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## ART ATELIER IN CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND THE ORGANIZATION OF SPACES AND ENVIRONMENTS IN THE INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING

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### ABSTRACT

The following presents reflections on the theme “organization of spaces and environments in Early Childhood Education and the aesthetic education of the teacher” based on the actions of teaching, research and extension developed with the students of Pedagogy and Fine Arts and teachers of Early Childhood Education at Belo Horizonte City Hall. We present in more detail the work developed throughout the subject “Art Atelier: aesthetic education, spaces, environments, in Early Childhood Education”, offered in the first semester of 2018.

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## INTRODUCTION

"The atelier is a metaphor for the idea of school, understood as a great laboratory, a workshop for the ideas of educational practices that welcomes and amplifies the approaches and the creative views of adults and children" (BASSI, 2007). This text presents reflections on the theme “organization of spaces and environments in Early Childhood Education and the aesthetic education of the teacher” based on the actions of teaching, research and extension developed with the students of Pedagogy and Fine Arts and teachers of Early Childhood Education of the Belo Horizonte City Hall. Between 2013 and 2016, we carried out an action research at UMEI São João, located in the Aglomerado da Serra, south of Belo Horizonte (CAPES / FAPEMIG notice 13/2012), whose main objective was to enhance the use of space as a powerful resource for teaching-learning through the organization of environments focused on children's play<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>We developed several actions such as diagnostics and analysis on the manner of occupation and use of spaces by children and teachers; reorganization of internal and external spaces; conception and execution of projects such as the production of a garden; continuing education of teachers and elaboration of an architectural project for the construction of a playground. As a result of these interventions, we can say that they brought significant changes in the quality of the children's play at UMEI São João. We expanded and diversified the places for children's play. We built participatory methodologies for listening to

The results of this research unfolded in other actions within the university: the realization of two subjects for the undergraduate course: (“Organization and spaces and environments in Early Childhood Education” and “Atelier of Art in Early Childhood Education”), an extension project for public district schools of Early Childhood Education (“The child wants more than space: building environments focused on play in municipal schools of Early Childhood Education in Belo Horizonte”); finally, three monographs of Specialization courses in Early Childhood Education. Throughout the offerings of undergraduate courses and in-service training with teachers, we developed and improved some training strategies more focused on the experience and experimentation of situations in which they were led to think, reflect and propose effective actions aimed at the organization of educational environments: laboratory of experiences and practices of body and plastic arts, visits to early childhood schools, reports of experiences, production of models and organization of environments. In this text, we will make a cut when we present in more detail one of these experiences: the work developed along the discipline "Art Atelier: aesthetic education,

children on the topic. We also gathered rich material to support the work of teachers, such as furniture and toys catalogs, specific bibliography on environments for Early Childhood Education, instruments for evaluating spaces and reports of experiences on different pedagogical work proposals.

spaces, environments, in Early Childhood Education", offered in the first semester of 2018. Our first question would be to present the reasons why we highlight the importance of the theme, especially for teacher training. The spaces and environments in Early Childhood Education are conceived here as generators of learning and, for this reason, an integral part of the pedagogical action. In this sense, the selection and use of objects and materials (furniture, toys, books, etc.), as well as their arrangement in space, do not fail to express the conceptions of what the group of professionals from a given institution attributes to childhood, to development of the child and the educational process in which he participates. It can, for example, favor the construction of children's autonomy and protagonism, in the construction of cooperative and solidary relationships between children, in stimulating play, recognizing the importance of learning processes that occur in the interaction between peers mediated by objects. On the other hand, the organization of the space can, on the contrary, emphasize an adult-centric posture with little visibility of children's actions, valuing control and discipline much more than autonomy, a learning process guided by the interest and initiative of the adult and not the child.

We call space in Early Childhood Education the places delimited and equipped with furniture, objects, educational and decorative materials, composed of different odors, textures, sounds and colors, where activities are carried out (FORNEIRO, 1998; HADDAD & HORN, 2011). It is also a living space for people who live in it where they can feel, do and perceive the world around them. It is a place that in some way is not indifferent to children's experiences. We call the Early Childhood Environment the set of this physical space and the relationships that are established in it, characterized by the affections and interpersonal relationships between the people involved in it, developing social processes. In this sense, space and environment are socially constructed and the result of interactions carried out by the actors who work in the context of early childhood education. The school environment is considered here under several dimensions: physical, functional, temporal and relational. It is also considered an important curricular element in the sense of conceiving it as a structure of opportunities and context of learning and meanings. In addition to its physical dimensions (height, width, length) or architectural (lighting, acoustics, temperature) and its functionality (being flexible, meeting the demands of the school's routine), we think of spaces in Early Childhood Education that not only communicate but also provide opportunities and promote relationships and learning between those who live there. Aesthetically attractive and aimed at promoting interactions between children and adults, mediated by objects (materials, furniture) and with the aim of seeking the full development of the young child, we think about this environment on several aspects; that guarantees a child's learning occurring with the whole body, for example. Therefore, let it be thought of in its polysensory aspect in the sense of offering multiple sensory experiences (tactile, olfactory, visual, gustatory) to those who live in it. That also responds to the child's need for movement: the large, expansive and collective as well as small and individual, linked to the need for retreat and privacy. Let it be considered a principle of the organization of environments (the child moves around the room looking for places that arouse his interest). Finally, a space that values children's interactions and games.

The space offers limits, regulations and agreements to children, but also welcomes and supports them in their imaginative processes of search, experimentation and invention, enchantment and surrender (OSTETTO, 2010), recognizing their needs and enabling the development of their potential. Finally, space is conceived as a product of the subjects who inhabit it. In this sense, we can say that it has the cultural and identity mark of its inhabitants, in a clear process of its appropriation by the subjects in an act of transforming it into a place. It is also a place that not only documents but also narrates the courses experienced by the classes. By following the class itineraries it is also a mutant and changeable space giving us the idea of being always under construction. Among the various pedagogical proposals in Early Childhood Education that intentionally think about the organization of spaces and environments, the proposals that conceive

the activity room as an atelier space are the ones that have most stimulated us. Atelier in the sense of being the artist's work space, a place for research, experimentation and discoveries, but above all for artistic practice, listening and expressing the child through their multiple languages.

### *The atelier as a training strategy*

**The discipline "Art Atelier: aesthetic education, spaces, environments, in early childhood education"** was developed in the form of a transversal discipline<sup>2</sup>, a partnership between the Faculty of Education and the School of Fine Arts<sup>33</sup>. With the workload of 30 hours, its main focus was to deal with creative processes, experimentations and aesthetic investigations, in relation to art, spaces and environments in Early Childhood Education. We now begin to highlight some of the training strategies developed over the course.

**The body and life narratives as training Strategies:** One of the training strategies on which the subject was based was to develop a training process through the life stories of participants in a perspective of a "biographical-atelier" (BERNARDES, 2013), using narrative practice for this "... as an opportunity for the subject 'to walk towards themselves', to become aware of their personal and professional paths" (BERNARDES, 2013, p. 66). In this sense, many moments of the discipline stimulated its participants to narrate their stories, as in the dynamics of making patuás, an activity that opened the subject.



**Figure 1. Patuá produced by student**

*"Our first class was on March 13th. We started the class in the classroom and finished it in the Mandala Garden. It was an amazing experience! I can define this day as sensitivity, intuition and reflection. Professor Rosvita told us about a project (Secrets of the heart) with a class in which the students had just lost their reference teacher. It touched me deeply because my mother had died almost 5 years ago and this*

<sup>2</sup>The Transversal Formations are academic activities that address themes of general interest aiming to encourage the formation of a critical spirit and an in-depth view of the major issues of the country and humanity. It constitutes a possibility of academic trajectory and a common training space for all students of UFMG's undergraduate courses (<https://www.ufmg.br/meulugar/curriculo-transversal/>). The discipline had 30 hours of workload and was developed at the Faculty of Education, UFMG.

<sup>3</sup>Partnership between Rogério Correia of the Faculty of Education and professor Rosvita Kolb Bernardes, School of Fine Arts, Visual Arts course, UFMG.

*process of reframing the absence is constant. In this project she made patuás with her students and proposed that we did the same. It was the first time I sewed. Inside of the patuá there should be a note that we wrote for ourselves, telling what we expected this year. The exchanges of experiences made in this class were very enriching. My patuá has been kept in my wallet since this day” (Thais M. Duarte)*

The production of a portfolio, where each student reflected on how the dynamics and experiences lived in the workshops directly affected them, was also a very significant strategy. Daily records made by the students were presented at the beginning of each meeting, accompanied by the speeches and impressions of the other members. The students' account of childhood experiences and how this was connected to the discussion we had about the place of art in childhood was another strength of the subject. Finally, representing what this exercise of weaving the collective memory network from the threads woven by its participants meant, we cite the experience of occupying one of the spaces of the mandala garden by weaving a true spider web. Another main teaching and learning instrument was the students' own bodies, thought of as a matrix of meanings, a bundle of affections and a source of capture of the multisensory stimuli of the environment. In this sense, bodily experiences, using games and play, group dynamics and theatrical games, occupied an important place in our work routine. With them, we exercised the awareness of occupying spaces with our own body as a measure. Through it we took the students to become aware of the surrounding space, its limits and potential. Walking in different rhythms and shapes, jumping and rolling, intense, expressive and vigorous or slow and smooth movements, walking barefoot under the floor of the room or blindfolded on the leafy garden floor ... we provoked students to experience situations of strangeness in a space that was familiar to them. At the same time, we promoted interactions in which the encounter with the other through the game of glances, physical contact and collective productions generated a sense of well-being, connecting everyone in the proposal.



**Figure 1. Spiderweb dynamics**

The reports of two students about the experience of walking with their eyes blindfolded in the Mandala Garden exemplify our work proposal. The most significant thing to record was how the participating students perceived that the lived experience was related to the proposed readings on the sensitive quality of materials. We realized how much the course was contributing to the students' aesthetic training.

*“Blindfolded and barefooted, the touch, hearing and smell gain prominence and allow us to feel the world in a different way. The smell of wet earth and aromatic herbs, the different textures of the plants, the sensation of damp leaves on bare feet, the confidence to be guided on the other hand, were the main experiences that remained in the memory. In fact, memory is a great word to define this class. All the sensory experiences sent me directly to childhood” (Thais M. Duarte).*

*“... it was an incredible experience, as in the class we worked in the matter of textures, this was one of the best classes for me, “coupled” very well with the text “children spaces and relationships as design environments for Early Childhood Education. “. The thing of exploring all the senses, in a place with so many textures and smells, was fantastic. As the authors said “the skin acts as a mediator between us and the world (...)I managed to experience several of these parameters in this class, mainly because I was blindfolded, waking up even more the others senses ”(Regina M. O. Abreu).*

When proposing all these activities, we discussed with the students what the place of art was in Early Childhood Education, at the same time that we offered them aesthetic experiences similar to the challenge they would have when building such a proposal with the children. We wanted the experiences to show a vision of art as

*“... a continuous and daily process, which involves research (doubting, asking questions, searching, experimenting, exploring materials, ideas and possibilities), achieving self-confidence (personal belief in the ability to do and learn, rehearsing authorship), courage to go there where you don't know, where the mystery is hidden ”. (OSTETO, 2010, sp).*

**Circulating through the university spaces and transforming the room itself:** During the course, we promoted visits to children's schools that were concerned with the quality of their spaces and environments. We wanted to reinforce with this the idea that more than talking or reading about a potentialized educational environment to enable children's practices and experiences, it was necessary to inhabit it. In other words, much of the knowledge would only be possible to be appropriated by the students once they were present in these spaces. Smells and aromas, sounds, colors and textures, as well as ideas of comfort, safety and warmth were considered by us to be sensitive qualities and sensations that would be accessible to students once they were present in these places. Not only in the sense of this experience significantly marking their own bodies and senses, but also of them being able to perceive how the environment affected everyone who lived in it, such as children and teachers, the interactions that they established with each other, with the materials, the environment, furniture and how the environment was organized for the proposed activities.



**Figure 3. Collected materials in the mandala garden**

We also sought to explore what the university brought best in terms of external spaces such as gardens, soccer fields and woods. It was in the external spaces that we had part of our conversation circles and plays. It was from there that we also collected part of the materials that passed to compose the collection of objects in our atelier.



**Figure 2. Parachute plays around the faculty**

*“The outdoor classes allowed me to explore the space, almost never used in the college itself. Being the class more involved, we had an excellent experience of completely belonging to our surroundings, and this is what we have to do, explore the materials that sometimes are so close to us and we don't even notice” (Regina M. O. Abreu, course participant)*

We have also transformed the visual arts classroom space. At this point, it fits here a parenthesis. It was our goal since the beginning of the course to propose students to do an exercise to modify the space of the visual arts room. It was the first time that it would work in that space. The room was quite large and we started our classes before the furniture was completely changed, which gave us the opportunity to explore the large empty space that existed with several laboratories. New materials became part of the room: fabrics and cardboard boxes, old overhead projectors (which remained in classrooms, but only serving a decorative function) were brought together and reframed; caps and stumps, seeds, leaves and small relics (objects brought by the students chosen for their sensitive qualities) gained space along with paints and brushes. With these materials, we have carried out various experiences aimed at bodily experiences (games and plays and theatrical dynamics); space occupation experiments based on three-dimensional structures (boxes and fabrics); sensory explorations in the mandala garden; research, classification and use of elements of nature; experimentations based on the development of a light studio (shadow theater, making compositions based on exploring the quality of materials in the face of light (translucency or opacity of objects, miscibility of liquids, perception and variation of colors). As the workshops were happening, the materials used were composing the new space of the new visual arts room.

Finally, when all the furniture arrived, we started other changes. The group students discussed how the new space would be, bringing together the experiences lived in the workshops with the furniture and materials that already belonged to the arts room. They made several sketches of what the new room would look like, suggesting changes in the reorganization of furniture, tables, cabinets and materials.

The large tables and chairs shared a place with rugs and pillows. The productions of students from past semesters (sculptures, portfolios, drawings and paintings) as well as art books were removed from the cabinets, decorating and documenting the room's environment. Likewise, we have also organized work materials (paints, brushes, papers, pencils and other materials).

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The whole experience brought significant learning to us and the students. Once again it was clear that it does not make sense to deal with themes such as the organization of spaces and environments in Early Childhood Education without addressing the aesthetic training of teachers. Such training involves experiences (aesthetic, bodily) and the connection with their life stories. In this sense, thinking about the Atelier proposal in the initial training of students, exploring all its potential for openness, research and experimentation brought a renewal of our pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education.

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