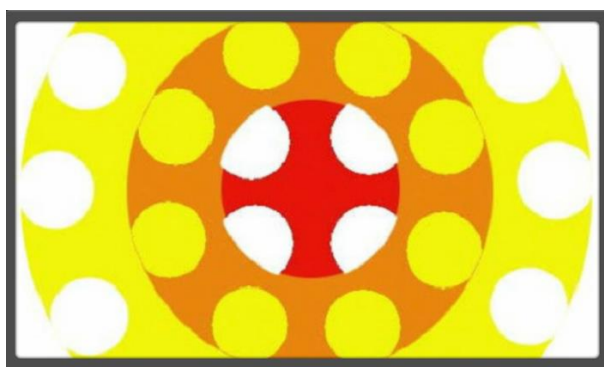




Constructed spaces: Affordances and a theory of the built environment in Christian early learning education

Dr Brendan Hyde
(Research Fellow – Dr Meg Upton)

**A Report Submitted to Australian Research Theology
Foundation incorporated (ARTFine)**



June 2024

Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
Methodology and Research Design.....	10
Findings and Analysis.....	12
Discussion.....	21
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	23
References.....	25
Appendices.....	28

Executive Summary

The aim of this project was to explore the perceptions of early childhood teachers working in Christian early learning centres in Victoria and NSW to ascertain the features of those environments, as constructed spaces, that enhance the Christian education of children. Two theoretical perspectives underpinned the research. Firstly, Affordance theory, a notion emanating from Gibson's (2015) ecological approach to perception, in which affordances refer to what the environment presents to an individual. The affordances present in a given environment are "its *functionally significant* properties considered in relation to an individual" (Heft, 1988, p. 29). Secondly, a theology of the built environment, which concerns our experience of being placed, and the extent to which God is both revealed and concealed in our experience of space (Gorringe, 2022).

A mixed methods approach was utilised for the data collection and analysis. Firstly, early childhood teachers working in Christian early learning contexts in Victoria and NSW were invited to (1) take part in an anonymous online Qualtrics survey, the data of which was analysed using thematic analysis ($n=32$), and (2) take part in a Zoom interview to ascertain the features of those environments, as constructed spaces, that enhance the Christian education of children ($n=4$). The interviews of these participants were recorded (audio and visual) and analysed using a phenomenological framework.

Findings from the survey data indicate four themes - theological, structural (physical), emotional, and 'wished for' environments. Findings from the interviews analysed using a phenomenological framework indicated that the constructed space yielded five common types of affordances – emotional space, embodied space, physical space, relational space and theological space.

The findings suggest that it is the constructed environment of the early childhood centre itself that affords particular types of spaces, such as emotional space, embodied space, and so on. They also indicate that it is the educator who make the difference in seeing the possibility for and creating such spaces, and their intentionality in acting to create such spaces.

While there are limitations to this study, including the small sample size, the findings nonetheless indicate the importance of the constructed space in enhancing the Christian education of young children in early childhood educational contexts.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, we acknowledge that this research was conducted on the Lands of the Kulin Nations, and we pay our respects to Elders past and emerging. We acknowledge the Uluru Statement from the Heart and that Aboriginal lands were never ceded.

We would like to acknowledge the Australian Research Theology Foundation incorporated (ARTFinc) for its generous funding of this project.

We would also like to acknowledge Godly Play Australia and Christian Early Learning for allowing us to advertise via their social media platforms, and for supporting and promoting participation.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank all of the Christian early childhood educators and Godly Play storytellers who participated by completing the online survey and agreeing to be interviewed.

Introduction

There is an emerging body of research investigating features of learning environments that enhance the education of children in early childhood and early learning contexts (e.g., Blackmore et al., 2011; Matthews & Lippman, 2020). However, to date, there is very little evidence of such research being applied to Christian early learning centres. This is surprising given that there are now a number of organisations in Australia promoting Christian education for young children from birth to eight-years-of-age (e.g., Christian Early Learning, Godly Play in Australia).

The aim of this project, then, was to explore the perceptions of early childhood teachers working in Christian early learning centres, as well as Godly Play storytellers, in Victoria and NSW to ascertain the features of those environments, as constructed spaces, that enhance the Christian education of children¹. While I have undertaken some preliminary work (Hyde, 2022, forthcoming), this is an area in which there has been relatively little previous research, and so this project makes a modest but significant contribution to new knowledge in the field of early childhood Christian education.

Two theoretical concepts underpinned this project – affordance theory, and a theology of the built environment. Affordance theory emanates from Gibson's (2015) ecological approach to perception, in which affordances refer to what the environment presents to an individual. A theology of the built environment concerns the experience of being placed, and the extent to which God is both revealed and concealed in a person's experience of space. Both of these theoretical concepts form the basis of the literature review, which follows this introduction.

It is hoped that the findings of this research, modest though they are, will be of use to educators in Christian early learning centres, as well as to Godly Play storytellers, who also generously participated in this research. It is also hoped that these findings will help to influence policy and decision-making in relation to the construction and refurbishment of spaces in Christian early learning centres and parish communities.

¹ Participants in this project comprised early childhood educators working in Christian early learning centres, as well as Godly Play storytellers who more typically volunteer in parish settings with young children, usually between the ages of three and eight.

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review provides an exploration of current literature as it relates to constructed spaces and built environments, the affordances of such environments for Christian early learning education, and perceptions of environments by Christian early learning educators. The review considers literature that engages with understood and possible intersections between such theories, constructed spaces, and educational contexts in order to position the research project. While there has been preliminary research undertaken in the field (Hyde, 2022), the perceptions of early childhood teachers in relation to the affordances of learning environments for Christian education is a little researched area.

Early learning frameworks and learning environments

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia V2 (the Framework) (EYLFA, 2022) provides early childhood education centres with a series of principles to inform educational programs and practices in early childhood education and provides guidance in relation to the importance of learning environments. In terms of learning environments, the Framework states,

Learning environments include physical, temporal, social and intellectual elements. Welcoming, safe and inclusive indoor and outdoor learning environments reflect, respect, affirm the identities, and enrich the lives of children and families (p. 23).

As a series of principles for creating learning environments in early childhood education settings, the Framework invites critical analysis of the stated qualities – physical, temporal, social and intellectual – and how such qualities are enabled/developed through the construction of spaces and the affordances offered by the spaces of early childhood learning, specifically in Christian early learning centres in relation to this study.

The constructed space

There is a growing body of literature researching affordances of built learning environments and indoor spaces in both early childhood and school setting (Blackmore et al. 2011; Matthews & Lippman 2020). What is a constructed space? Fain (2004) describes a constructed space as one that requires some things to be eliminated, and some things to be minimized as form is given to the space. He argues “the construction of space is not so much what we add to the space we are creating but rather what we take from the realm of

possibility of choice” (Fain cited in Callejo Perez, Fain & Slater, 2004, p. 20). Constructivist views of learning suggest that how an individual encounters a space or an object will be shaped by their dispositions, their beliefs, their past experiences, and their understanding (Warden, 2011). Within early years education educators are guided to “plan and create environments both indoor and outdoor that promote and support different types of play for children’s active engagement, agency, problem solving, curiosity, creativity and exploration” (EYLFA, 2022, p. 22). Therefore, the concept of constructed spaces is arguably inherent in the Framework. It offers opportunities for early learning educators to consider the affordances of certain additions or absences from the space. This study seeks to understand what these additions or absences are in order to afford children a Christian early education learning experience.

Affordance theory and the early learning space

The Early Years Learning Framework outlines pedagogical guidance for early learning educators including affordance theory, a theory that asks educators “to think, for example, about the possibilities for activity that the physical environment offers children” (EYLFA, 2022, p. 13). The “possibilities for activity” suggested by the Framework intersect with Gibson’s (1979) affordance theory – the concept of environment being able to guide movement or behaviour – and offers insight into children’s movements and behaviour in the early learning environment. Each learning space will differ and will be influenced by the physical attributes, planning, and ‘additions’ to the space. Gibson proposes that “The environment provides different opportunities depending upon the ‘actors’ and their needs...the environment provides different opportunities for different people” (Gibson, 1979). Heft, also drawing on Gibson, states “The affordances of an environment are its functionally significant properties considered in relation to an individual. An object that is smaller than the hand-span if a particular individual is perceived by that person to be graspable, that is it *affords* grasping” (Heft, 1988, p. 1). Affordance theory has commonly been applied to outdoor spaces however aspects of affordance theory provide rich perspectives in relation to how indoor spaces are constructed, what is placed in a space, what is left unconstructed, by whom, and the intentionality. In terms of this research project, the concept of affordances provides a useful framework that bridges understandings of ‘space’ and ‘action’ towards an appreciation of spatial environments (Young et al., 2019; Young & Cleveland, 2022) as spaces to enact spirituality.

In relation to Christian early learning environments, construction of space, and the affordances of such spaces, the perspectives of educators are a central focus. Indeed, the research considers how educators' themselves consider themselves as an 'affordance' through intentionality and practice (Hyde, 2022; forthcoming).

Affordance theory and the Godly Play room

Within Christian early education with young children, Godly Play as an approach provides opportunities for young children to respond to Sacred stories, Parables and Liturgical actions (Hyde 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014). Modelled on Montessori's 'prepared environment' (1965), the Godly Playroom is an environment that includes "the physical attributes" (Gibson, 1979) of affordances that can be applied to elements of the Christian tradition. Godly Play includes specific processes whereby a Storyteller (mentor) presents a story using objects and materials (a prepared environment and physical attributes) and together the Storyteller and the children wonder about the story's meaning. Hyde (2022) discusses the "taxonomy of affordances" that are structured around what is physically offered in and by both the physical and the emotional space. Hyde (2022) also closely considers 'transactions' between learners and objects in the space, including furniture and placed objects of Godly Play such as in the story of The Parable of the Good Shepherd. What is afforded by the physical space are the transactions between learners and objects in that space, as well as the transactions between teachers and learners.

In the Godly Play Room, the role of the teacher is to guide the children, but not to be the obstacle that comes between the child and the child's experience (Montessori 1965). The teacher encourages, observes, prepares and introduces materials based on observation, and respects the child and their work. The literature contends that in the culmination of these principles an intellectual environment in which learners develop their own intellect and personalities is constructed.

Spirituality in Christian early learning - towards a theology of the built environment

A critical aspect of Christian early learning is spirituality. Hyde (2022) considers the perspective of the early childhood educator. In this study Hyde describes spirituality as being an individual's sense of connectedness with Self, Others, the World and God (p. 202). Hyde contends, however, that spirituality, while abiding in the self, is developed and expressed through 'the social' and through educators' needs to recognise, address and help to nurture spirituality in their students in educational contexts (p. 202).

A theology of the built environment

To be human is to be placed: to be born in a particular house, or hospital (Gorringe, 2002). A theological reading of the built environment concerns our experience of being placed, and the extent to which God is both revealed and concealed in our experience of space. Constructed spaces, as Gorringe (2002) argues reveal who and what God is for people in particular places and at particular times. This includes the early childhood setting in Christian contexts.

Graham (2011) writes of the significance of space and place for “finding ourselves”—not just on a grid reference, but as fully human. Built environments, carefully constructed, can enable people to “find” themselves and experience what it means to be fully human. Sometimes, this is referred to as being “at home” in a particular space (van Manen, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 2004). As Sheldrake (2001) maintains, “we need a place where we can belong to a community... a place that offers access to the sacred” (p. 10). Such spaces are indeed those that reveal who and what God is for people. Thus, Christian early childhood settings that afford close attention to the constructed spaces in which they operate, and which attend to the types of spaces that are created within such built environments, are, effectually providing opportunities for children to discover who God is for them, to “find” themselves and to be “at home” in those particular spaces. As Graham (2011) notes, the significance of place and space is indeed about belonging and being at home.

When we think of space, we usually refer to the mathematical dimensions of space – height, length, area, and so on. Yet space, as it is experienced is more difficult to put into words because the experience of lived space is pre-verbal – we do not ordinarily reflect on in (van Manen, 1990). God can be experienced in particular spaces – not just in churches and cathedrals, but in other types of built spaces. Gorringe (2002) maintains a Trinitarian ethic is at the heart of all built environments – an ethic of creation, reconciliation, and redemption:

God the Creator is the one who brings order out of chaos, and is therefore the source of all order and of the planning which gives form to our world... God the Reconciler is the one who ‘breaks down the walls of partition’ both between God and humans and between humans themselves. God is therefore the source of all attempts to realise community and of the justice without which community cannot survive. God the Redeemer is the author of all dreams and visions, the author of the imagination which seeks the new Jerusalem and anticipates it in structures here and now (Gorringe, 2002, p. 5).

Methodology and Research Design

This project utilised a mixed-methods approach (Cohen et al., 2017) comprising an online Qualtrics survey and individual semi-structured interviews. As a result, two types of analyses were employed – thematic analysis for the online Qualtrics survey interviews, and phenomenology for the interviews. The design and analysis of each is detailed below.

The online Qualtrics survey

The online Qualtrics survey was designed to enable participants to respond to a range of open-ended questions in relation to the affordances of their early childhood centres (see Appendix B). The responses to these questions provided a snapshot of the broader ways in which participants understood those features of their early childhood environments that enhanced the Christian education of the children in their care.

The online Qualtrics survey was advertised through social media sites, in particular the Christian Early Learning Facebook page and the Godly Play Australia Facebook Group Page. The survey questions asked participants about those features of their early learning/early childhood centre that they thought might enhance Christian education for young children, for example, furniture (tables, seating, etc) shelves, digital technologies (e.g., tablet devices), people (the centre's director, other staff). The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. There were 32 submitted responses to the Qualtrics survey, with 19 having complete responses; 13 incomplete responses.

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to analyse the responses to the online Qualtrics survey. TA is a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning, or 'themes' in qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). A key feature of TA is its flexibility, not just its theoretical flexibility but also its flexibility in terms of the research question, sample size and constitution, data collection method, and approaches to generating meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The semi-structured interviews

As a part of the online Qualtrics survey, participants were asked whether they were prepared to take part in an online interview to delve more deeply into the features of early childhood environments, as constructed spaces, that enhance the Christian education of children. Four participants agreed to be interviewed, providing contact details so that interviews could be arranged at a mutually agreeable time. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted for approximately 30 minutes (Appendix C). Zoom interviews can

enhance human encounters and have been advocated for even when in-person events are possible because of the opportunities that are presented by such communication platforms (Hyde & Rouse, 2022). The Zoom interviews were recorded for the purposes of transcription and analysis.

The Zoom interviews were analysed using a phenomenological framework focussing particularly on the notion of lived space (Merleau-Ponty, 1978, van Manen, 2014).

Phenomenology is a form of human science research which, to use Heidegger's (1962) infamous description, is "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself...to the things themselves!" (p. 58). But it is also a reflective process that attempts to recover and express the ways in which people experience their lives as they live them, with the aim of being to act practically with greater thoughtfulness and tact (van Manen, 2014).

We applied phenomenological analysis to the online interviews of our participants. Of particular importance was the notion of space. Lived space is "the existential theme that refers us to the world or landscape in which human beings move and find themselves at home" (van Manen, 1990, p. 102). It is "space in which the heart feels...space which is close to us and with which we are organically connected" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 54). Lived space, then, guided the analysis. The aim was not to be able to make broad generalisations, but rather to explore the ways in which these participants understood and created spaces in their early childhood contexts that nurtured and enhanced the Christian education of children in their care.

Findings and Analysis

As a mixed methods approach was utilised in this project, there are two sets of findings – the findings from the online Qualtrics survey (which were analysed using TA) and the findings from the online semi-structured Zoom interviews (which were analysed using a phenomenological framework). Both of these are presented below.

Findings from the online Qualtrics survey

Using TA, the following spatial themes were identified from the participants' responses – theological, structural (physical), emotional, and 'wished for' environments. While there were 32 submitted responses to the Qualtrics survey, with 19 having complete responses and 13 incomplete responses, for the purpose of TA, all surveys – complete and incomplete – were considered.

Theological

Eight participant responses could be clearly categorised under the theme of 'theological'. In this theme, participants made explicit reference to the sacredness or religious qualities of the spaces in their early childhood contexts. For instance, one participant said that her centre consisted of "Sacred prayer space, symbols, stations for personal reflection, religious artifacts, candles, prayer mats, prayer spaces". Similarly, another participant indicated that "Christian education is woven through most of our spaces".

Three participants explicitly named the Godly Play approach as contributing significantly to the idea of a theological space. For instance, one participant said, "Our Godly play space [allows] children to explore spirituality independently and make meaning of shared stories", while another said that Godly Play provided "Space for devotion and play." One particular participant summed this up insightfully, saying that Godly Play "Allows the opportunity for God to come and join in the play."

Structural (Physical)

Five survey participants' responses could be clearly categorised under the theme of 'structural', or 'physical'. In this theme, participants made explicit reference to the physical structures in their early childhood centres that enhanced Christian education for children. For instance, one participant made reference to a number of such physical features – "Mud pit, sandpit, nature space, sleep spaces, sensory spaces, home corner, craft area, spaces for gathering, spaces for working, spaces for playing individually, spaces for working together."

Another participant named an “Atelier space” – art space (Vecchi, 2010) – as being important. Still another participant pointed to the neatness of the indoor environment in enhancing Christian education for children, saying, “We work on a simple strategy, keeping the environment and the materials uncluttered and basic.”

Emotional

Interestingly, ten participants indicated aspects of their constructed environments that enabled the emotional needs of children to be attended to in their Christian education programs. For instance, one participant stated that her early childhood space “Create a sense of safety and security”. Another indicated that her centre has a “calm-down corner” where children could be at ease and recollect themselves. One participant indicated that her centre had “quiet and reflective” spaces that nurtured children’s emotional wellbeing, while another stated that “we do meditation in the morning” as a means by which to enhance children’s emotional wellbeing. These ideas reflect the EYLF (2022) of welcoming, safe and inclusive spaces. Other responses that could be classified under the emotional theme included spaces that promoted “kindness and giving”, and spaces that “enhanced children’s ability to worship.” In particular, one participant noted that the “unhurried exploration” provided by the Godly Play approach was effective in nurturing children’s emotional wellbeing.

‘Wished for’ environments

In addition, 12 participants indicated things that they wished they had in their early learning environments that might enhance the Christian education of children. These included spaces for “messy play”, water, a dramatic play area, and area for dance and music, spaces that were filled with natural light, and quiet places for prayer and meditation. Those participants who utilised the Godly Play approach also indicated they would like environments that included additional Godly Play materials, Parable boxes, and in one instance, a room dedicated solely for Godly Play.

How space enhances Christian early learning education

The survey data, in taking into account each of the themes outlined above, indicated how these types of spaces enhanced Christian early learning education. To summarise, the survey participants’ responses indicated the following:

- Allows children to explore create and reflect without being disturbed
- We believe children are learning to pray as they quietly work

- Create art pieces to reflect their faith
- Experience God in different ways
- Cater to the needs of the children
- No one size fits all
- The space is ‘invitational’
- Objects serve as enduring reminders of our faith
- Can gently prompt or invite individuals to engage in prayer
- I am convinced that these objects have the potential to foster a greater sense of spirituality
- Depends on Educators and children’s creativity
- When children play with these they learn to use the language of the Church
- Furniture facilitates our goals to help children comfortable and ready to be open to the Spirit’s prompting
- They are able to store books and art supplies [very practical response!]
- Access objects under educators’ permission and to put it back when they finish – to help the children learn to respect things that don’t belong to them

Findings from the online Zoom interviews

Findings from the interviews were analysed using a phenomenological framework that focused on the notion of lived space and indicated that the constructed space yielded five types of affordances in common amongst all four participants, reflecting to some degree the survey responses, but extending beyond these – emotional space, embodied space, physical space, relational space and theological space.

Affordance – Emotional space

“...emotions are atmospheres poured out spatially that move the felt (not the material) body”
(Schmitz et al. 2011, p. 247).

While the physical spaces of environments are important, an interesting finding from these participants was the necessity of *emotional* space, and the ways in which the physical environments of early learning centre can be created to foster emotional space for children. One participant expressed this clearly, saying:

The difference is the emotional space that comes when you have Christian educators. It's that emotional connection, that all children are God's children, and they all deserve the best start in life.

This same participant went on to talk about the importance of creating emotional spaces within the physical environment. She said that:

We use the circle of security, and we create an emotional environment as well in which children can feel safe... an educator comes alongside her (the child), and she connects with them, and she calms down. She's safe – she matters.

Another participant noted the importance of emotional space, indicating the calmness that is experienced when entering an environment that has placed an emphasis on creating an emotional space:

...the children feel calm in this space too because of the predictability – you definitely notice the difference in body language and noise levels between when children are arriving outside the room, and when they come in the room.

For one participant, incorporating an active use of Bible within the physical environment helped to create and nurture an emotional space. She indicated that:

...we intertwine Bible stories with, for instance, learning about our emotions and our feelings in being worried and anxious, and to turn to Jesus in times of trouble, or are in moments by themselves where they're getting anxious...

This same participant went to further elaborate, saying, in relation to the account of Jesus calming the storm, that “Jesus gets up and calms the storm and we will intertwine that with learning about our emotions and our feelings in being worried and anxious.”

Intimacy, safety and trust were, for one of the participants, key features of an environment that created and nurtured emotional space. She indicated that:

...spaces that provide the opportunity to create intimacy and safety. Trust...trusting reciprocal relationships between children and educators... [we consider] routine, rituals and rhythms and what they might look like in our spaces – in building safety for children, the value of being known.

The ways in which these environments were able to create and nurture emotional spaces within them enabled them to act as an affordance that served to nurture and enhance the Christian education of children for these participants.

Affordance – Embodied space

“I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1978, p. 140).

For the human being, one’s experience of the world is always and necessarily a bodily experience. People encounter one another through a bodily presence – a handshake, an embrace, a smile, and so on (van Manen, 1990). *Being present* – carefully attending to the here and now of experience (Hyde, 2008) – through attention to our bodies’ interaction with Self and Other in the space in which we find ourselves connects with Merleau-Ponty’s (1978) notion of body as not being separate from space and time, but rather of combining and including them, that is, embodiment.

The participants all expressed this notion of embodiment. For instance, in speaking about the children’s own bodies, one participant said:

We actually need to bring the preschoolers a sense that they can use their bodies and that helps keep them activated in that space. So that is probably the biggest part in terms of space.

This participant went on to say that when children embody space in this way, “it feels like there’s this sense of peace and joy, and just when you watch the way they’re engaging with other each other, they’re busy. They’re learning, they’re communicating. They’re talking – they’re happy.”

Another participant spoke about the need for the children to take a greater sense of ownership of the space in the early learning centre. She said that she “would like to see children being more involved in maintaining the space,” and that she would like to devise ways of scaffolding children into physically caring for the early learning centre’s environment.

In speaking about telling stories from the Bible and the importance of space, one participant indicated that “children are able to go and re-enact those stories themselves”. In other words, in re-enacting those stories, the children are in fact embodying them physically and corporeally. There is a sense in which these stories then “become a part of who they are.”

The notion of ‘risky play’ was also mentioned by one participant. Risky play doesn’t mean engaging in dangerous and reckless behaviour. Rather, it refers to play that involves thrilling, exciting, physically challenging activities like climbing, jumping, balancing, or rough and tumble play, as well as hiding or seclusion from the constant surveillance of adults. Risky play involves embodiment on the part of the child. This particular participant noted

that in her early learning centre, “quite a few spaces are set up for risky play and the idea they [the children] are capable.” These spaces included both indoor and outdoor spaces.

Affordance – Physical space

“The architectural space is more than a physical space, and it always exceeds geometry and measurability” (Soltani & Kirci, 2019, p. 2)

The physical space of a constructed environment is important. Architectural space “serves life” (Soltani & Kirci, 2019, p. 5), and designing experiences in architectural space should, then, be one of the main goals of those who design such spaces. The physical space within a constructed environment therefore acts as a possible affordance for nurturing and enhancing the Christian education of young children.

This notion particularly came to the fore with participants who utilised the Godly Play method in their early childhood contexts. For instance, one participant spoke about “The threshold the children cross and are then ready to hear the story.” The threshold is a physical boundary that children to enter a Godly Play space. It could consist of entering a room specifically set up for Godly Play through a doorway, or perhaps crossing the floor from an open space onto a mat. This same participant spoke of the physical space for Godly Play, particularly the design of the shelving, saying:

Children are drawn particularly to the objects that suit them. We have a focal shelf, with the Holy Family at the top. It is a curated arrangement. The materials used impact on the children...having concrete objects actually helps them to visualise and verbalise what they are thinking and meaning.

However, other participants who did not utilise the Godly Play method also spoke about the importance of the physical space. For instance, one stated that:

We have used the ‘concierge service’. We greet children at the front door and bring them into the space, and we begin by praying with them. It improves their separation and anxiety and helps with their self-skills and independence.

Some participants spoke about the need to have what they termed, ‘uncluttered’ physical spaces. For instance, one participant indicated that:

We prefer to have an uncluttered look – where there is clutter it is in the form of furniture that we want to remove. I think that perhaps people wanting to create stimulating rooms have but we have perhaps put too much within rooms, which isn't really helpful!

Similarly, in speaking about ‘uncluttered spaces’, another participant further maintained that “Open space is really important because you feel physically uncluttered, and there’s flexibility for children’s posture and groupings.” This idea was further supported by the comments of another participant, who said “we prefer to have uncluttered spaces...we try to have a number of spaces set up within each room that are a bit more open-ended to encourage small groups of children to gather.” Another participant summed up her frustration in trying to create an environment that was uncluttered, indicating that if the room was always cluttered, “You never have enough space for anything. It’s always messy!”

The ways in which these environments had been architecturally designed, and the physicality of the spaces themselves, or indeed that physicality that was enable in these environments, acted as an affordance that served to nurture and enhance the Christian education of children for these participants.

Affordance – Relational space

“The relationships people maintain with others in the interpersonal space they share” (van Manen, 1990, p. 104)

Relational space refers to the way in which people utilise space to connect with one another and the intimacies that draw people to unite (and to reunite). van Manen (1990) notes that, in a larger existential sense, people have always searched in their experience of the Other, often as in the religious experience of God, and that one can only really come to know oneself through relation with God. In the early childhood centres of the participants, relational space was brought to the fore in terms of the interactions that took place between the educators and the children, between the children themselves, and between each child and God. This was particularly evident when one of the participants indicated that:

You can have the most beautiful environment and have spent a fortune on resources, but if you don’t have the right educators, it makes no difference. And if you have interaction between children and educators that promote a positive self-image of the child, then that opens up relationships. It comes back to people, who are wonderfully made in the image of God.

The above response begins to reflect something of the notion of a relational God, and this aspect was clearly expressed by another participant, who said:

Christianity is relational (with God and the children). Our space won’t look anything different to a ‘normal’ kindergarten, except that it’s a space speaks of our values and what’s important to us – the children, our relationship with them and with God...

This same participant went on to speak more explicitly about the idea of a relational God. She said, “we want to be able to help children understand that God is relational, that God loves them, and that God speaks to us through the Bible.”

Another participant spoke of the nature of the relationship between staff, parents and children, and how this was evidenced when children from families who were not necessarily Christian came into the centre:

...not all families are Christian families, and so they're coming into a space that is a little different to what they may have experienced before, and they comment on the loveliness of the space – the relationality of the space.

One participant told a short anecdote to illustrate the relational nature of the space in her early learning centre. She said:

[the staff member] came out and one little girl had just arrived, and she hadn't said hello to her. The staff member said, “I must go and say hello to her. I haven't greeted her today.” And I just thought that was just beautiful, because each child can see that they're valued and welcomed by that interaction with that staff member. So, it's just something that they intentionally do... each child can see that they're welcomed into this space by the interaction they have with staff...

The ways in which the environments of these early learning centres focussed on the interactions and relationships between staff, parent, children and God acted as a relational affordance that served to nurture and enhance the Christian education of children for these participants.

Affordance – Theological space

“To be human is to be placed...Profound, creative, grace-filled spiritualities produce grace-filled environments” (Gorringe, 2002, pp. 23-24).

The notion of a theological space emanates from the concept of a theology of the built environment. God is both revealed and concealed in our experience of space, and constructed spaces reveal who and what God is for people in particular places and at particular times (Gorringe, 2002). One of the participants summed this up aptly in her own words, stating that “God is in everything and our children’s experiences in all the physical spaces – we hope and pray that is what they experience.”

Some participants expressed the notion of a theological space through the use of prayer, worship, and Bible stories. For instance, and in relation to Bible stories, one participant said:

While you won't see a cross on the wall or anything really religious, during the course of the day the children will be read a Bible story that will have something to do with the theme they are investigating. We want the Bible to be part of the curriculum and to be able to teach the children from the Biblical framework in every aspect, for instance, Noah and the Ark.

Interestingly, another participant, specifically in relation to praying, used a phrase that she herself had devised – 'worship parties' to describe the theological application of the space in her early learning centre used as a form of prayer. She said, "...we do like to utilize our spaces for kind of big opportunities for worship parties." When asked about this phrase, she indicated that it was a term she herself had devised to describe the kind of prayer in which children were invited to participate that utilised space in a joyful way.

Other participants expressed the notion of a theological space through the Godly Play method that they utilized as a part of their program. For instance, one participant said:

The space is purposefully used for Godly Play. I don't know if it was designed specifically for Godly Play, but it is set aside for Godly Play. It is purposeful because the resources are laid out in a systematic way.

In a similar vein, another participant spoke about Godly Play and its usage within her centre as a "space within a space". She said that:

Having this 'space within a space' with concrete objects actually helps them to visualise what they are thinking and meaning...the children engage with the stories and ask questions...it helps them to find God in this space.

This same participant also saw the space in which the children in her care were placed as a ministry. In a theological sense, the space for her was one of – and to use this participant's own words - "Kingdom business". This was a phrase the participant herself had devised, referring to the way in which she could bring about the Reign of God – the Kingdom of God in the here and now, and in the space in which she was working.

The ways in which the environments of these early learning centres had been drawn on by early childhood teachers with a realisation that God was both revealed and concealed within those spaces, acted as a theological affordance that served to nurture and enhance the Christian education of children for these participants.

Discussion

Lived space refers to felt space. When thinking of space, it is common to think of geometrical space, that is, to the dimensions of space – height, length, depth, and so on. While the findings of this project indicate these dimensions of space are, to some extent important (e.g., when one participant stated that “We prefer to have an uncluttered look – where there is clutter it is in the form of furniture that we want to remove”), lived space refers to the landscape in which people move and in which they consider themselves at home, for “Home is where we can *be* what we *are*” (van Manen, 1990, p. 102). Hence, a phenomenological reflection on the findings above, especially the interviews, inquires into the nature of the lived space that renders the phenomenon of the Christian education of young children its quality of meaning.

Merleau-Ponty (2002) argues that “space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible” (p. 284). The ‘position of things becoming possible’ in the findings above reflects this understanding. From the themes that emerged from an analysis of the interviews, it became clear that, for these participants, it is the environment of the early learning centre *that affords the creation of particular types of spaces* – physical, embodied, emotional, relational and theological – that serve to enhance Christian education for young children. This became especially clear when participants used phrases such as “space with a space”, trying to have “a number of spaces set up within each room...” and “spaces that provide the opportunity to create intimacy and safety” to capture this notion. It was further highlighted by the participant who spoke about the creation of a space for worship parties when she stated, “We do like to utilize our spaces for kind of big opportunities for worship parties.” It also came to the fore with those participants who utilise the Godly Play approach in their centre, who indicated that “[this space] is set aside for Godly Play”, and “The space is purposefully used for Godly Play.”

This notion of the environment affording the creation of particular types of spaces that might enhance Christian education for young children is important. Such a notion is not so much reliant on having large budgets to build facilities as it is on having early childhood educators who are capable and skilled in being able to see the possibilities that a particular environment might afford spatially and utilising those spaces appropriately and creatively. Each of the spatial affordances highlighted above – physical, embodied, emotional, relational

and theological – are then not ‘money-dependent’, but are rather contingent on the skill and imagination of the educators in the early learning environments.

This then leads to a second key understanding that emerges from the findings, that being the educator herself (or himself) who makes the difference. As one participant so aptly put it, “You can have the most beautiful environment and have spent a fortune on resources, but if you don’t have the right educators, it makes no difference.” It is the interaction between children and educators that promote a positive self-image of the child, and that then, to use this same participant’s words, “opens up relationships. It comes back to people, who are wonderfully made in the image of God.”

In other words, it is the behaviour and intent of the early childhood educator in seeing the possibility for, and creating such spaces that is critical. If the educator can see the opportunities for nurturing Christian through the creation of these spaces - physical, embodied, emotional, relational and theological – then the affordance of space has been acted upon (Hyde, forthcoming). In this sense, the early childhood educator is, in fact, an affordance. It is interesting to think of people as ‘affordances’, since most early childhood educators would not think of themselves in this way. Yet, and as Young et al. (2020) argue, people in the educational setting – teachers and children – are identified as such because they afford a range of experiential opportunities. Early childhood educators are the ones who prepare the environment in such a way that it presents opportunities for discovery and learning, both direct and indirect. They are the ones who facilitate various experiences for children, and as such, are indispensable and have a key role to play. Through their close observation of the children in their care, they not only enable particular behaviours and actions, but they know when to intervene and when to ‘get out of the way’ so as not to become the obstacle that comes between the child and the child’s experience (Montessori, 1965). The adults are also those who perceive the opportunities that are afforded by particular moments in the early childhood space, and they enable these to occur naturally. Thus, there is an important and necessary connection to be made here between the educator valuing Christian education and intentionally enacting a pedagogy that enables this to happen (e.g., the inclusion of worship parties). If the educator can see opportunities for creating particular spaces within the environment and nurturing, then the affordance has been acted upon.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This project has explored the perceptions of early childhood teachers working in Christian early learning centres, as well as Godly Play storytellers to ascertain the features of those environments, as constructed spaces, that enhance might the Christian education. Two theoretical concepts underpinned this project – affordance theory, and a theology of the built environment. Affordance theory emanates from Gibson’s (2015) ecological approach to perception, in which affordances refer to what the environment presents to an individual. A theology of the built environment concerns the experience of being placed, and the extent to which God is both revealed and concealed in a person’s experience of space.

A mixed methods approach was used to collect and analyse the data. Survey data was collected via an online Qualtrics survey and was analysed using thematic analysis. Online interviews were also conducted with four participants and were analysed using a phenomenological framework focussing on the notion of lived space.

Findings from the survey data indicate four themes - theological, structural (physical), emotional, ‘wished for’ environments. Findings from the interviews analysed using the phenomenological framework indicated that the constructed space yielded five common types of affordances – emotional space, embodied space, physical space, relational space and theological space.

From the themes that emerged from an analysis of the interviews, it become clear that, for these participants, it is the environment of the early learning centre *that affords the creation of particular types of spaces* – physical, embodied, emotional, relational and theological – that serve to enhance Christian education for young children. It also became apparent that it is the educator herself (or himself) who makes the difference in terms of seeing the possibility for and creating such spaces within the early childhood environment.

Given that the the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia V2 (the Framework) (EYLFA, 2022) explicitly states that learning environments include “physical, temporal, social and intellectual elements” and that “Welcoming, safe and inclusive indoor and outdoor learning environments reflect, respect, affirm the identities, and enrich the lives of children and families (p. 23), there is a clear remit here for focussing on the spaces that these learning environments may afford for the Christian education of young children.

In the light of this, some tentative and provisional recommendations can be made from the findings of this project. Firstly, opportunities for professional development for early childhood educators centred on the notion of constructed space and how it may both nurture and enhance the Christian education of young children, are paramount. Organisations such as Christian Early Learning, who generously promoted this project, are well-positioned to offer sessions exploring the theology of the constructed environment to its members. Indeed, this particular organisation runs regular professional learning sessions for its members, as well as an annual retreat which combines elements of professional learning with prayer and reflection. The notion of affordances and the constructed environment could readily be incorporated into such offerings.

Godly Play Australia, who also promoted this project, are equally well-positioned. While Godly Play requires practitioners to complete an essential core training program – some of which in fact introduces the importance of the environment and the space in which godly Play takes place – it could provide additional opportunities for development and learning focussed more specifically on (1) a theology of the constructed space, and (2) the notion of Godly Play storytellers as ‘affordances’ who prepare the environment in such a way that it presents opportunities for discovery and learning, both direct and indirect. They are the ones who facilitate various experiences for children, and as such, are indispensable and have a key role to play. Such opportunities for development and learning would further serve to honour the important roles that these adults play in the Christian education of the children in their care.

Importantly, further research is needed to extend upon the findings of this present study to ascertain how early childhood educators discern the features of their environments, as constructed spaces, that enhance the Christian education of children. It would be valuable to conduct a larger mixed methods study so that the findings might be more generalisable. Indeed, this was a limitation of this present project, as was the fact that participants were only sought from Victoria and NSW. Nonetheless, this present study has yielded a set of original and insightful findings that may have the way for more extensive research in this area.

References

- Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. (2022). *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia V.2*
<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-law-regulations/approved-learning-frameworks>
- Blackmore, J, Bateman, D, Loughlin, J, Omara & Aranda, G. (2011) *Researching into the connection between built learning spaces and student outcomes*. Melbourne: Victorian Dept of Education.
- Callejo-Perez, Fain, S.M & Slater, J.J. (2004). *Pedagogy of place: Seeing space as cultural education*. Peter Lang.
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Cohen, L., Morrison, K., & Manion, L. (2017). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE
- Gibson, J. (1979). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Classic Edition. Taylor and Francis.
- Gorringe, T.J. (2002). *A theology of the built environment: Justice, empowerment, redemption*. Cambridge University Press.
- Graham, E.L. (2011). Finding ourselves: Theology, place, and human flourishing. In M. Higton, C. Rowland, & J. Law (Eds.), *Theology and human flourishing: Essays in honour of Timothy Gorringe* (pp. 265-279). Cascade Books.
- Heft, Harry. (1988). Affordances of children's environments: A functional approach to environmental description. *Children's Environments Quarterly* 5, 29-37.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Harper & Row.
- Hyde, B. (2008). *Children and spirituality: Searching for meaning and connectedness*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Hyde, B. (2010). A dispositional framework in religious education: Learning dispositions and early years' religious education in Catholic schools. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 31(3), 261–269.
- Hyde, B. (2012). Learning stories and dispositional frameworks in early years' religious education. *Journal of Religious Education*, 60(1), 4–14.
- Hyde, B. (2014). Nurturing spirituality through a dispositional framework in early years' contexts. In J. Watson, M. de Souza & A. Trousdale (eds), *Global perspectives on spirituality and education* (pp. 128–139). Routledge.

Hyde, B. (2022). Action possibilities enhancing the spiritual wellbeing of young children: Applying affordance theory to the Godly Play room. *Religions*, 13 (12), 1202.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121202>

Hyde, B. (forthcoming). Shifting the landscape – from performativity to a consideration of spatial affordances. In E. Rouse, B. Hyde, & T. Eade, (Eds.), *Nurturing young children as spiritual beings in a globalised world*. Bloomsbury.

Hyde, B., & Leening, L. (2012). Teachers' perceptions and experiences in using a dispositional framework in Catholic school early years' religious education to track student's learning. *Journal of Catholic School Studies*, 84(1), 56–67.

Hyde, B., & Rouse, E. (2023). What is it like to experience the other in an online interview? Using phenomenology to explore the online encounter of the other. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 29(7), 874–881. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004221144071>

Matthews, E., & Lippman, P.C. (2020). The design and evaluation of the physical environment of young children's learning settings. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 48, 171–180. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00993-x>

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1978). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2004). *The world of perception*. Routledge.

Montessori, M. (1965). Teaching religion to young children. In *The child in the church*. Edited by Edwin Mortimer Standing. Hillside Education, pp. 71–81.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>

Warden, C. (2018). *Nature Pedagogy is an approach to teaching which puts nature at the heart of what we learn* <https://scoonews.com/news/news-nature-pedagogy-is-an-approach-to-teaching-which-puts-nature-at-the-heart-of-what-we-learn-3118/>

Sheldrake, P. (2001). *Spaces for the sacred*. SCM.

Schmitz, H., Owen Müllan, R., & Slaby, J. (2011). Emotions outside the box—the new phenomenology of feeling and corporeality. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 10:241–259. DOI 10.1007/s11097-011-9195-1

Soltani, S., & Kirci, N. (2019). Phenomenology and space in architecture: Experience, sensation and meaning. *International Journal of Architectural Engineering Technology*, 6, 1–6.

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. State University of New York Press.

van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Left-Coast Press.

Vecchi, V. (2010). *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia: Exploring the Role and Potential of Ateliers in Early Childhood Education*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203854679>

Young, F and Cleveland, B (2022). Affordances, Architecture and the Action Possibilities of learning Environments: A critical review of the literature and future directions. *Buildings*, 2022, 12, 76.

Young, F., Cleveland, B., & Imms, W. (2019). The affordances of innovative learning environments for deep learning: Educators' and architects' perceptions. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 47, 693–720. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00354-y>

Appendices

Appendix A – Ethics approval from Deakin University to conduct this project



Human Ethics Advisory Group

Faculty of Arts and Education
Geelong Waurn Ponds Campus
Postal: Locked Bag 20000,
Geelong 3220, Victoria, Australia
Telephone: 03 9244 5814
Email: aeethics@deakin.edu.au

Memorandum

To: Dr Brendan Hyde
School of Education
B

From: Faculty of Arts & Education Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG) **cc:** Dr Meg Upton

Date: 22/11/2023

Subject: HAE-23-133
Constructed spaces: Affordances and a theology of the built environment in Christian early childhood education

Please quote this project number in all future communications

The application for this project has been considered by the Faculty HEAG under the terms of Deakin University's Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC).

Approval has been given for Dr Brendan Hyde, SOE, to undertake this project from 22/11/2023 to 22/11/2027.

The approval given by the Faculty HEAG is given only for the project and for the period as stated in the approval. It is your responsibility to contact the Faculty HEAG immediately should any of the following occur:

- Serious or unexpected adverse effects on the participants
- Any proposed changes in the protocol, including extensions of time.
- Any events which might affect the continuing ethical acceptability of the project.
- The project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.

In addition you will be required to report on the progress of your project at least once every year and at the conclusion of the project. Failure to report as required will result in suspension of your approval to proceed with the project.

The Faculty HEAG and/or DUHREC may need to audit this project as part of the requirements for monitoring set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018).

Jo Collins
HEAG Secretariat
Faculty of Arts and Education

Appendix B - Qualtrics survey questions

Instructions

The purpose of this survey is to find out about those features of your early learning/early childhood centre that you think might enhance Christian education for young children. There are 12 questions. Nine of these questions are set out under the headings of “spaces”, “objects” and “people”. There are also three additional questions under the heading “miscellaneous”.

In your response, please **do not** state the name of your early learning/early childhood centre or the names of any staff that might work alongside you.

Please respond to as many questions as you can. All answers are valid. If you do not wish to respond to a particular question, you may leave it blank.

Spaces

- What types of spaces do you have set up in your early childhood centre?
- How might these spaces improve Christian education for young children in your centre?
- Are there any spaces you don't currently have set up that might improve Christian education for young children in your centre? What might these spaces look/sound like?

Objects

- What types of materials – e.g., furniture (tables, seating, etc) shelves, digital technologies (e.g., tablet devices, art materials) – do you have in your early childhood centre?
- How might these materials enrich Christian education for young children in your centre?
- What types of materials do you not currently have that might enrich Christian education for young children in your centre?

People

- Who are the people present in your early childhood centre? (e.g., director, assistant(s), children, etc)
- In what ways might these people contribute to Christian education for young children in your centre?
- Are there any people not currently present in your early childhood centre who could contribute to Christian education for young children at the centre?

Miscellaneous

- Are there any other features of the Christian early childhood environment that you think enhance the Christian education of children?
- If you could change one element of your centre's Christian early childhood environments, what might that be?
- If you could 'build' one new feature of your Christian early childhood environment, what might that be?

Plain language statement and consent form constructed spaces

Would you like to be interviewed about your experiences of features of Christian early childhood environments that enhance the Christian education of children? If so, please read the attached Plain Language Statement (PLS). This statement outlines the project in further detail. Once you have read the PLS, and would like to be interviewed, please contact email the researcher, Dr Brendan Hyde, directly - brendan.hyde@deakin.edu.au. Before participating you will be asked to sign and email back to him a Consent form. Dr Hyde will contact you to arrange a mutually convenient time for the interview via Zoom. Please note that only six participants are required for an interview. The first six to respond will be chosen. If you are not chosen, we thank you in advance for your willingness to be involved.

Appendix C – Interview Guide

Reminder to the interviewee

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview for this project, “Constructed spaces: Affordances and a theology of the built environment in Christian early childhood education”. During the interview, can I please remind you **not to** state the name of your early learning/early childhood centre or the names of any staff that might work alongside you.*

- How would you describe the space at your early childhood centre/Godly Play room?
- What do you think are the particular qualities of this space that are conducive for Christian education?
- How do you feel in this space? How do you think the children feel in this space?
- How do you experience this space? How do you think the children experience this space?
- If you could change one thing about the space to enhance the Christian education of children at your early childhood centre/Godly Play room, what might that be, and why?