

IT'S THE SAME THING- JUST DIFFERENT:



NURSERY 101: HOW SPACE IMPACTS LEARNING

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It's the same thing- just different: how space impacts learning.

Physical environments influence how we feel, hear, see and do. Spaces influence cognitive and affective performance by enabling or disengaging users and it is proven that changed spaces change practice. Choosing a nursery is a highly personal decision and is often a combination of emotional and rational thoughts. Location aside - what should every parent think of when they choose their child's first educational experience? You may be surprised that the important stuff often is overlooked. Well, it starts with space. Nursery space designers should have an articulated vision of active space that set out clear learning intentions before they fill a classroom with the traditional learning apparatus. This articulated vision of the space makes the same thing, well, just different. And the difference is best understood that good teaching does not equate to good learning; good learning is the child experiencing the intentions and digesting the context in which it is presented, namely the matters of space where it is offered.

An example of two key learning intentions in the early years are self directed exploration and focused play. Self directed exploration is founded on the premise that a child must be an independent learner and the space that they find themselves in must provide both varied and viable opportunities of interest. Classrooms that are divided into "mini-zones" are best as they dispel the stressors of large group interaction and instill a feeling of small space ownership. Low walls and small carpeted areas with available activities ensure children can navigate the classroom exploring home corners, blocks and building stations, sand and waterplay, book corners, texture steps and cozy corners to curl into. This ensures children can choose to follow their mood and ability and ensures that a class does not remain teacher focused but allows the child to observe, initiate and direct their own experience - its a "space democracy" which is shown to produce better short and long term learning outcomes.

But even a well designed classroom with lots of “experience centers” is impacted by larger forces. Research shows that temperature and air quality are the most important variables affecting student achievement. Natural daylight is shown to pacify restless classes and promote achievement. Look for atrium spaces where classes open into versus long corridors of box classrooms with no community space. Research on colors is conflicting but bright colors are overstimulating and should be used in moderation. Chronic noise pollution is also a problem and classrooms should vary times of silence, quiet buzz of activity and high energy time. Toys and equipment should be available but not in over abundance. Ask if the environment informs and engages viewers with mirrors? children's work? simple activities and toys that require different skill-sets and ideas? A carefully curated and rotating collection of materials is far more effective than everything available all of the time.

Where do children sleep? Are there spaces to go to like gyms and outdoor equipment including sandboxes, grassy fields, planting and recycling zones and active wetspaces? And how do parents know about classroom work? Are their books of evidence based work present? report cards? and most of all - is the planning consistent with the curriculum offered?

Perhaps some of the often overlooked questions relate to security, insurance and staff. Are all the staff on appropriate visas or labour cards with authorization to work? Dubai requires all nursery staff to have occupational health cards which require pre-screening for various diseases before being allowed to work with children. Ask to see these for the staff looking after your children. Also, check out insurance - do they have public liability and all risk coverage? Do they have a fire evacuation plan? Are staff pediatric 1st Aid trained? What is the security like? Is there CCTV? Are the floors “bouncy” under play equipment and conform to fall height regulations? What about windows - are they lined ? shatterproof? Is there shading and do toys meet standard safety regulations?

While many of the questions noted here may not be the obvious ones - they are the necessary ones and everything from anti-slip lined stairs to cleaning supplies needs to be actively thought of. From the floors that babies crawl on to the phonics programs

used all impact the importance of the early years - that time when brain development is not just at electric speed but the environment and its contents have huge impact. It is perhaps the most important thing you can do for your child. So next time you tour a nursery or school ask them what considerations they have made to connect space to learning and see if it merges with their learning intentions. The answer could be the same thing, but the consequences - just plain different.