Kindergarten as a Space that Promotes Multilingualism

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Abstract In this paper, we analyse the kindergarten as a space that promotes children's multilingualism. We define space as a set of conditions that influence children's learning through the physical and psychosocial environment, and the design of space as an essential element that influences the interaction between individuals in a given space. As kindergarten is a culture-creating space, educators should think about the design of the space before actually designing it, as it can influence the development of community and positive identities and contribute to children's learning achievements. We live in a multicultural society where two or more languages are used naturally by up to three-quarters of humanity. Therefore, multilingualism and language pluralism are valuable resources that need to be preserved. Multilingualism in the system can be achieved in different ways. This article focuses on play corners, books, singing, ICT technology, and free play.

Vrtec kot prostor, ki spodbuja večjezičnost

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Sinopsis V prispevku analiziramo vrtec kot prostor, ki spodbuja večjezičnost otrok. Prostor opredelimo kot skupino pogojev, ki preko fizičnega in psihosocialnega okolja vpliva na učenje otrok, oblikovanje prostora pa kot pomemben element, ki vpliva na interakcijo med posamezniki v določenem prostoru. Ker je vrtec prostor, ki ustvarja kulturo, je pomembno, da vzgojitelji pred pripravo prostora razmislijo o načrtovanju le tega, saj lahko to vpliva na otrokov razvoj skupnosti, pozitivne identitete ter uspešno učenje. Živimo v večkulturni družbi, v kateri je uporaba dveh ali več jezikov naraven način življenja za kar tri četrtine človeštva, zato večjezičnost in jezikovni pluralizem predstavljata dragocen vir, ki ga je potrebno ohraniti. Večjezičnost v vzgojno izobraževalnem sistemu lahko dosežemo na več načinov, v prispevku pa smo se posvetili igralnim kotičkom, knjigam, petju, IKT tehnologiji ter prosti igri.

1   Introduction

When we think of space, we first think of something surrounding us; however, space has a much broader meaning. It represents a group of conditions and influences on learning, including the physical (layout, extent of resources, access and use) and psychosocial environment (interactions between educators and children, between children and the wider environment - home and community) (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018). The configuration and conceptualisation of space enables, facilitates, or hinders interaction between individuals in a particular space (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Nowadays, many societies are multicultural, which leads to a need for intercultural competence, i.e., a set of relationships that enable us to adopt appropriate and effective behaviour in a given context that helps us live in a multicultural world. Culture is linked to language, and if we want to make multiculturalism intercultural, it is essential to develop respect and acceptance towards other cultures and languages from an early age (Baloh, 2018).

2   Kindergarten as a space of culture

Malaguzzi sees the kindergarten as a space that expresses and creates culture, as a living organism, a structure in motion that is constantly adapting, and as a space that is open to the environment and surroundings. The kindergarten is permeated with culture; it is a laboratory of culture, a space of communication between children, educators, and parents. It is a system of relationships and communication embedded in the broader social system (Devjak, Berčnik & Plestenjak, 2008). The kindergarten can thus be understood as a social and cultural scene of children, educators, and parents with different plans, goals, views, and desires. It is also a social, cultural, historical, and political space with different practices that create discursive conditions for development and learning (Pesch, 2021). Children and adults shape space through personal interpretations and shared views of the kindergarten as a physical and cultural space. Kindergarten spaces are shaped by relationships beyond the context of the here and now. They relate to the social networks from which we learn; they are rooted in social relationships and the structures of our lives, which include power structures, individual choices, and the interdependence and interconnectedness of the actors involved. Each child, educator, and parent builds a kindergarten space based on their position in society, with the knowledge and interpretations they have adopted in their social networks. The kindergarten is thus a space where cultural ideologies intermingle (Vuorisalo, Raittila & Rutanen, 2018).

From kindergarten, life spreads into families and the city. In kindergarten, there is a lively exchange of ideas in a friendly environment where everyone feels at home (Devjak, Berčnik, Plestenjak, 2008). Thus, the integration of the kindergarten into the larger social space enables the co-creation of culture and influences children's attitudes towards the reality of life, which in turn influences the creation of new educational content and practices through children's participation (Devjak, Berčnik, & Ivančič Fajfar, 2011).

From the children's point of view, space is what they can make of it, so the space we give them is even more critical. The kindergarten curriculum (1999) highlights space as an essential element of the curriculum, where the right to choice, privacy, intimacy, flexibility, and stimulation must be guaranteed. For educators, such planning of pedagogical work, activities, and even space is vital as it can influence community development, positive identities, and children's learning (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Educators should include in their reflections and operational planning a reflection on the design of the child's living space and the toys and materials offered to the children (Kroflič, 2005). In the Reggio Emilia approach, the child is a being who comes from a particular cultural environment, has rights of his own, and is ready to explore and communicate in order to develop dispositions in a social, cultural, and societal context. At the same time, the child is involved in all stages of his learning (planning, development, evaluation) by exploring his interests, knowledge, various activities, and experiences with the help of the educators (and also the parents). (Devjak, Berčnik & Plestenjak, 2008). Children feel comfortable in spaces that match their interests and developmental stages. The space should be pleasant, authentic, aesthetically pleasing, and culturally representative; it should incorporate nature and be filled with appropriate materials. The space structure encourages relationships, communication, collaboration, and playful exploration. Materials to promote creativity, thinking and problem-solving skills, questioning, experimentation, and open-ended play are added judiciously (Reggio Emilia, 2015).

The Reggio Emilia approach considers space the third educator and assigns a crucial role to the physical environment in the learning and teaching process. It is space that influences interactions between individuals and interactions with the environment. Children in kindergarten interact with people and materials every day. Therefore, the space must be aesthetically rich and full of materials that encourage children to express themselves differently. The importance of space and environment is also highlighted by Brofenbrenner (1999), who sees the environment as a reciprocal

object. According to him, the environment and space influence the child and vice versa. When Brofenbrenner's bioecological theory is combined with sociocultural theories, emphasizing that individuals build their knowledge through participation and interaction in different social environments, the impact of the environment on language development is evident. Different conditions in different language learning environments influence children's everyday lives in kindergarten (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Smagorinski, 2011). Thus, the external environment enables children to experience phenomena that contribute to their meaning (Anggård, 2012). During play activities in kindergarten, children use their experiences to attribute meaning to social interactions with peers and adults (Vygotsky, 1986). It is this constant interaction that fosters development. In the kindergarten context, the space must be enclosed.

3   Multilingualism

Modern research shows that the worldwide spread of multilingualism is a natural process due to fundamental changes in economics, politics, culture, and education. A focused, systematic understanding of the phenomenon of multilingual education has only begun relatively recently when it comes to finding effective methods for teaching foreign languages. Researchers' efforts have primarily focused on the issue of bilingual education (learning the mother tongue and the foreign language) as the most common form of multilingual education. Processes related to third and further language development are the least explored and have only recently been investigated - in the context of the European Commission's plans to legalise trilingual education (King, 2018). Nevertheless, although using two or more languages is a natural way of life for three-quarters of humanity, multilingualism still amazes some people. Those who have spent their lives in a monolingual environment find it hard to imagine how people who speak more than one language live and often think of multilingual people as exceptions rather than something commonplace. Although there are no accurate official statistical data, we can state that 6000 languages in less than 200 countries worldwide reflect a great diversity of languages (Council of Europe, 2001). This diversity leads to multilingualism, which is partially addressed in this paper. In dealing with the concept of multilingualism, attention must also be drawn to the interpretation of the term itself and its frequent equation with plurilingualism. Individual plurilingualism is to be distinguished from multilingualism, because plurilingualism is not only the sum of the greatest possible linguistic abilities in individual foreign languages, but a comprehensive linguistic

repertoire of the individual, which also consists of the smallest linguistic fragments of individual languages. Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which stands for the knowledge of several languages or the coexistence of different languages in society. Thus, plurilingualism represents a communicative competence to which all language skills and experiences contribute, and, in which languages are interrelated and interact with each other (Council of Europe, 2001).

Multilingualism is mentioned as an essential principle in several European documents. The Maastricht Treaty considers multilingualism and linguistic diversity valuable resources to preserve. Every citizen must learn two languages of the European Community in addition to his or her mother tongue - English as a lingua franca and one other language (Council of Europe, 2001). The preamble to R (98) 6 reaffirms the Council's policy objectives for cultural cooperation in the field of modern languages. It states that, to this end, sustained, lifelong efforts must be promoted and an organisational basis and funding established at all levels of education (ibid.). Multilingualism as a critical competence is also mentioned in the Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. This competence has a historical dimension that includes intercultural competencies, maintaining and developing competencies for the use of the mother tongue, and acquiring knowledge of the country's official language(s). A positive attitude that includes respect for cognitive diversity, interest, and curiosity in different languages and intercultural communication is essential for the development of the above competence (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019). In a multilingual and multicultural Europe, both multilingualism and plurilingualism must be considered when designing curricula (Council of Europe, 2001). The White Paper on Education in Slovenia (2011) also states that multilingualism is one of the principles of modern society and the basis for tolerance between language communities and nations. At the same time, it is the surest way to achieve interculturality.

4   Space as an element of multilingualism promotion

Multilingualism in the education system can be achieved in different ways, which is done by "increasing the number of languages available in a school or education system, or by encouraging pupils to learn more than one foreign language, or by reducing the dominance of English in international communication" (Council of Europe, 2001). The White Paper on Education in Slovenia (2011) points out that

schools should offer the broadest possible range of language teaching, including intercultural and multilingual awareness, and should also include languages that are not part of the curriculum but are nevertheless present in the environment, such as pupils' first language. The facts mentioned above lead to broader knowledge and awareness of languages and a higher linguistic and intercultural awareness. With multilingual children, there is also a phenomenon called translanguaging. However, this concept is mainly associated with multilingualism and linguistically diverse societies in modern society. There is an increasing tendency to define language and learn different languages broadly and loosen the boundaries between them. For this reason, the English term "pedagogical translanguaging practices" has emerged to refer to pedagogical practices within multilingualism, including the promotion of multilingual awareness, the integration of a comprehensive language repertoire, an integrated language curriculum, and translation shifts. With these pedagogical practices, we promote a response to communication and other needs within the group. However, they also need to be constantly evaluated to provide for their effectiveness (Cezon & Gorter, 2021).

There is no universal answer to what a kindergarten space for promoting multilingualism should look like. There are many spaces where children develop their stories; they can be natural or virtual. In order to perceive the space, we must first learn to listen: to listen to ourselves, to listen to the interlocutors, and, last but not least, to listen to what the space is telling us, what resources it contains, and so on. (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 65). Listening is a sensitivity to patterns that connect us to others; the awareness/belief that our understanding and existence is only a tiny part of the more comprehensive, integrated (networked) knowledge that unites the universe. Listening involves the educator, a group of children, and an individual child, i.e., all listening to themselves and others, shifting from teaching to learning. However, the educator's task is to allow the children diversity of expression, both a diversity between them and diversity in the linguistic field, which includes the transition from one language to another (Skubic, 2009). So what space should an educator who wants to promote multilingualism prepare and create?

Spaces and play corners have been shown to be crucial for preschool children's learning. In a Canadian study, preschoolers took on the role of co-researchers and photographed areas in the playroom that they believed helped them learn. The photos were used to stimulate discussions in small focus groups. The children talked about the room and the individual play corners as essential areas that help them

learn. They also said that they could talk to other children while playing in the different corners and that they had the opportunity to share their work with the whole group (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018).

In terms of language, books were crucial in 131 kindergarten groups or classes in the three Nordic countries - Sweden, Norway, and Finland (Hofslundsengen et al., 2020). Multilingual children were represented in 82 % of the groups. The results show that children's books are widely available and accessible in all three countries. Half of the kindergartens had a writing centre, and digital devices were available in less than half of the kindergarten groups. Texts and books in the first languages of multilingual children were rare. The results show that children's books were the main access point to literacy in these kindergartens, while literacy artefacts and digital devices were less common. The findings suggest that the physical environment in these kindergartens does not reflect ongoing societal changes towards increasing multimodal literacy. From the above research, we can conclude that books in different languages are an important part of the spatial design in kindergarten. For the language development of multilingual children, it would be necessary to have books in the kindergarten in the children's first language and, of course, in all other languages, including the official language(s) of the country where the kindergarten is located. In addition to the books, the kindergarten teacher can help create a space that promotes and values multilingualism through her work and attitude. Brook Chapman de Sousa (2017) states in a study that teachers and educators promote multilingualism through joint productive activities that respond to children's actions and words and promote different language resources in both the mother tongue and the new language.

In the arts realm, music is particularly exposed, especially singing. Kultti (2013), in a qualitative study observing practice videos in kindergarten groups, found that singing has a significant impact on the development of language skills in multilingual kindergarten groups. Singing activities provide children with various communication resources such as song lyrics, gestures, rhythm, artefacts, and opportunities for repetition of activities. It can be concluded that the multilingual kindergarten room should contain a music corner that includes: Books with songs in different languages, drums and other instruments suitable for the age of children, music players; the corner can also be equipped with different things for the children to sing.

Moreover, we should not neglect ICT technology in modern society. Ljunggren (2016) conducted a study to determine the importance of modern technology and parental engagement on children's language development in a multilingual kindergarten group. In the study sizeable coloured animal posters and special ICT pens were used, with which the children touched these posters. In this way, the children used modern technology to prompt the language in a pen that contained a linguistically recorded description of the animal in different languages. The children's parents or older siblings provided the description of the animals in their mother tongue. In this way, the kindergarten children received descriptions of the animals in different languages contributed by native speakers. This example shows the possibility of using ICT technology for educational purposes in a playful manner. It also highlights the need to introduce and promote ICT technology in kindergartens for these purposes. Therefore, the kindergarten that promotes multilingualism should be adequately equipped with ICT. McGlynn-Steward and co-authors (2019) also refer to the practical use of ICT to promote language learning in a multilingual kindergarten. In kindergarten and at home, the children used an application that included bilingual picture books whose content supported social, emotional, and linguistic components. In this way, children, educators, and parents were involved in the activity. The researchers made observations in the playrooms and conducted interviews with the parents. They found that children had more opportunities to practise and strengthen their social, cognitive, emotional, and multilingual skills while improving home-school relationships. Last but not least, we also explored free play as an element to promote multilingualism in kindergarten. S. Fraser and P. Wakefield (1986) examine the relationship between free play and language in multilingual and multicultural kindergartens and indicate what strategies are needed to promote second language development through play. Children who are slower in their language development are often pushed aside and isolated during play. They point out that educators should pay special attention to structure children's play well, even free play. At the same time, they should not dominate it. Research has shown that children lag in social play and talking in some cases and do not participate as actively when the educator is frequently involved in the play. From this critical information, we can conclude that the kindergarten room that promotes language development and multilingualism is a room that also promotes free play. Therefore, the room should have corners with different sets where free play can occur, perhaps even with a slightly distant separate corner for the kindergarten teacher and her work. Bjoerk-Willén (2007) also found in a study how important free play is for language acquisition, especially how children who speak another language in a

kindergarten play with their peers. She found how the children used a range of verbal and non-verbal resources in the play activities. Of particular interest is the children's coordination of non-verbal actions, discussing how these complex actions are used to achieve and sustain participation in the play with peers. The analysis highlights two interactional phenomena of interest to our understanding of children's behaviour. Shading refers to the carefully coordinated execution of an action that mimics a previous natural movement by another participant. Crossing refers to a particular case of language exchange in which participants adapt to and benefit from their interlocutors' linguistic and ethnic background and promotes cooperation between children whose first language is different. In doing so, it is important to offer the children as diverse toys and equipment as possible to identify with them and use them in play and non-verbal expression.

Although a well-equipped, designed, and furnished space is essential for children's development in virtually all areas, fostering a social environment for multilingualism and interculturality is even more important (Straszer, 2017). Therefore, the design and arrangement of the space in the kindergarten should always consider the social interactions that take place in that space. Educators can do this by designing the space itself, approaches and activities.

5   Conclusion

In Slovenia, there are some professional discussions, master's theses and professional consultations, which are focused on bilingualism, multilingualism and interculturalism in schools, but additional attention should be paid to multilingualism and interculturalism in kindergartens. We have not found any research that would link multilingualism and/or interculturality and space in kindergartens in Slovenia. We perceive a significant shortcoming in this area, which is why the present paper represents its value and an important step towards more concrete attention and scientific research in this field. Especially because research shows how important the introduction of foreign languages in kindergartens and learning additional languages at an early stage (Pižorn, 2009).

In addition, there are more and more immigrant children in Slovenian kindergartens and more and more children who speak at least one foreign language in addition to their mother tongue. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SiStat, b.d.), in the 2020/2021 school year there were as many as 5,631 children,

foreign nationals, attending kindergarten. Compared to the school year 2016/17, when there were only 3637. The data therefore shows the need to strengthen both language and cultural competencies of children in the preschool period.

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