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The challenges and development paths of preschool educational environment

This article discusses challenges of designing a subject-spatial environment in the context of goals and objectives of the preschool organizations in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The paper aims to address a role and an importance of the educational environment in early childhood, and define the concept of «educational environment». Research results are presented on the example of numerous preschool organizations of the Karaganda region. The general issues such as leisure furniture shortage, special conditions for children with disabilities, children's personal, and free activity space have been highlighted. The article emphasizes the significance of diagnosing the educational environment with an international «ECERS-R». The use of scale indicators helps to see weaknesses in the activities of preschool organizations and ways for improvement. The designing stage of strategies for preschool environmental development has been presented, which helps to bridge the gap between the real and ideal educational practice. The outlined strategies based on these «trouble» zones will help teachers build an authentic educational environment, design «zones of developmental opportunities» for children. The identified «trouble» zones and strategies for the development of the educational environment of preschool organizations can become the basis for changes in the preschool educational organizations of the country.

Keywords: preschool education and training, environmental approach, subject-spatial developmental environment, international ECERS-R methodology, problem areas, development of preschool educational environment, development strategies, educational environment.

Introduction

The most important strategy for the development of the quality of preschool education is to increase the developmental effect of educational work with preschool children. In preschool organizations, all necessary conditions must be created for the formation and development of both child's collectivism and individualism. It can be achieved by continuous improvement of the educational process, as well as creation of an environment which allows children to develop independence and encourages curiosity, provides support not only for initiatives, but also for the creative activity of each child.

The issue of designing an environment that provides opportunities for the development of preschoolers has gained much importance in recent years. The relevance of the topic has been propelled to the forefront in numerous studies of the influence of the environment on the development of children [1,2]. It has been documented that concept of preschool development — an environment is called a «child's third teacher» after parents and an educator (Reggio Emilia).

Currently, the «environmental» approach has stepped over the boundaries of a separate educational program and has become a powerful trend in the development of preschool education around the world.

Most researchers [4–6] note that the environmental approach is synthesizing, covering all the parameters of the educational environment of preschool organizations, which are considered as generalized criteria for the quality of education. At the same time, the environment, in the broad sense of the word, includes not only the actual environmental conditions, but also the educational process with all the attendant conditions.

In our opinion, the advantage of the environmental approach is that it allows to focus on those environmental conditions that significantly affect educational results and, in fact, become opportunities for achieving the quality of education. This kind of approach has a great explanatory potential, as it creates the basis for subsequent corrective influences on the educational system, both pedagogical and managerial.

The «environment» is a multicomponent phenomenon; many scientists who study the educational environment interpret this concept in different ways. As the review of scientific works of V.I. Slobodchikov, J. Gibson, V.I. Panov, G.A. Kovalev, V.A. Yasvin, and many others, it shows the term «educational environment» is defined ambiguously.

Therefore, in the works of V.A. Yasvin and S.N. Rybinskaia [7], the educational environment is understood as a territorial and event-limited set of influences and conditions for the formation of a personality, as well as opportunities for its development that arise when a person interacts with his social and spatial-objective environment. In their definition, the concept of «opportunity» acquires special methodological significance for us, which assumes an active role of the personality itself (i.e., its subject position) in the development of the developing resources of the environment. «Possibility» is determined equally by the specific properties of the environment and the properties of the personality. At the same time, «influences» and «conditions» presuppose the influence of the «active» environment on the «passive» person, that is, they predetermine the object position of schoolchildren (in our case, pupils).

We see a similar approach in J. Gibson's theory of possibilities, in his idea of the environment as a set of conditions and possibilities, which are in relation to complementarity to the needs and capabilities of the individual. The environment is not the whole and not any set of spatial, social, and other relations and properties, in the environment of which the individual is. The environment is, first of all, those natural conditions of human habitation as a biological species, which are directly perceived by him as the space of his possibilities for certain actions [8].

J. Gibson, introducing the concept of the spatial environment as a complex of possibilities, writes about the possibility of what already exists (reflected in the consciousness of the individual) or can be reflected (or may not be reflected) by the individual as a space of certain possibilities. In this case, the observer and his habitat (as a set of possibilities for the observer's actions) are in a relationship of complementarity and form the «individual — habitat» system. The definition of the environment as «opportunities» emphasizes the beginning of the subject, mastering the living environment («ecological world»). Possibility is determined both by the properties of the environment and the properties of the subject itself. Consequently, the analysis of the possibilities of the social and subject-spatial environment in assessing the quality of education should be aimed at enriching the conditions for the development of the child's personality.

The conducted analysis allows us to state that most definitions boil down to the statement that the educational environment is a set of conditions, influences, development opportunities in the socio-cultural and spatial-subject environment of the subjects of education (in our case, pupils, educators, parents).

At the same time, there are several equilibrium concepts: the subject-play environment, the subject environment (N.N. Poddyakov), developing the subject environment of childhood (S.L. Novoselova), the subject-spatial environment (V.A. Petrovsky), developing the subject environment (A.G. Asmolov), and others.

In the state compulsory standard of preschool education and training in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the subject-spatial developmental environment is understood as a system of conditions that ensure the personal, emotional, social and intellectual development of preschool children [9].

In order to create the necessary conditions for the development of preschoolers, it is necessary to determine the components of the subject-spatial developmental environment for design. Currently, science is developing approaches to the study of the educational environment, studying its structure, components, characteristics.

It has been established that the developmental effect of the environment is achieved through a set of opportunities for the development (self-development) of all subjects of the educational space. This complex, according to V.A. Yasvin, includes three structural components that can be considered as the main components of the educational environment [10].

Social component (O):

- the nature of the relationship of all subjects of the educational process (children, teachers, parents, administrators, etc.);
- psychological climate, psychological attitude, social and psychological environment, «spirit» of the organization;
- personal characteristics and level of knowledge of children, changes in personal and interpersonal space depending on the conditions of a particular educational organization;
- gender, age and national characteristics, distribution of statuses and roles of children and teachers.

Subject-spatial component (E):

- architecture of kindergarten, group and other premises;
- degree of openness-closeness of internal design structures;
- accessibility, size and spatial structure of premises, ease of their spatial transformation when necessary.

Technological component (T):

- training and educational programs;
- technologies, methods and techniques, actual children's activities, etc.

In accordance with these components, it is possible to isolate and diagnose environmental conditions, understood as a set of opportunities for the development of a child. At the same time, the components of the educational environment (V.A. Yasvin) can be considered as design objects that make it possible to construct environmental opportunities that are heterochronous to the child's development.

We agree that special requirements are imposed on the educational environment of the kindergarten, since it includes diverse conditions for the socialization and development of preschool children:

- spatio-temporal (flexibility and transformability of the subject space);
- social (forms of cooperation and communication, role and interpersonal relationships of all participants in the educational process, including teachers, children, parents, administration);
- activity (the availability and variety of activities that correspond to the age characteristics of preschoolers, the tasks of development and socialization).

In recent decades, the principle of an enriched subject-spatial developmental environment has been put forward. Its essence lies in the fact that the environment was saturated with various elements: various «spaces», materials, and other objects that create the conditions necessary for the manifestation of child's subjectivity.

The correct organization of the environment should allow the child to be active and make choices, thereby providing the basis for his best development. Each child should be able to freely choose their partners in the game, the content of the game itself and the necessary materials. There should be enough materials and equipment to create conditions for children to choose activities and partners, and their quality should be such that they allow complex types of cultural actions (for example, for drawing there should be different kinds of paints, crayons, pastels, etc., for the construction of a sufficient number of high-quality cubes and the allotted space for creating a large building and deploying a long game).

Children need a variety of «spaces» that take into account their basic needs for communication, movement and relaxation, play and education. Therefore, the environment of a preschool organization should be rich and accessible for free use by children. The creation of an enriched environment leads to the fact that the preschooler's involuntariness, his field behavior, «distraction» from a traditional obstacle to the education of children becomes his ally [11].

It is the enriched environment in preschool education that acts as powerful means of creating conditions for the formation of child subjectivity.

However, in practice, there is a serious contradiction between the need for a subject-spatial developmental environment and the impossibility of creating it — on the basis of an objective assessment of the quality of the conditions existing in the preschool organization.

The search for ways to overcome this contradiction made it possible to identify the issue and formulate ways of developing the educational environment based on its assessment.

Experimental

In 2017–2019, a study was conducted to assess the quality of education in 31 preschool organizations of the Karaganda region. Five sub-samples of the study were identified on the following grounds: types of preschool organizations, their administrative-territorial affiliation and status (innovative / general type). Preschool organizations took part in the study on a voluntary basis.

The level of «good» quality is ascertained in innovative preschool organizations, urban preschool organizations and preschool organizations of public-private partnerships are referred to the level of quality above the «minimum», the level of «minimal» quality is demonstrated by rural preschool organizations and mini-centers.

The obtained results indicate that the characteristics of the types of preschool organizations, the social situation of development and the social status of the research participants affect the quality of the preschool educational environment.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised (ECERS-R) technique was developed in 1980 (North Carolina, USA) by a team of authors (Telman Harms, Richard M. Clifford, Debbie Cryer) [12]. This methodology is an international valid tool, designed for a comprehensive assessment of the quality of the activities of organizations that implement preschool education programs for children from 2.5 to 5 years old.

ECERS-R is in line with Developmentally Appropriate Practice and covers the entire range of conditions that a child finds in kindergarten. The authors of the methodology use the formula «spirit of ECERS», interpreted as the value of an environment that contains conditions for the emotional well-being of children, as well as the development of arbitrariness, which allows one to actively start at school [13]. By the educational environment, the creators of ECERS understand the organization of space (furniture, furnishings, equipment, etc.), time (daily routine, the ratio of regulated and free activities) and interaction (the nature of interaction between children and adults, as well as relationships in the children's group and adults with each other).

The assessment of the quality of education was carried out using the international «ECERS-R», which includes the following 7 subscales:

- subject-spatial environment;
- babysitting and caring;
- speech and thinking;
- types of children's activities;
- interaction;
- structuring the program;
- parents and staff.

Each subscale contains a number of indicators, 43 in total. For ease of use, indicators have specific indicators, a detailed description with explanations and examples. Each metric is rated on a scale of 1 to 7, from minimum requirements to ideal [14].

Results and Discussion

In the course of the study, experts observed educational, play and communication processes, interviews with teachers and kindergarten staff, and then put marks on the presence or absence of certain elements of the environment (indicators) in the assessment forms. Based on the assessment results, «education quality profiles» were constructed. Thus, the quality of preschool education was measured indirectly — the fixation of a set of conditions, understood as a set of environmental opportunities for a child's development.

According to the research results of the 31 surveyed preschool organizations which include in total of 362 preschool groups, an average value of the preschool educational environment quality in Karaganda region was 3.93 on a seven-point scale (Figure 1).

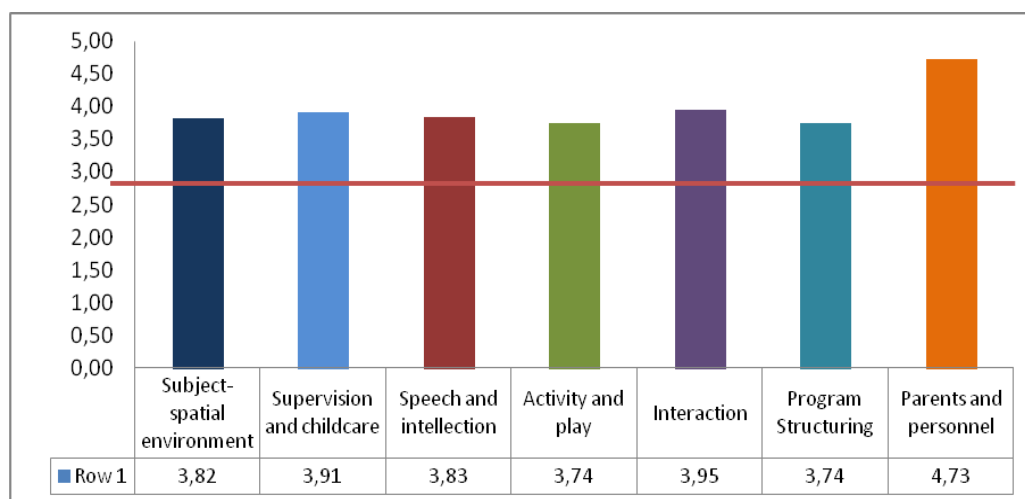


Figure 1. Average values for all scale indicators

This value, according to the results of the pilot testing, occupies a borderline value between the assessments of «minimum quality» and «good quality».

Mathematical and statistical analysis of the results of assessing the quality of preschool education made it possible to identify common problematic areas for all preschool educational institutions that made up the sample of the Karaganda region, regardless of their type and administrative-territorial affiliation. The analysis of the identified challenges made it possible to outline the development paths of the preschool educational environment (Table 1).

Challenges and development paths of the preschool educational environment

Problematic areas (according to ECERS-R subscales)	Ways of developing a preschool educational environment
Types of activities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shift in emphasis from productive forms of education to reproductive forms of «transfer» of knowledge. • «Depleted» subject-spatial environment, not saturated with incentives for self-organization of children. • Insufficient equipment of the ICT environment with gadgets. • Underestimation of gender and cultural differences in educational practice, intercultural sensitivity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization of children's activities with an emphasis on productive forms of education. • Increasing the polyfunctionality of the environment through the creation of stimuli for the child's activity. • Saturation of the educational environment with modern gadgets and encouraging staff to use them. • Promoting children's self-identity by ensuring the continuity of cultural traditions, fostering ethical standards.
Structuring the program	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imbalance of organized educational and free activities of children with a predominance of the former. • Minimum conditions for the integration of children with special educational needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring a balance between organized educational and free activities of children, safe living conditions. • Creation of conditions for inclusion of children with special educational needs in an inclusive process.
Subject-spatial environment (SSE)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistency of SSE with the principles of saturation, availability, variability. • SSE does not contain a system of incentives that initiate the manifestation of individuality • Minimal knowledge of psychological and didactic principles of designing the space of a preschool group, organizing «centers of children's activity». • Lack of furniture for relaxation and comfort, places for privacy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization of SSE, corresponding to the principles of saturation, availability, variability. • Building a system of stimuli and symbols as conditions and opportunities for the child's personal, intellectual, social, and emotional development. • Creation of zones of personalization, relaxation, autonomy of the educational environment. • Development of professional and personal competencies of a teacher in the design of conditions and developmental opportunities for SSE.
Interaction	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of informal interaction between teachers and children (emotional support, «I-statements»). • Rare interaction of teachers with the educational environment to create conditions for «stress» (V.I. Panov). • Manifestations of conflict, aggressiveness, intolerance, rejection in the child-adult community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising the level of psychological and pedagogical competencies of teachers in conducting a dialogue with children based on an «eventful community». • Organization of a complex of developmental stimuli and upbringing of the «aggregate, group» subject of the «tense» educational environment. • Research, design, and implementation in educational practice of effective strategies and skills of communication, behavior in various life situations.
Speech and thinking	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak self-stimulation and stimulation of children's speech interaction to expand the cognitive capabilities of the educational environment. • Inability of the teacher to take actions in the context of «common life», to recognize their manifestations of «monologism». 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replenishment of the methodological arsenal of teachers with speech educational practices that stimulate the cognitive capabilities of children. • Development of a reflexive position among teachers as a necessary condition for the formation of the subjectivity of the educational environment.
Supervision and care	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arbitrary execution by the educator of the basic (regime-procedural) functional of the program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation of social skills and, cultural and hygienic habits among teachers and children, a conscious attitude to their health.
Parents and staff	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of conditions for meeting personal and vital needs of staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing technological solutions to create conditions for the personnel of preschool organizations that have structural and architectural constraints.

The implementation of the proposed solutions for the development of the environment among preschoolers will improve the quality of education for them in following:

- a set of educational incentives (the spatial-object component of the environment, which activates the channels of personal development: perceptual, cognitive, and practical);
- a number of conditions for the subjects' activity of the educational environment (a technological component of the environment that actualizes the psychological mechanisms of personal development: cognitive processes, reflection, empathy, design, etc.);
- an interpersonal interaction of subjects in the educational process (social component of the environment, mediating the impact on the personality of the corresponding stimuli — in accordance with age, gender, ethnic and other specific individual characteristics of the personality) [15].

Analysis of common challenges and issues of subject-spatial environment formation, identified during the study of the quality of preschool education in Karaganda region, made it possible to develop strategies for its transformation.

Let's consider specific recommendations for enriching the subject-spatial developmental environment in accordance with the strategy — the organization of the subject-spatial developmental environment, corresponding to the principles of saturation, accessibility, variability. The environment should be rich and accessible for children to use freely. Equipment and materials should be sufficient to organize the educational process, taking into account the individual abilities, inclinations, needs of children and to provide support for the initiative and the ability to make choices. The materials should be freely available to children.

The variability of the environment implies zoning of space, that is, the presence of various small spaces (zones, areas, corners, sectors, centers, etc.) intended for various types of children's activities. The presence of certain zones may be associated with a specific curriculum and opportunities, and some zones, within the framework of a single multi-purpose architectural and design space, can be designed according to a gender principle [16].

Zones can be transformed: changed, supplemented, and combined depending on the educational tasks and individual characteristics of children. The zoning of the space should be organized considering the entire time of the children's stay in the preschool organization. Educators should ensure that the environment is accessible to children with special educational needs.

In accordance with modern requirements for a subject-spatial developmental environment, a list of additional zones for a full-fledged teaching and educational activity of a kindergarten has been formed. It is recommended to equip the following zones in the group room:

- for plot-based role-playing and directorial games (theatrical activities, «dressing up», the development of social roles and professions, etc.);
- for cognitive activity (experimenting with various materials, development of speech, observation of natural phenomena, the development of mathematical concepts, etc.);
- for independent activities of children (construction from various materials, artistic and productive activities, familiarization with literature, an exhibition of children's creativity, a center of national traditions, etc.);
- for physical activity (sports games, competitions, etc.);
- for board-printed and educational games (viewing illustrated material, didactic games, etc.);
- for experimentation and observation of natural phenomena (experimental laboratories, design centers, creativity; nature calendar, centers for organizing various projects, etc.);
- for relaxation (solitude, reading, individual lessons, etc.).

When creating or supplementing a subject-spatial development environment, it is necessary to remember that all its elements must be decorated in a single aesthetic style to ensure a comfortable and cozy environment. The design of a children's architectural environment must meet modern artistic, aesthetic, cultural and civilizational requirements. This applies to windows, doors, furniture, and other interior elements, as well as to the environmental contexts of figurative fields, spheres, zones of general synarchyotectonics of space [17].

The light-color solution of the architectural environment is selected considering children's perception. The interior of the group is designed in such a way that it is possible to «change the scenery» depending on the tasks of the educational process, as well as on the season. This can be a change of stands, exhibitions and even individual wall or ceiling elements. The presence of various scenarios of lighting and dimming (roller blinds with an electric drive, sconces and ceiling chandeliers, floor lamps, etc.) is also of great importance.

Architectural design can be associated both with the «seasonality» of the educational program, and with the possibility of adding new functional areas and plot themes focused on holiday and future events. This can be done in several technical and technological ways using sliding, transformable partitions, transformable furniture, sectional, modular and free-standing furniture, which are combined into different structures. Such a design ensures the rational use of space, the elimination of unused space in bedrooms, aisles, a reception area with the transformation of such elements into useful rooms.

The flexibility of the proposed planning solutions in the design of the internal space will have a positive effect on the creative abilities of children, contribute to their intellectual and emotional development. Throughout the day, the child can alternately visit various play centers, zones, workshops, independently moving from one to another, mastering all kinds of activities, while the teacher provides him with the necessary assistance in using the play equipment.

Conclusions

Summing up, we can state that the information content of the ECERS-R methodology has been illustrated in terms of identifying challenges and specific characteristics of educational environments for making strategic decisions to enrich and develop the educational environment.

The proposed strategy for organizing a subject-spatial developmental environment corresponding to the principles of saturation, accessibility, variability, and implementation in educational practice sets in motion a mechanism for improving the quality of education based on assessing the characteristics of the educational environment. The identified common issues and strategies for the development of the educational environment can be used by specialists in the field of preschool education and training to create a modern space, child's subjectivity.

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Мектепке дейінгі білім беру ортасын дамыту мәселелері мен жолдары

Мақалада Қазақстан Республикасының мектепке дейінгі ұйымдардың қызметінің мақсаттары мен міндеттері контекстінде пәндік-кеңістіктік дамытушы ортаны жобалау мәселелері қарастырылды. Баланың дамуындағы білім беру ортасының маңыздылығы мен рөлі атап өтілді. Білім беру ортасы ұғымының мәніне теориялық талдау келтірілген. Авторлар Қарағанды облысының мектепке дейінгі білім беру ұйымдарында жүргізілген мектепке дейінгі білім беру ортасын зерттеудің нәтижелерін ұсынып отыр. Мектепке дейінгі білім беру ортасының жалпы проблемалары атап көрсетілген: демалуға және жайлылыққа арналған жиһаздың болмауы, жеке отырысқа арналған орындар, жеке кеңістік, балалардың еркін қозғалыс белсенділігі үшін толтырылмаған кеңістік, мүмкіндігі шектеулі балаларға арналған жағдайлар. Мақалада «ECERS-R шкалаларының» сенімді және валидты халықаралық құралымен мектепке дейінгі ұйымдардың білім беру ортасын диагностикалаудың маңыздылығы баса айтылған. Шкала индикаторларын пайдалану мектепке дейінгі білім беру ұйымдарының қызметіндегі «әлсіз жерлерді» көруге және жұмысты жетілдіру үшін көрсеткіштерді анықтауға мүмкіндік береді. Мектепке дейінгі білім беру ортасын дамыту стратегиясын жобалау кезеңі ұсынылған, шешуші міндет — нақты және идеалды білім беру практикасы кеңістіктері арасындағы алшақтықты жою үшін жағдай жасау. Анықталған «проблемалық» аймақтар негізінде мектепке дейінгі білім беру ортасын дамытудың баяндалған стратегиялары педагогтерге теңтүпнұсқалы білім беру ортасын құруға, балаларға арналған «даму мүмкіндіктері аймақтарын» жобалауға көмектеседі. Анықталған және егжей-тегжейлі сипатталған «проблемалық» аймақтар мен мектепке дейінгі ұйымдардың білім беру ортасын дамыту стратегиялары мемлекеттің мектепке дейінгі білім беру ұйымдарындағы өзгерістер үшін негіз бола алады.

Кілт сөздер: мектепке дейінгі тәрбие және оқыту, орта тәсіл, пәндік-кеңістіктік дамытушы орта, ECERS-R халықаралық әдістемесі, проблемалық аймақтар, мектепке дейінгі білім беру ортасын дамыту, даму стратегиялары, білім беру ортасы.

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Проблемы и пути развития дошкольной образовательной среды

В статье рассмотрены проблемы проектирования предметно-пространственной развивающей среды в контексте цели и задач функционирования дошкольных организаций Республики Казахстан. Отмечены значимость и роль образовательной среды в развитии ребенка. Приведен теоретический анализ сущности понятия «образовательная среда». Авторами представлены результаты исследования дошкольной образовательной среды, проведенного в дошкольных организациях образования Карагандинской области. Выделены общие проблемы дошкольной образовательной среды: отсутствие мебели для отдыха и комфорта, мест для уединения, личного пространства, незаполненного пространства для свободной двигательной активности детей, условия для детей с ограниченными возможностями. Подчеркнута важность проведения диагностики образовательной среды дошкольных организаций валидным и надежным международным инструментом «Шкалой ECERS-R». Использование индикаторов шкал позволило увидеть «слабые места» в деятельности дошкольных организаций образования и определить показатели для совершенствования работы. Представлен этап проектирования стратегий развития дошкольной образовательной среды, решающий задачу, — создание условий для преодоления разрыва между пространствами реальной и идеальной образовательной практикой. Изложенные стратегии развития дошкольной образовательной среды, на основе выявленных «проблемных» зон, помогут педагогам выстраивать аутентичную образовательную среду, спроектировать для детей «зоны развивающих возможностей». Выявленные и подробно описанные «проблемные» зоны и стратегии развития образовательной среды дошкольных организаций могут стать основой для изменений в дошкольных организациях образования страны.

Ключевые слова: дошкольное воспитание и обучение, средовой подход, предметно-пространственная развивающая среда, международная методика ECERS-R, проблемные зоны, развитие дошкольной образовательной среды, стратегии развития, образовательная среда.

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