

Thinking Critically About Environments *for Young Children*

Bridging Theory and Practice

Edited by

Lisa P. Kuh



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Introduction

Thinking Critically About Environments

Lisa P. Kuh

The shelves above the cubbies are piled high with bright blue plastic rest mats. The carpeted meeting space is home to an area rug depicting a busy street scene bordered by the alphabet and the numbers 1–10 in primary and secondary colors. Wall spaces have plastic pocket calendars, bulletin board decorations with scalloped edges in various designs, and posters depicting names of shapes, colors, and feelings—all from catalogs. Some children’s work is also displayed—one piece of artwork from each child, each barely discernible from the other. Shelves are stacked with materials: a pegboard atop a floor puzzle atop a tub of pattern blocks. Outdoors a large plastic and metal climbing structure dominates a flat landscape, surrounded by wood chips.

I visit many environments, both formal and informal, indoors and out of doors, every year, and I find myself asking, “Why is that object there? What is its purpose? What is the teacher’s (or community’s, parent’s, museum director’s) goal in offering this object, this arrangement, and this space to children?” These are questions that practitioners, policymakers, and designers must ask themselves regularly. Unfortunately, the answers are not usually related to creating meaningful spaces that promote play, exploration, and rich learning experiences. The early childhood classroom described above, which was assembled quite intentionally, represents what is widely accepted as high-quality school design for young children. On the surface, things may look quite cheerful, but the ever-present primary colors and catalog items also symbolize tensions related to environments for young children.

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This book considers the ways in which environments for children promote and hinder experiences in them, how social constructs about what is good for children influence environmental design, and what practitioners can do to develop effective learning environments for young children, be they in schools, playgrounds, museums, or virtual worlds. The classroom described at the opening of this chapter reflects a typical early childhood classroom and can serve as a starting point for rethinking and expanding the notion of environments. There are many books about setting up classrooms, but few of them ask educators to respond critically to the messages sent to children as a result of the choices adults make in establishing learning environments. This book seeks to combine the philosophical and practical aspects of environments for young children so that readers can both understand and articulate how and why thinking carefully about young children's spaces is crucial to their growth and development.

DEFINING ENVIRONMENTS

Before we consider the colorful catalog classroom described above and examine what makes it problematic, let us stop and consider some definitions of the word *environment* as applied to spaces for young children. The word *environment* is carefully chosen and has roots in education, environmental psychology, cultural geography, and architecture. Montessori used the term *prepared environment*, specifying characteristics such as materials and furniture in proportion to the child and his or her needs; beauty, order, and harmony in design; the cleanliness of the environment; and an arrangement that facilitates movement and activity (Standing, 1957). Important in this notion of environment is that the child has access to spaces where he or she can choose materials and develop independence. Environmental design scholars also note the importance of choice in environments and view them as places that support development by affording opportunities to try out predefined roles in conventional settings. This involves promoting children's exploration of unprogrammed and undefined spaces where preschoolers can manipulate the environment and engage in pretend play, and practice independence (Heft & Chawla, 2006).

Interestingly, progressive classrooms in the early 1900s share some important similarities with classrooms of today. Over time there were shifts in what "counted" as a high-quality early childhood environment, and certain trends garnered favor according to the social and political climates of the day. Classroom practices related to block play, nature exploration, loose parts, high-quality wooden furniture, real objects such as glass and china, didactic materials, and their uses were part of past early childhood curricula inspired by

educational theories and philosophies such as those of Froebel, Montessori, Dewey, and the Bank Street College of Education. Although vestiges of these early environmental developments still appear in today's classrooms in the form of child-sized furniture and materials designed specifically for children, Progressive Era innovations are disappearing, as evidenced by classrooms without blocks, the prevalence of primary-colored plastic furniture and materials, and the elimination of outdoor play in some settings.

The Reggio Emilia approach takes a strong stance regarding environments in schools and in broader communities, and characterizes the classroom environment as a “third teacher” (after parents and educators) (Gandini, 1998). From this perspective, children have the right to be educated in thoughtfully designed spaces that support their development (Stremmel, 2012). Architect Mark Dudek (2005) uses the word *environment* in connection with designed spaces for young children to describe a “landscape” for exploration and play within and beyond the classroom. All of these conceptions of spaces for young children, which we call environments, denote formal, informal, and virtual areas where children have the opportunity to express themselves and make choices as they encounter what the environment has to offer. In this conceptualization, *environment* is an aggregate term referring not only to the actual spaces and the objects within them, but also to the social and cultural forces that shape them—and are in turn shaped by those who use them.

PROBLEMATIZING ENVIRONMENTS FOR LEARNING: RETURNING LANDSCAPES TO THE CHILDREN

Let's return to the classroom description that began this chapter. Is it really so bad? Consider the primary-colored and letter-and-number-adorned meeting area rug. On the surface, it serves a very functional purpose. It provides a soft space in the classroom and a place for children to gather or spread out materials. But it is not a neutral rug. What messages do the primary-colored images and the letters and numbers on it send? That primary colors are the most important colors? That you must drive your train only on the prescribed “road” on the rug? What if children want to build with blocks on it—does the rug now dictate what they should build? Such highly commercialized materials send strong messages to children about what is important and how they should play. In addition, for young children who are sorting out the sensory stimuli in their environments, building with multicolored blocks on a visually busy rug might be an overwhelming experience, especially for those grappling with visual stimuli or sensory issues. I have seen children sitting in rows on these rugs, with piles of Cuisenaire rods, small chalkboards and handwriting books, or beginning readers, in close proximity to one another, being asked to

read, write, sort, and respond—an enormous task that is made more challenging by the environmental constraints of the classroom.

The messages children absorb from their environment are especially important, considering the amount of time children spend in controlled, structured, scheduled, directed activity. Play experiences indoors and outside may be few and far between as recess time in schools diminishes and structured, scheduled activity takes the place of outdoor play after school hours (Rivkin, 1995). Dudek (2005) and others lament that “landscapes” for children are no longer freely available to children and that our role as parents, teachers, designers, and policymakers is to return these landscapes to the children.

The loss of play space and time is also related to policy regarding children’s learning. The emphasis on standards and learning outcomes has in many ways superseded teacher thinking about the fuller range of experiences that children might have in a given environment (Heft & Chawla, 2006). In this light, the colorful rug is a misappropriation of curricular intention. More and more, it seems that every object must now overtly teach something very specific to a child who comes into contact with it. This phenomenon is seen in the tic-tac-toe boards on playground equipment where design communicates a mode of play that is directed at the child, as opposed to inviting children to extend ownership and creativity to their play narrative. In our efforts to have our environments be as educationally instructive as possible, we actually limit what children can or will do in these environments. If there is little for children to “take up” in their classrooms, if classrooms are specifically designed to minimize responses and interactions with the space in ways that don’t follow prescribed curricular goals, then children must rely on the adult to manage their responses and guide their interactions.

This can be especially problematic in light of research on children living in poverty. Annette Lareau (2003) asserts that poor children are repeatedly instructed to defer to adults in institutional settings and are not often exposed to the idea of choice. Louise Derman-Sparks and Patty Ramsey (2011) add another layer of complexity, noting that there are ranges of antibias categories with which children might identify related to race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and ethnicity and that some children enter into learning environments not having any of their personal characteristics addressed or reflected in the space. What has to change in our thinking about environments that impacts the kind of programming we provide for young children, especially those living in poverty, coming from marginalized groups, or those looking to see themselves in their learning spaces? Robert C. Pianta, in the introduction to the *Handbook of Early Childhood Education*, poses this question another way, wondering: How can restructuring environments for young children increase the quality of care for young children, especially our most vulnerable (Pianta, Barnett, Justice, & Sheridan, 2012)? Although the colorful rug with the letters

on it may look innocuous, it comes with an inventory of meaning about learning that may exclude entire groups of children from being able to fully engage in their own learning.

HEALTHY RISK-TAKING: DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE AND SAFETY FIRST

Responses to diversity in our student population often result in tightening the technical aspects of our work, of which furnishing a classroom is one. The standardization of what counts as a classroom, schoolyard, or learning environment regardless of children's context is an unsurprising response to the growing diversity and achievement gap in education. The cost, however, is that the specifics of what to include, and who gets to decide what to include, are limited to a prescribed menu of items. Flexibility in design considerations and openness to out-of-school learning venues are largely missing from conversations about classroom quality, especially in environments that serve poor children.

Complicating this issue is that developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) has become synonymous with safety and not with the kinds of healthy risks that we hope teachers and children will take in their interactions with one another and in their environments. Although licensing and accrediting organizations perform important functions in establishing and maintaining high standards for quality in early childhood settings, they also limit children's exposure to the real world and perpetuate a materials industry that is out of touch with what children need to learn. Creating environments that trust children and encourage competency is especially important for all children whose experiences may be limited due to lack of access to high-quality environments, loss of play spaces, and overly structured experiences that hinder child-centered explorations.

Safety standards in early childhood are designed to keep children from harm, yet the definitions of what is harmful and what might be an interesting provocation for learning are confusing. Genuine logs brought from a neighbor's yard after a tree fell in a storm could result in a splinter. If notions of safety are our primary concern, then clearly a prefabricated composite material "log" is a better choice. As a classroom teacher, I stored my colored pencils in a variety of glasses from a secondhand shop. The children loved choosing which glass to take to a table and had classified the glasses according to attributes (the "bumpy" glass, the "bubble" glass). On the rare occasion that a glass was dropped, we carefully swept it up. In my 25 years of teaching, perhaps four glasses have been broken, and I have never had a child cut by broken glass. However, during a licensing visit at one school, we removed all glass and china

from the classroom before the inspection so as not to draw attention to items that could be deemed “dangerous.” More and more, furniture is required to be bolted down, making flexible rearrangement of classrooms more difficult. Although no one wants a child to be injured, children (and teachers) can be trusted to use materials safely if they are shown how to handle them carefully. Furnishings can be selected that are low to the ground and accessible to children, as opposed to tall, heavy, adult-height shelving piled high with materials.

Both being careful and taking risks are important work in the life of a child. It takes self-control to carry a tray of fragile items from one side of the classroom to another; it takes physical control, stamina, and perhaps teamwork to carry a large log across the playground. Children, deprived of these experiences, are also deprived of the chances to practice “taking care” and reaping the joy and self-awareness that comes with this. Teachers need practice, too. They must learn to form partnerships with licensors and regulators and to articulate an environmental philosophy that applies to indoor settings, outdoor spaces, and virtual learning contexts.

The school equipment and materials industry sends a strong message about what a high-quality classroom should have in it and what it should look like. This message is so pervasive that some “teachers who take a different approach may even feel pressure from other teachers or parents to decorate so that their room looks like a classroom should look” (Tarr, 2004, p. 1). However, the current early childhood field has not specifically addressed how or which components of environments are important for promoting high-quality interactions with environments and child-centered learning experiences. Rating scales and curriculum checklists itemize materials and characteristics that should be present indoors and out, but what they are to look like and how they are to be arranged is unclear. Although this vagueness promotes flexibility and interpretation, it also allows commercial institutional uniformity to define what is “good” for children (Beatty, 1995). Yet the early childhood community and the culture at large do not often question the value of particular design norms and the educational stance they represent.

Although DAP guidelines do address the trend toward the “narrowing of the curriculum scope” and the constraints of teaching to ever-increasing academic standards, they stop short of proposing or advocating for possible environmental counterbalances to these restrictions (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The reality is that the environments we provide for children are within our control, while some policy constraints such as adhering to standards or a specific curriculum are not. Notwithstanding these policies, teachers can develop a strong philosophical stance toward environmental design for young children that accommodates policy constraints while at the same time providing a space for learning that inspires. Given that the environment is to serve as a “teacher” and that children will learn from the spaces in which they spend

time (for better or for worse), then thinking carefully about the current state of prepared and spontaneous environments is an important endeavor (Gandini, 1998). If, as some espouse, childhood is the time when individuals begin to see and use the environment imaginatively, environments should inspire children to do just that.

NEW NOTIONS OF ENVIRONMENTS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

The notion of environments for young children is broadened to include multiple contexts for learning and growth. As such this book is organized into three parts that address a span of conceptualizations of environments for young children. Part I (Chapters 1–3) provides historical background and addresses aesthetics, politics, and space configurations in school environments for young children. Chapters 4–6 in Part II take up outdoor play spaces, beginning again with a historical overview moving to intentionally designed outdoor play-scapes, children’s gardens, and improvisational play venues. Part III (Chapters 7–9) considers the role of environments outside school, including informal learning environments that promote science knowledge, museum spaces, and virtual environments.

Those contributing to this book have noted ways in which children respond to the environments around them, and the contributors share a common critical stance related to the impact of spaces for children. The authors in this book also share a practice-based focus as well as a researcher lens. They substantiate their writing with examples from practice, lessons learned, and illustrations and photographs of key aspects of the environments they discuss. They bridge the practitioner–researcher divide and draw upon their diverse backgrounds in and out of the “schoolhouse.” Many of the authors have grounded their work in a particular theoretical perspective. The purpose here is not to project one theory, but to put theories to work as guides for practice or the practice of others. Each chapter includes implications for practice and discussion questions related to the topic to assist readers in adopting an active stance toward building a new notion of environments for young children.

In my Conclusion, I ask readers to think about the environments in which they do their best learning. This question is for teachers and administrators looking to make changes in their schools, students who may be using this book in a class, or professors assigning chapters as part of a class. In higher academia, we do not often follow environmental guidelines for maximizing learning with our own students, nor do schools take these into consideration when designing professional development for teachers. Tools for educators are presented so that those using this book have some ways to shape the learning