

COMMENTARY

Spaces and Places for Pre-school Children. Little voices big ideas.

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Abstract: Accessible Early Years learning environments are a critical component of education providers' commitment to enhancing equity for all young children within Early Years provision. This paper explores some of the broader cultural aspects of Early Years and architecture in creating an enabling environment that shapes universal design practices in Early Years inclusive settings. It examines how the transforming effects of the Early Years can be designed in relation to what we know about learning, more specifically about Universal Design for Learning (UDL), from the little voices and great ideas of our young learners, and from experts in architecture. with the flexibility to respond also to what we do not know about the future.

The article deals with accessibility in its broadest sense: physical, educational, psychological and social accessibility for a truly inclusive environment with buildings that create a language pattern of harmony, a sense of belonging and inclusivity.

Keywords: Spaces for early years, early inclusive education, Universal Design for Learning, preschool education

"We shape our dwellings and afterwards our dwellings shape us."
Winston Churchill

BACKGROUND

In this paper the authors look at some of the broader cultural aspects of early childhood and architecture and how the transforming effects of the kindergarten can be explored through their cultural role with special reference to Malta. The country is rapidly transforming into a multi-cultural

society. Its diversity is swiftly expanding with migrants from around the globe settling in local communities. The need for culturally sensitive educators working in environments that are understanding of other cultures is becoming more pronounced. A person's culture includes many diverse aspects of life and values, all of which educators need to consider and understand with regards to the individual needs of each child under their care. Meeting the cultural needs of children requires educators to change their own attitudes and assumptions. Understanding where and when changes in the kindergarten environment are of paramount importance to make the children and their family feel comfortable, recognised and valued is of paramount importance.

Kindergarten practices differ widely even in Malta and the extent to which the educational systems and structures are applied to varying contexts are culture dependent. In today's increasingly multicultural communities, children come to kindergarten from diverse backgrounds of varying cultural preferences in relation to their physical environment. Children who have experienced warm family cultures may be able to play without conflict and in small spaces, spaces that potentially generate a high level of conflict in children from other backgrounds. School culture has been linked to effective inclusive schools (Ainscow, 1995; Alton-Lee, 2003; Carrington, 1999; Dyson et al., 2004). It is a complex phenomenon and has been noted to be an intricate and illusive notion (Prosser, 1999), a social experience (Corbett, a, 199b), pluralistic, subjective and dynamic (Rossman, Corbett & Firestone, 1999). School culture is often used interchangeably with terms such as school climate, ethos, atmosphere or character, and these terms are assumed to be a common phenomenon (Prosser, 1999). Each kindergarten school develops its own unique culture based upon the traditions, philosophy and aims underpinning the school and the way in which these are then translated into daily school practice (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Stroll, 1999).

To gain an understanding of a school's culture one needs to study the shared language together with the assumptions of the members of staff. These assumptions can be studied through "long term anthropological research, consisting of focused observation, interviews, and the collaboration of the researcher with the members of an organisation to systematically identify their underlying assumptions" (Zollers et al., 1999, p.160). School culture is also based upon the organisational set-up of a kindergarten together with the value systems, beliefs, and personal experiences that each individual brings to the school. When individuals do not support a philosophy, it is challenging to encourage these individuals to shift beliefs (Avramidis et al. 2002, Radtke 2003). In an inclusive culture, sharing of ideas from all perspectives, whether students, teachers and parents work and learn together despite differences, creates success for a common cause and where difference of thought and opinions is respected.

THE CULTURE OF KINDERGARTEN ENVIRONMENT

Optimism for Change

Change must start from somewhere. It might emerge from something incremental, marginal, and even trivial and yet it might amount to a huge restructuring of the fundamental aspects of the entire system. In Malta the publication of the National Standards for Child Care Facilities (2006) sought to provide a framework and guidelines to ensure that the quality of provision was raised. More recently, the *National Curriculum Framework for All* (2012) has recognised the importance of the early years and a curriculum framework for the sector, separate from that of the primary years, has been drawn up. The new curriculum framework reflects an inquiry-based approach that highlights the importance of social and emotional development on children's learning. It refers to all the issues of educational innovators: learning through the development of a thematic approach, the benefits associated with play, choice of activities, learning through a multisensorial approach and the use of ICT and new technologies. However, classrooms remain regular rooms and do not reflect their proposed educational practices.

The architectural design of a kindergarten

Mark Dudek (2001) poses several questions with respect to architecture for kindergarten design:

1. Is the architecture interesting and engaging?
2. Is the architecture visible to its users?
3. Is the building designed with the scale of a child in mind?
4. Is there enough space?
5. Do the children have a range of spaces that will support different activities?
6. Are the routes through the building clear and unencumbered?
7. Is the outdoor space readily accessible?
8. Do children feel safe and secure?
9. Do the adults commissioning the project understand the architecture for kindergartens?
10. Is the architecture flexible and extendable?

In his introduction to *Children's Spaces* Dudek upholds that architecture should go beyond functionality. "The richer and more stylish it is, the more likely it is to turn older children onto education and learning and perhaps most importantly encourage meaningful social interactions" (Dudek, 2005, p.ix).

Spaces and Places for Pre-School Children

The authors view spaces and places for pre-school children in a broad sense of the physical environment in which little children live. This includes various landscapes, buildings, outdoor and indoor environments, interior design, furnishings, equipment and play material. The idea that kindergarten design must be flexible whilst accommodating school programmes is a perplexing problem. Space has been multipurpose for years but there is also a type of flexibility that needs to be imposed to allow kindergarten classrooms to change their space to accommodate new programmes and designs.

Maria Montessori's (1966) learning environment aligns with 'form follows function', where children use their hands and minds in different areas of the room specifically designed for language, mathematics and sensory exploration. Different learning activities are located in designated places for specific use for language, mathematics and movement. The spaces reflect the practices in which children are engaged around their interests.

Learning Environments

Innovative ideas concerning learning environments have been proposed and are indeed part of educational practices. Montessori (1996) designed schooling space in her classroom to reflect the Montessori philosophy of education as child-centred learning that connects the mind, spirit and hand. Stations were created for hands-on exploration, mathematics, writing and the arts. This environment was designed to allow children to explore and discover on their own. The Reggio Emilia preschools also developed their own learning environments. The founders believe that "the school's environment is the third teacher and is crucial to the early childhood program" (Giudici & Rinaldi 2001, p.59). Reggio schools have successfully translated their philosophy into kindergarten design. They have been thoughtful in their approach and understand the value of a facility that supports their teaching and the child's learning.

The Way Forward

The physical environment has a supportive role in children's learning. This theme had re-surfaced in the literature mainly relating to handbooks addressing good practices for childcare centres such as the Dublin *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment* which states that,

Children learn in both outdoor and indoor environments. These environments should be motivating and inviting, and reflect children's changing developmental needs as well as the specific needs some may have.....

.... Environments which support children's learning through relationships

and also through play make early learning appealing, relevant and fun. This does not happen naturally. The adult needs to plan, organise, resource, and evaluate the environment regularly so that each child's learning is supported in the best way possible (2004, p.20).

Malta still needs to develop a strategic vision for the early years sector which will take into consideration both the architecture and pedagogy of kindergartens. The strategic vision has to embrace the complexity of the design and pedagogy taking into account the emerging educational concepts.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

The Context

“Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports” (DEC and NAEYC, 2009, p. 2).

The concept of ‘universal design’, physical accessibility for all, can be traced to architecture post Second World War. The term was coined by Ron Mace in 1987. Moore (2007) in her book review of Rose, Meyer, Stragman and Rappolt (2002) gives a concise account of the development of this concept. She describes how Michael Bednar emphasised that barrier free structures accommodate a wide range of users throughout their lives (Tanti Burlò, 2010).

Whereas the concept of universal design was also embraced by product design, it is only recently that it was applied to learning, known as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and has been introduced in educational discourse. As architects have to include access for all considerations in the design of kindergartens, so do educators in order that, a priori, they may present a flexible curriculum accessible to all children.

Universal Design for Learning

Neurological research points that each individual learns differently and uniquely as one's DNA. Thus, learning has to be designed in a way that offers

multiple means of engagement, representation and expression (Centre for Applied Special Technology).

UDL facilitates the creation of a community of learners growing together, in solidarity, without fear, stress and anxiety following the general curriculum (Tanti Burlo`, 2010). UDL and inclusion are fundamental for quality education (Thurnbull et al 2010; Tanti Burlo`, 2010).

In universal design the catch phrase is ‘progress in the general curriculum’ where children are playing, learning together and building a strong, cohesive classroom community. This is increasingly recognised as the foundation of successful classrooms. Students must feel safe, respected and valued in order to learn new skills. Fear, discomfort and anxiety are incompatible with the learning process, and renders teaching and learning difficult. Successful classes are ones whereby students feel supported in their learning, willing to take risks, challenged to develop their humanity and sense of empathy with one another, and open to new possibilities (Sapon-Shevin, 1999).

Conn-Powers et al (2006) are lead authors on this theme. They state that, “The principles of universal design for learning are clearly applicable to early childhood education. They can guide professionals in designing programs in which all children and their families have full and equitable access to learning and social opportunities” (Conn-Powers et al, 2006, p.4). The objective for educators, in the early years, is to design flexible programmes which target the needs of all the children who learn together and from each other within the same environment (Conn-Powers et al, 2006). (Early educators should value, from the onset, the importance of planning learning environments and activities for a diverse population, thus designing universally designed environments where all learners and their family members can actively participate and learn (Conn-Powers et al, 2006) .

Most of the literature on UDL deals with school age students, however it is also applicable to early education:

A universal design approach for learning follows principles of good practice in early education:

- (1) recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach to education simply will not work;*
- (2) understanding the need to design curricula to meet the needs of diverse classroom populations; and*
- (3) declaring that all children who attend early education programs will be successful in their development and learning (Conn-Powers et al, 2006, p.5).*

Early educators applying UDL will:

plan for from the start in thinking about the physical, social-emotional, health, and teaching dimensions of their environments to assure that every child

- *feels welcomed as a full and equal member;*
- *accesses and engages in all learning opportunities;*
- *learns according to his or her individual strengths and interests;*
- and*
- *demonstrates his or her learning in ways that reflect the individual's strengths (Conn-Powers et al, 2006, p.5).*

Conn-Powers et al (2006) lists a number of criteria for UDL for early education (Table 1).

Table 1: Adaptations of UDL Principles to Class Meetings from Conn-Powers et al, (2006).

Environment	Applications:
Physical environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Expand the group meeting area so that all children can be present and focus their attention on activities. 2. Provide varied seating options so each child may lie on the floor, sit on a mat or chair, or use specialized seating. 3. Use other materials of different sizes, textures, and shapes to help each child actively manipulate the objects for learning. 4. Make sure that the building is accessible for all.
Health and safety	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide clear, wide paths throughout the classroom so each child may safely and easily reach the meeting area. 2. Ensure floor covering for safe passage for any child; one has to note not only a child who is in a hurry but also one who has visual impairments and/or make use of a wheeled stander. 3. Consider each child's energy level and health conditions in planning activities. 4. The students may remain in contact with their class when they are unwell through Skype.
The socio-emotional environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Invite and encourage all children to join in using multiple means of communication (e.g., speaking English and/or children's home language, signing, displaying symbols). 2. Give simple directions using multiple means (e.g., verbally, through signs, in print or modelled) so that each child may see, hear and understand any rules and expectations. 3. Use books, songs and communication that involve and represent all children regardless of cultural predominance or linguistic and skill levels
The teaching environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vary the expectations for participation and performance. If children are listening to a story and are asked to recall events,

	<p>some may attend to and repeat back key words; others may recall the names of characters by pointing to pictures or using signs and gestures; others may predict what will happen next using complete sentences in English.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Present content in multiple formats, including verbal, print, video or concrete objects, repeating key words/phrases in children’s home language and using simple sentences with gestures. 3. Use physical cues to focus children’s attention, such as pointing to the picture in a book, giving verbal prompts to help children begin a response, offering language models for children to imitate, and encouraging children to keep thinking and trying 4. Invite and encourage all children to join in using multiple means of communication (e.g., speaking English and/or children’s home language, signing, displaying symbols). 5. Give simple directions using multiple means (e.g., verbally, signs in print or modelled) so each child may see, hear, and understand any rules and expectations. 6. Use books, songs, and communication that involve and represent all children regardless of cultural predominance or linguistic and skill levels
Individual assessment and program evaluation practices	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Request information or action in various ways including complex questions, simple phrases, and emphasis and repetition of key words or phrases. 2. Identify the multiple ways children can show what they learn during activities. For example, the child who waits for another child to respond to a teacher’s request, to handle a show-and-tell object being passed around, or to choose the song, demonstrates turn taking. Some children, as in the example above, may respond to the request using complete and accurate sentences spoken in English, while others may need to point, sign, or use words in their home language. Others may point to the object or event in the book in response to simple questions.
Family involvement practices	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Share information with families through a newsletter written at an appropriate level. Have key phrases translated into families’ home languages, and include photographs of children engaged in an activity. 2. Provide multiple opportunities for families to be involved. Bilingual parents might be willing to translate the information for monolingual families. Families could support their child’s involvement by asking specific questions about the activity and/or the book read to the group”
	(Conn-Powers et al, 2006, p.7)

The physical environment enables children to have equitable access for full participation in all programme activities. This includes structures, permanent

and movable equipment and furnishings, storage, and materials. Health and safety components promote wellness and minimize risks and hazards. Regardless of health status or conditions, children should have on-going access to learning without interruptions due to illness and injury. The material of the building must not cause undue noise which could upset children especially those experiencing hypersensitivity.

The socio-emotional environment offers children full membership in the social-emotional life of the group and supports their social-emotional development especially their level of self-determination. Activities need to be structured and follow a visual time-table. Having a group of mixed ages facilitates the development of play, communication and level of socialization. The teaching environment also provides children with equitable access to learning opportunities through information and activities in multiple formats and means for engagement, expression and learning. This includes the curriculum, teaching practices, materials, and activities.

Individual assessment and programme evaluation practices provide multiple approaches to finding out what children know and what they can do in order to assess individual learning, development and educational progress. Assessing all children in the same way is nothing short of discriminatory. For example, assessing a learner with specific learning difficulty (dyslexia) through reading and writing is putting that learner at a disadvantage in comparison with a student whose reading and writing skills are effortless.

Family involvement practices support equity access and engagement of all families in the full range of experiences. This includes on-going communication, learning opportunities, and programme involvement activities.

WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK OF THEIR KINDERGARTEN?

Do children have an opinion about their kindergarten? Alan Clark, a senior lecturer in early childhood studies at the Froebel College, Roehampton University, studied the involvement of young children and practitioners in the design process of kindergartens and listens to the 'voices' of the under-fives, that is, "to bring the expertise of young children into the formal design process" (Clark, 2007, p.1). Clark notes that *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) (UNCRC) has reinforced the importance of the need of listening to young children and that this is highlighted through General Comment 7 on early childhood issued by same convention. This "General Comment 7 can be seen to support a view of children as acute observers of their environment" (Clark, 2007, p. 1). Paragraph 14 of *General Comment 7*, entitled 'Respect for the views and feelings of the young child' states that:

As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views, which should be 'given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (article 12.1). Young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places and routines in their lives, along with awareness of their own unique identity. They make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through

the conventions of spoken or written language (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Children Fund, and the Bernard van Leer Foundation 2006, cited in Clark, 2007, p2).

Citing James and Prout (1997), Clark views children “not as a group of ‘becomings’ but as ‘beings’ whose ideas, approaches to life, choices and relationships are of interest in their own right” (Clark, 2007, p.2). He, therefore, explored ways of reaching out to “children’s competencies in sharing their expertise” and he focused on ways, which “play to children’s strengths” (Clark, 2007, p.2). The methods used emphasized the modes of communication other than the written word such as talking, walking or drawing (Clark, 2007).

Although there is some important work demonstrating “children’s competencies in reflecting on their own environment, dialogue between children and architects, planners and designers is still the exception rather than the rule” (Clark, 2007, p.3). More research needs to be conducted to overcome the challenges for effective participation of children and answer several questions which are still not addressed such as, amongst other issues, which methods could be used to listen to children’s views and experiences, how much experience do architects or policy makers need to have in communicating with young children.

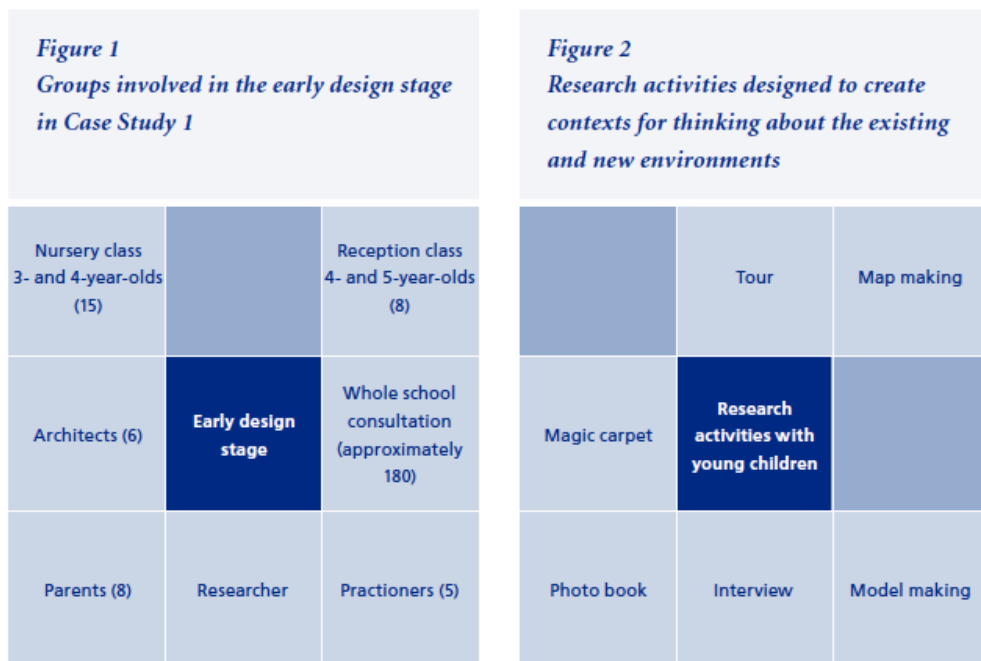
Clark (2007) is convinced that children do bring new insights to the architects’ and policy planners’ drawing board as they can identify important factors which facilitate their enjoyment of their early kindergarten years and identifies the following:

- 1 *Forming and maintaining relationships with peers and key adults;*
- 2 *The quality of food and drink available and their access to these facilities;*
- 3 *Access to the outdoor environment, in particular the use of favourite equipment;*
- 4 *Having time to finish their ‘projects’; and*
- 5 *Receiving support with difficulties arising from transitions to new settings”*
(Clark, 2007, p.3-4).

A founding principle of the Reggio Emilia schools “is the view of the child as competent and strong, a ‘rich child’” (Rinaldi 2001, in Clark, 2007, p.4). The children’s interaction with space, light, materials, colours and even the micro climate are carefully observed and annual reviews are held with the participation of the parents (Vecchi, 1998 as cited in Clark, 2007).

Clark (2007) upheld that architects still did not relate and listen to children enough and this led her to engage children and viewing them as stakeholders in the *Living Spaces Study*. Her objective was to investigate “how young children’s views and experiences could inform the planning, design and development of early years’ provision” (Clark, 2007, p.5). Her method is known as the “mosaic approach” (Clark & Moss, 2005; Clark 2007). Other objectives of Clark’s project were “to contribute to cross-national and cross-disciplinary and professional exchange about young children’s involvement in changes to indoor and outdoor provision” (Clark, 2007, p.5).

Figure 1 shows the groups involved in the early design stage of Clark’s study (Clark, 2007, p.8), whilst Figure 2 maps the research activities designated to create contexts for thinking about the existing and new environment (Clark, 2007,p.8). Figure 2 illustrates the activities involved in the “mosaic approach” which offered children different opportunities to review and develop their ideas.



Four themes emerged from this study:

1. Personal markers,
2. Scale and perspective
3. Legibility and
4. Privacy.

Personal markers showed how the children's feelings about their nursery were linked with their sense of identity: taking photos of their name, where they hang things, their work places where they can link with their parents or siblings. Their disinterest for the unknown nursery clearly reinforced this aspect. Scale and perspective is evident in the images of the children, which manifested difficulty with scale and perspective. They took photos of ceilings, the sky and the floor and brick walls in pathway, which could be rather disturbing for little children. Details of close up and far away spaces needed to be taken into consideration with lower shelves accessible to children. Flash cards with the written word could also help with objects being colour coded. Legibility is the way the children "felt the importance of being connected with other parts of the site including outdoors" (Clark, 2007, p.17). The children need to understand the pattern of the site. Seeing one's parent from the window taking a younger sibling to the nursery or looking through the window to the gate from which the parent passes to come and pick up the child at the end of the day creates security. Privacy is not just about a place where one is alone but a place where he/she can be himself/herself in a safe place. Clark cites Titman (1994) who describes a "place for being" that enables children to "be themselves, which recognized their individuality, their need to have a private persona in a public place, for privacy, for being alone and with friends, for being quiet in noise, for being a child" (Clark, 2007, p17). This is the ability for the child to control social interactions; there are children who felt the need to chill out for a while; many mentioned a book or a corner in their home. Outdoor spaces were investigated by reviewing their documentation, by a story based session and through the use of drawings. The themes for a new outside play area showed that the children thought of play equipment, social and aesthetic spaces. Some of the suggestions of the children were the following:

- *Places to climb and slide*
- *Places to sit and wait with parents and siblings*
- *Quiet places*
- *Places to 'run around and do things*
- *Things to keep including the bikes and balls*
- *Things to replace: the tunnel, plants, the playhouse and the sand pit* (Clark, 2007, p.20).

The final design also included some alcoves for the parents and children to sit in, a solution, which became very popular, a climbing structure which

included a hideaway for a few children to sit in and the grass under the tree which provided a quiet area.

Final Comments

Kindergartens still pigeon hole children according to their age. Some countries, like Italy, opt for mixed ages in a class. Vygotsky called for “scaffolding” and considered older children acting as “scaffolds” for younger ones. While Piaget preferred same age children who together would try to solve a problem, later research does not give either position any vantage point.

In their study ‘Children’s Social Behavior in Relation to Participation in Mixed-Age or Same-Age Classrooms’, Diane McClellan and Susan Kinsey (1999)

suggest that children in mixed age classes developed a significantly higher level of prosocial behaviour, while fewer children appeared to experience social isolation. Teachers also noted less aggressive behaviours in mixed age classes. Those children who had experienced mixed-age classrooms continued to be perceived as less aggressive and more pro-social by their third-grade teachers. Whether children attended mixed or same age classrooms did not have any significant effect on friendship patterns.

Reggio Emilia and the Waldorf kindergartens which present two schools of thought support mixed ages classes. Further to this, educators must use UDL to keep all children engaged in their learning.

Kindergartens prepare children better for formal schooling. The way the premises are designed has an enormous effect on the children. Whereas UDL seems to focus on the classroom situation, can a building’s pattern language, (a concept derived from the architectural theorist Christopher Alexander (1936 -) “generate experiences of dissonance and splinter community (on the one hand) or generate experiences of harmony and ... community (on the other)”: In their book *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (1977) Alexander and his team uphold that people should be involved in places they live in or spaces they use. This links with one of the reasons why we looked at studies like those of Clark.

Can one identify a pattern language for kindergartens which facilitates the children’s growth and development? Adapting and modifying The DEC/NAEYC Joint Statement (2009) one may forward the following six recommendations:

1. *Create high expectations for every child to reach his/her full potential through UDL;*
2. *Develop a programme philosophy on inclusion;*

3. Establish a system of services and supports for all children;
4. Revise programme and professional standards;
5. Achieve an integrated professional development system and
6. Influence federal and state accountability systems. (DEC/NAEYC, 2009).

And, finally, creating kindergartens which resonate a harmonious pattern language cannot not take into consideration the children's little voices expressing big ideas. What children experience and learn before they enter formal education (over 6 years in many countries) is fundamental and vital for their future scholastic life design.

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