

## Understanding Features of Amiable Environments That Can Nourish Emergent Literacy Skills of Preschoolers

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**Abstract:** Educators and researchers are cognizant of the importance of environment and relationships and their impacts on children's gaining literacy skills. The Reggio Emilia approach values all layers of environment that surrounds preschoolers. The current study focuses on many dimensions of "classroom environment." It examines how classroom environment appears and facilitates literacy education in a Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool. The qualitative research study involved a Reggio Emilia inspired-laboratory preschool at a Midwestern research university in the United States of America. The results indicated that a preschool classroom environment has many dimensions that preschool teachers should know about. Moreover, the study showed that the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool offered a rich, amiable environment that satisfied preschoolers' interests, triggered their inquiries and supported their development and learning in relation to literacy.

**Key words:** Environment; Emergent Literacy; Reggio Emilia Approach; Preschool.

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### INTRODUCTION

Classroom environments of preschools, where children from three to five attend, are critical contexts in children's development and education. Katz and Inan (2007) state that the impact of classroom environments continues to play an important role in strengthening children's education and foundational development. They indicate that as children spend increasingly more time in these environments, the quality of these classrooms is highly critical.

Studies in America suggest that recently educators spend more time on creating high quality environments since they are cognizant of the impact of quality environment on children's learning and development. Otherwise, lack of essential stimuli in the environment might be detrimental to children's development and learning (Hadzigeorgiou, 2002). The issue of Reggio Emilia environments is discussed by educators and researchers, but very little is known about Reggio Emilia-inspired environments in the United States of America in relation to Emergent Literacy.

Emergent Literacy is defined as the process of developing an awareness and control of print language, which occurs before young children begin reading and writing conventionally (Davidson, 1996). Young children in the stage of emergent literacy discover the critical set of concepts about print which is necessary for being successful in later stages of literacy and learn how pleasurable reading books and being read to is (Gillet & Temple, 2000). Roskos and Christie (2000) point out the ecological perspective which claims that there is a link between literacy mastery and literacy-enriched classroom environments. The classroom environment can play an important role in preschoolers' developing emergent literacy skills.

Many researchers indicate that literacy-enriched environments can increase the number of literacy activities and events happening in the classroom (Einarsdottir, 2000; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1991; Roskos & Neuman, 1998; Vukelich, 1991). Preschoolers can construct their knowledge about literacy better in an environment where they can do some practices, observations, explorations, and experiments with literacy (Davidson, 1996). Roskos and Neuman (1998) state, "Play environments rich in literacy resources, including people, push children to reveal what they know about writing and reading and pull at their literacy development in a seemingly beneficial way" (p.103). Clearly, it is seen that literacy materials, tools or toys in early childhood education centers can enrich young children's experiences with literacy and increase literacy-play activities and events.

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In the Reggio Emilia preschools, the importance of environment is stressed by stating that *environment is the third teacher* who helps, guides, and serves children, and thus facilitate children's learning and development (Gandini, 2002). Accordingly, the role of classroom environment in early childhood education is essential to be examined and understood by educators and researchers. The current study focuses on features of quality preschool environments in relation to preschool literacy education. Specifically, the study aims to examine an exemplary preschool environment, which is inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach.

**Theoretical Framework:**

Environment in early childhood education centers is an issue which is discussed for centuries by many thinkers, even by Froebel (1782-1852), who is known for his work on the first kindergarten, play, gifts (materials and tools) and occupations (activities). Some of other well-known thinkers on early childhood environments are Montessori, who organized the space and created special play (self-correcting) materials for children; Piaget, who stressed the importance of children's direct interaction with the physical environment and their active manipulation of materials; Vygotsky, who states the importance of the triangle of the social environment, physical environment and children; and Bronfenbrenner, who underlines the importance of different layers of the environment in children's lives from direct ones to indirect ones.

In order to emphasize the importance of environments in people's lives, Greenman (1988) states "An environment is a living, changing system. More than the physical space, it indicates the way time is structured and the roles we are expected to play. It conditions how we feel, think, and behave; and it dramatically affects the quality of our lives". As the environment is an important part of life, it is essential to examine functions of it in education and development and understand it in-depth, so that teachers can create high quality environments, in which effective literacy education can be achieved.

Emergent Literacy and the internationally-known early childhood education approach, Reggio Emilia, have interested educators and researchers, but there is little research about how the physical environment appears and facilitates children's gaining of emergent literacy skills in a Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool classroom. Rinaldi (1998) states that through constructing and organizing spaces they aim to help children and teachers in various ways (see Table 1 & Table 2) as well as increase parents' involvement and collaboration with teachers and other parents. The current study aims to make at least a little contribution to understanding Reggio Emilia environments in relation to Emergent Literacy.

**Table 1:** The construction and organization of the space 1 (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 120).

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The Construction and Organization of the Space should enable *Children*:

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- 1-to express their potential, abilities, and curiosity;
  - 2-to explore and research alone and with others, both peers and adults;
  - 3-to perceive themselves as constructors of projects and of the overall educational project carried out in the school;
  - 4-to reinforce their identities (also in terms of gender), autonomy, and security;
  - 5-to work and communicate with others;
  - 6-to know that their identities and privacy are respected.
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**Table 2:** The construction and organization of the space 2 (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 120).

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The Construction and Organization of the Space should enable *Teachers*:

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- 1-to feel supported and integrated in their relationships with children and parents;
  - 2-to have appropriate spaces and furnishings to satisfy their need to meet with other adults, both colleagues and parents;
  - 3-to have their need for privacy recognized;
  - 4-to be supported in their processes of learning and professional development.
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The current qualitative study specifically focuses on the Reggio Emilia's innovative approach to "preschool environment" and how "literacy education" appears in such an environment where the education philosophy is inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. Katz and Inan (2007) indicate that an environment involves many features: (i) The physical structure (e.g., size, walls, flooring, windows, lighting, doors, colors, and texture); (ii) the objects within the space (e.g., toys, books, manipulatives, children's works, moveable furniture, plants, and decorative stuff); (iii) the arrangement of these structures, objects and activities within the space. The current study focuses on those physical features of an environment and how it appears to have an impact on educational life of children as the third teacher, in Gandini's words. As the Reggio Emilia approach uniquely contributes to the philosophy of the early childhood education and the environment of early childhood education settings, the study reported here examines the literacy education in a Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool classroom from the point of view which focuses on the physical environment.

The aim of the current research was to examine promising classroom practices or processes inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, the way in which they exemplify classroom quality. This study addresses the following question: *How does the physical environment facilitate literacy education which is socially constructed and integrated into the daily life curriculum in the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool?*

**Methodology:**

**Context:**

This study involved a preschool classroom setting, which was part of a laboratory school in the United States of America. This laboratory school involved many early childhood education philosophies and programs as it has served as an early childhood education center since 1923. The school's goal is to offer an exemplary program for young children and their families, which is inspired by an Italian early childhood education philosophy, the Reggio Emilia approach. It also provides university students with an opportunity to conduct research and learn strategies to promote cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development in young children. This laboratory school provided the current study rich context in which we could understand how environment facilitates the inclusion of Emergent Literacy education in a Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool.

**Participants:**

The preschool classroom included 18 preschoolers, 1 program coordinator, 2 lead and 8 student teachers, and the participant researcher. The children were selected for this laboratory preschool in order to create a heterogenous population and balance for the children's sex, age, and cultural/ethnic background. In this classroom, there were eight girls and ten boys whose ages ranged from three to five years. Six of the children are African-American, ten are Caucasian, and two are Asian. This sampling population was also heterogenous in terms of their families' religious beliefs, which included Atheist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim.

All teachers including the program coordinator were White, female, and American. Student teachers were present in the setting to receive training from the lead teachers and conduct projects with the preschoolers. The researcher was a White, female outsider studying early childhood education. As the goal of ethnography is "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world" (Malinowski, 1922, p. 25, italics in original), the researcher identified herself as a participant observer who was taking part in the research context by conducting direct observations and informal interviews, collecting documents/artifacts, and taking field notes (Patton, 1990; Spradley, 1980). The data collection took over one year. Being a participant observer provided the researcher an opportunity to observe the preschoolers from the viewpoint of someone in the classroom rather than outside the classroom.

**Data Collection & Analysis:**

Specifically the goal was to examine the physical environment in relevant to Emergent Literacy by utilizing Spradley's Grand Tour and Taxonomic Domain Analysis. To gain in-depth information, this inquiry-based study adapted a research design with ethnographic data collection techniques (i.e., interviews, participant observations, document/artifact collection, and field-notes).

An ethnographic method, Spradley's Developmental Research Sequence [D.R.S.] Method (Spradley, 1980), was utilized to collect both surfaced and in-depth data. Data collection included two phases: Spradley's Grand Tour, which is utilized to collect general information about the environment like how it looks like, and Spradley's taxonomy, which is utilized to understand the environment in-depth like how the environment accommodates both group and individual works.

The data analysis occurred throughout the study as it also shaped how the study proceeded (Glesne, 1999). As the first step of the data analysis, all data was transformed into computer in various ways (e.g., interviews were transcribed verbatim).

The data were analyzed from an interpretive perspective using a cultural lens, namely Spradley's D.R.S. Method. Spradley's D.R.S. Method (1980) helped to set the cultural tone, which is the heart of ethnography. Spradley defined ethnographic analysis as "a search for the parts of a culture, the relationships among the parts, and their relationships to the whole" (p.116). The D.R.S. Method provided a systematic way to reveal the embeddedness of literacy throughout the culture of the classroom. His Grand Tour and semantic relations system (Taxonomic Domain Analysis) reflected the role of the physical environment in constructing literacy in the preschool classroom. Coding and diagramming was facilitated by a software program called Inspiration.

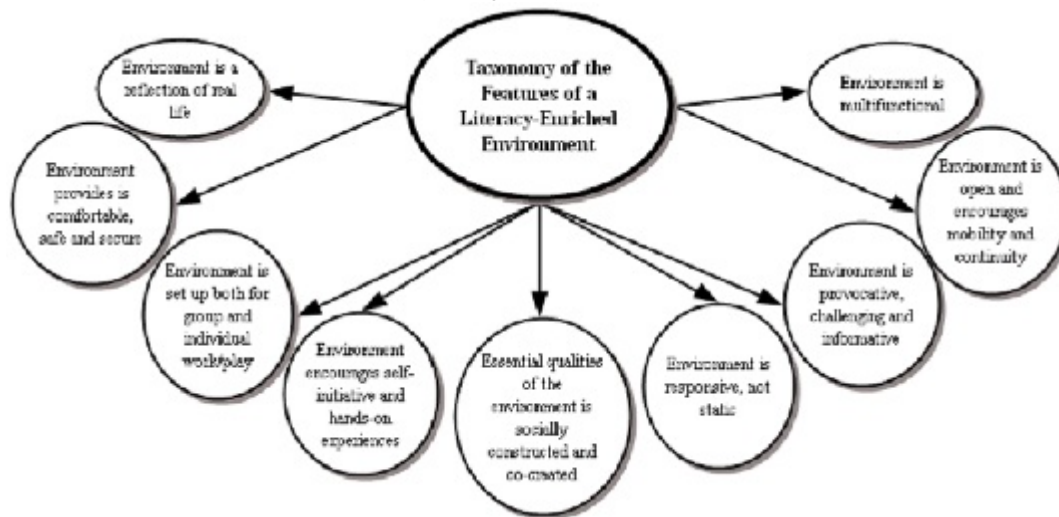
**Findings:**

**Grand Tour: Environment is the Third Teacher:**

This preschool classroom had four parts besides a playground: A big room with an open studio, a small quiet room with a little loft, a kitchen, and a bathroom. There was a deliberate attempt to create a challenging, provocative and complex environment for these young children. Many stations were designed for preschoolers to work at and big posters of previous projects were displayed on the walls of the classroom. The actual literacy works of the preschoolers were displayed everywhere –on the shelves, and up on the ceiling; and a variety of tools/materials and resources related to literacy were spread all around the room.

In the words of Lella Gandini (2002), the environment was the third teacher. It provided preschoolers a quality, thoughtfully arranged context in which they could engage with emergent literacy work in a meaningful and playful way. In the current study, examination of the environment (i.e., Grand Tour and the semantic relations in terms of the places for doing literacy) showed that the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool environment is rich in print and facilitates literacy education in the preschool.

Environment, adult support, and free play— all of those worked together harmoniously as expected in quality preschool environments. The preschoolers were exposed to challenging situations through the carefully arranged environment, free to play and explore their surroundings with joy, and provided the security and enrichment of adult guidance. In the current study, features of the Reggio Emilia-inspired classroom environment reveals nine cultural domains (see Figure 1).



**Fig. 1:** Taxonomy of the Features of a Literacy-Enriched Environment

**Domain 1- Environment Is Open and Encourages Mobility and Continuity So That Literacy Occurs Across Spaces and Time:**

Preschoolers co-constructed frequently literacy in multiple places including almost every space of the classroom. The playground and other places outside the classroom provided space and opportunities for children to pursue their interest in literacy and engage with literacy, from the quiet room, to the kitchen, and the main classroom including the art studio. Similarly books and print materials were located at every parts of the classroom.

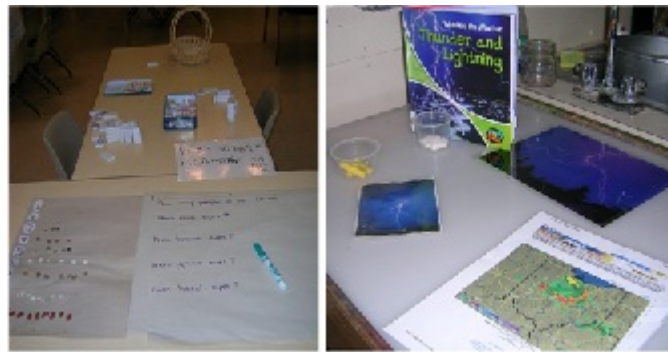
Teachers arranged the places in the preschool classroom carefully and thoughtfully to provoke children’s inquiry and interest and to support their understanding of literacy. They provided a variety of materials and tools in those places so that the preschoolers could manipulate and learn about literacy. One of the teachers, Mary, indicated that they offered several areas of the classroom where literacy materials/tools were available and children could have literacy experiences. When the teachers foresaw learning possibilities for the preschoolers, they supported preschoolers’ literacy development at different places, at different times during the day and over days and weeks. In summary, there was no space or time limitation for literacy activities and events and emergent literacy activities and materials were occurring all over the classroom.



**Fig. 2:** Emergent Literacy was co-constructed at multiple places at multiple times: 1- Main classroom: Tracing wooden letters and using pipe-cleaners to make letters and numbers, 2- Art studio: Reading books about countries and flags and painting on the light table, 3- Main Classroom: Writing letters, 4- Kitchen: Making a banana bread from the recipe book.

***Domain 2- Environment Is Multifunctional Supporting an Integrated Curriculum:***

In addition to Emergent Literacy activities happening at multiple places and during multiple times throughout the day, Emergent Literacy works also were interconnected with other disciplines, such as math, natural sciences, social sciences and art. Disciplines other than Emergent Literacy happened throughout the classroom just like Emergent Literacy. The places within the classroom were multifunctional and promoted an integrated curriculum, and this integrated curriculum promoted the multifunctionality of the classroom spaces.



**Fig. 3:** Environment is multifunctional in a way that Emergent Literacy embedded in a wide range of disciplines. Examples: 1) Math and 2) Natural Sciences.

***Domain 3- Environment Is Provocative, Challenging and Informative:***

The teachers set up the environment with various materials and tools which can attract preschoolers to think, search and have some Emergent Literacy experiences. But more importantly, the teachers wanted children to always aim harder, better, and deeper. It was not a boring traditional way of exploring print. Preschoolers were very excited and engaged with deep investigations. The teachers provided preschoolers opportunities and materials and time to work on print. The preschoolers deeply, successfully and happily engaged with using print materials and working on print, such as telling stories, reading books with teachers, checking picture books, using recipes, writing happy birthday messages, reading weather maps, tracing letters, reading weather maps on the light table and so on.

***Domain 4- Environment Is Responsive, Not Static:***

The teachers were setting up the environment with new materials and tools, changing things/variables at each time to better support children's Emergent Literacy development. For example, one day the subject was colors and fireworks, because it was Independence Day. The teachers enriched the environment with related books and props (e.g., Color Dance by Ann Jonas, the Color Eyes by Dayle Ann Dodds). The other day the studio was set up with an overhead projector, shadow books and some props since the subject was shadows. Changing some variables or completely changing the subject helped the preschoolers learn more things related to literacy and have quality literacy experiences.

***Domain 5- Essential Qualities of the Environment Is Socially Constructed and Co-created by Teachers and Children:***

Through negotiations, documentation and 'listening' carefully to the preschoolers, the teachers make decisions on what would be next in terms of the new pathway of the curriculum in general and how to shape the environment. Teachers made a careful selection of materials and tools, and prepared the environment where the preschoolers could explore and interact with literacy materials (including toys and books). Along with a thoughtful selection of materials, the teachers paid much attention to how materials would be presented to create learning possibilities for the preschoolers. They aimed to provoke children's interest in reading and writing by providing materials and tools and a chance to explore them freely in a comfortable place (see Figure 4). Teachers co-created the essential qualities of the space with the children. Not the curriculum but the environment, which was enriched with literacy materials and tools, was provocation to interests of the preschoolers in literacy. For example, the preschoolers were interested in Bob the Builder, a cartoon character who builds houses, and the teachers enriched the environment with related literacy materials and props and gave the preschoolers time and an opportunity to work on their interest.



**Fig. 4:** Children were interested in building houses.

***Domain 6- Environment Encourages Self-initiative and Hands-on Experiences in Literacy:***

Environment encourages self-initiative and hands-on experiences in literacy, such as manipulating print objects, writing happy birthday letters, reading books and telling stories on a tape-recorder (see Figure 5). The teachers always encouraged hands-on experiences, literacy-related dramatic plays, and the preschoolers were very successful in working on literacy concepts.



**Fig. 5:** Various literacy experiences: 1-Reading books and telling stories on a tape-recorder, 2-Reading books and weather maps, checking transparent pictures, 3-Making a message box, and writing happy birthday messages to a friend in the class.

***Domain 7- Environment Is a Reflection of Real Life- Life Outside the Classroom:***

Literacy was truly integrated into children's lives because the selected topics were relevant to children's experiences in real life. Parallel to this, the environment is a reflection of real life. The lead teacher Kathy said, "We can make sure that what we do experience together is meaningful, that it matters to the children... our approach is to use always, always as much as possible, real things, real materials, real encounters." As the life of the classroom is reflection of the life outside, the preschoolers' experiences with literacy was reflection of real life experiences. For example, they pretended working in a restaurant, took orders and put it on a paper. Another example can be looking at a recipe book and making cup cakes. Again another day was one of the preschoolers' birthday and teachers and the preschoolers made a box, and filled with their happy birthday message cards, which they prepared. The integration of real life experiences into literacy works made them more natural than if literacy skills were used in a typical classroom context where a teacher give students direct instruction on literacy.

***Domain 8- Environment Is Set up Both for Group and Individual Work/play:***

The space is thoughtfully organized to foster social exchanges and interactions between the things and the people, and to provide spaces where children can stay alone if they want (see Figure 6).



**Fig. 6:** Environment accommodates both individual work and group work.

***Domain 9- Environment Provides Is Comfortable, Safe and Secure Places Enriched with Adult Guidance:***

The results of the current research indicated that the teachers in the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool created a literacy-rich context of *social-constructivist* education where children's knowledge of print and literacy skills could be nourished. They provided the preschoolers a context where they could pursue their inquiries and interests in the literacy, learn about print, use Emergent Literacy skills, and actively engage in reading and writing. They provided preschoolers scaffolding, time and a comfortable and safe space to work on literacy.

**Conclusion:**

Inan and Katz (2007) state that high quality education and care in early childhood programs is associated with features of the physical and social environment, which are predictive of a range of positive developmental outcomes for children in their cognitive, social-emotional, language, and physical domains. Accordingly, it is essential for educators and researchers to be cognizant of the importance of environment and relationships and their impacts on children's emergent literacy skills.

The Reggio Emilia approach values all layers of environment that surrounds preschoolers. The current study focuses on many dimensions of classroom environment and examines how it appears and facilitates literacy education in a Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool. The results indicated that a preschool classroom environment is a multidimensional, emergent literacy-rich and emergent literacy-friendly environment that triggered preschoolers' inquiries and supported their learning relevant to emergent literacy.

The current research aimed to uncover much of the complexity of how the Reggio Emilia-inspired environment facilitates Emergent Literacy skills of preschoolers in a preschool context. This study did not identify all the facets of the environment, but it showed that the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool environment and literacy embedded within it is complex and dynamic phenomena in which both teachers and the children acted together to construct their knowledge of literacy and such environment facilitates the inclusion of literacy into the curriculum effectively in its unique way. The features of the exemplary early childhood education center, which is inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, can be summarized with nine different domains as follows:

- Environment is open and encourages mobility and continuity so that literacy occurs across spaces and time,
- Environment is multifunctional supporting an integrated curriculum,
- Environment is provocative, challenging and informative,
- Environment is responsive, not static,
- Essential qualities of the environment is socially constructed and co-created by teachers and children,
- Environment encourages self-initiative and hands-on experiences in literacy,
- Environment is a reflection of real life- life outside the classroom,
- Environment is set up both for group and individual work/play,
- Environment is safe and secure and enriched with adult guidance.

This study focuses on specifically the concept of educational environment and relationships. Since the Reggio Emilia approach encourages young children to engage with emergent literacy, it is worth to examine and explore it more in-depth in terms of the ways of the environment facilitates emergent literacy education in Reggio-inspired preschools. Thus documenting emergent literacy environments in preschool settings can help inform the practices of teacher educators.

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