

Creation of Ecological Environment in Kindergartens in China

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Abstract

For kindergartens, ecological environment provides an inclusive space and plays an important role in the development of young children. Chen Heqin was a prominent Chinese educator who proposed the creation of aesthetic environment, scientific environment and psychological environment in kindergartens and laid scientific groundwork for the creation of ecological environment in kindergartens in China. For kindergartens, ecological environmental education should enable young children to achieve natural, social, and psychological harmony and unity. The creation of ecological environment in kindergartens should therefore involve the creation of natural ecological environment, of social ecological environment and of psychological ecological environment.

Key words: Kindergarten; Ecological environment; Chen Heqin

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INTRODUCTION

The environment is the third teacher of young children. As a hidden curriculum, it exerts an imperceptible but irreplaceable influence on children’s intelligence and personality development. In order to illustrate the effects of the environment on people, ancient Chinese educator Xunzi said, “Fleabane grows straight among cannabis; white sand grows black among graphite.” Using silk as an example, Mozi also said, “Silk gets green when dyed with a green pigment and turns yellow when dyed with a yellow pigment. We must be careful when we dye silk.” It can be seen that Mozi emphasized the role of the environment in human development. In Western education, how the environment shapes human development is also a major issue for educators. The famous Italian early childhood educator Maria Montessori said, “The environment plays a crucial role in education as children absorb everything from the environment into their lives.” (Li, 1999, p.16). John Dewey believed that schools should prepare a proper environment for students to learn by doing. In fact, the environment is an animate factor that changes what young children have on the mind and affects how they feel and behave. It is therefore possible that young children make a difference in the environment and even create a positive environment for their own development through their own activities. To understand this point is vital to grasp the role of the kindergarten environment and create a good environment. (Yuan, 2010, pp.7-8)

1. MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT IN KINDERGARTENS

The ecological environment in kindergartens is an environmental system made up of various ecological

relationships that influence the development of young children. It is the sum of the natural environment, social environment and psychological environment in kindergartens. It involves not only young children's real living environment but their subjectivity and personality development. It reflects the harmony of children with nature and society at the same time. In a sense, ecological environment in kindergartens is an integrated structural system where each part of the kindergarten is indispensable and connected to one another and an inclusive space where each element of the kindergarten statically and dynamically alternates and internally and externally complements one another. The ecological environment in kindergartens includes outdoor areas like the functional area, activity area, leisure area, planting and breeding area and playground, and indoor areas like classrooms, corridors and the living area. It is a combination of education, play, exercise, discovery, exploration, leisure, and aesthetics. The ecological environment in kindergartens includes the material environment like the green area, activity area, corridors, living area, etc., and the spiritual environment like school culture and theme activities. The all-around ecological environmental creation is necessary to help young children know about the ecological environment, establish correct awareness of the ecological environment, develop good ecological habits, and achieve physical and psychological health.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS OF CREATION OF ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT IN KINDERGARTENS

Chen Heqin was a prominent Chinese educator with fruitful results in child psychology and early childhood education. He said that the kindergarten curriculum should be a systematic fusion of different subjects. He called for the use of nature and society as living materials and the combination of book learning with direct experience. The concept of living education offers rich inspiration for the creation of ecological environment in kindergartens as follows:

2.1 Creation of Aesthetic Environment in Kindergartens

According to Chen, it is a child's nature to love beautiful things and it is feasible to cultivate a child's temperament with beautiful things. In the creation of indoor environment, educational wall charts, pictures, and story paintings should be placed to make children comfortable and receive good aesthetic education. In the creation of outdoor environment, there should be many lawns and gardens planted with all kinds of vegetables, bright flowers and evergreen trees, so that children can enjoy the beauties of nature physically and mentally.

2.2 Creation of Scientific Environment in Kindergartens

Chen believed that kindergartens should create a scientific environment that helps children's physical and mental development. The scientific environment should enable children to interact with nature and society during play, artistic activity, and reading. Teachers should allow children to perceive and learn things with their hands and senses by growing plants, arranging gardens, watering, sowing, weeding, and feeding animals. In addition, Chen advocated the five-finger activities: children's health activity, children's social activity, children's art activity, children's literary activity, and children's scientific activity. The five activities are like the five fingers of the hand that are connected to one another and that work together to boost the growth and development of young children.

2.3 Creation of Psychological Environment in Kindergartens

Chen also believed that a young child's growth was closely related to the environment. The environment includes the natural environment and the artificial environment of which the latter plays a big role. In the long-term observation and practice, Chen summed up seven psychological tendencies of children – to play, imitation, novelty, success, wild life, group, and praise. It is therefore essential that kindergartens create a relaxed and pleasant psychological environment. At the same time, teachers should be very careful with their words and deeds, including their look, expression, attitude, language, and behavior in order not to harm the psychological development of young children. Chen's living education is an educational concept with Chinese characteristics that embodies absorption, transformation, and innovation and that still inspires and guides today's preschool education reform.

3. APPROACHES TO CREATION OF ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT IN KINDERGARTENS

Ecological environmental education should enable young children to achieve natural, social, and psychological harmony and unity. The creation of ecological environment in kindergartens should therefore involve the creation of natural ecological environment, of social ecological environment and of psychological ecological environment.

3.1 Natural Ecological Environment in Kindergartens

The natural ecological environment in kindergartens is the sum of all naturally occurring substances and energies that have direct or indirect effects on the life and development of young children. As a structural and functional complex

of biological factors, spaces, and surroundings in nature, natural ecological environment in kindergartens typically includes green plants, water resources ecosystem, and wetlands ecosystem.¹ The creation of natural ecological environment provides close access to nature for young children to discover, explore, and learn in the real natural environment. It leads young children to admire the beauties of nature, observe the natural environment, find the relation of the environment to human survival, and see the world with their own eyes. It allows young children to perceive the richness of human life, inspire them to explore nature, and teaches them to care for the environment. For example, kindergartens can open up walkable lawns and set up static and dynamic green corners for each class. In the green corners kindergartens can put fruits and vegetables for children to know what they look like. To create a sense of novelty, kindergartens can make fruits and vegetables into dolls and toys, such as radish boats, cucumber swings, and potato hedgehogs, which can enhance children's hands-on skills and enrich their knowledge. The design of green corners can also be updated according to the change of seasons and children's interests as long as it can excite children's love for nature. The creation of natural ecological environment contributes to a natural and harmonious atmosphere that brings happiness to young children and cultivates their love for nature.

3.2 Social Ecological Environment in Kindergartens

The basic idea of social ecological environment is that society is an ecological system of which each element or component is an individual subsystem and that to maintain the balanced and stable development of the ecological system and its subsystems we must pay attention to the environment where these subsystems are.² The social ecological environment in kindergartens is an environmental system composed of political, economic, cultural and management subsystems in the kindergarten environment. The balanced and stable development of these subsystems is the prerequisite for a good social ecological environment that will be conducive to the socialization of young children. In fact, kindergartens can promote young children's intelligence and ability by imparting social norms and cultivating social roles. A good social ecological environment also facilitates young children's overall development as individuals, helping them foster skills in self-cognition, emotional management, interpersonal communication, and social adaptation. The creation of social ecological environment in kindergartens must focus on children's acquisition

of knowledge and skills as well as their development in physical, emotional, social, artistic, and aesthetical terms. Starting from children's life experience, teachers should instill into children basic knowledge, not obscure concepts. For example, teachers may highlight outreach activities during the creation of social ecological environment, guiding children to understanding the surrounding environment, to loving the country, the school, peers, and teachers, to knowing about themselves, and to learning to care for, help, respect, and sympathize with others from a young age. (Peng, 2007, pp.73-75)

3.3 Psychological Ecological Environment in Kindergartens

The psychological environment refers to the environmental facts in the human brain that affect all human activities, that is, the environment that has actual effects on human psychological events. The psychological ecological environment in kindergartens is the environment that can have actual effects on children's psychological events, including the tangible activity space, the familiar and warm communication space, and the comfortable and cozy living space. In the process of exploring and growing up, young children may have some psychological problems, but educators often look for causes from children themselves or external stimuli. To solve young children's psychological problems, educators must not focus on children alone as psychological problems not only come from children but also reflect imbalances in the psychological ecosystem. A healthy ecological environment in kindergartens, such as the school's material environment, teacher-student relationship, student-student relationship, harmonious dynamic environment and other factors, will have an impact on young children's psychological quality development. In the creation of psychological environment in kindergartens, it is necessary to provide young children with positive language and education methods and perform education through lively activities, like games, operations, and observation, to create a good psychological ecological environment in kindergartens. In this way, young children can fully grasp the relationship between people and the environment, absorb spiritual nutrition, and receive profound education. To this end, local rich environmental resources can also be utilized for education. (Wu, 1999, p.29) As an example, Changyi Weizi Kindergarten in Weifang, Shandong organizes the "I love the Home of Kites: Interactive Making and Flying" series every year. While children enjoy the fun of making and flying kites with the help of their parents, there is enlarged participation of parents, reinforced parent-child relations, and increased kindergarten-parent interaction.

¹ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/983113.htm>.

² <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/7674626.html>, May 24, 2006

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the creation of ecological environment in kindergartens involves not only imparting basic ecological environmental knowledge but also cultivating awareness of the surrounding environment and love of the ecological environment, so as to help young children develop moral habits of protecting the ecological environment and achieve natural, social, and psychological harmony and unity.

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