

# “Playgrounds for the Mind”: Aligning School Libraries with Educational Philosophy towards Creative Learning Environments

## “Parchi gioco per la mente”: allineare le biblioteche scolastiche alla filosofia educativa per ambienti di apprendimento creativi

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### Abstract

This contribution reflects on the need for the school library being considered a vital and integral part of the school – both in physical terms, as a proper and dedicated space in the building, and in pedagogical terms in the school curriculum, including cultural and recreational activities •, and therefore being aligned with the school pedagogy and culture. Two examples of primary school libraries are provided that show how they were rethought and designed as a learning commons (LC), in the first case, and as a Multiple Intelligences library in the second case.

**Keywords:** school environment – educational philosophy – physical space – learning commons – multiple intelligences library – school library

### Introduction

Research findings, guidelines, standards testify the multifaceted – educational, cultural, social, and recreational – value of the school environment, including the building itself and its playground. The ways pupils interact, learn, and play are often studied as a useful medium for observation and assessment (Howard, McInnes, 2013). The school environment is not neutral: its spaces, furnishings, decorations, and equipment reflect and express the underlying educational philosophy. Welcoming, stimulating, attractive, accessible, well equipped environments can facilitate and foster the educational and learning process. A homier environment help pupils and students feel themselves comfortable. Physical spaces and the way they are arranged, furnished and decorated do count. In fact,



The pandemic has proved that the school cannot be entirely displaced into virtual spaces. Even in areas of high internet connectivity and relatively equitable access to devices, the total or partial closure of school buildings in times of disruption shed new light on the importance of shared physical and social presence in schools. (Unesco, 2021, p. 100)

This is particularly true when it comes to the school library, where physical and digital can meet and meld. The “phygital” school library becomes a special “playground” for searching, experimenting, enjoying, both in person and online, since libraries can be considered “as playgrounds for the mind” (Spencer, Huss, 2013). Online access to a variety of services, resources and activities resulted to be very helpful to remote library activities, including, for instance, many online book clubs that were established during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the school library space plays a key role in many dimensions (cognitive, affective, social etc.). There is a wealth of literature on the impact of a functioning school library on the student’s learning outcomes, and, more in general, his/her education as a whole. A useful resource on the theme is *School Libraries Impact Studies*, the review of contributions curated by the Library Research Service (LRS), provided by the Colorado State Library, a unit of the Colorado Department of Education.

The school library can facilitate the acquisition of skills and competencies, such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. The school library can foster the process of learning to think outside the box and to act creatively. “Creativity is not anymore, a ‘nice to have’, but has turned into a ‘must have’.” (Ritter et al., 2013, p. 2), a highly appreciated requirement in current societies, since it is linked to innovation. Creativity is also related to imagination and emotions: fostering their relationship since early childhood requires specific planning, resources, time, space and setting. The physical environment, the space, the setting is a teacher itself – the “third teacher” –, according to Loris Malaguzzi’s theory, and shapes ones’ mind, learning and behavior (Barrett, 2011), according to embodied cognition and spatial psychology theories, too. The importance of children’s emotional life is one of the underpinning principles of the Reggio Children’s philosophy and pedagogy. Listening and paying attention to actual children’s needs and emotions is key in education. For instance, in the kindergartens in the Reggio Emilia area (Italy), teachers are trained on listening to children’s needs and imagery, allowing them to make their own decisions and take the initiative, as remarked by Gardner in Edwards, Gandini & Forman (1998: xv-xviii) and quoted by Broadhead (2003, p. 125).

Children’s needs for (and their rights to) quality information, learning and recreational opportunities can be met by a functioning school library as an inspirational ‘third space’, and a dynamic, flexible, inclusive learning commons. Unesco (2021, p. 97) points out how schools could be reimagined, especially after the lessons learned by the pandemic, to become safe and stimulating learning en-



vironments, that promote inclusion and collaboration. Those environments could be conceived

as a large library where some students study alone, connected to the internet or not, and others present their work to classmates and teachers. Others are outside the library in contact with people and worlds outside the school, possibly in far-flung places. The library supports an immense diversity of situations and space times. It is a new environment quite different from the usual structure of the school and the classroom. This library can be taken both as a metaphor and literally. It reminds us that school times and spaces need to serve as portals connecting learners with the knowledge commons.

### The Learning Commons Approach

The school library, both as a physical space and a place, should be designed as learner-centred, with the learner positioned in the middle, and should constitute a vibrant setting that lets his/her curiosity, interests, talents, creativity emerge and flourish. Such a transformation of the school library is reported by research and professional literature (see, for instance, the systematic review by Schultz-Jones, Farabough, Hoyt, 2015, pp. 406-424). The development of the “Learning Commons” (LC) represents the transition from the “Information Commons”, as described by many authors (Accardi, Cordova, Leeder, 2010; Bonnard, Donahue, 2010; Roberts, 2007) and organizations:

A Learning Commons is a flexible and responsive approach to helping schools focus on learning collaboratively. It expands the learning experience, taking students and educators into virtual spaces beyond the walls of a school (OSLA, 2010, p. 3).

The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the *IFLA School Library Guidelines* (Schultz-Jones, Oberg, 2015) suggests the learning commons model to be adopted to foster teaching and learning innovation. The LC can be easily adapted to the variety needs (whether informational, learning, or recreational) of an individual, a small group or a whole class or larger groups. The LC extends and enriches the learning experience in collaborative terms, because it provides students and teachers with opportunities to trespass the classroom boundaries and collaborate beyond them, in both physical and virtual spaces. At instructional level, the school library is a space that is traditionally and naturally designed for learning and collaborative working, therefore it provides the ideal structure to be transformed in a ‘learning commons’ (OSLA, 2010), due to the fact that its resources and program are planned, selected, and organized to meet the specific educational and informational needs,



and with clearly defined teaching tasks and learning objectives, as the author of this contribution has already underlined (Marquardt, 2013a).

The learning commons enhances the social dimension of learning and, in the meantime, the learner's responsibility and mastery (Bennett, 2003, p. 38). The learning commons acts as a "third space". The "third space" concept, developed by Oldenburg (1999), when applied to the school environment, refers to the meeting and merging of the school curriculum with the informal and spontaneous interactions that take place outside a classroom (Kuhlthau, Maniotes and Caspari, 2007). Although a professionally managed school library should have the 'natural' conditions to be transformed into a LC, this evolution is often described as a "revolution" (Koechlin, Loertscher, Zwaan, 2008; Loertscher, Koechlin, Zwaan, 2011).

The school library as learning commons has been rapidly spreading across North America and Australia in the last thirty years. Similar experiences are currently taking place in Europe. For instance, in France, the Government has been promoting since 2012 the progressive transformation of the "CDI" (centre de documentation et information) into a "centre de connaissances et de culture" (3C or CCC), as a third space based on an educational approach and project, where knowledge and culture are built in a cooperative and creative way (Lamouroux, 2013). In recent years, school libraries have been radically changed in South Tyrol (Italy) and transformed into innovative learning places (Autonome Provinz Bozen, 2013). South Tyrol is the only area in Italy where the school library is mandatory and the school librarian's job position has a legal framework (Provincial Law n.° 17/1990), therefore each school (K-13) has a professionally managed school library. The learning commons was the inspirational model of an innovative school building in Welsberg/Monguelfo, not far from Meran/Merano (province of Bozen/Bolzano), designed by Arch. Klaus Hellweger in 2005 and opened in 2009 (Hellweger, 2009a).

In the Welsberg/Monguelfo Kindergarten and Primary School (K-5), the school library learning commons is at the very and beating heart of the school: it is the school, actually, and represents 'schooling at the library'. A feature of this model is represented by the close cooperation between the school teachers and the librarian, and the innovative ways of co-working and co-teaching (Marquardt, 2013a, 2013b). The process started more than twenty years ago, due to the emerging need for a new school building to host both the kindergarten and the primary school. Upgrading the existing building could have resulted as too expensive and not so functional. Therefore, a courageous decision was made for a brand new building to be built according to the principles of bio-architecture, sustainability, flexibility, and the library learning commons (LC), a model that was studied in depth by the School Principal Joseph Watschinger, PhD. In the luminous 3-storey LC, children of different ages and abilities help each other, play and learn together; their teachers and librarian collaborate. Thanks to the new whole school approach



as LC, the school culture changed and turned into a more cooperative and constructivist one. The new environment and educational styles boosted children's interests, motivation, mastery, engagement, and created a setting where they grow and learn in a collaborative, creative and joyful atmosphere, as well documented by the picture gallery as a virtual tour of the school (Hellweger, 2009b).

## The Multiple Intelligences Approach

According to Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI), there are different types of intelligence. Gardner (1983) defined seven intelligences: 1) linguistic (related to words and languages); 2) logical-mathematical (related to logic, reasoning, etc.); 3) spatial (related to spatial judgment and ability to understand graphic information); 4) musical (related to sounds, music, singing); 5) bodily-kinesthetic (related to one's own movements, sense of timing etc.); 6) interpersonal (understanding others and being sensitive to them, working in a team); 7) intrapersonal intelligence (understanding one's own characteristics, including emotions, strengths, etc.). He later added two further intelligences: 8) naturalistic (related to nature and its different aspects, empathy and caring), and 9) existential (related to questioning about life and existence, and exploring existential issues). An educational environment should provide the child, the learner with space, resources, and activities that stimulate and foster those intelligences, and the different ways of thinking, solving problems, learning, approaching life they reflect.

The New City School, located in St. Louis (Missouri, USA), was the first school (K-6) in the world that embraced the MI theory, a radical revolution in teaching introduced by its former Principal Tom Hoerr, PhD, who specialised with Howard Gardner. Although the school library was professionally managed, it was not aligned with the MI theory. So, it was redesigned to meet the underpinning educational philosophy of the school. As stated in the school website,

The New City School Multiple Intelligences Library is a joyful place where all the students look forward to being. It is not only an aesthetically pleasing environment, but is also a place full of energy, learning, and exploring. (New City School, 2023).

Besides the traditional library elements (e.g., an extensive book collection, a professional librarian, an educational program for teaching library, information and reading skills), the New City Multiple Intelligences Library (that was officially opened by Dr. Howard Gardner in December 2006) is regularly embedded in the school curriculum all year long (Bayliss, 2013). The space itself contributes to the enhancement of multiple intelligences through different areas: a small amphitheatre; a larger area for groups, performances and meetings; the so-called



“Exploratorium”, a workshop area for art work and hands-on activities; furthermore, toys, puzzles, games, realia etc. are available, too. Cooperation is key to achieve high-level learning outcomes: the librarian and the MI specialist work closely to provide students with a stimulating environment where they “can relax, explore, create, read, write, problem-solve, role-play, and think” (New City School). Weekly MI centers are arranged in the library with the aim at engaging pupils actively in a series of activities (games, projects, role-playing, and many others) that take place in the library setting. The New City’s Games, a program coordinated by the librarian, aims at enabling students with gaming skills, and exploiting several intelligences (logical-mathematical, spatial, linguistic, and personal). While playing various games, children develop their problem-solving and critical thinking skills. “From first to sixth grade, students get the opportunity to learn a new skill, practice that skill, and compete with others in an environment that focuses on the values of sportsmanship and fair play” (New City School, 2023).

The MI Library model has inspired the SMIL project for a new school library in Kragerø, Norway (Ofstad, 2007, pp. 4-5), and an interesting toy library - the “BU Toy Library” -, a project developed by the Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, USA (Bloomsburg University, 2023). The toy library is the translation of MI Theory into practice, and provides its patrons (both educators, academic students, and researchers, and children) with access to resources that stimulate and meet the different learning and playing styles, abilities, knowledge. The toy, play, game, and book collection is arranged according the eight intelligences (Fig. 1).

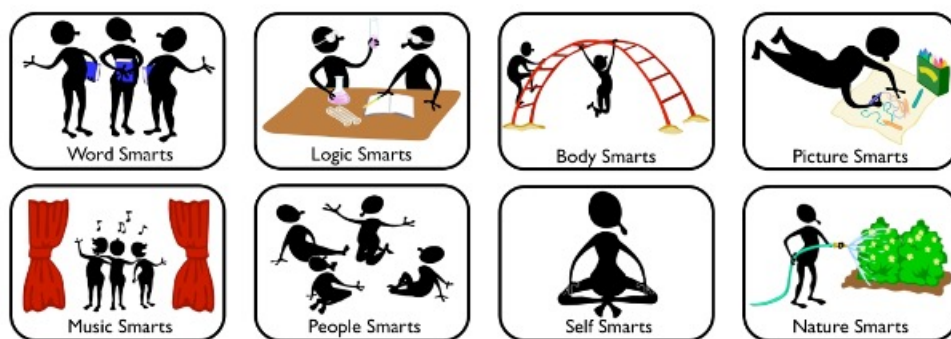


Figure 1: The BU Toy Library Collections (Source: <https://butoylibrary.bloomu.edu/index.php/resources/>)

## Conclusion

The natural children’s needs for playing, exploring, learning, hanging out, can be met in innovative, different, and effective ways through the school library. This



should be ‘rethought’ and turned in a more stimulating, resource-rich, and inclusive environment. The two school library models briefly presented here – the ‘Learning Commons’ (LC) and the “Multiple Intelligences” (MI) – can constitute a reference point for those schools who do want to provide their school community with “quality education” (SDG 4 in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development).

An interesting aspect of both cases is the school principal’s role (and his visionary capacity). In both cases, the principals envisioned the future education and aimed at aligning their school libraries to the new trends and needs. Transforming education, including its environments (and the school library, of course), is transforming societies. As Hoerr stated (2007: 3-4),

It’s time for libraries and librarians to take the next step forward and support the various ways that people learn as well as the many modes in which information can be shared. Libraries should always have a plethora of books, of that there is no question. But books may be only one part of the collection, one way to learn. The goal is to facilitate and support learning, however this is done.

We would add, whether in physical playgrounds located around the school building, or in “playgrounds for the mind”, as a LC or a MI library can provide to the school community.

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