewer have drawn on younger children’s (e.g., preschool age children) perspectives.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the scholarly literature regarding the early learning physical environment with a focus on how young children can actively participate in designing their learning environment. In addition, I will review the literature in order to explore how educators can incorporate children’s voices in creating the learning environment. Finally, based on the literature review, I intend to make practical suggestions to early childhood educators who are interested in integrating children’s ideas about the learning environment into their classroom design.

**Guiding question**

My guiding question in this paper is: How can children’s voices be considered in designing and creating their learning environment?
Organization of the Paper

In chapter one, I introduced the topic, purpose, and structure of this paper along with the theoretical framework that supports children’s participation in decisions that affect their lives. In chapter two, I expand on the theoretical framework and I review the literature pertaining to the significance of listening to children’s voices, the role of physical environment in children’s learning, and the ways in which children’s voices have been considered in designing the physical environment. In chapter three, I connect the key findings from my reviewed literature to educational practice. I intend to present a summary of my findings and practical suggestions in the form of an informational brochure. Finally, in chapter four, I draw conclusions from my project and address some limitations that my project had along with making suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following chapter, I first present the theoretical framework for this study, namely, contemporary critical theories of childhood. I then elaborate on the new image of children as active and competent participants, in particular, how this image is interpreted in educational studies and pedagogies along with the importance of the physical environment for young children’s learning. Finally, this chapter draws on the extant literature regarding children’s roles as participants in designing their learning environments. I also address the ways educators can involve young children in creating the physical learning spaces.

The New Sociology of Childhood

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the dominant perspective about children was that they were passive, immature, incompetent and asocial creatures (James & Prout, 1997). This approach defined childhood throughout its natural growth and development and carried three themes: rationality, naturalness, and universality. Rationality means that children’s maturation is connected to their biological growth and natural development, and it is universal for all children. In this regard, this approach went beyond the domain of psychology and affected the sociology of childhood as well (James & Prout, 1997). Even though contemporary developmental approaches, such as the socio-cultural paradigm, acknowledge childhood as a product of society and culture, this does not mean that the socio-cultural paradigm, for example, disregards traditional aspects such as universal maturational processes and children’s vulnerability (Woodhead, 2006).

According to the developmental approach, childhood was regarded as a pre-social phase and children were seen as becoming a complete human being only in adulthood. During their development and in the socialization process, children transformed from immature and irrational
beings into mature and rational beings (James & Prout, 1997), whether through a biological process or by social and cultural processes (Woodhead, 2006).

After the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, a new paradigm emerged in children’s education and development. Articles 12 of UNCRC, mentioned in Chapter One, have affected early childhood education both in research and practice. According to this article, children have the right to express their interests and ideas freely in all the matters that affect them and in any form they desire, whether orally, in print or in the form of art (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990).

Accordingly, in 1990s, influenced by the UNCRC, the image of childhood altered from that of an invisible subject into a more visible position in society. Listening to children’s voices became a matter of focus in educational domains, including researchers’ studies and policy making (James, 2007; James & Prout, 1997; MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007). Researchers started to define childhood from a new perspective, which refused the biological basis as the only basis for children’s development, and instead, portrayed children as the producers, and not only consumers, of culture and history (James & Prout, 1997). James and Prout (1997) are known as the main authors of the critical theory in childhood studies. They claim that children are historical and political citizens of the present, rather than “passive subjects of social structures” (p. 8). It means that childhood is constructed by humans’ activities and their circumstances, and it has been reshaped and reconstructed throughout history. This theory views children as actors of social processes, competent individuals and experts of their lives, who are seen as ‘being’ rather than ‘becoming’ in the future (Clark, Moss, & Kjørholt, 2005; James & Prout, 1997). In addition, critical perspectives view children as co-constructors of knowledge and active participants of society. It means that young children’s contributions should
be valued in social decisions and reflected in policies attributed to them (Clark, Moss, & Kjørholt, 2005). New theories of childhood hold the view that children should have agency in regards to what affects their lives. Accordingly, it emphasizes listening to children’s voices and enhancing their empowerment in relationships with adults and in social decisions (Woodhead, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, early childhood education has been influenced by critical perspectives since the UN convention. In democratic societies, the practice of listening to children’s voices is being reflected in different aspects of early childhood education such as policy-making, research, pedagogy and practice (MacNaughton, 2003), yet the definition of what it means to listen to children has been a debatable issue among educators and researchers. Therefore, in the following section, the concept of listening to children’s voices is defined in-depth and examples of studies where children’s voices have been listened to are provided.

**Beyond Children’s Voices**

Before I discuss children’s participation in designing their learning environment, I need to clarify the notion of children’s agency, what listening to children’s voices means, and how we can assure that their perspectives have been taken into account in decisions associated with their education. In this regard, Scott and Church (2011) define human agency as:

A quality which enables a person to initiate intentional action in order to achieve goals that are valued… The role of the individual in constructing his or her experience of the world is active, in that people are agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences. (p.17)

However, when we speak of children’s agency, especially the younger ones, it becomes a controversial issue. While the traditional approach questions children’s capacity to have agency
in decisions attributed to them, the contemporary approach considers children as agents, individuals who construct their own learning and environment (Scott & Church, 2011).

Moreover, the concepts of listening to children’s voices and the extent of listening to them have become an arguable subject among researchers and policy-makers following the UNCRC (James, 2007). Moss (2006) quotes from Carlina Rinaldi, the president of Reggio Children, arguing that listening is not just a technique or a methodology; rather, it is a way of thinking of ourselves and our connection with the world. Moss further posits that it is a cultural and ethical viewpoint about what we want our society to be like. Also, listening is not limited to speech and hearing with ears, it contains all the senses, languages, symbols and codes that we use to communicate with the world around us. Likewise, in her critical reflection on the concept of children’s voices, James (2007) indicates that listening to children’s voices is not simply hearing what they say; rather, it is an exploration throughout our understanding of what children contribute to the social world. Both of these statements point out the fact that listening has more than just one dimension. Children communicate with various languages and there are various modes of listening to their voices. This point has been mentioned in Article 12 of UNCRC as well, stating that children should be able to express themselves directly or through any other appropriate representatives (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). In addition, listening associates remarkably to how, as adults, we perceive and understand the world and our perception of children and their potentials. As Clark, Kjørholt, and Moss (2005) indicate, adults need to revalue their views and be multilingual in order to listen to young children, and it requires time and effort for adults who have forgotten many other languages than verbal and written languages.
Listening to children’s voices is also important for children’s later experiences. In fact, children’s experiences in their early childhood construct their identity as citizens later in life and have an impact on their competencies, confidence and well-being (MacNaughton, Lawrence, & Smith, 2003; MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007). MacNaughton, Lawrence, and Smith emphasize the importance of giving voice to young children for the enhancement of future society. They focus on children’s involvement in policy-making, stating that including children’s views in decisions that we make about our community improves children’s sense of belonging to the community and consequently enhances the community’s strength (MacNaughton, Lawrence, & Smith, 2003). In 2003, MacNaughton and colleagues did a consultation case study with children (birth to eight years old) for the government of Australian Capital Territory (ACT). In this study, the ideas of 137 children about what they needed for their well-being were collected. Children discussed what makes them feel safe, happy, good, and included. Children’s ideas about what they valued most in their lives and what made them feel more valued were also collected. Children shared their ideas verbally and non-verbally through interviews, drawing pictures or by assistance of an adult, taking field notes and photographs of children’s behavior in specific situations. The study revealed that children had clear viewpoints about their well-being. For example, their opinions about their well-being included different areas of their lives that they thought had a role in ensuring their safety, such as their family, their childcare and their community.

An approach that is based on listening to children’s voices in an educational setting is the Reggio Emilia pedagogy. Reggio Emilia is a pre-primary educational institution in Northern Italy that claims that educators are not the only teachers in the learning setting. Educators learn from children as much as children learn from educators. This means that children and educators
engage in a collaborative process of meaning making. Also, the basis of this pedagogy is listening to the “hundred languages of children” (Clark & Statham, 2005). Children’s voices are not constrained to verbal language. Rather, children are able and encouraged to express themselves through a hundred different modes of representation, such as artistic, kinaesthetic, graphic and visual (Moss, 2006). In Reggio Emilia pedagogy, the learning process is based on relationship and conversation between children, the educators, the parents, the environment and the community at large. One practice that the Reggio Emilia approach introduced to study children’s learning processes is documentation. Documentation is known as visible listening (Rinaldi, 2005). The educators carefully record children’s learning in different ways. For example, teachers may take pictures of children’s activities and create observational notes as well as videotape children’s experiences. In other words, as Rinaldi (2005) explains, by documenting, children’s thinking becomes tangible and possible to be interpreted. Documentation reveals the journey that children have traveled in their learning. The documentation is later presented in the classroom in the form of displays that include photographs, video clips, or notes about the children’s learning processes (Rinaldi, 2001). This ongoing process of documentation provides an opportunity for dialogue between children and educators about children’s thoughts, theories and ideas (Rinaldi, 2005).

In the Reggio Emilia approach, the physical environment is known as the “third teacher” (Gandini, 1998). The educators consider the environment as a space for provocation: a place for igniting children’s curiosity and imagination. It is because of its crucial role in propelling children’s learning that the physical environment is recognized as the third teacher (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). With this in mind, before elaborating on how children can have active roles in the design of their learning environment, in the following section I discuss the
importance of the learning environment and what it can offer to children. Along with that, some examples are provided to illustrate how different educational approaches have addressed and described appropriate learning spaces for young children.

The Learning Environment

This section focuses on the role of the learning environment and its impact on children’s learning. Before discussing children’s involvement in designing their environment, I want to illustrate why the environment is so important for children’s learning. Moreover, different early childhood pedagogies have suggested different children’s learning spaces, based on their educational philosophies. Thus, some examples of the key components of these environments are also explained.

Any environment, including children’s learning environment, has two aspects within it. First, it is a physical and visual space that is designed in a specific manner and contains various materials and tools for its participants to use. And second, it is a social space that creates a sense of ownership, a context of shared meanings through building strong relationships. In other words, the environment, with its physical and social aspects, creates a series of expectations for its participants. These expectations form people’s experiences, communications, relationships and values. Therefore, particular learning spaces influence children’s activities, interactions and meaning making differently (Nordtømme, 2012). For example, children act differently in environments where they are able to move freely in the space and can access toys and tools easily, whereas environments that have rigid structures limit children’s interactions with materials in specific ways. In an ethnographic research on 18 Norwegian kindergarten children aged 2 to 5 years old, Nordtømme (2012) studied children’s engagement and the way they make meaning in the space with each other and with materials in a kindergarten environment. Her
narratives, which were summaries of her observations, photos and videos of children’s activities and behaviors, revealed that children’s access to play materials, such as level of shelves, blankets or furniture, helped them have a central position in their play. It also showed the different ways that children participated and engaged in the various games.

The role of the physical environment is essential in children’s learning to the extent that different approaches in early childhood education have identified specific characteristics for the best children’s learning environment. Froebel, who is known as the founder of kindergarten, or “children’s garden”, developed the first kindergarten in the early 1800s. As it is apparent from its name, he attributed children’s environment to the natural world (Dudek, 2000). Froebel highlighted the crucial role that indoor and outdoor environments, especially in unity with nature, play in children’s learning (Upitis, 2004).

The Montessori approach has identified specific factors that affect children’s learning and development, including lighting, color, aesthetics, and liberty (Dudek, 2000). For example, in the Montessori classroom, children are encouraged to move freely in the space. In this regard, the furniture is at the height and scale of children and tables and chairs can be moved (Dudek, 2000). This also allows children to feel independent, responsible and trusted to use the materials they want (Krogh, 1982). Montessori also created some teaching tools for children to enhance their learning. Children use these tools to explore their environment in self-directed and cooperative activities (Lippman, 2010).

Waldorf schools, which are known as artistic places for children’s learning have special characteristics. Children’s spaces are painted with pastel colors and furnished with wooden furniture while natural light brightens the rooms. These features of the environment reflect the arts-based curriculum of the Waldorf approach and the special emphasis on art subjects such as
painting, playing musical instruments or dancing. Subjects, such as mathematics and science, are encouraged to be viewed from an artistic point of view (Upitis, 2004).

Finally, in the Reggio Emilia approach, which was introduced in the previous section, the physical environment is seen as the third teacher. The environment is stimulating and complex in materials as it attempts to respond and evoke children’s curiosity and questions. The physical environment has a key position in Reggio Emilia’s approach. Strong Wilson and Ellis (2007) identified a number of characteristics for the environment that demonstrate the concept of the environment as a third teacher. According to Strong Wilson, and Ellis, children’s learning space is seen as a dynamic setting where children’s relationship and interactions with others is motivated in a way that enhances their learning. According to Reggio Emilia approach, a learning environment should keep the balance between children’s free exploration and a classroom’s structures. Emphasizing the importance of children’s relationships, Malaguzzi (1994) stressed that children should enjoy the environment of the school because their initial interactions with other people will form there. Strong Wilson and Ellis (2007) portray children’s space as a powerful resource whereby: “Place is a source of meaning, belonging, and identity largely due to the relationships facilitated by bonds to place” (p. 43).

These examples represent how influential approaches in early childhood education value the physical learning environment as a key mediator of children’s learning and experience. The four examples follow similar goals in giving a freedom of expression and movement for children and encouraging open-task activities along with having the potential of learning a variety of different types of subjects such as art and music in an integrated and experiential way. Tarr (2004) and Upitis (2004) argue that the architecture of the space, and the arrangements of the class, represent the cultural values that we expect children to learn. The physical factors of
the environment transmit the image of the child, the kind of relationship that educators and children should have, and the expected behavior from the child (Tarr, 2004).

In her article about school architecture, Upitis (2004) focuses on the effects of architecture of educational environments on children’s learning. She indicates that the school architecture influences the ways in which children learn. She compares the architecture of schools in the last two centuries to factories. In the factory model students are put into classrooms, which are bounded spaces, according to their ages. During the school year, children will be “processed” by the knowledge that they are offered to learn, and at the end of the year, they will be tested with standardized exams to make sure that they have learned the specific knowledge that was offered. This cycle will be continued until they reach the age that they are ready to enter the workforce. However, this school structure is contrary to what we expect from children to become democratic citizens, because children neither get any sense of autonomy nor participation, which are two main components of democracy. Although the factory model is typically reflected in formal schooling, over the past decade there have been changes in early childhood policy in a direction that Moss (2013) termed “the schoolification” of early childhood education.

Tarr (2004) targets specifically displays that are used on the classrooms walls and what they represent to children. She puts herself in the children’s position, thinking of what they experience every time they come in the classroom and are faced with what is displayed on the walls. She criticizes the commercial images that some teachers use in their classes, without noticing the stereotyped messages these pictures often carry. The messages from the displays, such as cartoon characters with smiling faces, not only do not reflect children’s images accurately; they also do not value children’s competencies and potentials. These two examples of
the architecture of the schools and also the arrangements in the learning space, extensively, describe how the physical structure of the learning environment can influence the way students learn and make meaning.

Importantly, our children’s learning environment is a reflection of how the child is viewed and what behaviours and beliefs are promoted in that environment. The quality of the interactions and the tools and materials that are used in the environment become unique and represent the image that the school has of the child (Malaguzzi, 1994). In this regard, one factor that amplifies values such as children’s competencies and self-worth is to design environments that reflect these values. In the following section, I focus on the studies that have involved children in the design of their environment and have reflected children’s voices in children’s spaces.

**Children’s Role in Designing Their Learning Environment**

After a broad discussion about the importance of listening to children’s voices and the role of the physical environment in children’s learning, the main question to address now is how can young children be involved in the process of designing their environment. Children’s participation in designing their environment can occur at different levels and in various fields. In this section, I focus on studies where researchers and educators have collaborated together to involve children in the design of the learning environment. These studies also include suggestions about the ways children can participate in these endeavor. In addition, I elaborate on projects carried out by architects and designers who intentionally engaged children’s voices and ideas in the process of designing spaces.
Educators and Researchers Studies

Several studies have focused on the participation of school-aged children in design and construction of their physical environment. Hart, Espinosa, Iltus, and Lorenzo (1997) focused on children’s involvement in social activities and environmental issues. They viewed children as active citizens that have rights and responsibilities as other members of society. They go further and claim that children are designers and planners as evident when children play and create with construction games and materials. Hart and colleagues suggest different methods for applying children’s voices in the design process. For example, they suggest that by consulting with children about their environment and asking about their preferences in regard to different issues in the environment, children gain a better understanding of the role they can have in creating their surrounding environment. Although Hart and colleagues (1997) suggest consultation with users before designing the new environment, they point out that children’s spontaneous statements about what they desire in their environment may not be sufficient. In a playground project that Iltus and Hart carried out in a rural area in Vermont, USA, they showed elementary students a video of Danish children’s participating in building their own playground with a lot of lumber and with assistance from a leader. Afterwards, children participated in a discussion regarding the design and issues related to it. The researchers claimed that showing the video had an influential, positive role in constructing children’s ideas and the success of the discussions regarding the design of the playground (Hart et. al., 1997).

Despite what was stated earlier about the importance of children’s participation in designing their environment, very little attention has been placed on gaining young children’s perspectives on this topic. Among the few studies that have focused on young children’s participation in designing their physical spaces, are Clark’s (2006; 2010) studies. These form a
valuable body of work that have been influential for researchers and educators. In her studies, Clark benefited from the method that she and Moss (2006) had first established, called the “Mosaic approach”. The Mosaic approach is a practical way for listening to children’s voices and facilitating the communication between children and adults. Clark and Moss (2006) created new tools that assist interactions between children and adults. These tools work as a medium, or a language toolkit, to help both groups understand each other. Some of the research tools in the Mosaic approach are observation, interview, book-making, taking tours and model-making. These tools will be described in detail in the Chapter Three.

In 2006, Clark did a case study with young children, using their voices for the design of their new nursery school. The case study was conducted in Holly Lodge primary school; located in a city of London. The primary school also had a nursery class for three-to-four year olds. The school was facing redevelopment and in the very early stages, young children were asked to share their desires and requests for their ideal new educational space. There were two groups of participants. There was a group of 15 children from the nursery class (three to four year olds), and eight children from the preschool class (four to five year olds). Clark played the role of a facilitator to enhance the interactions between the children and the architect’s crew. According to Clark, the idea of creating a special approach to elicit children’s ideas began when the project’s architect raised the question about how one was to talk to a group of three year olds.

To simplify the communication with children, the researcher used the Mosaic approach. The children’s ideas were collected and then shared, discussed, and reflected upon among parents, practitioners, and architects. The Mosaic approach helped the design team to discover the world that the children perceive. The communication tools developed conversation with children in a way that was meaningful for children by not limiting their self-expressions to a few
communication modes such as speaking and writing (Clark, 2010). In conclusion, the design was not only based on adults and what designers assumed was best for children. Rather, children’s perspectives were also included (e.g., children’s desire to sit on adult-sized chairs, climb steep steps or their desire to have privacy in childcare environment). This inclusion happened in different levels. For example, architects developed the design of the nursery from their conversations with children, children’s drawings and photographs, as well as from the children made maps and books. In fact, architects began to look at the design of the learning space from a different lens. Children’s perspectives were combined with professional views and resulted in a design that could reflect both children’s and adults’ ideas and interests (Clark, 2010).

Designers’ Perspective

Some designers and architects have acknowledged that without reflecting on participants’ thoughts in their design, the environment may remain unused or misused due to the lack of connection between the physical environment and the users (e.g., children). For example, architects and experts, who design and build playground areas for children, have opened up new discussions about the unintended use of play areas. The term “unintended” references the unwanted use of a design that is not overseen by the design team. In other works, unintended use is users’ creative activities and performance that were not planned and/or expected by the designers of the space. Therefore, in case of playgrounds and parks, designers are keen on accommodating multi-function areas in their design that will increase children’s creativity and will offer them an opportunity to reimagine their play (Harbut, 2015).

Harbut (2015), a landscape architect, brings some instances of unintended uses in the community park components that are discovered by observing activities of children in different ages in these areas. For example, he claims that while cities allocate a lot of money in installing
water features, like spray parks and splash pads, rain gardens play an essential role in engaging children’s play with water. There are many examples of children’s play in the discharge channel, holding surface water. Moreover, the children’s interest in playing in and around creeks is also apparent as designers intentionally locate the playgrounds near these small storm water reservoirs. The other common example is storm storage ponds. A storage pond is an artificially made water reservoir in community parks. Besides its utilitarian engineering purpose, the basin offers a temporary bike area during drought, and a place for children to float ‘homemade rafts,’ and in wintertime, it provides a perfect ice rink for skating (Harbut, 2015). A kick wall or rebound wall is another example that with children’s innovation works as a climbing apparatus in parks, while its primary use is to help soccer players’ work on precision shooting (Harbut, 2015). These examples of community parks design show the value of observing children’s alternative uses of park’s components. Also, these examples will ultimately give designers the chance to include more from children’s perspectives to creative design solutions and to make multi-use play features.

One of the few examples where young children participated in the design process of a learning environment is a project in Leipzig, Germany (Designing with Children, 2013). In this project, an architect, kindergarten teachers and children collaborated in designing a new kindergarten building. The architect’s aim was to design a creative environment for children to explore and experiment with their surroundings. With this goal, she invited children to discuss their ideal worlds and the way these worlds can be reflected in children’s environments. Children who participated in this project were three to six years old. They presented their voices by telling fictional stories about their ideal world and also by drawing and modeling the spaces where they enjoy spending their times. The architect, Susanne Hofmann, formed the concept of the design
by reflecting children’s voices as well as observing children’s activities and responses to different spaces. The architect valued observing children’s exploration in the environment as a helpful resource for the design team. For example, by observing young children, designers found out that young children loved light reflections and how they can see themselves in the reflective materials (Designing with Children, 2013). The result of the project was a design of the kindergarten building, as inspired by children’s ideas, including different aspects and materials that both children and teachers enjoyed. For example, in the outdoor space, an old tree became a new play-area for children. In the indoor space, elements such as lights, low windows, and the use of mirrors in different areas created a comfortable atmosphere for children’s expression (Designing with Children, 2013).

As mentioned above, there are limited examples of young children’s participation in the design process of learning environments. This is usually due to the lack of knowledge among educators and designers regarding the ways they can listen to young children’s voices and reflect their ideas in the design. However, according to what was indicated in the aforementioned studies regarding different ways of listening to children, in the next chapter, some suggestions regarding the ways educators could involve children in the design of their environment are introduced along with the aspects that should be acknowledged in listening to children’s voices.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the theory supporting the new image of the child was elaborated on as the ethical framework for this paper. According to this theory, children are competent citizens whose views are important and valued in decision-makings. In addition, listening to children’s voices was defined and clarified with some examples of the ways this aim can be achieved. The crucial role of physical environment in children’s learning was discussed to show why children’s views
should be reflected in the design of their physical environment. Finally, a number of studies were reviewed in order to illustrate the ways that educators, researchers, and designers have accommodated children’s participation in the design process. In the following chapter, the discussion about children’s participation in designing their learning environment will be continued from a practical angle, by presenting practical suggestions to educators who wish to include children’s perspectives in the design of the learning environment.
CHAPTER THREE: CONNECTION TO PRACTICE

In chapter two, I reviewed the literature regarding children’s competent position in the new sociology of childhood, what listening to children’s voices means, and the role of the physical environment in children’s learning. In addition, I indicated some strategies that researchers and designers have suggested in their studies and projects to include more of children’s perspectives in the creation of their environment. In this chapter, I focus more specifically on a major goal of this paper that is to gain a better understanding of how as educators we can invite children’s voices into the design of their physical environment. I connect the extant theory to practice and present an informational brochure for educators. The brochure contains a brief description of what was stated in chapter two along with practical suggestions, which I present below, for teachers about the ways they can involve young children in the process of designing the learning environment (Appendix A).

My practical suggestions for children’s involvement in design incorporate four different levels. I believe that in order for children to participate actively in the process of design, educators should consider these four levels simultaneously to achieve a holistic process of co-designing the environment with children. The first level relates to the teachers’ perspective about children’s competency. The second level involves consideration of the significance of children’s diversity. The third level entails the incorporation of the multiple ways for listening to children’s voices (referred to as the “hundred ways” of listening to children’s voices) into one’s practice. At the fourth level, educators and children reflect and evaluate the environment to see if/how children’s voices have been meaningfully included in the designed environment.
Listening to Children as Teachers’ Ethical Responsibility

The first step for children’s active participation in designing their learning environment relates to the perceptions teachers have about children’s rights and competencies. In other words, children’s involvement in the process of designing the environment will not happen unless teachers value young children’s viewpoints and give them a chance to participate in decisions that affect them.

As explained in the previous chapters, traditionally children have been viewed as innocent, immature, and less capable than adults to meaningfully contribute to society. This has been the dominant approach in educational contexts for a long time, and thus, educators may not have been introduced to the relatively new, rights-based approach that views children as competent and resourceful in making decisions about their lives. As stated earlier, children have been typically viewed as needing adults’ protection and adults’ knowledge in order to develop and become mature and independent human beings. In educational contexts, teachers often see themselves holding a power position as the ones who have the responsibility to decide what is best for children. In other words, the power relation between teacher and students is imbalanced. One way for developing a more democratic approach in early childhood contexts is to invite educators to consider children from the perspective of rights and capabilities. As was demonstrated in the literature review for this project, currently there are multiple resources that can be shared with educators in order to provoke them to engage in this new ethical approach to children. Sharing resources, including current policy documents, such as the British Columbia Early Learning Framework (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2008), or the UNESCO Policy Brief on Early Childhood, titled: What is your image of the child? (Moss, 2010), is a starting point in
engaging teachers in thinking about how to collaborate with children in designing the learning environment.

When educators learn that listening to children’s voices is an important aspect of ethical practice, which means that children’s diverse ways of thinking is valued and that otherness is respected (Moss, 2006), the practice of using different ways of listening to children may begin.

Acknowledging Diversity

Another aspect that should be considered in involving young children in the design is to acknowledge and act on their diversity. In fact, when we are talking about children’s voices we should ask ourselves, whose voices are heard? Have all the children’s ideas been reflected in the decisions about the design of the environment? Have children’s voices been marginalized because of a different cultural background, ability, gender, and/or interest?

Hart and colleagues (1997) point out that in including young children in designing their environment we should be mindful of the cultures and communities that children come from. Children come to the learning space from diverse backgrounds and cultures. One of the initial steps in involving children is to notice diversity and to consider the meanings embedded in their different voices. Undoubtedly, children’s cultural experiences within their families and communities can be a rich resource for the design of the learning space.

Another aspect in designing an inclusive environment that responds to children’s rights is to listen to children’s with different competencies and abilities, especially children with special needs. Even in learning environments that are appropriately designed for children with special needs, the design is predominantly based on adults’ perspectives. Children may have different points of view that have been silenced. For instance, they may wish their environment to be more convenient in enhancing their social interactions with other children or to help them overcome
their physical limitations. Giving children with special needs a voice in design opens up new possibilities for them to feel included in the learning context, without limitations that separate them from other children.

And finally, teachers should anticipate that when they are listening to children’s voices, they are confronted with a variety of ideas and interests from children. Although children may have many similar ideas about their physical environment, their interests vary based on their different personalities and passions. Namely, some children may be more introverted and prefer calm activities and cozy spaces in the environment, while other children may be more extroverted and choose group games or areas in which they can interact with other children. Educators could acknowledge and act on diverse ideas and interests of children in a way that the designed environment is responsive for children’s needs and interests.

Using A Hundred Languages

In Chapters One and Two, I mentioned that children can express their ideas in a hundred different languages and that teachers can listen to children’s voices in a hundred ways (Clark & Statham, 2005). In Reggio Emilia the metaphor, the Hundred Languages of children, is used primarily to express the idea that children can express their ideas through multiple symbol systems, such as drawing, painting, sculpting, dancing, and drama, and that listening to children is not limited to listening to spoken or written language. Reggio Emilia educators suggest that for listening to children’s voices, adults need to relearn and revalue diverse languages and modes of expression (Moss, 2006).

One practical method for listening to children’s perspectives is the Mosaic approach, which is multi-method and multilingual and is inspired by the educational practices in Reggio Emilia (Moss, 2006). The Mosaic approach is focused on identifying a number of tools that help
children express their theories and ideas. While these tools were identified briefly in Chapter Two as observation, interview, book-making, tour, and model-making, I elaborate on these tools here.

Observation plays an essential role in understanding children’s lives, development, and learning. Educators can choose between non-participant or participant observation. In the first instance, the educator is a passive observer who does not get involved in the activities, and in the other instance, the educator participates with the children during the observation (Clark, 2010). In Clark’s (2010) study, which was described in the previous chapter, she observed young children in the nursery, in spaces where they spent a significant amount of time. These observations helped the researcher understand how children used the environments.

Interview is another tool for collecting children’s ideas. However, it is a difficult task because the interviewer questions may affect children’s responses. For a successful interview, teachers should pay attention to how, what, and where they interview children. For example, the location of the interview should be a place with which the child is comfortable. In addition, teachers should consider carefully what words they use in their questions. For instance, Clark (2010) suggests that “why” questions may be confusing for young children. Teachers can alternatively ask “Tell me about…”, which may lead the children to respond with more details.

Holding the pedagogical approach of children as competent beings, I encourage teachers to think about interview questions that are responsive to the competencies of children within their contexts, and these may include “why” and complex questions. Another factor that teachers should consider in the interview with young children is flexibility. Meaning that some children prefer to answer questions in one-to-one sessions, while others may prefer to have the interview in a group session (Clark, 2010).
Book or map-making of the desired environment are techniques involving visual tools. When the children take photos and use photographic narratives they provide mental maps for the different spaces in the environment. Drawing is also used as another medium to reveal and engage child’s conceptual map. Drawing a map of the environment gives teachers an image of children’s perceptions about the surrounding environment (Clark, 2010). In Clark’s (2010) study, children were invited to take 12 or more photos of what they thought were the important things in their nursery. Following the photography session, the researcher and children had conversations regarding the images. The children were asked to choose which photo to keep in a book and the selected photos represented children’s personal and shared meanings of “important” places and things in their educational environment.

Actual tours in the environment are used in the Mosaic approach in order for children to guide the teacher in the environment and explain their ideas. Children usually lead the tours and direct the way of their teacher or researchers. Teachers and/or children may take photos or record their voices during the tour in order to document their process of responding to the environment (Clark, 2010).

Model making is another tool that teachers can use to involve children in the design of their learning space (Clark, 2010). For example, teachers can provide opportunities for children to participate in actual design by providing them with loose materials and equipment to create mock-up models of their ideal environment. Lego and blocks are examples of materials that can be used by children in model making.

**Reflection of Children’s Voices**

Whether the designing of the learning space is a one time project or an on-going process, teachers should assure that children’s voices are reflected in the environment. Teachers can ask
themselves: Is the designed environment inclusive and reflective of the children’s voices? and
Do children feel a sense of belonging to the co-designed learning space?

In cases where the design is a one-time project (as in Clark’s 2010 study), when educators and designers have completed the design process, they can present it to children in different forms. They can share the final design with children through images or models to engage children in the evaluation process. Teachers can set a day in preschool to hold an event such as an open house when teachers and designers presented the designed environment to children. Children can express their responses in different ways. For example, children can use pins to show which photos they like more. At the end of the day, teachers will figure out children’s preference by the density of pins. Also, the designer can present the design with a mock-up model. Since this model is very close to the actual model, it is easier for children to imagine how their future learning space would look like. Teachers can benefit from children’s dialogue regarding the mock-up model to figure out children’s points of view.

Teachers can use the tools of the Mosaic approach to involve children in creating their learning space on an ongoing basis. In such learning environments, teachers become researchers who pay attention and study how the children are using their environment. Teachers are mindful of children’s responses to the environment in terms of its capacity to respond to children’s inquiries and needs. Evaluation of the environment will be done more frequently and in response to observations and dialogue with children about what they imagine their environment to be. Giving children freedom to change the environment provides children an opportunity to explore the space and learn about different potentials of it.

These four levels described above are factors that educators could consider if they wish to involve children as active participants in the design of their learning environment. The
aforementioned suggestions give teachers ideas of how they support children’s agency in the classroom, as well as how they can create a design that reflects children’s voices.

However, despite of the practical solutions that were described above for listening to children’s voices, teachers need to be cautious with the term and concept of “listening” and be aware of the challenges that they might face in enhancing children’s participation. As James (2007) indicates, giving children a voice is not only about listening to what they say. Children’s voices are not always easily accessible and clear. We need to find out in what ways and for what purpose children represent their interests and concerns. In addition, even with acknowledging children’s diversity, there is still a challenge that we continue to consider children as members of the same category, through their age group (James, 2007). And finally, another challenge of listening to children’s voices is with regards to the authenticity of reflecting their voices. As James (2007) points out, “The point of view being presented is, therefore, the view of the author, not that of the child; furthermore, the author inevitably glosses the voices of children as part of the interpretive process” (p. 265). This highlights the importance of teachers’ reflections to ensure children’s ideas and voices have been considered as accurately as possible.

What has been stated so far in this project along with the suggestions offered in this chapter will be presented in an informational brochure (see Appendix A). This brochure can be distributed to kindergartens, child care centres, and preschools in Vancouver. In the following section, the details of what is included in the brochure for teachers are reported.

**Informational Brochure**

I chose informational brochure for connecting theory to practice, because I believe that the format of a brochure reflects the key ideas of this project in a simple, direct manner. The audience for the brochure is early childhood educators who aim to create a learning environment
in collaboration with children. The suggestions in the brochure can inspire educators to think about the different ways to involve children in the design process.

The informational brochure consists of five different sections. The first part contains a description of what the brochure is about; namely, that the brochure is created to show that young children can actively participate in the process of designing their learning environment. In the next two parts, the significance of this topic is addressed, explaining why children’s voices matter and the important role of physical environment in children’s learning and development. The main section of the brochure is about the four levels of teacher’s practice in supporting children in the process of designing their learning environment. Finally, some key references are offered for educators who are interested in finding more information about this topic.

Summary

In chapter three, I connected the reviewed literature to practice; presenting my ideas regarding the ways children can participate actively in designing their environment. I offered four levels for educators’ practice. Namely, changing teachers’ perspective about the image of the child, acknowledging children’s diversity, using different modes for listening to children’s voices, and finally, examining whether children’s voices have been reflected in the design. I also described an informational brochure for teachers containing information about the significance of this topic in addition to the four suggested levels for teachers’ practice. In the next chapter, I will reflect on my guiding question with my concluding thoughts. I will also explain the limitations of this paper and make suggestions for future studies.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I respond to the guiding question that propelled this capstone project. I reflect on the possibilities of children’s participation in designing their learning environment, and I address the limitations of this project as well as make suggestions for further studies and practice.

Responding to the Guiding Question

I started this paper with the question, *How can children’s voices be considered in designing and creating their learning environment?* and I grounded this project in the perspective of the new sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997). This contemporary perspective on childhood challenges the traditional approach that viewed children as incomplete and incompetent individuals. Instead, it challenges us to view children as active and competent beings. As the image of children and childhood have been revolutionized there is a growing belief in early childhood theories, policies, and research that acknowledges children as citizens with rights, active participants in decision-making and experts in their lives (Moss, 2006).

Accordingly, it is time for educators to re-think how educational settings become a place for co-construction. Early childhood settings can be places that provide opportunities for children’s agency and self-expression through engaging children in the creation of the learning space.

As this project has illustrated, researchers, educators, and designers have already developed unique methodologies for listening to children’s perspectives about their environments. In their studies and projects, the researchers, educators, and designers have actively invited young children to express their views about how they imagined play and educational places. They have also assured that children’s ideas have been taken seriously in decision-making regarding the design of the environment.
In responding directly to the question of how children can actually participate in the decisions about designing their learning environment, I have highlighted the importance of viewing things from children’s points of view through the pedagogical act of listening. As Moss (2006) says, listening is not a technique; it is an expression of ethical practice. When teachers consider listening to children as an ethical responsibility, they offer children different modes and methods to express their theories and ideas and they make children’s ideas matter.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

One of the main limitations of this paper relates to the relatively small amount of research about including children’s voices in designing their learning environment. This limitation can be traced to the fact that the dominant approach is still one where adults hold the position that they know best which environment is best suited for young children’s learning and development. The topic of this paper has numerous aspects that need to be studied. For example, apart from listening to children’s voices, future studies might inquire into the crucial characteristics that early learning environments should have in order to provoke children’s active participation and involvement. These elements may be flexibility and open-ended materials.

Another limitation of this paper relates to the complexity of listening to children’s voices. Despite a growing focus on the practice of listening to children’s voices in theoretical approaches and pedagogies, this concept is complicated and not easily defined. There is still confusion regarding the possibilities of actualizing children’s voices. Including children in decision-making (in this paper about the design of their learning space) requires a strong responsibility from educators to be able to reflect and act on children’s voices. The feasibility of this approach is still in question.
Nonetheless, this project may open a needed dialogue about the possibility to take children’s perspectives about the environment seriously whether in educational contexts or other contexts of society. My hope is that such dialogue would transform educators’ perspectives about children’s agency and about the significance of children’s roles in designing their early learning environment.
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Appendix A: Informational Brochure

Cover Page and Back Page:

References:


YOUNG CHILDREN AS PARTICIPANTS IN DESIGNING THEIR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Contemporary approach to childhood positions children as competent social actors and as active citizens who have valid ideas and opinions about their world and who have the right to express their ideas in regards to what affects their lives and their communities (James & Prout, 1997). Accordingly, young children can participate actively in the process of designing and shaping their learning environment. Within the context of children’s participation in the creation of the learning space, we can view them as imaginative designers, competent builders, and expert consultants (see, for example, Designing with Children Project, http://designingwithchildren.net/db/kindergarten-lichtenbergweg).

1. Listening to Children as Teacher’s Ethical Responsibility

“Listening is not only a technique, and a didactic methodology, it is a way of thinking and seeing ourselves in relationship with others and the world. Listening is an element that connects and that is part of human biology and is in the concept of life.” It is a way of thinking and seeing ourselves, it’s about how we as people wish to be in the world, it’s about how we want our society to be, it’s a cultural political and ethical idea.” (Rinaldi, as cited in Moss, 2006, p. 21).

Teachers can begin by reflecting on their views and voices. The first step for children’s active participation in designing the learning environment relates to the perceptions teachers have about children’s rights and competencies. As the quote above suggests, listening to children’s voices and inviting their participation is a complex idea that requires a commitment to a particular pedagogical and ethical idea.

2. Engaging with Children’s Diversity

For designing an inclusive environment, consider children’s multiple voices and diversity by thinking about the following questions:

- How do children’s different cultures and backgrounds reflect in the environment?
- How are children’s competencies considered in the design? (For example, how are children’s disabilities considered)?
- How are children’s learning experiences reflected in the environment?
- How are children’s interests, passions, and desires reflected in the environment?

3. Using the Hundred Languages and the Mosaic approach

According to the Reggio Emilia Approach children express their ideas through multiple symbol systems, or through a “Hundred Languages,” such as drawing, painting, sculpting, dancing, and drama, and that listening to children is not limited to listening to spoken or written language (Moss, 2006). Classroom environment that offer children the use of multiple media, make children’s participation possible and visible.

Similarly, to the Hundred Languages approach, the Mosaic approach is a methodology that introduces three tools for teachers to listen to children’s ideas (Clark, 2010).

For example, the tools that were used in a study where young children’s voices were considered for the design of a new nursery school were:

- Interviews: children discussed their ideas about the environment with teachers.
- Observation: children were observed in various spaces to learn where they spent a significant amount of time.
- Map Drawing: children drew maps of the desired learning spaces.
- Photographs: Children took photographs of spaces they liked and explained why they preferred these spaces.
- Tours: children took teachers on guided tours to explain their ideas about environment.

4. Reflecting on Children’s Voices

The teacher as a reflective practitioner, or as a researcher, pays attention to children’s responses to the environment, and continuously reflects on how children’s voices and ideas about environment have been considered. The teacher may ask:

- How is the learning environment being used?
- Does the classroom environment invite children to express their ideas in multiple media (through a hundred languages)?
- Did children’s voices make any difference to the classroom design?
- How is the value of participation reflected in the classroom?
- How is the identity and diversity of the group reflected in the environment?

CHILDREN’S VOICES MATTER

According to Article 12, of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to express their ideas freely in all matters that affect them and in any form they desire (UNCR, 1990), including children’s views in decisions that affect them, improves their sense of belonging to the community and consequently enhances the community’s strength (MacNaughton, Lawrence & Smith, 2003).

Valuing children’s voices in early childhood spaces has an impact on their competencies, confidence and well-being and it supports the formation of their identity as active citizens and valued members of their community (MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007). Children are the main users of the learning environment and therefore their participation in designing the environment can enhance their learning and development experience.

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT IS IMPORTANT

The early childhood learning environment has been considered as an important element in children’s development. Well-known ECE approaches, such as Montessori and the Reggio Emilia Approach, advocate for environments that both evoke and respond to children’s curiosity and questions (Strong Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Contemporary approaches to learning environments challenge us to think about how the space conveys messages about how the child is viewed (i.e., is the child viewed as a competent and active participant?) and about how the educational values held by the community are reflected through the design of the space (Torr, 2004).