



Young Children Selections of the Physical Elements in the Preschool Environment

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Abstract

The camera is a tool which can give young children an opportunity to express their thoughts and provide adults with a tangible evidence of their preferences. This study is to explore young children thoughts and preferences of their preschool environment through words and photographs. Eighteen young children of age four and five was given a camera to take pictures of their preschool in pairs. Children were interviewed on their photographs selection and their conversation was recorded. Results show there are differences and similarities on the children preferences on the physical elements in the preschool environment.

Keywords: young children, preferences, photographs, camera, preschool environment

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1.0 Introduction

In this era of technology, digital camera is now a common tool for both adults and children, for various purposes. Adults may use the camera as part of their hobbies or as they pursue their career as a photographer to capture moments and children may use them to take pictures of their interest or capture objects and moments that are meaningful to them. Besides, with the gradual evolution of the camera technology, it has made easy for young children to use the camera and many children have shown great enthusiasm when using them (Thomas, Davison & Sharples, 2001). With the availability of this technology, the use of camera has gradually been introduced in the preschool classroom, providing opportunities for children to be young photographers. In earlier studies, classroom photography usually involve teachers in taking pictures; documenting children's experiences and sharing them with the children as part of the classroom activities (Pastor & Kerns, 1997). However in later studies, the growing interest on understanding children's perspectives has lead adults to allow children to be the photographer, capturing pictures of what they think might be interesting or meaningful, while giving them a chance of an exciting investigation and projects. By understanding young children perspectives, it allow adults to understand the children's emotions, needs, interest and preferences better and provide them with a better learning experience. This can be seen in several studies where, with the use of camera with young children has not only provide them with a valuable learning experience (Cook & Hess, 2007; Pastor & Kerns, 1997), but it also provide adults with the understanding of how children feel about their environment and what they see in the environment provided to them (see DeMarie, 2003; DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006; Einarsdottir, 2005). Hence, this study is to investigate young children preferences and selections of their preschool physical environment, both indoor and outdoor through photography.

2.0 Literature Review

The need to understand young children perspectives about their environment is important as it allow adults to acknowledge and provide materials and experiences that are significant to the children's interest. This is because adults perception towards the environment might be different than children. As suggested by Scott (2000) in Cook & Hess (2007), there is a large gulf between adults observation about a child's understanding of a situation and the child's own perception. As defined by Ackerman (1996), perspective taking is one's ability to experience and describe the presentation of an object or display from different vantage points, which involve both differentiation and coordination of viewpoints. Children are known to develop this ability as they grow. In reflection of this study which involves children in the preoperational stage, according to Piaget, children at this stage are bounded with the preoperational egocentrism. However, egocentrism appears in different form. According to Piaget, preoperational children are egocentric with their symbolic viewpoints. This means

that that they are unaware of viewpoints other than their own, and they believe that everyone else perceives, thinks and feels the same way they do (Berk, 1994). People's perceptions of the world are constructed rather than veridical reflections, and thus are not occasionally wrong but occasionally differ from the perceptions of others. As Piaget recognized, adults come to view the world less egocentrically than children, although they do not outgrow their childhood tendencies altogether (Epley, Keysar, Boven & Gilovich, 2004). In many occasions, adults tend to understand or at least try to understand others point of view when making judgments or decisions. However, many social judgments, even among adults are still egocentrically biased, where people tend to believe, for example that their initial states and intentions are more transparent to others than they actually are; they overestimate the extent to which others attend to those and exaggerate the extent to which others will share their thoughts and feelings (Epley et al., 2004). Hence this shows that even adults can have difficulties having their own perspective to be set aside, while trying to understand or consider others point of view. However, according to several theorists (e.g., Davis, Hoch & Ragsdale, 1986; Nickerson, 1999), people do not actually set aside their own perspective when adopting another's, but instead use it as a judgmental anchor and adults know that sometimes this egocentric anchor needs adjustment to accommodate differences between themselves and others (Epley et al., 2004). Looking at this situation, it is possible to say that adults have the same dilemma in accepting young children perceptions about the world, and it is possible that adults have a harder time accepting it, knowing that young children thinking are less rigorous than adults.

Children's own photographs are a source of tangible documentation for adults to see and understand young children's perception of the world around them. Through photography, young children are given the opportunity to explore the environment and express their feelings and thoughts (Helm & Katz, 2001). In a study by Einatsdottir (2005) on children handling cameras with adults presents and without adults presence, it is found that with adult's presence, children tend to take pictures of "socially expected and acceptable" of their classroom experiences which suggest that the adults might influenced the children's photograph selection. On the other hand, without adult's presence, children tend to take unique pictures and private places such as silly faces, cubbies, bathrooms and hallways, which show the children's own interest and views of their world that were not filtered by an adult perspectives. Even though adults might influence children's decision in telling others their perspective, adult can also facilitate the young children, as it is the adults who have created the possibilities for each child to express himself or herself, and it is the adults who also interpret the child's perspective (Samuelsson, 2004). However, adults need to bear in mind that children's expression of meaning always takes place in a certain situation, a specific context, based on the child's earlier experiences and capacity to express himself or herself. Thus, through camera, adults would have the opportunity to visually see and understand children's thinking and preferences about their environment. With that opportunity, adults could also then offer children a better learning experience and create possibilities for each child to express himself/herself.

3.0 Methodology

Participants: This study involved a sample of ten four years old and eight five years old children (n = 18). These children attended their preschool in Wangsamaju, Kuala Lumpur and were at the center 5 days a week from 8.00 am to 1.00 pm. All of the participants had shown interest using the camera and had used the camera before, based on a discussion when the camera was first introduced.

Procedure: Children were first engaged in two discussions for 15 to 20 minutes (during circle time) about cameras and the things that they like the most in the school. After each discussion, they were given cameras for them to get familiarized with the tool. Once the children were comfortable handling the camera, they were asked to take pictures of things that they liked the most in the school, with a voice recording device attached to their shirts. The voice recording device was used to record children conversations during the photography session. Each of the children was given approximately 45 to 60 minutes to handle the camera and they were consistently reminded of the question as they handled the camera.

Data Analysis: During the photography session, each child was interviewed on some of their photographs to ensure they were taking pictures of the things they liked in the school. Children's conversations about their pictures were recorded in addition to the interviews conducted with the children. A total of 949 pictures were divided into two categories, indoor and outdoor, to see children's preferences of their environment based on the content analysis methods of Denzin (2001) and Patton (2002). The indoor and outdoor categorizations were selected based on the function of the spaces available at the preschool and the function of the object available. The function of the spaces refers to the areas where children play and learn or engaged in an activity and the function of the object refers to the children's meaningful experiences with the object and the unique characteristics of the object.

4. 0Results

4.1 Children's Photograph Selections and Words

Based on our results, it is found that not all of the materials, furniture, decorations or parts of the building provided to the children were photographed. Generally children tend to focus on taking photographs of spaces that they enjoyed being there, spaces they have experienced interesting events and objects that they liked and which they found interesting, which shows a pattern of regularity in children's preference. For example, children tend to take pictures of what they personally like, either because of the color, shapes, size or

design. Some children are found to show interest of their own personal things, mainly because of a particular character that they like, such as 'princesses' and 'Thomas the train'. It is also interesting that they choose to take photographs of their friends' belongings just because it belongs to their friends. This shows that children do treasure their own personal belongings and they are able to acknowledge other people's belongings which they might think as important as theirs. Besides that, some of the children tend to take photographs only in several parts of the preschool environment, such as the computer room, own classroom, gym, dining area, sand play area, art area, the garden and outdoor playground. These places are found to be available to the children most of the time during class session and these are the places where children do their activities throughout the day, which probably influence their selection of photographs of their school environment. However, not all of the children took all photographs of all of the above areas. In fact, children tend to choose areas of which they really enjoy being there as they engage in their daily activities. Children photographs and words on parts of the environment that they have experienced interesting events shows that children do talk about their past experience on a particular event when they are asked about it and when they are given a chance to talk about it. It is found that the use of camera give children the opportunity to identify part of the environment which they have an interesting past events. This also gives adults the opportunity to see what other experiences that the children have gained besides experiencing activities and events in the classroom.

From the children's interviews and voice recordings, it is found that children do take a particular picture for a reason and there is a reason on their photograph selections. Generally, their reasons are much focused on spaces where they enjoy doing activities the most, such as the gym compared to the classroom, spaces where they engaged and encounter interesting experiences such the drainage area where they found the snail and objects which they like and which they have memories of. With their ability to explain and recall previous memory and events, some of the children are able to explain in detail the reasons of their preferred photograph selections such as their trip to the zoo and their yearly concert day which are framed at the hallway. With children explanations, it gives us a better understanding on what they intend to photograph and their preferences on the spaces and objects

4.2 Children's Photograph Categorization

Looking at a more detail perspective, children's photographs were divided in several categories and sub categories for both indoor and outdoor. These categories show a more specific idea on children's photograph preferences and selections of the preschool environment. These categories were selected based on children's photographs and words (if available) which focused on a specific space and specific objects (Denzin, 2001; Patton, 2002). Children's interviews and voice recordings were also used to specifically identify and

define the photographed spaces and objects. There are six categories identified for indoor and nine categories for outdoor environment. For indoor the categories include indoor areas, learning materials, furniture, belongings, physical structure and decorations. For outdoor categorization, it include fence, outdoor areas, decorations, learning materials, belongings, furniture, physical structure, nature and material surfaces, These categories do not reflect all of the areas and objects available in the preschool, but only those areas and objects that are found in the children's photographs, as children are found to be quite selective in their photograph selections based on their own preferences. The categories identified in this study reflect a general overview of the space and object function. However, for some of the categories, subcategories are identified which show a more specific focus of the spaces and objects in the preschool environment. For example, the indoor learning areas show only the general function of space available and the subcategories show a more focused learning area such as the classroom, computer room and TV area. Again, these subcategories are selected based on children's photographs selection of the preschool environment. Looking at both areas, there are several similarities and differences in the categories and subcategories for both the indoor and outdoor. These similarities and differences in the categorization and sub-categorizations are due to the different spaces and settings available in the preschool indoor and outdoor and the various types of objects prepared for the children.

Table 1 below shows the categorization and sub-categorization of the indoor spaces and elements. These categorizations were developed based on the children's own photographs on the preschool environment that they prefer the most. The categorizations below shows the general focus of spaces and objects and the subcategories show a more detailed focus of spaces and objects. With children's words on each categorization and sub-categorization, it shows the evidence of children's reasons on their selection and preferences. Through the indoor categorizations, results show that not all of the spaces and objects are photographed by the children. For example, not all of the learning areas are photographed by the children. Only some parts of the 4 and 5 year-old classroom, computer room and the TV area are photographed. When some of the 4-year old children are asked why they do not take pictures of other indoor learning areas such as the block area and the art room, they tend to give reasons such as "No, I don't like it" or "I don't want". This shows that children are aware of their own photograph selections and their preferences of the environment.

Table 2 below shows the categorization and sub-categorization of the outdoor spaces and the elements. Again, these categorizations were developed based on the children's own photographs on the preschool environment that they prefer the most, which show their focus interest of spaces and objects available outdoor. From the children's photographs, it shows that children are found to take more pictures of the outdoor compared to the indoor. Besides, it is found that more elements were photographed by the children outdoor compared to the indoor.

Table 1: Categorization of indoor spaces and elements

Categorization	Sub-categories	Children's Words
Indoor areas	Classroom	• "I never go to Mama Siti's room. Because I used to makeup in her room only."
	Computer room	• "Love it! I take picture of the computer.... But my computer is at grandma's house. I like the game with the sun."
	TV area	No words
Learning materials		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Jawi Language) "I take pictures of Jawi because I love Iqra'." • (Small ball) "The ball is small. Can throw up till it the window."
Furniture		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Round table) "I like green." • (Door) Child A: "I take this picture from the door hole. Hole in the door." Child B: "This look like her face!" (pointing to Child A)
Belongings		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I love bags.. their sweet!" • "My bag! Hehe...pretty!" (giggling)
Physical structure	Window	• "I can see outside from here..."
	Staircase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I can see my friend go down..." • "Because I was going down the stairs and Syamil take my picture."
Decorations	Frames / Pictures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Yup. I have take picture before." • "This is before...Emila...Batrisha...me...and Emilia...Shamil and Naim is not around yet."
	Murals and posters	• "Anum see Mickey mouse just now...haa...Anum take a picture!"
	Artwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I like artwork. Yeap! Because we have make rockets before." • Because can cut. Can make flowers....make rockets."
	Hanging decorations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I like it...It's all pretty!" • "Because...it's pretty."
	Special decorations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Because..we have...because I use to take pictures of butterflies with mama before." • Child A: "I like the decorations...yup!" Child B: "It has grapes!"
	Soft toys	No words
	Carpets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Eee...pretty! Lots of colors!" • "I like that carpet."

For example, children are found to take pictures at most parts of the outdoor area such as the gym, shoe rack area, dining area, playground, waiting area, assembly area (flag) and the garden. This shows that children are found to have preference more of the outdoor space compared to the indoor, which is probably due to the interesting events that they experienced and probably due to the beauty of nature available outdoor. In fact, during the photography session children seem to spend most of their time taking pictures outdoor compared to the indoor. When the children were asked why they do not take pictures indoor, their reasons would be "I like it outside more!" or "I like it here". This reflects their preference of the outdoor compared to the indoor, and thus more outdoor elements were documented in the categorization and sub-categorization for the outdoor.

Table 2: Categorization of outdoor spaces and elements

Fence	Fence	• "I like to see outside.."
	Object outside fence	• "I like that black car. It is nice!"
	Sky	• "I take pictures up there...up..up.." (pointing at the sky)
Outdoor area	Gym	• "Like the gym...yes...because I can play...can assembly when it is raining...can assembly in the gym."
	Shoe area	• "The shoe rack is nice."
	Playground	• "Uuuuuuu.....the playground!" • Child A: "I like the playground. Yeap! I can slide." Child B: But it is dirty." Child A: "There is cat poop!" Child C: "Yes! Over there..there!"
	Waiting area	• "I like the container on the table....nice!"
	Canopy area (dining)	• "I can't wait anymore! I want to take lots of pictures at the canopy." • "There are babies over there!" (pointing at the canopy)
	Flag	• "Negaraku...!" (singing)
	Field	• Child A: "We walk...then we take pictures of flowers...'click'." Child B: "Pretty eh?" Child C: "Yes..."
	Outdoor project area	No words
	Garden	• "I like it outside. It is fun!"

	Play area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I like to play over there...but I don't really, really like it. I only jump there."
	Entrance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "There is a teacher coming in!"
	Fish area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child A: "This is fish." Child B: "You take picture of fish like me?"
Decorations	Frames/pictures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "These are old pictures. All the teachers are there..." • "That is Balqis sister before. Kak Shahida"
	Murals and posters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Princess are pretty!"
	Pots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "There are fish in here. The fish will bite the finger!" (Pointing to with water plants)
	Special decorations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Chinese container) "Preey! Because I like it!"
	Decorated containers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I have a turtle at home!"
Learning materials	Gym materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I can exercise." • "That ball is big!"
	Signage	No words
	Playground materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "That day my friend slide with head first! Head down...feet on top!"
Belongings		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Slippers) "I have one! You just have to put in your feet."
Furniture		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Rattan chair) "This chair is very nice."
Physical structure	Ceiling	No words
	Tiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I like the floor because there are footsteps. Can jump and jump!"
Nature		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child A: "Look! Ants!" Child B: "Waaaaaah." • Child A: "There's ants at the corner...over there..." Child B: "That is ants house!"
Material surfaces	Drainage area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child A: "Hole." Child B: "We can get in the hole." Child C: "Haris?" Child A: "No...the hole is too small..." Child C: "When we are small we can get in." Child D: "Yes...never mind. The ants will get in."
	Drain cover	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child A: "Wah...picture of a hole. I take pictures of the hole." Child B: "Where?" Child A: "Well...just like penny." Child B: "Ooooooh..!"

5.0 Discussion

The use of camera has shown to be a powerful tool to identify children's preferences and

perspectives towards their environment (Einarsdottir, 2005). Children's own photographs do play an important role in showing adults, especially their teachers and parents on what they like, dislike and what they think about the environment around them. It is important for teachers to know if the environment designed and provided to them create a meaningful experience for the children, or whether the children value the environment around them. With the categorization and sub categorization above, it shows the specific objects and areas or spaces that children has photographed, which could give adults (especially teachers) a different perspective of how children perceive their environment. Since there is a pattern of regularity in the children's photographs, teachers could then probably have a better idea on which areas or objects in the preschool meant the most to the child, and which part of the environment that the children have the least interest.

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