IJNRD.ORG ISSN : 2456-4184
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF NOVEL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (IJNRD) | IJNRD.ORG
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

PLAY AS CHILDREN'S FOUNDATIONAL WORK: A CHILD-CENTERED DESIGN FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Running Head: *PLAY AS FOUNDATIONAL WORK*

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Abstract
This study examines the application of child-centered design principles in educational environments, emphasizing play as the primary medium through which children achieve cognitive, social, and emotional development. Drawing on established educational philosophies such as Montessori pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach, alongside contemporary neuroscientific insights, the study argues that learning spaces designed from the child's perspective support natural learning processes and promote sustainable developmental outcomes.
Play is conceptualized not as a supplementary activity but as a central mechanism through which children construct knowledge, regulate emotions, and develop social competence. Educational environments that recognize play as serious developmental work foster autonomy, creativity, and intrinsic motivation. When spatial design aligns with children's developmental needs, it enables exploration, experimentation, and learning through direct sensory and social interaction.
The study analyzes three evidence-based approaches to illustrate effective child-centered educational design. The Giochimparando–OpenMind methodology implemented in Italy demonstrates how structured play combined with open-ended exploration enhances self-directed learning and cognitive flexibility. The integrated Meravigliamo method introduces multisensory sonic experiences as therapeutic and pedagogical tools, utilizing sound frequencies and spatial acoustic design to optimize neuroplastic conditions for learning. Outdoor learning environments informed by biophilic design principles highlight the benefits of nature-based engagement for attention, emotional regulation, and experiential learning. Additionally, participatory design practices position children as active contributors in shaping learning spaces, reinforcing agency, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging.
The findings indicate that play-based, child-centered learning environments contribute to improved academic performance, reduced educational disengagement, and the development of higher-order cognitive skills such as problem-solving and collaboration. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscores the adaptability of these approaches, as flexible, multisensory, and outdoor learning environments supported continuity and emotional well-being. Overall, the study offers practical insights for educators, architects, and policymakers seeking to design inclusive and developmentally appropriate educational spaces.

Keywords: play-based learning, child-centered design, educational environments, biophilic design, Montessori pedagogy, Reggio Emilia approach, inclusive education, outdoor learning

1. Introduction

The design of educational environments profoundly influences how children learn, develop, and construct knowledge about their world. Yet traditional approaches to educational facility design often prioritize adult perspectives, operational efficiency, and standardized spatial configurations that may not align with children's developmental needs and natural learning processes. This article advocates for a fundamental reconceptualization of educational design that positions children's play as serious developmental work worthy of intentional spatial support.

The conceptual foundation for this approach emerges from recognition that learning and play are inextricably intertwined in childhood development. As we design educational spaces, integrating the child's perspective enables creation of meaningful environments that encourage wonder while engaging curiosity across diverse subject areas, including traditionally challenging disciplines such as philosophy, history, and mathematics (Montessori, 1994; Rinaldi, 2006). This child-centered design approach transforms not merely physical spaces but the epistemological frameworks through which we understand children's capabilities and learning processes.

2. Theoretical Framework: Understanding Knowledge Construction in Childhood

For decades, epistemologists have investigated how humans arrive at knowledge, whether through scientific inquiry, reason, or experiential discovery (Edelman, 2006). Within educational contexts, Dr. Maria Montessori's pioneering research and systematic observations of young children and adolescents in carefully prepared environments demonstrated that children absorb knowledge from their surroundings, essentially engaging in self-directed learning when provided with appropriate materials and spatial conditions (American Montessori Society, 2020). Her empirical work established that children possess innate drives toward learning that manifest through exploratory play and sensory engagement with their environment.

Similarly, Loris Malaguzzi's research on children's learning in Reggio Emilia, Italy, identified optimal conditions for supporting children's developmental journey through building with them and for them "a network of understandings that is founded on the continual intertwining of the fields of knowledge and the fields of experience" (Feder, 2020, p. 118). The Reggio Emilia approach conceptualizes the physical environment as the "third teacher" alongside educators and families, emphasizing how spatial design actively participates in pedagogical processes.

3. Contemporary Urgency: COVID-19 and Educational Paradigm Shifts

The global COVID-19 pandemic forced unprecedented disruptions to traditional educational delivery, shuttering schools worldwide and necessitating rapid adaptations to remote and outdoor learning modalities. This crisis paradoxically created opportunities to reconsider long-standing assumptions about educational environments and rediscover historical pedagogical legacies emphasizing children's right to play as a form of participatory expression and authentic learning.

Recent research on Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) has documented significant challenges and adaptations in educational practice. Iglesias-Pradas et al. (2021) found that the sudden shift to online learning during COVID-19 actually resulted in improved academic performance in some contexts, suggesting that organizational factors and pedagogical flexibility can contribute to successful implementation of emergency educational measures (doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2021.106713). Similarly, Misirli and Ergulec (2021) documented how parents experienced both challenges and opportunities during emergency remote teaching, highlighting the critical importance of family engagement and support systems in maintaining educational continuity (doi: 10.1007/s10639-021-10520-4).

The transformation of educational delivery during the pandemic revealed fundamental insights about the nature of learning environments and pedagogical adaptability. Erlam et al. (2021) examined academics' experiences of emergency remote teaching, finding that the forced transition led to critical reflection on pedagogical practices and ultimately enhanced awareness of what truly matters in educational delivery (doi: 10.3389/feduc.2021.639842). These findings align with child-centered educational philosophy that prioritizes flexible, responsive approaches to learning over rigid institutional structures.

The pandemic context reminds us that meaningful educational change must begin in the adult world first, requiring educators, designers, and policymakers to critically examine how contemporary practices situate children as protagonists in learning processes within homelike environments that promote cooperative living and learning (Feder, 2020). This article examines three interconnected approaches to child-centered educational design: play-based pedagogical methods, outdoor learning environments, and participatory design practices that honor children's perspectives.

4. Method

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology examining three distinct but interconnected approaches to child-centered educational design. Data sources include documented outcomes from the Giochimparando-OpenMind program implementation in Italian primary schools, empirical research on outdoor learning environments with specific focus on Crow Island School (Winnetka, Illinois), and participatory design projects including the Discovery Elementary School Design Challenge. Analysis synthesizes findings from educational research, neuroscience, environmental psychology, and architectural design literature to identify common principles and practical implications for educational practice and policy.

5. The Giochimparando-OpenMind Method: Play as Inclusive Pedagogy

5.1 Conceptual Foundation and Implementation

Giochimparando-OpenMind represents a comprehensive pedagogical approach centered on learning through games (literally translated as "play-learning"). Developed and implemented in Italian primary schools, this method recognizes that during play, children experience emotional self-regulation and reconnect learning with positive emotions including excitement, enjoyment, and freedom from anxiety (Riccardi, 2017). The approach has been validated through rigorous evaluation by the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy Development at La Sapienza University of Rome, establishing empirical foundations for its effectiveness.

The method aims explicitly toward inclusive education by integrating children experiencing various forms of hardship including language difficulties, serious illnesses, and socio-economic challenges, with particular attention to foreign children facing additional barriers to educational success. Through this educational experience positioning play as children's meaningful expression, schools transform into welcoming spaces for friendship, well-being, and creativity rather than sites of anxiety and exclusion.

5.2 Documented Outcomes and Impact

Systematic evaluation of schools implementing the Giochimparando-OpenMind method demonstrates measurable improvements across multiple dimensions. Quantitative data reveals reduced dropout rates among participating students, with particular effectiveness for children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Academic performance indicators show enhanced engagement across traditional subject areas, with notable improvements in mathematics and literacy comprehension when delivered through play-based modalities.

Perhaps more significantly, qualitative assessments document improvements in children's self-esteem, social cooperation, and emotional regulation. Teachers report observing increased curiosity, enhanced peer relationships, and improved classroom climate characterized by collaborative rather than competitive dynamics. The method's success stems from its recognition that academic learning and social-emotional development occur simultaneously through purposeful play experiences.

5.3 Meravigliamo: Multisensory Learning Through Marvel and Sound

The Giochimparando method has been enhanced through "Meravigliamo" (literally "let's wonder"), a collaboration with sound designer and conceptual artist Marko Guglielmi, known professionally as Reimmortal for his interactive installations emphasizing sonic experiences. This "marvel channel" project introduces art experiences into children's learning dimensions through sound as a primary sensory stimulus, opening children's minds to novel sensory wonders and expanding traditional boundaries of educational experience.

Marko Guglielmi Reimmortal, as co-author of the Meravigliamo method alongside Barbara Riccardi, brings over thirty-five years of experimental research on sound and vision to pedagogical innovation. His "sonic vision of reality" philosophy recognizes sound as a universal language capable of creating immediate reciprocal influence that transcends formal linguistic barriers. This approach views humans as "musical instruments in the grand concert of life," each contributing to a universal harmonic symphony.

The Meravigliamo method systematically integrates multisensory experiences into educational settings through carefully designed sonic environments. The approach employs interactive sound installations, harmonic frequency modulation, and spatial acoustic design to create learning spaces that respond to children's natural ways of processing information through multiple sensory channels. Marko's background in creating large-scale sonic installations like the MEGAGONG series and interactive pieces such as the "Sonic Tree" provides the technological and artistic foundation for translating museum-quality sonic experiences into classroom pedagogy.

Central to the method is the concept of "wonder as an experiential channel" that sensitizes children to the harmonic beauty of their environment while teaching them how to appreciate and preserve it. The pedagogical framework incorporates elements of magic, music, and art to create structured learning experiences that utilize

surprise, curiosity, and emotional engagement as primary drivers of knowledge acquisition. Children participate in guided activities involving blindfolded movement exercises responding to sonic stimuli, creation of "emotional orchestras" using specially designed instruments, and perception-altering experiences using colored filters and dimensional tools.

Neuroscientific research supports the pedagogical value of multisensory learning environments. Sound stimulation activates multiple neural pathways simultaneously, enhancing memory consolidation and emotional engagement with learning materials (Panksepp, 2007). Marko's integration of harmonic frequencies and therapeutic sound technologies creates optimal conditions for neuroplasticity while supporting children's cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and social cooperation abilities.

Recent advances in music-based neuroplasticity research provide empirical support for the Meravigliamo approach. Miendlarzewska and Trost (2013) demonstrate that musical training produces measurable changes in brain development, with particular benefits for frequency following response (FFR) - the brain's ability to synchronize neural activity to acoustic parameters of sound stimuli, thereby enhancing both musical and linguistic processing capabilities (doi: 10.3389/fnins.2013.00279). Furthermore, Koelsch et al. (2024) found that music-induced brain network oscillations occur in specific frequency bands, with listening to preferred music facilitating easier access to cognitive functions, emotional regulation, and creative thinking processes (doi: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e23134).

Research on pediatric music therapy applications directly supports the therapeutic potential of sound-based learning interventions. Bringas et al. (2015) demonstrated the effectiveness of music therapy as an aid to neurorestoration in children with severe neurological disorders, showing measurable improvements in cognitive and behavioral outcomes through structured musical interventions (doi: 10.3389/fnins.2015.00427). This research aligns with Marko's approach of using sound not merely as background stimulus but as an active therapeutic and pedagogical tool that engages multiple sensory systems to optimize learning conditions.

The Meravigliamo approach recognizes that learning occurs through the integration of cognitive, emotional, and sensory experiences. By creating immersive sonic environments that honor children's multisensory ways of knowing, the method transforms traditional educational spaces into dynamic laboratories for discovery, creativity, and collaborative exploration. This pedagogical innovation represents a synthesis of artistic vision, scientific research, and educational practice that positions wonder as both medium and message in children's developmental journey.

6. Outdoor Learning Environments: Biophilic Design and Natural Engagement

6.1 Theoretical Foundations and Evidence Base

Research in environmental psychology and educational neuroscience consistently demonstrates that exposure to natural environments supports children's cognitive development, attention regulation, and emotional well-being. Outdoor learning environments designed according to biophilic principles create opportunities for direct engagement with natural systems while providing flexible spaces for exploration, experimentation, and discovery-based learning.

The Green Schoolyard Network documents multiple benefits of outdoor learning environments, including improved academic performance, enhanced creativity, better physical health, and stronger environmental stewardship attitudes among participating students (Green Schoolyard Network, 2011). Meta-analytic research indicates that outdoor education programs produce significant positive effects on academic achievement, self-concept, and social competence (Neill, 2011).

6.2 Case Study: Crow Island School Design Innovation

Crow Island School in Winnetka, Illinois, exemplifies architectural innovation supporting child-centered learning through integration of indoor and outdoor spaces. The school's design philosophy recognizes children's need for movement, natural light, and connection to outdoor environments as fundamental requirements for optimal development rather than luxury amenities.

The facility incorporates multiple outdoor learning spaces, including gardens, gathering areas, and flexible pavilions that support curriculum integration across subject areas. Students engage in science learning through direct observation and experimentation in natural settings, while language arts instruction incorporates storytelling and creative expression in outdoor amphitheaters designed at child scale.

7. Participatory Design: Children as Educational Environment Protagonists

7.1 Philosophical Foundations and Implementation Approaches

Participatory design practices in educational environments position children as active contributors to spatial planning and environmental modification rather than passive recipients of adult-designed spaces. This approach recognizes children's expertise regarding their own learning needs and spatial preferences while developing their agency, self-advocacy skills, and sense of ownership over educational environments.

The Discovery Elementary School Design Challenge exemplifies this approach through structured processes that engage students in identifying spatial problems, generating creative solutions, and participating in design decision-making. Students collaborate with architects and educators to envision learning environments that support their diverse learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and creative expressions.

7.2 Outcomes and Benefits

Schools implementing participatory design processes report enhanced student engagement, improved school climate, and stronger connections between students and their learning environments. Children who participate in environmental design decisions demonstrate increased pride in their school, greater care for shared spaces, and enhanced sense of belonging within educational communities.

These processes also provide valuable learning opportunities in areas including spatial reasoning, collaborative problem-solving, democratic participation, and creative expression. Students develop understanding of how built environments influence human behavior and well-being while gaining practical experience in design thinking and project implementation.

8. Neuroscientific Foundations: Play and Brain Development

Contemporary neuroscientific research provides compelling evidence that play serves essential functions in brain development, particularly in areas related to executive function, emotional regulation, and social cognition. Jaak Panksepp's research demonstrates that play behavior activates neural circuits associated with positive emotion while supporting the development of social brain networks crucial for cooperative behavior and empathy (Panksepp, 2007).

Play experiences create optimal conditions for neuroplasticity, enabling children to develop cognitive flexibility, problem-solving capabilities, and adaptive responses to novel situations. Educational environments that provide rich opportunities for varied play experiences support healthy brain development while fostering resilience, creativity, and social competence.

Recent research on developmental neuroplasticity confirms that childhood represents a critical period for experience-dependent brain modification. Tooley et al. (2020) demonstrate that learning mechanisms during childhood and adolescence are mediated by neuroplasticity processes that create adaptive structural and functional changes in brain networks, with formal and informal learning experiences directly shaping neural development through the first two and a half decades of life (doi: 10.1016/j.dcn.2020.100764). These findings underscore the importance of designing educational environments that leverage children's enhanced neuroplastic capacity during these formative developmental periods.

9. Implementation Framework: Design Principles for Child-Centered Educational Environments

Based on analysis of the Giochimparando method, outdoor learning research, and participatory design practices, we identify several key principles for creating child-centered educational environments:

- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Spaces should accommodate diverse learning styles, group configurations, and activity types through moveable furnishings, multi-purpose areas, and modular design elements.
- **Sensory Richness:** Environments should engage multiple sensory modalities through varied textures, natural materials, acoustic design, and opportunities for movement and exploration.
- **Scale and Proportionality:** Furniture, fixtures, and spatial dimensions should reflect children's physical dimensions and developmental capabilities rather than adult conveniences.
- **Natural Integration:** Access to natural light, outdoor spaces, plants, and natural materials supports both physical and psychological well-being while providing opportunities for environmental learning.
- **Cultural Responsiveness:** Design elements should reflect and celebrate the cultural backgrounds and experiences of students while providing opportunities for cross-cultural learning and appreciation.
- **Collaborative and Individual Space:** Environments should provide options for both social learning and individual reflection through varied spatial configurations and acoustic zones.

10. Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

The evidence presented through play-based learning approaches, outdoor education research, and participatory design practices has significant implications for educational policy and facility planning. Traditional approaches to educational facility design that prioritize standardization, cost efficiency, and adult supervision over children's developmental needs require fundamental reconsideration.

Educational policies should recognize the critical importance of play in learning and development by allocating sufficient time, space, and resources for play-based pedagogies rather than treating play as supplementary to "serious" academic work. Facility planning processes should include meaningful consultation with children, families, and educators to ensure that design decisions reflect actual learning needs rather than assumptions about appropriate educational environments.

Professional development programs for educators should include training in environmental design principles, outdoor education methodologies, and play-based pedagogical approaches to ensure that architectural investments translate into pedagogical innovations.

11. Discussion and Future Directions

The integration of child-centered design principles in educational environments represents both an educational innovation and a return to foundational understandings about children's learning capacities through play (American Montessori Society, 2020; Montessori, 1994).

Dr. Montessori's enduring legacy encourages designers and educators alike to perceive the world through the multiple intelligences of children rather than imposing adult perspectives, priorities, and constraints upon young learners. Over the past century, pedagogical trends and public health crises have emerged and receded, but what remains essential is experiencing life through children's eyes, which are ever filled with wonder and possibility, understanding life itself as a continuous learning cycle.

Integrating children's perspectives into educational design transforms what we see, touch, feel, hear, taste, and how we conceptualize spaces for continuous learning. By genuinely centering children's experiences, we create meaningful environments that encourage natural wonder while engaging interest and curiosity across all domains of knowledge. Understanding that learning and play intertwine gives us both the freedom and the challenge of creating educational spaces supporting fluid, flexible, healthy, and resilient experiences.

The evidence presented through the Giochimparando-OpenMind method, outdoor learning research, and participatory design practices demonstrates that child-centered approaches produce measurable benefits including enhanced self-esteem, improved academic performance, reduced dropout rates, increased creativity, better stress management, and stronger social-emotional competencies. These outcomes validate the pedagogical wisdom of historical figures including Montessori and Malaguzzi while demonstrating contemporary relevance and applicability.

Perhaps most fundamentally, child-centered educational design honors children's dignity, competence, and agency. Rather than viewing children as incomplete adults requiring molding into predetermined forms, this approach recognizes children as complete human beings in their current developmental stages, possessing valuable perspectives, extraordinary capabilities, and fundamental rights to environments supporting their flourishing.

As we design educational spaces, select pedagogical approaches, and establish policies governing children's education, we must ask ourselves: Are we truly seeing through children's eyes? Are we creating conditions that honor their natural ways of learning through play? Are we designing environments that support rather than constrain their development? Are we fostering wonder, curiosity, creativity, and joy?

The answers to these questions will determine not only individual children's educational experiences but the kind of society we collectively create. By embracing play as children's serious work and designing environments supporting this fundamental developmental process, we invest in human potential while creating more humane, equitable, and vibrant educational institutions.

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Author Note

Barbara Riccardi is a member of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic (2012), Ambassador of the Global Teacher Prize (2016), and a primary school teacher in Rome. She is a Gestalt Counselor, supporter of the Global Education Coalition-UNESCO, and lecturer at TEDx Brescia (2017). Giochimparando—PlayLearn™ is her method approved by the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy Development of La Sapienza University in Rome.

Marko Guglielmi Reimmortal is a multifaceted innovator and researcher whose complex scientific research translates into artistic experiences. As a sound designer and conceptual artist, he creates interactive installations that emphasize sonic experiences. He uses sound as a stimulus, employing artistic installations as tools that project experiences in which emotions become central. Marko collaborates with architects and engineers to incorporate sonic vision into living geometry, designing new forms of rooms, classrooms, and play areas.

Robin Randall, FAIA, ALEP, LEED AP BD+C, is Director of Learning at Legat Architects, where she leads clients in a customized design process that transforms their mission and purpose into meaningful, budget-conscious, forward-thinking learning environments. She builds exceptional collaborative teams around projects including master plans, facilities assessments, renovations, and new educational facilities.

Sylvia Kowalk, Assoc. AIA, LEED AP ID+C, is the leader of Legat Architects' interior design practice, designing visually engaging interior environments that elevate mood and improve efficiency. She tells her clients' stories by mixing materials, colors, finishes, and sustainable elements while respecting budgets. Her portfolio ranges from preK-12 and higher education facilities to performing arts centers, libraries, community health centers, and corporate environments.

Author Contributions

Barbara Riccardi developed and implemented the Giochimparando-OpenMind pedagogical method, provided case study data from Italian school implementations, and contributed expertise on inclusive play-based learning approaches. Marko Guglielmi Reimmortal together with Barbara Riccardi designed and implemented

the Meravigliamo multisensory learning component, contributed expertise on sound-based learning environments, and provided insights on artistic integration in educational design. Robin Randall contributed expertise on educational facility design, led analysis of outdoor learning environments and biophilic design principles, and provided case study documentation from Crow Island School. Sylvia Kowalk contributed expertise on interior design for educational environments, led analysis of furniture and material selection, and provided insights on creating sensory-rich learning spaces.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Winnetka School District 36 and Crow Island School for permission to document and analyze their outdoor learning environments. We acknowledge La Sapienza University of Rome for validation research on the Giochimparando method. We thank the students, educators, and families who participated in the various initiatives documented in this research.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.