

REVIEW

written by

Assoc. Prof. Lora Ilieva Spiridonova, PhD

ABOUT DISSERTATION FOR AWARDING OF EDUCATIONAL AND
SCIENTIFIC DEGREE "DOCTOR"

PROFESSIONAL FIELD:

1.2. PEDAGOGY (PRESCHOOL PEDAGOGY - INTERCULTURAL
EDUCATION)

TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION:

**“LEARNING SPACE AS A FACTOR OF CHILDREN’S INTERACTION
AND COMMUNICATION IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS”**

Author of the dissertation: Polyxeni Bougioukli

Supervisor: Prof. Ekaterina Nedelcheva Sofronieva, PhD

FESA, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Biographical presentation of the candidate

Polixeni Bougioukli successfully completed three master's programs, each directly or indirectly related to the doctoral program for which she has developed her dissertation— "Special Education" (2013), "Lifelong Learning and Adult Education" (2013), and "Intercultural Education" (2011).

The PhD student successfully integrated the acquired qualifications into her work as a teacher in the direction of its primary responsibilities, namely providing individualized support to children with special educational needs and creating individualized educational programs to improve student's academic achievements, as well as collaborating with parents, teachers, and other specialists to ensure the holistic development of children.

Compliance of the procedure with the current regulations, author’s summary, and publications

The presented reference shows a sufficient number of publications, which are on the topic of the dissertation. The author’s summary of the dissertation follows the structure and the content of the dissertation. The procedure corresponds to the requirements of the Law of the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Law of Scientific

Degrees and Titles, as well as the Regulations for their implementation. There is no plagiarism in the work and there is no violation of intellectual property rights.

Relevance of the topic

The PhD student focuses her research on a relevant topic in modern preschool education. The importance of the learning space as a "third teacher", along with teachers and parents, is a concept widely advocated in alternative pedagogical approaches - Montessori, Reggio Emilia, etc., which finds a place in the theory and practice of modern preschool education. The substantiation of the importance of material space in multicultural groups is a perspective in scientific research with indisputable significance in intercultural education. The processes of transformation of the learning space, prepared by the teacher, into a meaningful environment for each child, based on his feeling of belonging and security, have relevant theoretical and practical dimensions in intercultural education at preschool age.

Structure and content of the dissertation

The dissertation is 242 pages long, of which 28 are for the bibliography and 21 are for annexes. The text incorporates 57 tables and 51 figures. The bibliography includes 454 titles in English and Greek.

In the first chapter, the PhD student brings out the importance of the learning space for the quality of the educational process. A theoretical analysis was made of concepts according to which the material aspects of the space have a direct impact on the social interaction between the children, i.e. they are visible in the social relations that unfold within its framework, which also affects the cognitive achievements of children. Another main point of view in the dissertation is the incompleteness of the learning space, which is perceived as a process of constant transformation and reconstruction. This leads to identifying two of its essential characteristics, namely openness and flexibility as basic prerequisites for the formation of innovative and creative thinking of children. The analysis continues with systematized theories leading to an understanding of the relationship between the learning space and the virtual learning environment as its aspect. Special attention is paid to the specialized areas/centers, which support the formation of children's social skills and their sense of community. The PhD student advocates the thesis that the material space influences the behavior of the teacher and the children. The main prerequisites for an effective interaction between them are good organization, convenience, and the rich opportunities it provides for the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development of children. Specific requirements for the design of the learning space, such as the multifunctionality of the zones, safety, etc. are highlighted.

From this more general basis, the PhD student directs the analysis to the specific characteristics of the effective preschool learning space as a result of cooperation between pedagogues and architects in creating a stimulating environment for children, according to their age and individual characteristics. The systematized basic requirements for its design are related to positive emotions, supporting active learning, and recognizing the value of each child in the group. The PhD student brings out the main indicators of an effective learning space in preschool age, namely children's engagement, concentration, focus on meaningful cognitive experiences, higher achievements, motivation, and critical thinking, considering it as an important factor for the child's well-being. The design of the material space in preschool educational institutions understood in the dissertation as a set of interior, exterior, and educational materials, is argued as a creative process with social, cultural, and political dimensions. The aesthetic layout and the optimal use of the walls as a space for a visual presentation of information relevant to the children are brought out as other main features of the design. This guarantees a balance between structure and freedom in the classroom. Other main highlights are opening the learning space to the community outside the educational institution, and providing opportunities for team plays, as well as for individual activities. The organization of such learning space requires a changing role of the teacher in modern preschool education. The point of view is that the material space influences the pedagogical interaction, and the main prerequisites for its effectiveness are to place the child in its center and to provide opportunities for cooperation and learning through experience.

In the second chapter, the specificity of intercultural education in preschool age is characterized. Theories and research related to its main concepts - differences, stereotypes, and prejudices - have been examined and systematized through the perspective of the preschool age-specifics, and the importance of the intercultural approach in foreign language learning at this age has also been substantiated. Basic prerequisites for the formation and development of the intercultural competence of preschool children have been identified, including classroom organization, appropriate materials, plays in foreign languages, music, fairy tales, and stories in which cultural diversity is represented. The importance of recognizing the cultural identity of the children in the group, as well as the formation of teams of children with different cultural backgrounds, is emphasized. The theoretical analysis in this chapter continues with a description of the methods of pedagogical interaction in a multicultural learning environment, ensuring recognition of the culture of each child, an attitude of acceptance of cultural differences as enrichment, self-reflection of one's own cultural background, tolerance and respect for children's values and behavior. The second chapter also includes a theoretical

analysis of concepts of intercultural communication in the multicultural learning space with focus on intercultural sensitivity as an aspect of intercultural competence and on the learning space as an environment for its application.

In the third chapter, concepts of communication and interaction and their dimensions in education are systematized, which deepens the theoretical analysis made in the first and second chapters. Their specificity in preschool age is brought out in terms of their realization in two perspectives: child-teacher and child-child. Prerequisites for the optimal realization of these processes in the practice of intercultural preschool education are outlined, among which an essential role is assigned to the play.

The fourth chapter presents the research methodology. Specific, measurable, and relevant goals are formulated with the following directions:

1. Research and identification of the relationship between learning space and interaction and communication in the practice of preschool education.
2. Identification of teachers' views on the importance of the learning environment.
3. Research on learning space models in preschool education in Greece and their influence on interaction and communication.
4. Designing and testing learning spaces that develop and support interaction and communication between children in multicultural preschool classrooms.

Two main research questions are posed. On the one hand, they are related to the relationship between learning space and communication and interaction in the multicultural educational environment in Greece. On the other hand, they are related to teachers' opinions about the importance of learning space and the ways in which they use it.

Two hypotheses are formulated. According to the first, purposefully organized learning space has a positive effect on intercultural interaction and communication in the practice of preschool education. The second hypothesis suggests the teachers' awareness of the importance of the learning space.

The research was conducted with 109 children aged 5-6 years in five multicultural classrooms, as well as with 47 teachers.

The main research methods are a survey and non-participant observation according to a pre-prepared protocol with derived indicators for observation before and after the experiment.

The experiment includes integration of the author's models of a learning space in multicultural educational institutions in Greece, in which cultural artifacts are included, as well as other elements brought out in the theoretical part of the dissertation as significant, and

observation of communication and interaction between children within the framework of three weeks before and three weeks after its implementation.

The fifth chapter presents the results of the experiment, which confirm the positive influence of the author's models for the organization of the learning space in a multicultural environment. The obtained results were processed with SPSS 26 and their quantitative and qualitative analysis was made.

The results from the survey with the teachers were analyzed in detail according to the following criteria with indicators derived from them: 1. demographic characteristics; 2. use of space; 3. convenience; 4. organization of space; 5. emotional and physical safety and well-being; 6. technological security; 7. overall satisfaction with the space.

The conclusions reflect the achievements of the thesis and are set out in a separate, *sixth chapter*. They are supported by the results of the survey with the teachers.

I accept the formulated **contributions** as achieved with a focus on:

- analyzing and systematizing concepts and research findings and bringing out the relationship between the quality of the learning space in preschool age and the interaction in a multicultural environment, which emphasizes its importance in a theoretical aspect;
- the development and testing of effective models of multicultural learning space in preschool age in a practical aspect;
- the development of a system of research tools, integrating survey and observation, in an experimental aspect.

In conclusion, my assessment of the dissertation is positive and I suggest with conviction to the scientific jury awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in Professional Field 1.2 Pedagogy (Preschool Pedagogy - Intercultural Education) to Polyxeni Bougioukli.

Date: 23.11.2024

Sofia

Reviewer:

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