



This paper is taken from

*Innovative Practice and Research Trends in Identity, Citizenship and Education*  
*Selected papers from the sixteenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2014

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,  
ISBN 978-1-907675-21-8**

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Nowicka, M. & Śliwa, M. (2014) 'Nursery space in shaping the identity of a child: a comparative ethnographic study', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Innovative Practice and Research Trends in Identity, Citizenship and Education*. London: CiCe, pp. 155 – 166.

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## **Nursery space in shaping the identity of a child: a comparative ethnographic study**

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### **Abstract**

*The physical space of a nursery is a very important element in shaping the child's identity. The social functioning of children is being shaped directly by the type and origin of the elements present in kindergarten space, their arrangement, diversity and availability. Pedagogical research on this topic remains scant, especially when it comes to pre-school stage. Background of the research presented in the text refers to the theoretical perspective of the pedagogy of space, which emphasizes the role of the dialectical relationship between man and space in the formation of individual identity and the development of social relations. The analyses also refer to Foucauldian theory of power discourse regarding the arrangement of the interior of the educational institutions. The method of visual ethnography and photographic documentation techniques supported by interviews with teachers of kindergarten were used in the study. The study included 9 kindergartens from Poland, Lithuania and the UK. The basic conclusion that emerges from the analysis of the accumulated body of research indicates that the spatial arrangement of kindergartens in post-communist countries induces/predisposes to the development of mirror identity operating efficiently under authoritarian rule. This kind of the interior arrangement reflects the conservative tendency to subordinate children and persistently correct their imperfections. Such a situation equals cultural look back, not forward – toward preparing children for a conscious and creative participation in society. Space of English nurseries promotes children's autonomy and self-determination. It seems beneficial to adopt selected solutions from the kindergartens in the West by Polish and Lithuanian ones.*

**Keywords:** *identity of a child, physical space of nursery, pedagogy of space, visual ethnography*

### **Introduction**

The place of education of a small child, the physical environment in which the child stays, is very important for development. The type and origin of elements present in the space of the kindergarten, their layout, availability, directly determine/shape the social functioning of children. Pedagogical research in this field is scarce, particularly as regards the pre-school stage. Therefore, we have made an attempt to explore this issue.

### **Pedagogy of place and development of child identity**

The Polish precursor of the idea concerning the pedagogical role of the place in which educational processes are run is Maria Mendel. She created a category of 'pedagogy of

place', emphasising the educational importance of the physical environment conditions. She underlined that

place is always meaningful, since 'everything' has its place. Events are held in some places, senses through which we understand the reality, and ourselves within it, are set in some places, with more or less clear, but always a present sense of relationship with a place (Mendel, 2006, p. 21)

Places cannot exist without the meaning given to them by people, but at the same time, people cannot exist without places. Various relations are formed between those components (Mendel, 2006, p. 32). Each place makes it an important space for humans, affecting their activity. Both adults and children behave differently at home and differently in various places outside. The understanding of the place is subjective, since this is what individual people take it for; one place can have many meanings (Męczkowska, 2006, p. 29).

The place also plays a self-creative role in the life of each entity. Through a place, the human being creates his own identity (Męczkowska, 2006, p.39). Mendel claims that everybody

becomes themselves with the educational 'support' of the place (...), since their being dwells in it, it is made possible through it. Educational interaction, deliberately and intentionally mediated through the place which by an attempt of the educator has been properly formed or - left unchanged - simply 'played' as educating, is the use of this interrelation (Mendel, 2006, p. 27).

For Męczkowska (2006) the notions of *place* and *space* are interchangeable, with the importance of a place for constructing human identity noted. As she emphasised 'a place, as a space for experiencing the world, makes a meaningful space for the processes of constructing the identity of entities' (Męczkowska, 2006, p. 39). However, this is not a deterministic relation. This identity concerns mainly relations produced by humans in relation to space. Cultural transformation and the multitude of worlds of experiencing indicate that 'human identity is not produced as much in specific places, but rather than in relation to those places' (ibid).

And although man moves between different places, a larger part of the source place, primary in relation to others (for example, his homeland), always remains in him, which means that he identifies himself with this place and this place builds his identity (ibid, pp. 39-40).

The spatial and physical conditions of a kindergarten room determine what type of 'educating place' (Mendel, 2006, pp. 26, 28) the kindergarten will become. Signs present in its space make it possible or force specific behaviours of a child, providing the bases for the development of the foundations for the child's own identity.

While referring to the issue of identity, it is worth noting that nowadays, in the age of cultural changes caused by the 'postmodernist breakthrough in thinking' (Karkowska et al, 2010, p.29), the conditions of its development are redefined. In the 'liquid modernity'

(Bauman, 2006), former fundamental and clearly defined principles for constructing identity do not apply. It is not treated as the aim or the limit to be reached and it is not considered in terms of 'necessity, irreversibility and essence' (Melosik et al, 1998, p. 58). The identity of the contemporary person is a dynamic and changeable construct. Its character is negotiable and 'process-able'. Space and place play here a huge role, particularly since, following the track of Foucault's reflection (Foucault 1998a, p. 29), they are involved in the knowledge-authority discourse, inseparably combining mechanisms of cognition and coercion. This knowledge is not emerging without impact of various types, and it is always used for justification of the message sent by the authority. For Foucault, an entity is a 'susceptible body', which the authority disciplines and controls through produced knowledge and practices resulting from it (Foucault 1998b, p. 174).

### **Research method**

To examine the physical space of kindergartens in Poland, Lithuania and in England, we have applied a qualitative approach. In these three countries, theoretically speaking, the same kindergarten education model (preparation for school) is used (Sobotka, 2011, p. 17). The aim of the research was to examine the physical cultural environment of kindergartens and what behaviour sources are transmitted through this environment to children. The research was of a pedagogical nature, and interpretation of spatial elements was aimed at determining the conditions for the children's activity, for building their causation and autonomy, which are the bases for creating their own identity.

Treating elements of space as a product of culture, we directed our interests towards visual ethnography. This method offers the possibility of applying various paths of data collection. The research used photographic documentation obtained through a technique referred to in the literature as *participatory photography*, or more adequately, in our case, as *talking pictures* (Nowotniak, 2012, p. 86). The pictures were taken by the kindergarten teachers themselves, who implemented a general topic of the session entitled *Physical space of the kindergarten*. The research covered three kindergartens in Poland (in a large city), three in England (one in a large and two in a medium-sized city), and three kindergartens in Lithuania (in a large city). Additional data were gathered with the use of interviews carried out on the basis of photos (one for each country), during which kindergarten teachers characterized the spatial elements presented in the pictures.

### **Analysis of the kindergarten's space**

#### ***The general appearance***

##### *England*

#### Entrance and hall

It is used to encourage the entry to kindergarten, children are welcome here. In two kindergartens we can read on the door -'Welcome!' The teacher in one kindergarten every day stands and greets all incoming calls. In the lobby, there are also places where

parents can read the information for them. In one kindergarten there is a shelf for books about children, which parents can borrow. In the second kindergarten parents can attach their proposals regarding the classes or nursery decoration to a special tree.

### Room

Rooms of English kindergarten are very large, often made up of several rooms. They are wide open, glazed. It is impossible reach visually every place in the room from a general view, because it is divided into many corners, 'nooks and crannies', alleys, alcoves. The cabinets are arrayed in different directions, not at the walls, they often form narrow passages. Children can play in them without being seen by the teacher, may remain in seclusion. But there are also places where groups can play together. However, the tables do not stand evenly in rows. The hall, when you look at it vertically, is divided into two parts - the first is the level of children's activity. Shelves, equipment toys, space for hanging e.g. pictures on the wall are at the level of their vision and growth. Above, in the second part, different elements are prepared for children: tables, illustrations, information ornaments. There are also places for teachers and for parents. The general plan gives the impression of a multitude of equipment and components. The room is colourful and full of children's creations. There is no doubt that this space is dominated by children's activity. There is no central part such as carpeting and there is not clearly extracted and exposed space such as teacher's desk. The floor has a various texture, in places to work it is easy to keep the order, in the place for relaxation there are carpets and cushions.

The rooms are bright, well-lit, indoors is a lot of light. Glazing provides open space, accessibility for everyone. There are many elements hanging on the walls and it is difficult to determine which of them is most important.

### *Poland and Lithuania*

Analysis of the Polish and Lithuanian kindergarten's space showed that they are very similar. So here we present their join characteristics, without clear separation description of kindergartens in these countries.

### Entrance and hall

This is a visit card of both, Polish and Lithuanian, kindergartens. It is used primarily for the presentation and exposition of preschool activities. This is a typical place designed for parents. There are some beautiful illustrations and photos of various activities and events, the cutest children's work are hung on the walls. Often we can find objects of tradition there or cabinet with trophies and diplomas that kindergarten won for participating in various competitions, unique single toys for occasional use.

### Room

Halls, both in Polish and Lithuanian preschools are also large. There is one room for one age group of children. Rooms are usually with the large windows, they are bright. Despite the size, preschool hall can be grasped at a glance and all its parts are easily visible, regardless of the point of observation. Teacher can see every child as well as who and what is playing with. Rooms are rectangular in shape and clearly separate the

front and back associated with the division into two parts: relaxation- with carpeted floors and open children's play areas and educational - with tables and chairs and the teacher's desk. Lockers are arranged along the walls, the tables - straight in a row. One large carpet area is used for play and common activity, such as reading books with teacher. Its central placement does not provide intimacy.

There is always one main wall in the hall/room, usually the teacher's desk, audiovisual equipment, the most important information for children (illustrations of the alphabet, code of conduct, etc.) or expensive aids or toys are located close to it. Especially these toys are rarely used and the children have to ask the teacher for permission to use them. Doors clearly separate hall space from other rooms in the building. No one can unintentionally look from corridor into the hall, and when parents bring their child they usually stand in the doorway. General view of the hall leads to the conclusion that everything here is in the perfect order. Everything is arranged, organized, many elements of the décor just embellishes the room and we can see that this space is prepared by the teacher. There are beautiful drawings, charts and computer printouts visible on the walls. There is a very little evidence of child's work.



English kindergarten



Lithuanian kindergarten



Polish kindergarden

### *Elements of the space*

#### *England*

In the preschool room we can see a lot of elements located in cabinets, shelves, on the walls. These are teaching aids, toys, children's works and relatively little amount of toys which are ready to use, like playground themed kitchen, theatre, shop. Definitely the most of space is occupied by boxes, cases, trays, drawers, containers, bowls, cups, in which there are elements for processing by children. They show clearly that children are the creators here, that they work independently and can explore and observe. They can use all these elements, combine them, paint, press, soak, bury in sand, and wash in water. The pads, drawing materials, shapes cut out of paper, crayons are prepared (often directly sprinkled on the table) to await the children. Everything is immediately available, saying "Use me." Most importantly, these items are often changed.

As one of the teacher's said in an interview:

For example, coming into the room in the morning I had to prepare a place for children to work: to put some paper, glitter, cereal, pebbles in empty containers, to boil pasta and put it inside (...) It was necessary to insert the paper into the compartments. It had to be thin paper and thick cardboard and coloured one for children's choice. In addition to the containers it should have been some kind of a paper towel tube or box, because children like to tape and create some modules. I had to check that everything is in sufficient quantity, and if not, then I had to add something.

All elements in the corners allow for self-exploration and the children decide for themselves how to use them. As another teacher said:

Toys and utensils are located everywhere and there are within reach for children. (...) It is the children's decision what they want to do and what to play with.

The books are stored in coffers, compartments, there are permanent elements of nursery space accessible to children. The Corners, full of soft mattresses and pillows, allow easy viewing of books, or listening to them during the teacher's reading. An essential element in the space of each nursery, whose pictures we watched, was an array of markers, with direct access for children. An important element was also the house where the children can play in ensuring complete seclusion. Rooms in English kindergarten are very rich and varied. Moreover, by looking at the most of the elements it is not decisive whether a part is designed for girls or boys.

### Poland and Lithuania

Elements of equipment are very tidy in the Polish preschool room. The space is dominated by thematic areas (corners), in which objects have their clear, unambiguous purpose. A strong gender domination is also visible here, for example, the areas for girls are full of dolls and in the corners for boys there are a lots of cars. In two polish kindergartens and one Lithuanian children' had the small house/cabin they could play with. As said one of the Polish teachers:

All love to play with it and often quarrel about who might be there.

Some items, which had been placed too high and as such are not available for children. Similarly, the items are not destroyed which means that children do not have access to them. Permanent element of the room is a desk of preschool teacher. It's his/her personal space. Children have limited access to it, and it is a clear sign of the dominance of the teacher in the room. Private teacher's things, like a cup or bag, are on the desk. A pin board with notes, often lockable cabinet with teacher's stuff and a used kettle are close to it. Very often audiovisual equipment is also located here. Although it stands at a height of children, they are not free to approach and use it. It's actually owned by the teacher. In one of the photographed rooms the TV was locked in the cabinet inaccessible to children. In the nursery room children do not have personal belongings. In an interview, one of the teachers said that children can bring to the kindergarten their own toys only one day, on Friday.

In the hall, for six year olds, and often even for five year olds the layout of equipment is very similar to a classroom. This is evident both in the Polish and Lithuanian nurseries. The teacher's desk is located near the blackboard, which additionally increases her/his rank as a dominant person in dealing with children. Blackboard and what is written on it is the most important, more important than the toys that are located on the back of the room. All elements in the preschool room clearly underline the teaching authority. It can be seen who possess these elements, who is in charge, who is the most important. Perfect order, meticulous decoration of the walls indicate that here the important one is the teacher, who with his height provides, organizes, presents and allows child to do something.

Places are not prepared for children. Empty tables will be the site of action just in time marked by the teacher with the use of objects which she/he authorises. Elements of the space are among the teacher and she/he allows or not to use them. The child can't see



some elements, because the teacher hides them in cabinets, or in the back and brings when it deems appropriate. Despite the variety and colours of the Polish and Lithuanian kindergartens, nursery room is static, and game components can be considered as 'finished', already 'invented' to play with at certain framework.

### ***The social nature of space***

#### *England*

English nurseries are friendly to children and their space is a pro-social. Definitely it can be felt that the premises are subordinate to children. A homely atmosphere and small corners provide a sense of security. Children also have free access to any place in the room, they can move freely. They also have access to all the elements of space. In the space there is no sterile order. As in the workshop, everything has its place, but the layout of objects and furniture in the room is not pedantic. Depending on the needs, the children can play in small groups, in a secluded place, or individually. Thanks to divided crannies in the room the children do not have to interfere with each other. In many places, at the table, in the music corners or reading areas they have the opportunity to conduct individual talks with teacher or colleagues, without compromising on the observation of others. The corners for children's free play and movement are also provided. They can also relax on the soft, comfortable cushions. Pastel-coloured walls contribute to cheerful mood of the children.

#### *Poland and Lithuania*

The space in the Polish and Lithuanian nurseries belongs to the teachers and has anti-social character. Although it is seemingly colourful and filled with appliances for many children, it is clearly dominated by the teacher. A teacher has own personal space. Climate of the hall is stiffened, official, and everything has a designated place. It is underlined with the particular static system of placing the equipment in a room and the permanent arrangement of the tables. Children in this area are not able to retreat, shelter from view of others. One big rug in the middle of the room forces them to be in the community, constantly side by side with all the children in the group, with no rest or even partial isolation.

Children can't speak individually with the teacher without exposure to the observations of others. They can rarely play individually or in small groups. To take a break from their peers they have to look for another space-for example, the bathroom, where they will be alone, provided that the other children will not be using bathroom at the same time. Comfort of the child in the Polish and Lithuanian kindergartens interferes with the fact that children can't use freely all gathered toys. Many toys in kindergarten rooms are located too high, and the use of some of them is dependent on the consent of the teacher (expensive toys, new aids). The colours of the walls in Polish nurseries are pastel. However, in the Lithuanian one of the walls is pink, which gives it an artificial, infantile character.

### ***Autonomy and creativity***

*England*

Space and objects in kindergarten favour the formation of a child's autonomy. It is expressed primarily in the availability of all elements of the preschool room. A child, without asking the teacher for permission, can use any equipment, toys and space. Also, what is extremely important, children have the opportunity to make their own decisions about what they will deal with. There is no priority seating for the teacher, while the child in different locations can act autonomously without intrusive interference of a teacher. In one kindergarten a child has got the opportunity to choose cabinets, in which will be the stored its clothing this day. That is not acceptable in Polish and English kindergartens. The quality of the items in the nursery are shapes the child's creativity. They are not 'ready', 'finished' but they are ready to transform. Often these elements also change. They could be even defined using the term 'garbage.' These are fragments, components for 'treatment', next to which there are always readily available tools that allow children to process them. The child must just think of the use of these elements, must think to expand their functions and try them out. In the preschool space hangers with aprons, overalls, often can be seen which testifies to the fact that children perform different jobs and this can make them dirty.

It is characteristic that the children do not perform similar works to each other. Everyone creates its own interpretation on the same topic given by the teacher. The decor of the room does not matter, but the matter is what can they do in it, what actions can they take? We can say that the space is flexible, provides children the opportunity to freely move around and test environment.

*Poland and Lithuania*

In the Polish and Lithuanian kindergartens teacher dominance is very strong and explicitly limits the development of the child's autonomy. In the room there are signs of teacher dominance, the main symbol is the teacher's desk. The child is not possible to decide what will be dealing with, and must ask the teacher for permission to use various items. Everything has to be arranged as required by the teacher. Children in a very small way participate in the preparation of the decor of the room. Mostly children have access to ready-made toys. Their purpose and method of use are listed, 'programmed': dolls are for cuddles and carrying in a cart, and cars are for driving on the carpet, on which are drawn the streets. That destiny is easy to identify for children, so they are playing with what define the objects. Individual art works of children which can be seen on the walls of kindergarten classrooms are mostly the same, made with the same technique and actually difficult to tell them apart.

**Summary**

The research demonstrated great differences in the organization and equipment of the kindergarten room space in England and in the so-called post-communist countries of Poland and Lithuania. These differences concern the general layout of the kindergarten room, the quality of elements, the social character of space and the direction of the child identity being released. Kindergarten rooms in Poland and in Lithuania are very similar to one another, schematic, usually with a rectangular layout, with clearly separated

relaxing and educating areas. Class decorations are made for show and most elements are made by the teachers. There is a lot of equipment in the rooms, but they are characterized by stability and invariability. The furnishing of play areas demonstrates gender stereotyping.

In English kindergartens, the space is divided into small areas for individual or small group activities of children. The equipment with items of various types is very rich. Their characteristic feature is 'processability'. The elements prompt children to play, to experiment and to act.

The space of Polish and Lithuanian kindergarten is pro-social. Teacher's domination limits children activities to a significant extent. Furnishing indicates the imposition of stiffly determined social roles. Children work, play and rest always under the teacher's supervision. They have limited opportunity to make their own decisions: they are to play according to the intended use of the toy, according to teacher's instruction, or using those elements and equipment that the teacher makes available to them. Therefore, children autonomy is clearly limited.

In English kindergartens, space has a clearly anti-social character. Children can stay together in small groups, or play on their own, in isolation. They can choose their own activity and the teacher does not constantly supervise their activities.

The analysis of space in English kindergartens and in kindergartens in Poland and Lithuania demonstrates child and adult models assumed in education in those countries. Children in English kindergartens are treated as autonomous persons, endowed with many skills and abilities. They are granted the right to decide with what, when and with whom they may act. Thus, they are perceived as independent and creative persons, able to independently experience and explore the surrounding reality. Teachers trust the children's competences and pay attention to their activities and products. They are not afraid of the unpredictability of children's behaviour, and their main task is to create interesting cognitive, non-schematic, not-stereotypical situations with high potential for promoting development.

On the other hand, children in Poland and Lithuania are treated as dependent persons, who must be managed. It is assumed that their abilities will develop only through their activity carried out under the supervision of an adult. Teachers have no confidence in child competences; they precisely determine all activities and strictly define patterns of desirable behaviours. Their superior function is to control children's activity and to ensure constant supervision, since it is supported by the space of the kindergarten room. If we refer here to Foucault's reflection on the effect of institution, it can be claimed that the space of the kindergarten room is a particular panoptikon. A child is observed like a prisoner: 'it can be seen, but it does not see; it is an object of information and not the subject of communication' (Foucault, 1998a, p.195).

The space of kindergarten depersonalizes a child through the possibility of keeping incessant control over its behaviour.

## Conclusion

Although our qualitative analyses do not authorize us to formulate generalizations, they may be used to demonstrate certain tendencies in organizing the material environment for children at the stage of pre-school education.

A fundamental conclusion drawn from the analysis of the gathered research material is that the space layout in English kindergartens favours child autonomy and self-determination, i.e. features required for the development of mature identity in the future, while in post-communist countries it induces/predisposes towards a preference for features appropriate for foreclosure (Marcia, 1980) and uniform identity. Those features are needed for efficient functioning under conditions of authoritative power, and do not correspond to the contemporary social reality in those countries.

A 'foreclosure identity' means a strong attachment to an authority and unreflective acceptance of opinions and judgment propagated by those authorities. It manifests itself in involvement in activities of a totalitarian character, recourse into something that is known, and the lack of readiness to verify one's own views (Karkowska et al, 2010, p. 21). An entity representing this type of identity is characterized by conservatism, a tendency to subordinate and distrust in contacts with cultural diversity (ibid). The space of Polish and Lithuanian kindergartens favours the development of such a type of identity, since the quality and the layout of elements placed in this space block child autonomy by rewarding submissiveness and amenability with the teacher's domination; stiffens rules for playing social roles and restricts activation of the causative nature of children. This space also prompts the development of a unified identity. By rewarding similar tasks and behaviours, achieved with the use of the same elements and aimed at obtaining identical effects, children are accustomed to being average, mediocre, submissive and well-behaved. Children in kindergarten are to act and think in a similar way, ideally at the same pace, using identical material resources. Therefore, the question should be posed how they will face up to changeable, variable conditions of acting in the reality outside of the kindergarten. Interior decor and furnishings in Poland and Lithuania provide an expression of conservative tendencies to gain control over children and to persistently correct their imperfections, which means backward and not forward-looking culture, towards preparing children for conscious and creative social participation. Therefore, it would be worth transplanting selected solutions applied in English kindergartens to Polish and Lithuanian kindergartens.

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