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Research on Kindergarten Environment Creation based on Children's Perspectives

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Abstract

In the context of kindergarten environmental creation, adhering to a child-centered approach means viewing children as "meaningful creators of the environment" and designing learning spaces in a positive, empowering manner. This approach not only encourages an open and dialogic environment that stimulates children's autonomous exploration, but also allows the environment and curriculum to mutually enhance each other, optimizing the learning experience. In this process, teachers transition from being "creators of the environment" to "space creators," providing children with opportunities to explore and create. This approach enables children to freely express their ideas, participate in decision-making, and cultivate their creativity, autonomy, and sense of responsibility, ultimately promoting their holistic development.

Keywords

Kindergarten Environment Creation; Children's Perspectives; Autonomous Exploration.

1. Introduction

The environment plays a crucial role in children's development, as children construct experiences and promote their own growth through positive interactions with their surroundings. Kindergartens are not only important places for children's daily lives but also essential spaces for their learning. The environment within kindergartens is significant for children's development. The "Guidelines for Kindergarten Education" explicitly state that the environment should be healthy, rich, and capable of meeting children's developmental needs. Similarly, the "Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6" lists the creation of an appropriate environment as a key responsibility for early childhood educators.

An increasing number of kindergartens are beginning to recognize the value of the environment in children's development and are exploring various approaches to environment creation. However, some kindergartens still face issues such as viewing the environment solely as a carrier of the curriculum, creating environments from an adult-centric perspective, providing fragmented content, and lacking overall coherence. In some cases, the creation of the environment has turned into a showcase or competition for teachers, who invest considerable time and effort in preparing materials and arranging the environment. Yet, children often struggle to engage effectively with these environments, which consequently fail to meet their developmental needs.

The core focus of the kindergarten environment should be the children, as the creation of the environment reflects the kindergarten's views on children and education. The environment serves as an important learning resource; a high-quality kindergarten environment can inspire activities and curricula, enabling deep interaction between children and their surroundings, thus facilitating their development. Therefore, kindergartens should pay attention to children's feelings and perspectives regarding the environment, shifting from an "adult perspective" to a "child perspective." This approach will create a dynamic, high-quality kindergarten environment that encourages meaningful participation from children. Through this

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environment, children can engage with and co-create the curriculum, while the implementation of the curriculum can further reconstruct the environment from the children's standpoint.

2. Open and Dialogic Environment: Stimulating Children's Autonomous Exploration

The "Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6" indicate that children's learning is a process of acquiring experience through direct perception, practical operation, and personal experience[1]. The creation of a kindergarten environment based on children's perspectives should respond to children's learning styles and characteristics, maximizing the environment's role as a scaffold for children's development. By establishing an open and dialogic environment, it can stimulate children's autonomous exploration and learning.

Firstly, it is essential to maintain the openness of the environment and the materials provided. Compared to an environment with fixed elements, an open environment can inspire endless imagination[2]. It is important to keep the activity space dynamic and adjustable. The size and location of the space can be altered according to actual needs, allowing for flexibility regardless of the number of participants. The functions of the space should not be fixed, and connections should be established between different areas. For example, some classrooms link the reading area with the writing area, providing various writing tools-such as watercolors, markers, pencils, and brushes-at the reading corner, offering children multiple choices. Additionally, some classrooms break the original layout by placing the living area, science area, and art area closer to the water source, thus breaking down the barriers between indoor and outdoor spaces and making the environment more flexible and diverse.

Additionally, a large quantity of open-ended materials should be provided. Open-ended materials allow children to use, classify, combine, and redesign them in various ways. These materials should be diverse and abundant, including items such as paper, sticks, metal, shells, stones, sand, and rope. Unlike closed materials, open-ended materials do not have fixed uses; they are movable and low-structured, enabling children to choose and manipulate them independently. Children can use these materials creatively, either individually or by combining different materials. Through interaction with these materials, children construct experiences, gain a sense of control over their environment, and enhance their divergent thinking skills, thereby improving their ability to solve problems creatively.

Secondly, it is crucial to focus on children's developmental needs, allowing the environment to engage in intimate dialogue with them. Teachers should act as observers, inspirers, and guides during children's activities. By observing children's play, daily life, and educational activities, teachers can understand their cognitive development levels and existing experiences, pay attention to their interests, and refine their exploratory questions. This understanding can lead to the creation of a high-quality environment that facilitates dialogue and interaction between children and their surroundings.For instance, during a project-based activity in the middle class titled "Beautiful Clothes," children expressed the desire to "change the color of their clothes." The teacher recognized this interest and responded positively, guiding children to seek solutions through research, interviews, and experiments. Through a series of explorations, children discovered that they could dye clothes using plants. The teacher then led the children to find plants in their environment that could be used for dyeing, such as spinach, onion, and purple cabbage. Instead of purchasing dyes online or asking children to bring materials from home, the teacher encouraged them to plant these dyeing plants in the classroom garden, thus initiating a scientific activity focused on the growth and changes of plants. Additionally, a "dying workshop" area was created, allowing children to experience dyeing fabrics with plants firsthand. This process fostered close interaction and communication between children and

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their environment, truly stimulating their curiosity and encouraging critical thinking, making deep play and exploration possible.

Thirdly, the creation of the environment should return to nature. Children need to engage in intimate dialogue with nature, which is one of their learning methods. Nature itself is an open environment and serves as an important resource for learning and the curriculum. Kindergartens should establish a good natural environment, including treehouses, sandpits, water pools, rain gardens, planting areas, animal corners, and small hills, allowing children to engage in subtle and immersive learning through nature.For example, some kindergartens take indoor activities outdoors when the weather is nice. Children may observe and study how ants carry food and where their nests are located. Some children become interested in beehives, exploring the differences between the queen bee, drones, and worker bees. Others develop a strong interest in the various trees in the kindergarten, measuring their height in their own ways and investigating their shapes, functions, and the relationship between trees and humans. Throughout this process, children's cognitive abilities, scientific inquiry skills, and problem-solving abilities are also developed.

3. Children's Deep Engagement: Allowing the Environment to Support the Curriculum and Optimize the Environment

Traditionally, we have often viewed the environment merely as a tool or a carrier for the implementation of the kindergarten curriculum. In reality, the environment is not separate from the curriculum, nor is it a passive space that merely hosts curricular activities. The environment and the curriculum exist in a symbiotic relationship, and children's deep engagement is at the core of the interaction between the two. Children engage with the curriculum through the environment, which in turn fosters the development of the curriculum. As children participate in the curriculum, they reconstruct and optimize the environment from their perspective, allowing the environment to support the curriculum while the curriculum enhances the environment.

For example, the project-based learning activity "Blue Snowflower" in the middle class originated from children's curiosity and observation of a cluster of blue flowers on a small hill in the kindergarten. In the initial phase of the project, children investigated the question, "Why are the flowers blue?" and embarked on a "Flower Quest," discovering various blue flowers such as Dutch daisies, hydrangeas, bellflowers, and blue snowflowers.During the integrated development phase of the project, the children proposed planting blue snowflowers in a public area of the kindergarten. They researched planting methods by consulting older classmates with gardening experience and shared their findings with peers. Ultimately, they formed three action groups to plant blue snowflowers using three different methods: transplanting, cuttings, and seedling cultivation. Throughout this process, children learned to till the soil, sow seeds, apply fertilizer, and control pests, experiencing the growth cycle of the flowers from germination to leaf development to blooming.Under the children's careful care, the blue snowflower branches became dense and continually blossomed, contrasting sharply with the blue snowflowers planted on the small hill several years earlier. Additionally, during the planting process, children generated various questions, such as why the blue snowflowers were growing slowly and why the leaves were yellow. The teacher invited an expert to answer their queries, revealing that the soil lacked nutrients. In response, the children used rice washing water and urine as fertilizers. However, they soon discovered the limitations of these fertilizers-such as their singular nutritional content and long-term effects-leading them to begin using compost bins and worm boxes, utilizing nature to give back to nature.

The blue snowflowers on the small hill sparked a series of inquiries among the children. They engaged in investigations, sharing, discussions, decision-making, collaborative division of tasks,

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and in-depth exploration to solve problems. Ultimately, they not only learned how to plant blue snowflowers and understood the process of plant growth but also appreciated the significant value of plants and learned to respect and care for their surrounding environment.The children's inquiry initially stemmed from their curiosity about the outdoor natural environment of the kindergarten. Through the teacher's guidance, their curiosity transformed into a series of deep learning and exploration experiences. This illustrates how children engage with the curriculum through their environment and co-create the curriculum. During the project, the children established a new planting area for blue snowflowers, carefully tended to them, and utilized compost bins and worm boxes to convert kitchen waste into organic fertilizer, thereby transforming the existing environment of the kindergarten. The entire process reflected the children's deep involvement, exemplifying how continuous curriculum implementation can reconstruct and optimize the kindergarten environment from the children's perspective.

4. The Role of Teachers in Creating the Environment: From "Preparers of the Environment" to "Facilitators of Space"

Teachers' adherence to a child-centered approach in environmental creation does not imply a lack of preparation or a hands-off attitude; rather, it reflects a journey from "absence of children" to "recognizing children" and ultimately to "supporting children." The role of teachers transitions from being "environment preparers" to "space creators," rooted in the understanding that children are capable agents and co-creators of their environment.

Teachers should actively listen to children's voices, recognizing them as empowered subjects who possess rights in the environmental creation process. They should have a say and decision-making power in shaping their surroundings. For instance, a kindergarten may invite children to participate in the redesign of an outdoor sand and water area, using various expressive methods such as drawing and play to convey their visions. The institution integrates children's feedback and shares their perspectives with parents, teachers, and designers, who then revise the design based on children's input. This approach not only involves children in the transformation of the physical environment but also opens new possibilities for their play and learning experiences.

A space that emphasizes "white space" aims to encourage children to actively engage with and alter their environment, fostering a sense of control over their surroundings. Through interaction with the environment, children construct experiences that contribute to their holistic development. This "white space" can manifest both physically, as in leaving areas intentionally empty, and psychologically, by creating problem-solving scenarios and allowing for imaginative exploration. For example, teachers might pose the question, "What can this area be used for?" This inquiry encourages children to plan, design, and actively modify the space, deepening their involvement in shaping the kindergarten environment[3]. Such engagement not only enhances children's creativity and self-confidence but also aids in the development of collaboration and communication skills, laying a solid foundation for their future learning and life experiences.

Moreover, through this environmental creation process, teachers can foster children's reflective and critical thinking abilities. Encouraging children to share their thoughts and feelings after activities enables them to consider issues from multiple perspectives, enhancing their understanding of the importance of differing viewpoints. This educational approach not only contributes to the comprehensive development of children's competencies but also establishes a foundation for their future social adaptability.

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5. Summary

Based on a child-centered approach to environmental creation, teachers should establish an open and exploratory environment that integrates the environment with the curriculum, allowing for intentional "white space." By listening to children and truly seeing them, educators enable a dialogue between children and the kindergarten environment. This approach grants children the rights to create, express, and make decisions, empowering them to become genuine owners of their environment.

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