

A Case Study on the Creation of Kindergarten Material Environment from Children's Perspective

Ye Dou*

City University of Macau, Macau 999078, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: In conventional child research, adult viewpoints often dominate, and children are frequently “objectified,” serving merely as “subjects for study”^[1]. Since the 1980s, scholars have increasingly considered children’s issues from a child-centered standpoint, leading to the emergence of the concept known as the “child perspective.” This approach holds significant research value. Incorporating the child perspective into the professional growth of kindergarten teachers might help address existing challenges in teacher development and reinvigorate their professional progress^[2]. The author employs interview and observation techniques to examine the current state of material environment creation in Y kindergarten from the child’s point of view. The findings reveal a tendency toward teacher-centeredness, underutilization of available resources, and insufficient educational capabilities among teachers. In response to these observations and challenges, the author recommends enhancing the development of exploratory and challenging outdoor environments, emphasizing the cultivation of shared and communal values in indoor public spaces, and fostering a more autonomous classroom environment that encourages full participation from children.

Keywords: Children’s perspective; Kindergarten material environment; Case study

Online publication: May 29, 2025

1. Background and significance

1.1. Article background

In recent years, China’s preschool education policies have emphasized specific requirements regarding the creation of kindergarten environments. The Regulations on the Work of Kindergartens, which took effect in February 1990, highlight the significance of fostering a teaching and learning atmosphere suited to children’s development while offering them diverse opportunities for participation in activities. In 2010, the document “Several Opinions on the Current Development of Preschool Education” underscored the necessity of enhancing guidance by providing a wider variety of books and toys in kindergartens, thereby enriching the educational environment. Furthermore, the “Guide on Learning and Development for Children Aged Three to Six,” issued in

September 2012, clarifies the importance of valuing the unique roles of play and daily life experiences, focusing on the educational process, cultivating a positive learning environment, and fully supporting children's needs for experiential learning through hands-on practice, direct perception, and personal involvement ^[3].

Nevertheless, in real-world scenarios, the process of creating an environment frequently strays from policy guidelines and the initial educational goals. Based on the author's practical observations, even though teachers recognize the significance of environmental creation for children's growth, they often prioritize efficiency in implementation. As a result, environment creation tends to be heavily teacher-directed, leading to insufficient child involvement and making it challenging to leverage the "implicit education" role of the environment.

As a crucial medium for supporting children's development, the creation of kindergarten environments should revert to a child-centered perspective and fully consider the needs of children. Based on this principle, the author utilized a four-month internship at Y Kindergarten. Through observation, documentation, and engaging in equal conversations with children, the author thoroughly examined the current state of environmental design from the children's viewpoint, aiming to identify its strengths and weaknesses. This type of internship not only helps in building an equitable relationship with children but also supports detailed observation, enabling a deeper understanding of the role children play in the process of environment creation.

1.2. Research significance

1.2.1. Theoretical significance

The existing research on kindergarten environment design exhibits notable limitations. Firstly, the research perspective tends to be overly narrow, predominantly reflecting an adult-oriented viewpoint while failing to adequately grasp children's genuine needs. Secondly, the scope of the research is insufficiently broad, typically concentrating on isolated aspects such as classroom settings or wall decorations rather than considering the holistic kindergarten environment. This study aims to overcome these constraints by adopting a child-centered approach that emphasizes children's language expression, discovery processes, and practical experiences. In doing so, it seeks to enhance and expand the theoretical framework surrounding kindergarten environment creation.

1.2.2. Practical significance

From the children's viewpoint, this research thoroughly examines the present status, challenges, and reasons behind the development of the physical and psychological environment in Y kindergarten, offering a novel approach for educators on the front lines. While this is a case study, its significance is twofold: firstly, it aids teachers in developing an understanding of hearing children's voices, thereby encouraging the evolution of their teaching philosophies; secondly, it supports the transition of environmental design practices from being adult-centered to incorporating children's involvement, ensuring that the kindergarten setting aligns more closely with children's genuine requirements.

2. Children's perspective and material environment creation

In this study, the child perspective represents a specific research angle and approach. Educators are inclined to view children as competent individuals, kneeling to attentively listen to their thoughts, striving to fulfill their needs, and respecting their distinctive modes of expression. Teachers foster a more relaxed and open atmosphere, providing children with chances to engage in the creation of the kindergarten environment from their viewpoint ^[4]. This

paper categorizes the child perspective into two dimensions: the spatial dimension, which involves observing environmental design from the height of a child; and the ideological dimension, which focuses on comprehending children's perspectives and preserving their unique approaches to learning and thinking.

The material environment in kindergartens refers to the intentional and systematic creation of a positive setting by kindergarten teachers, aligned with specific educational goals. This involves the planning and utilization of the classroom environment, the arrangement of interior walls, as well as the establishment of the overall ecological functionality within the kindergarten.

3. Current situation of material environment creation in Y kindergarten from the perspective of children

3.1. Outdoor material environment creation

Montessori emphasizes that kindergarten education should offer children a purposefully designed environment, enabling their natural tendencies to unfold completely and spontaneously within an appropriate setting ^[5]. In the outdoor setting, children have the freedom to run energetically, shout joyfully, and engage in play as they desire ^[6].

Designing an outdoor sports environment in kindergarten encounters two primary challenges. First, the utilization of large toys is frequently constrained by safety considerations. For instance, despite the jungle gym in Kindergarten Y encouraging children's sense of challenge and achievement, it remains unused due to insufficient safety protocols and expert supervision. Additionally, the organization of materials within the sports zone, the scheduling of time, and the allocation of space should be adaptable and unrestricted. This allows children to independently choose their play location, activities, methods, and duration based on their individual needs and developmental stages ^[7].

3.2. Indoor public environment

As a distinctive group space, the kindergarten serves multiple levels of social interaction. The corridor culture within a kindergarten is a crucial component of its overall culture, encapsulating the institution's objectives, philosophy, demeanor, visual identity, and spiritual ambiance ^[8].

Currently, the design of public space environments in kindergartens faces two primary challenges. First, the diversity within corridor spaces is lacking. For instance, in Y Garden, the corridor environment demonstrates a clear "adult-oriented" perspective. While the suspended decorations are visually appealing, they remain out of reach for children. Additionally, the wall designs overly emphasize the unique features of the garden while neglecting the comprehension level of children. In contrast, less noticeable details, such as the Nian beast decoration behind doors, tend to spark greater interest in exploration among children. This situation reveals that the creation of corridor environments places excessive focus on display functionality, disregarding children's participation and interactive experiences.

3.3. Physical environment of class

The creation of regular and theme-based environments in kindergartens highlights several challenges present in contemporary kindergarten environmental design. In traditional areas, various functional zones encounter distinct issues: the reading area struggles with an imbalance in the quality of book resources; although the art area demonstrates a positive educational philosophy, teachers need to go beyond merely commenting on children's work and instead establish emotional connections with them ^[9]. Meanwhile, the construction area

overly emphasizes outcomes while neglecting the process. The role-playing area is constrained by stereotypical roles; the science area is hindered in exploration activities due to spatial limitations; and the living area tends to be overly simplistic in content. In theme-based areas, implementation often reverts to adult-centric aesthetics, such as an excessive focus on “Nordic style” or other adult-oriented designs. This results in an environment that prioritizes excessive gentleness and protection. Additionally, wall themes should align with overarching environmental goals, ensuring that all information within the child’s living space points toward a central concept. This approach encourages greater child participation in activities and leaves a deeper impression regarding the knowledge conveyed through the environment ^[10].

4. Problems created by the kindergarten environment from the children’s perspective

From the perspective of children, the author feels that the current situation of the creation of the material environment of Y kindergarten consists of advantages and disadvantages. There are advantages and disadvantages, and the following are outstanding problems.

4.1. There is an obvious teacher-centered tendency in environment creation

To enhance both work efficiency and visual appeal, numerous environmental designs overlook the genuine needs of children. For instance, symbols like the basketball player in the hallway may exceed children’s comprehension level and lack educational value. When involving children in environmental creation, only those with advanced drawing skills are chosen. While this approach is marketed as promoting children’s involvement, it essentially utilizes their artwork for decorative purposes, failing to genuinely acknowledge all children’s equal right to participate.

4.2. Outdoor environmental resources fail to be utilized to the maximum

The layout of the outdoor activity area in Y Garden is overly rigid, with stringent scheduling and usage regulations implemented for simplified management. For instance, it is specified that only one class can use the slide simultaneously. This not only restricts children’s chances for social interaction but also does not accommodate the activity requirements of children from various age groups and with diverse personality traits.

4.3. Teachers lack the professional ability of environment

Based on interviews with eight teachers, it was discovered that they encounter numerous challenges in creating environments from a child-centered perspective. Firstly, there is insufficient support and professional guidance available to them. Secondly, they struggle to strike a balance between pursuing aesthetic appeal in the environment and respecting children’s creative input. Thirdly, there is often an inappropriate level of children’s involvement. Some teachers rely solely on personal experience or online resources to address these issues. Additionally, the frequency of engaging in environment creation activities is relatively low (only 1–2 times per month), making it difficult for them to adapt promptly to changes in children’s needs. This highlights that while teachers acknowledge the significance of incorporating children’s perspectives, they still lack the essential professional knowledge and practical skills required to effectively implement this approach.

5. Reasonable suggestions

5.1. Reinforce explorable and challenging outdoor environment creation

In the design of large toy areas, kindergartens should prioritize the safeguarding of children's lives and the enhancement of their health above all else. Kindergartens need to enhance their safety assurance systems through various approaches. Firstly, they should implement scientific modifications to the physical environment, such as utilizing non-slip flooring materials and installing safety buffer zones. Secondly, a routine maintenance system for equipment should be established, along with the introduction of new toys that have a high safety rating. The design of outdoor environments in kindergartens should adhere to the critical principle of enabling children to explore on their own, ensuring that they can engage in play to the fullest extent while interacting with the natural surroundings ^[11].

At the teacher level, while ensuring safety is crucial, it is equally vital to maximize the educational benefits of large toys. During daily activities, teachers should capitalize on educational moments, assist children in learning the proper methods of play through illustration and direction, focus on spontaneous teaching opportunities, help children understand how to follow game rules, and develop their self-protection skills. Teachers should consistently highlight potential safety risks both immediately and on-site to strengthen children's awareness of safety ^[12].

5.2. Attach importance to the creation of a shared, public spirit indoor public environment

The design of public space environments in kindergartens should thoroughly embody a child-centered approach. This is particularly relevant for corridors and foyers, which are key areas for activities. These spaces require careful consideration to ensure a harmonious blend of educational significance and engaging appeal.

In the development of corridor environments, it is crucial to emphasize multi-functionality and engagement. Firstly, floor design should extend beyond mere traffic functionality by integrating diverse interactive elements, such as climbing activities, transforming the corridor into an engaging activity area. Secondly, wall design should balance teacher-led planning with child participation, respecting children's creative input while aligning with educational objectives. Lastly, in designing suspended decorations, children should be involved in both the discussion and execution phases, incorporating their creations to foster a stronger sense of involvement.

5.3. Improve children's independent participation in the creation of the class environment

Chen Heqin stated, "Children are able to acquire education from their surrounding environment; therefore, it is necessary for us to organize the environment in a way that enhances the richness of children's living conditions and diversifies their learning resources ^[13]." Considering the viewpoint of children, regarding how to establish a more autonomous classroom environment where children can fully participate, the author outlines five principles for consideration.

5.3.1. Respect children's subject status

This represents the core principle of environmental design. Establishing children as the central focus in creating environments means that all aspects of design should aim at promoting children's overall and effective development. Additionally, it is essential to highlight the active role of children in this process, taking into account their learning requirements and personal preferences, while emphasizing children's active involvement in environmental design ^[14].

5.3.2. The principle of meeting children's needs

The design of environments should take into account the varied requirements of children. On a physiological basis, it must fulfill fundamental living necessities and sensory experiences. From a psychological perspective, it should address multidimensional needs like cognitive inquiry, emotional articulation, aesthetic appreciation, and social engagement. Specifically, it is crucial to emphasize children's inherent curiosity and drive to explore, fostering an atmosphere that encourages the identification and investigation of problems.

5.3.3. The principle of balance of experience

Early childhood education should focus on children's fundamental life experiences and offer them a secure and comfortable environment ^[15]. It is essential to guarantee experience development in five key areas while maintaining a balance between direct and indirect experiences. The setting should facilitate children's direct engagement with nature and society and also supply stimulating opportunities for indirect learning experiences.

5.3.4. The principle of gradual progress

Environmental creation ought to embody a long-term developmental viewpoint rather than being confined to a specific timeframe. It is essential to strategically outline the pivotal experiences for each area and accomplish progress in stages. Additionally, children should be encouraged to articulate and document their growth journey through diverse methods, thereby illustrating the process of accumulating experience.

5.3.5. The principle of appropriate white space

The classroom environment, acting as the "third teacher," requires an appropriate amount of space. This type of space refers not only to the physical area but also to the psychological room, allowing the environment to remain flexible and adaptable. Proper space can inspire children's creativity while preventing overstimulation from the surroundings.

These five principles are interconnected and build upon one another: respecting children's rights and fulfilling their needs serves as the foundation, maintaining a balanced experience acts as the content requirement, while gradual progression and providing appropriate room for flexibility function as the specific implementation strategies. By adhering to these principles, it is possible to establish a genuinely child-focused classroom environment.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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