

## Teacher Creator: Practices of Creating Educational Contexts

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### ABSTRACT

By exploring certain perspectives, it is hoped that teachers can be helped to create inclusive educational contexts by transforming the learning environment into a third educator. Based on the Reggio Emilia approach, we hope to reveal the ways and means by which the spaces of the educational institution can be interpreted, prepared and in some cases created, in order to encourage children to explore and express themselves. This study presents the concept of context as a modern educational space and draws attention to several essential aspects for the creation of educational contexts: educational provocations and invitations; the use of materials and tools to create them; the learning documentation and learning visibility; and the nature of the adult-child dialogue. A qualitative research model was applied that produces information in the form of descriptive data records by providing clear and systematic descriptions. The data collection techniques used were literature studies and narrative interviews with pre-school teachers. Twelve pre-school teachers participated in the study and criteria-based selection was applied, with thematic analysis being used to analyze the data (Soderberg, 2006).

The experiences of pre-school teachers in creating contexts are summarized by distinguishing the following aspects of the thematic analysis of contextual development experiences: the change in the role of the teacher, the nature of the child's activities and the process and principles of creating contexts.

The results indicated that the context helps to engage the child and establish an authentic “dialogue” between the child and the materials and tools used, which is then developed with the adult. Educational contexts help develop the creation of an educational environment and allows teachers to create unique learning situations in any scenario.

*Keywords:* educational context, pre-school teacher, the Reggio Emilia approach, learner-centered teaching, creativity, the environment as the third teacher

## Introduction

The strategic educational provision “Lithuania 2030”, emphasizes, that in the pursuit of quality education there are two important factors: creativity and openness. Creativity and openness should be taken as essential in directing education, as child-centered education is based on them, by creating a social, cultural and physical environment in which the child actively develops his or her current and future powers (M.E.S.R.L, 2015).

Encouraging child activity and engagement is an educational goal and a rapidly increasing global imperative (Key principles of a Quality Framework, 2014), emphasized in European Commission and other documents. According to the theory of child-centered education, education is organized in such a way as to create conditions for the children themselves to actively participate and explore (Miller, 2019; Sommer et al., 2010). Therefore, learning is considered a process that is not a given, but a process in which the child actively discovers (Firlik, 1996). Such an educational process is considered tripartite active: the learner is active because he acts; the teacher is active because he creates an environment favorable to the learner’s performance; the environment created between them is active because it promotes action and change; and the teacher’s role is to organize and regulate the environment (Vygotskij, 1991). By recognizing the potential and importance of the environment as a third educator, the role of the teacher remains active, but takes on a different characteristic (Miller, 2019). The environment as the third educator is a central concept of the Reggio Emilia approach to education, which states that the physical environment plays a particularly important role in learning. Early childhood education theorists such as Loris Malaguzzi and Maria Montessori emphasize the idea of a prepared, or constructed, learning environment (Brown, 2020). Reggio Emilia practices reveal the ways and means by which educational institution spaces can be interpreted, prepared and, in some cases, created to encourage children to explore and express themselves (Asy’ari & Rachmawati, 2022).

The term “the environment as the third teacher” means that the environment has an important role in building knowledge, where children can explore, experiment, play and learn (Biermeier, 2015). Children adapt easily, like to explore, actively work, and enjoy interacting with friends, parents, teachers and surrounding environments. (Asy’ari & Rachmawati, 2022). Children thrive in environments that are suited to their interests and developmental stages. In the Reggio Emilia approach the environment is viewed as a place that is welcoming, authentic aesthetically pleasing, culturally representative of community, embraces nature and filled with purposeful materials. The layout of the environment promotes relationships, communication, collaboration, and exploration through play. Materials are thoughtfully added to the environment to promote creativity, thinking, problem-solving skills, questions, experimentation

and open-ended play (Blocker, 2020). In order to create such an environment, teachers should look deeper into a child's perspective, not just what they see at eye level. This will develop a better understanding of the basic principles of creating an environment, by considering children's thinking, questions, curiosities and surprises (Biermeier, 2015).

This is especially important in the modern context of education, when we are faced with an abundance of tools for use in educational institutions, and educational spaces are turned into warehouses of rarely used tools that lack educational intention. (Biermeier, 2015). A teacher should be able to reflect on the physical organization of the classroom environment, how it can be manipulated to enhance learning and its impact on students (Brown, 2020). Thus, the problem is defined as a lack of teachers' knowledge and understanding on how to turn the environment into a "third educator" and orient it to active learning activities according to the age of children. Other factors such as limited innovativeness, motivation, lack of creativity of teachers in implementing or organizing the surrounding environment also prevent the utilization of the potential of the given environment (Asy'ari & Rachmawati, 2022).

This article actualizes the role of a preschool teacher who is able to create such an environment, which requires a high level of creativity on the part of the teacher (Biermeier, 2015). Thus, the questions posed in the article are: How can today's teacher use the Reggio Emilia educational contexts strategy of creating an environment and create a space that promotes meaningful learning, individual understanding and develops the values of the child. **Aim of the study** – to open certain perspectives to help teachers create inclusive educational contexts by transforming the learning environment and turning it into a third educator.

## Theoretical background

Reggio Emilia approach is influenced by many theories of child development. The study methodology is based on constructivist theories, which look at cognitive processes as a set of certain constantly developing and improving cognitive structures (Bertran, 1995; Giordan, 1995). Didactic attitudes based on the principles of constructivism emphasize learning as individual knowledge created on the basis of personal experience. Primary perception acts as a mediator between the learner's knowledge and thinking structures (Bertran, 1995; Giordan, 1995). The structure of the primary perception is constantly being rearranged so that new knowledge is incorporated into the already existing cognitive structure of the learner. New information is always analyzed according to the model of primary perception, but at the same time it changes this model. It is important to note another important aspect of constructivism which is the use of active learning strategies in child-centered education (Neutzling et al., 2019).

Dewey (1910) concept that all of a child's "thinking is inquisitive" is a fundamental reflection of the Reggio Emilia approach to the child's role in their own learning. From Dewey's point of view, children are natural explorers, capable of making their own decisions, hypothesizing, making predictions, and revisiting what they have learned. John Dewey viewed children's learning as an active process, during which a significant experience for the child is formed, combining three aspects of experience into a unified whole: active action, accompanying emotion and new perception (Dewey, 1959). The research focuses on the experience itself during learning situations and its meaning for the author of the experience and the way of connecting the pedagogical interaction into a coherent sequence, as past experiences are renewed in present experiences and the experiences of others are renewed in personal experiences. This concept is central in the Reggio Emilia framework's image of children and the role that children play in their own learning. Dewey stated that many teachers and educators see children and the curriculum as separate; that you have one or the other.

Vygotskij (1991) emphasized the importance of social interaction and cooperative learning while groups engage with each other, in the building of knowledge. He contended that collective social experiences within various social environments affect the social orientation of individuals and ultimately influences their cognitive functions. It is suggested that new knowledge and skills are created as learners interact with each other and make sense of differences between their current knowledge and new experiences (Brackenbury, 2012).

Based on Vygotskij (1991) the main figure of the teaching process is the child himself, therefore, the learner's experience is considered a key factor in learning. Learning is implemented through the child's personal experience, which is fully dependent on the environment and the teacher's role is the organization and regulation of that environment (Vygotskij, 1991). The teacher, using the great possibilities of the social environment in which the child lives and works, can direct and guide their personal activities in order to achieve development.

Conceptual methodology is also based on the holistic approach to education. Holism emphasizes the interpretation of acquired knowledge, its meaningfulness, knowledge of the essence of man and the world. Holism states that everything exists in the context of interaction, connection and meaning, and that any change or event leads to a reorganization of the whole entity, even a small one. To develop a sense of commonality with the whole world and the joy of self-knowledge, to emphasize the importance of the overall education of the individual and general humanistic educational attitudes. The integrity of cognitive ways and methods is emphasized (Morin, 1992). Such an approach creates prerequisites for the diversity of fields of activity and research methods. Inspired, comprehensive child education includes the child's whole being, his wishes and attitudes (Juodaitytė, 2003). A holistic approach to child education is demonstrated in

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner H. (1983) distinguished and justified a multitude of intelligences, on the basis of which an environmental strategy can be created. It offers an environmental strategy that allows for the individual expression of children's diverse needs by creating an exceptionally resource-rich environment that reflects different types of intelligence. Such an environment would strengthen the development of each intellect and provide conditions for the unfolding and growth of the child's individual potential. These provisions made it possible to highlight the main methodological position: the learning process is possible only in an environment that is meaningful to the child. When education is perceived as a "free" environment for the child's spontaneous expression, which takes place through the natural development of social-cognitive potential, together with the emergence of these processes and the assumptions of the child's creativity in the educational environment that is meaningful to him, in a space that is gradually transformed by children's concepts, actions and deeds. The combination of constructivist, contextualism and holistic approaches is reflected in Loris Malaguzzi's advanced practices of creating educational contexts.

### **Reggio Emilia environment development strategy: educational context**

Reggio Emilia approach reconceptualized space as a primary source of educational provocations and inspirations (Miller, 2019). Malaguzzi's approach to environmental design strategy emphasises that "children discover visual and other expressive languages in tight synergy with verbal, body and logical languages (Manera, 2019). This highlights the importance of visual and physical arrangement in the learning space. When designing the educational environment as a "third educator", it is suggested to take into account the following aspects of the educational space: the harmony between the outside and the inside; intentionality and aesthetics of space organization, degree of availability of resources and tools, nature of activity in the studio.

In this case, the term 'contexts' describe learning situations modeled by the teacher in a certain way, for which a specific short-term educational space is created. The content or idea of the context created by the teacher usually depends on the child's area of interest. In child-centered systems, children's interest is used as the impetus from which learning situations are created. Such environment allows the teacher to respond to the child's interests, liberates and enables the co-construction of knowledge (Curtis & Carter, 2000). This is clearly reflected in the example of the study of the spider, which is presented by Biermeier (2015). The teacher may ignore the children's interest in watching a spider in the playground and limit this activity. However, the teacher can encourage the children

to either draw what they have observed and share it with the group or search the library for a story about the spider or information about these insects, creating a context for studying the spider. The building of knowledge becomes evident when children depict the body and count the legs of a spider in their drawings, comparing the spider with other insects. Deeper understanding and involvement is developed through children's own observation and exploration, answering the children's questions and changing their understanding (Curtis & Carter, 2000).

The Reggio Emilia system (Edwards et al., 2011), which models advanced practices for the development of a child's creativity, draws attention to several essential aspects of educational contexts:

- Learning provocations and invitations.
- Used materials and tools.
- The dialogue between adults and children.
- Learning documentation and learning visibility.

### **Educational provocations and educational invitations**

Reggio-inspired practices help children to build their knowledge of themselves and the world around them through educational provocations, inquiries, and individual learning experiences (Brown, 2020). Learning provocations and learning invitations are methods used to transform the physical environment by presenting unexpected materials and tools, arranging them in a specific order, which invites and encourages the child to approach, explore, ask questions and think reflexively (Brown, 2020). Provocations and invitations to learn are essential elements of any exploratory, game-based learning environment. Children have an innate desire to explore and understand the wonders of the world around them. The presentation of interesting materials in a stimulating environment reinforces this innate desire (Curtis & Carter, 2000). It may seem that nothing new can happen in a well-known space, but from Reggio's point of view, a different look at familiar things creates opportunities to engage the learner and enrich their understanding of themselves and the world around them. We can define the theatrical provocation as a stone lying on the road, over which a person must step. Such definition is suitable for describing educational provocation. After entering an unexpectedly changed environment, the child instinctively stumbles, begins to explore or transform it. In these environments, the child is extremely active, and deeply involved in the experience. Educational provocation is a specifically constructed context, which is made by using various visual means and/or written prompts in order to provoke the child's actions, thoughts and to motivate thinking and exploration (Brown, 2020). Learning provocations are specially designed by the teacher and can be based on the goals of the educational program and the interests of the children. An educational invitation encourages the child to explore, construct and express the already

existing learning experience in an unlimited environment, using various means and methods of expression. Educational invitations are dominated by artistic expression and materials.

Regardless of whether the teacher creates a learning provocation or a learning invitation, the design of their creation is extremely important and can be compared to the pleasure of giving a gift to a dear friend (Curtis & Carter, 2020). Therefore, the space used in both educational invitations and provocations must be attractive to the child. Materials and tools are arranged in a certain order using mirrors and/or the principle of contrast. To create learning provocations and invitations for children teachers use certain strategies such as changing the physical environment, presenting unexpected materials, encouraging joyful and reflexive thinking, asking questions and creating comments (Brown, 2020). Importantly, sensory and artistic provocations help to promote motoric development, social-emotional skills, language development and cognition (Schwartz & Luckenbill, 2012). Aesthetic spaces, consciously designed by the educator reflect the individual values and beliefs of the teacher (Brown, 2020).

### **Options for learning materials and tools**

Materials in the Reggio-inspired group are more ambiguous and surprising (Brown, 2020). In each group you can find paper and drawing tools that are actively used by children. However, in order to develop children's creativity, it is suggested to discover a variety of materials that will help the child get involved and learn. Therefore, there are several types of materials suggested for creating contexts (Brown, 2020):

- 1) construction materials and secondary raw materials (paper rolls, paper towel rolls, large wooden rings, paint rollers, bottle caps, egg cartons, sticks, boxes, fabric scraps, stickers, etc.,
- 2) natural materials (tree bark, pinecones, acorns, seeds, natural objects, sand, stones, rocks, wooden parts).
- 3) natural objects/objects found in the household.
- 3) mirrors of various shapes and sizes.
- 4) art tools (all types of tools: chalk, pastels, markers, paints, writing tools, clay).
- 5) books, large photographs, reproductions.
- 6) imagination-stimulating toys (animals, dinosaurs, people).
- 7) blocks.
- 8) musical instruments (they can also become household items).
- 9) various light sources. Media that can be used in light ray activities include desk lamps, mirrored tables, used bottles, candles, projectors, white screens, black screens, glasses, magnifying glasses, flashlights, computers, and CDs (Asy'ari & Yeni Rachmawati, 2022).



*Figure 1.* White paper options

One of the ideas of the Reggio Emilia method is to help children explore, experiment and play using light as a source of learning. Light beam activities can be performed indoors and outdoors (Asy'ari & Rachmawati, 2022). For these activities, indoor spaces are arranged with minimal lighting and dark walls to stimulate children's imaginations using different media. Meanwhile, outdoor activities require bright sunlight so children can use the shadows. Using light and other materials, teachers consciously design engaging learning contexts to create purposeful learning experiences, provoking the child to act and think. Children can also explore materials in new and unusual ways with the help of light. When creating contexts, it is not only suggested to use the most natural materials, objects that children can search for and discover in the environment, but also to create the conditions for the widest possible choice, for example, if the planned activity is to draw on white paper, then children are offered as many options as possible to choose white paper. It can be white paper scraps of different formats, wrapping paper, ribbons, etc. Although a wide variety of means is offered, all objects are arranged in a certain order, sequence, maintaining the structure of an aesthetic composition (Brown, 2020). Children are free to carry materials from one place to another while they are active.

### **The dialogue between adults and children**

In the dynamic process of educational creativity, which is constantly changing, the role of the teacher is changing. From a provider of knowledge to a creator of contexts that provoke discoveries, creating conditions for the child's free, spontaneous creativity. The activity of a teacher as a creator of educational contexts takes on a different character at different stages of the activity process. From the generator of ideas, the designer of an engaging multisensory environment, one moves to the application of reflection, thinking and creativity together with the child. In such a provocative and dialogic context, both the child and the teacher become creators of the process. In an interview with Lella Gandini, Loris



Malaguzzi states that the definition of the teacher's role can never be accepted once and for all, but is constantly revised – as time, circumstances, community, children change, the dynamics of their concern and cooperation change (Edwards et al., 2011).

When creating situations in which the child could act independently and get involved, the teacher withdraws from the leadership process, but moves to the position of an encourager, consultant, observer. The teacher observes and gets involved at the moment when he feels that the child needs help or encouragement and to move the process forward. Encouraging the teacher to get involved in the activity processes together is extremely important for the child, in such a process the child feels supported and develops confidence. The teacher is encouraged to establish a kind of dialogue with the group of children and to join their curiosity (Edwards et al., 2011). According to Loris Malaguzzi (2011), the role of an adult as a teacher complements the role of a child as a learner, so the dialogue between a child and an adult becomes extremely significant. It is a harmony in which the teacher and the child work in the same context. The main action of adults becomes the desire to activate children's creative competences as the basis of all education and the desire to discover appropriate ways to combine their interpretations into a fruitful dialogue with children's thoughts (Edwards et al., 2011).

This dialogue is developed by analyzing processes and asking provocative questions. Correctly used method of questions and moderation of the process unconsciously guides the child towards the desired goal. The metaphor – “catch the ball that the children throw to us and then throw it back to continue the game” speaks of the interaction between the teacher and the child, like a game of badminton. According to Loris Malaguzzi, for the game to continue the skills of the adult and the child need to be properly adjusted so that their growth in learning is meaningful, (Edwards et al., 2012).

The Reggio Emilia approach invites teachers to act playfully, respectfully, leading to an active, provocative educational process. The teacher, as a planner of the educational process, becomes a co-author of knowledge. A creative teacher is perceived as a person who is able to adapt and create methods and activities for specific learning situations, thus being able to create an authentic learning environment.

The role of the pedagogue remains active, while, spontaneous, child-initiated education creates more opportunities than purposefully organized, teacher-led education. Teacher's autonomy and freedom of action and creative thinking should be supported as they are creators and central foci of knowledge educational and social transformation. The image of the teacher as a creator, fundamentally changes the role of the teacher and becomes a challenge in the educational space.

### **Learning documentation and learning visibility**

Documentation of teaching/learning activities takes place throughout the process. In the Reggio Emilia approach, documentation is used as a tool to allow learners and teachers to identify and reflect on learning (Roque & Tamashiro, 2022). One of the distinctive features of the documentation of the Reggio Emilia system is its visuality. Certain methods based on visuality are used for this purpose: visual trajectories of the child's understanding (recording the child's drawings and/or the child's expressed thoughts), visual participation trajectories, photo collages, hexagons, and other methods. Documentation in the form of notes, photographs, videos, and artifacts aims to "make learning visible" (Krechevsky et al., 2009). Documenting the learning process can reveal a complete and deep picture of a child's learning.

Documents play an important role in recording and identifying individual learning trajectories of children. The recorded changed element in the child's drawing and its verbal naming can reveal a significant experience for the child and show the effectiveness of the pedagogical effect (for example, all the child's drawings and his expressed thoughts related to the study of the spider are consistently recorded). According to Roque and Tamashiro (2022), documentation using images, dialogue, artifacts, and other tools allows educators to capture the individual experience of a child and the value of what and how children learn. On the other hand, such visual documentation is important for the teacher himself. This is an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practice, the experiences of learners and improve their action plan based on this (Rinaldi, 2004). Teachers can use these types of documents to collaborate with the child in reflecting on their teaching and to assess the collaborative inquiry process. (Roque & Tamashiro, 2022). Furthermore, when teachers document children's learning and make it visible to their families and community, it provides concrete evidence that children are learning through hands-on experience (Kaufman, 2014).

From the point of view of educators in Reggio Emilia schools, documentation is open-ended and changing, following the idea that learning goals and processes emerge in the course of child-centered activities, more often they emerge rather than being predetermined" (Krechevsky et. al., 2009).

Through the visuality of documentation, teaching and learning become "embodied" and reveal the links between teaching and learning. In a recent study by (Vossoughi et al., 2020) work emphasizes that the visual "embodiment" of documentation can have ethical and political implications for those involved, as it reveals how they participate and what their future teaching and learning experiences might look like. Therefore, the aim is to develop educators' understanding of these actions and consequences. Thus, images and visual information are used in several ways: as a means for educators to reflect on their teaching actions, for students to reflect on their experiences. Teachers also document children's learning to make it visible to their families and community.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research model that produces information in the form of descriptive data records by providing clear and systematic descriptions. The data collection techniques used were literature studies and narrative interviews with pre-school teachers. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Soderberg, 2006).

In 2022 February – March, 2 months long action research was organized in the pre-school educational institution, during which, scientists collaborated with practitioners, with the aim to initiate innovative practices during creation of educational contexts and to record the experiences of teachers. The purpose of the action research is to test a theoretical solution in practice. In education, the validity of creating theoretical solutions depends not so much on “scientific” truths, but on their usefulness for a specific practical situation. Therefore, with this type of research, the correctness of theoretical solutions is confirmed through practice (McGlenn Manfra, 2019). Twelve pre-school teachers participated in the study and criteria-based selection was applied. Research participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Preschool teachers, younger than 35 years old.
- Having at least 2 years of educational experience.
- Having participated in specific training related to the creation of educational contexts.

All research participants had higher university education, at least bachelor’s degree.

*Table 1.* Characteristics of research participants

Code	Research participant	Age	Work experience
T1.	Lilija	28	6 yrs.
T2.	Simona	27	3 yrs.
T3.	Ieva	30	6 yrs.
T4.	Julija	30	4 yrs.
T5.	Gintarė	30	6 yrs.
T6.	Justė	32	13 yrs.
T7.	Ilona	33	7 yrs.
T8.	Ineta	25	2 yrs.
T9.	Darius	26	6 yrs.
T10.	Neringa	32	3 yrs.
T11.	Rita	38	15 yrs.
T12.	Dovilė	40	7 yrs.

During the interview, the teachers were asked to describe what specific contexts they have created during this period and to present the process of creating at least one of the contexts in detail, keeping the sequence of events as consistent as possible: the birth of the idea of a context → context creation → development of context together with children → context transformations → self-evaluation of activities. During the interview, the research participants were also encouraged to express the experiences and feelings they went through during the process.

After examining the collected material, the main themes were formulated using the inductive method, which are closely related to the available data and are not “tied” to theoretical basis (Braun et al., 2014; Soderberg, 2006).

Ethical principles were followed in order to ensure the well-being, safety and confidentiality of research participants. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the research participants, they have been given fictitious names, and the data were used for academic purposes only. The interviews were conducted at a time convenient for the research participants in a convenient place, thus ensuring the principle of benevolence (Žydžiūnaitė, 2012). During the research process, the principle of human dignity is maintained, the participants are introduced to the means of ensuring confidentiality, the purpose of the research and the application of the results.

## Results. Experiences of preschool teachers in creating contexts

During the research, three main topics emerged, which are relevant when analyzing the experience of creating contexts, these are: the competences and role of the teacher as a creator of contexts; the activity and involvement of the creating child; and the process of creating a context as an educational environment.

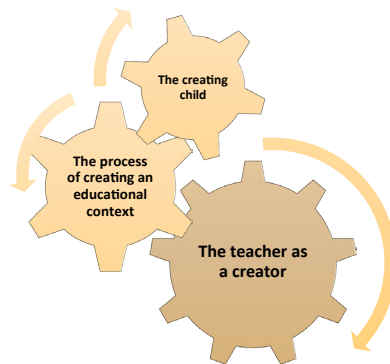


Figure 2. Thematic map of pre-school teachers' narrative interviews

Analyzing the first topic of the “**Teacher Creator**”, the teacher’s creativity competence is emphasized as one of the most important prerequisites for professional activity in creating educational contexts. The research participants associate the competence of creativity with the relevant attitude and abilities. The teacher’s new approach to the objects in the environment and their use is important here.

*Everywhere and always you can discover something new, untried and unknown. All these things must be looked at through the eyes of the developer. A small detail is enough, which can be born into wonderful things – creative projects when working with children. (T1)*

Another important manifestation of a creative approach, which is emphasized by many research participants, is the courage to improvise, present your own ideas, have a flexible approach to the educational process, and avoid templates.

*A creative teacher takes a broad view of the world, is interested in innovation, looks for new ways to organize activities involving and interest children, uses many non-standard, self-created tools in his work. (T3)*

Such a teacher is not afraid to take risks, not afraid of changing circumstances, acts boldly and creatively.

It is important to note that creating contexts provides an opportunity to develop creativity competence, as it recognizes that there is no one right answer, but rather a lot of discovery and exploration.

*Every idea born from inquiry is correct because the teacher acts in response to the needs of the students. (T5)*

A teacher with such an attitude is able to educate a child by creating an environment, means and opportunities for him.

When describing the experiences of creating educational contexts, the research participants note the changing and dynamic role of the teacher. When children get involved in activities, the teacher becomes an observer, and the children become creators, discoverers, active participants in the process. Therefore, the teacher can be a little more distant, watching the children in the process.

*Only at the children’s request, the teacher-creator enters the process, helps the children solve the problem or answer the question that arose in the process. (T6)*

By observing children acting freely and without restrictions, the teacher can understand how children learn at their own pace. Since children are interested in different things, the more diverse the context, the more interesting it is to observe them.

*The creator teacher has a rather difficult task to prepare a quality environment for engagement, but it is a great pleasure to observe the process. (T5)*

Describing the teacher as a creator of contexts, the research participants also characterize him as constantly learning from his experiences, experiencing joy and doubting.

*Negative feelings can set in when things don't go according to plan. Then I catch myself thinking, "it wasn't meant to be, I didn't think of it that way." Because when children are allowed to act freely, no one can be sure that they will go where they are invited. Sometimes it is not possible to prepare the environment in such a way that it interests children to develop the context more deeply. (T8)*

Such a teacher creates conditions that aim for the child to learn, create and act freely.

The second topic "**Creating child**" highlights the children's activity and involvement in activities. It focuses on better listening to children, motivation to act, learn and get to know each other. A well-designed context encourages the child to act and test himself in different activities.

Teachers also notice that children's involvement does not last long, sometimes they lose motivation to act, and they have to be re-engaged.

*Not all children concentrate their attention for a long time, often they want to do activities hurriedly, dismissively, but the initiative of other children who are still active brings them back to the activity. (T10)*

By acting and creating, children integrally develop a very wide range of abilities. Teachers note that in addition to counting, measuring or writing, children learn to discuss, find answers, express themselves, recognize different materials, and react to the situation appropriately. As a result, self-reliance, greater self-confidence, community spirit and teamwork are developed. Contextual learning provokes children to act independently and creatively, which is the main goal of educational process.

The third topic "**The process of creating contexts**", distinguishes the three sub-topics related to different aspects of contexts' creation:

- Search for ideas and sources of inspiration.
- Context variability, development, unpredictability.
- Context integrity and aesthetic thread.

During the study, teachers proposed and created contexts of different nature e.g.: an egg was left on the windowsill, which caused a great stir. This led to the creation and development of contexts of the active windowsill throughout the entire kindergarten. The following themes were developed: "Bench", "Mirror",

“Octopus”, “Suitcase”, “Kitchen Art”, “Patterns”, “Honeycomb”, “Chair”, “Tile”, “Magnifying glass” and “The Shadow”.

Research participants note that the simplest things that children pay attention to have become sources of inspiration when creating inclusive educational contexts. Teachers are suggested to look for new and interesting topics in the immediate environment. The objects and their details have become attributes of observation, exploration and creative expression of the child.

*Here, for example, the “octopus” noticed by the child on the part of the pavement that we see every day – the rain drain well – can become ornaments in a rich graphic drawing of the child, reflecting his active and sensitive relationship with the environment and a starting point for interest and searching for answers on this topic. It is important to be interested, to see and, if chosen correctly, to be able to apply it. (T2)*

When creating a context, often children provide ideas by themselves or through their expressed thoughts. Whilst teachers create contexts through their various trainings, group decisions and the actualization of these decisions.

However, it is emphasized that one common feature, an idea, must prevail in each context. It is important to preserve the integrity of that idea in the creation of a context. The teachers also noted that the synthesis of different spheres allowed the creation of more interesting contexts than those dominated by only one sphere.

Teachers noted the aspect of context variability and unpredictability.

*All contexts, no matter which teacher creates them, change their shape rapidly when the children get involved, and are filled with other objects or additional tools. (T6)*

Therefore, it is very difficult to define the lifetime of a context. As long as there is action in that environment, as long as it raises questions, then this context can live: from a couple of weeks to months, depending on its relevance.

Also, teachers note that the same context can be used in various ways and adapted to the topic under discussion by remaking, adding or removing details, replacing them with others.

*Therefore, you can always look at it from a different angle and not rush to “destroy”. The most important thing is for the child to be interested in the environment, to see the changes taking place in it and to want to act in it himself. An interesting, attractive environment always arouses curiosity. (T8)*

When the context is put into the “hands of the children”, it can take a completely different form than the original idea. The original idea in the creative process can

change as new ideas are born. Through the creation of a context, attention is focused on the meanings created by the child, which are formed while creating non-traditional environments. The child's perception is formed unconsciously, seeing variability and harmony between the exterior and the interior, when unusual or forgotten spaces of the educational institution are used.

## Discussion

It is clear that recognizing the importance of the environment as a “third educator” changes the role of the teacher in the educational process. The new approach talks about the proactive and dialogic role of the teacher. The teacher has more than one task: not only identifying and actualizing the child's area of interest, but acting creatively in creating inclusive educational contexts, what's more, the teaching process itself becomes open and dialogic. In such a provocative and dialogic context, both the child and the teacher become creators of the process. For this reason, special importance should be given to the development of the teacher as a creator. Creativity and imagination skills are salient in all areas involving professional perspective. The question arises, how should a teacher capable of transforming the environment and turning it into a third educator, be trained? What are the necessary competencies for a teacher?

It is important to note that during the action research and discussions with teachers, great attention was paid to the elements of environmental composition, aesthetics, and intentionality, which some teachers had not encountered. For a teacher who transforms the environment, aesthetic perception and feeling are important. The thread of aesthetics should accompany every activity and emerge in various educational situations e.g., creating material provocations, serving the table, adult-child communication, exhibiting works, etc., through a sense of harmony, wholeness and continuity.

The experiences of creating contexts recorded by teachers, revealed the lack of process documentation as one of the weakest links in creating an educational context. Created contexts can change and take a completely different direction, so change, analysis and reflection are a necessary part of the process. Not all the contexts created during the action research could involve children and the best, most inclusive solutions can be discovered by consistently monitoring the educational process. Therefore, a detailed analysis and evaluation of the content and the entire process; documentation of children's activities such as by photographing the activities step by step, writing down the child's comments, stories, etc.; and recording individual trajectories of the child's perception; should be one of the most important parts of the process. However, problematic questions arise in this topic: How to actualize and encourage the visual documentation of the process? How can modern technologies help teachers to record individual trajectories of



a child's perception and expression, as well as teachers' own teaching and learning experiences? What modern tools can be used to document the educational process, so that teachers learn through experience? The analysis of acquired experience gained by teachers would provide direction for the improvement of teacher qualifications and competencies. In this study, important attention is paid to the teacher, trying to answer how teachers develop their personal and professional identity, which is determined by their qualifications, experience, professional learning, the context of the educational institution and personal, professional goals.

## Conclusion

A context is a set of provocative environments created by a teacher for a specific activity, with a specific theme and educational purpose. Creating contexts is a process of well-thought-out situations that involve children in activities that awaken their research and creative pursuits. Location, objects and tools become the primary resource for creating an educational environment. Most importantly, is the child's active involvement through the activation of the senses as they are encouraged to experience, discover, explore, learn and create for themselves.

The study highlighted the following characteristics of creating inclusive contexts:

- **Creating choices:** Giving the child the choice of materials, tools, formats, mode of action, etc.
- **Integrity:** The synthesis of different spheres allows for more interesting contexts than those dominated by only one domain.
- **Change and dynamism:** When given into the hands of children, contexts can take a completely different form than the original idea. The original idea in the creative process can change with the birth of new ideas.
- **Searching for harmony between the exterior and the interior:** When the object is viewed from different perspectives, new uses of the object are discovered in different spaces. Teachers and children are starting to notice more about what is going on in the environment, thinking about how it can be incorporated into education.

Based on the results of the research it can be stated that the teacher, as a creator of contexts, moves:

- From direct management of children's activities to the creation of situations that promote active, spontaneous, creative and research-based education.
- From direct instructions to context, provocation, challenge, dialogue, thinking and creating together, whilst reflecting on the process.
- From fragmented to holistic, multisensory and experiential learning.

Creating contexts is a very creative, engaging process that brings joy to the teacher and children and provides new, interesting and fun learning experiences for children.

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