



## PLAYING WITH THE LANDSCAPE

**Miguel Castro**

Instituto Politécnico de Portalegre; Portugal

### **Abstract:**

A main concept of the geographical science is the landscape. It is from its observation and study that much of the research in Geography has developed. Training to look deeply at the landscape should start from an early age, since the children get into the educational system.

We carried out activities based on games and situations of clear opponents and spatial thought with the students of Pedagogical Practice, in order to train the acuity of observation of the landscape and the coherence of its fundamental elements by the children. In a playful way, children will more easily apprehend and develop skills which will allow them to become more interventional citizens.

This reflection is the product of the results achieved by the students and the supervisor's field notes about new didactical and pedagogical intervention of the geographical approach in kindergartens and the 1st Cycle of Basic Education.

**Keywords:** landscape, observation, spatial thinking, Geography

### **1. Spacial Education**

*"Those who recognize the beauty in a landscape find God."*

Sócrates

In kindergarten, the use of a landscape as an instrument for introducing a critical attitude towards one's surroundings can constitute a first approach to Geography. From this standpoint, and given the average age of kindergarten children is 3 to 5 years-old, the development of a systematic, analytical posture regarding the comprehension and interpretation of the surrounding environment, could seem difficult to achieve. Their attitude regarding their surroundings is essentially that of a "user"/of someone who experiments multiple situations, without worries or concerns about where they take

place. Even though we can accept this posture as normal amongst younger people, in the case of adults, this unawareness of one's surroundings shouldn't be faced so lightly. When we find a certain place enjoyable, or when something positive happens in a specific location, we tend to like the involving environment; in the opposite case, the most common behavior to adopt is to avoid that place. If we criticize it, we end up rarely presenting suggestions to make it more comfortable and welcoming. For instance, if we come across an abandoned house, we might make uncomplimentary comments about it to the local mayor or even to the government. But we very seldom hear someone suggest ways of avoiding or mitigating these situations, which do not benefit the landscape in any way. To sum up, we usually do not offer constructive criticism towards landscapes.

To become more aware of the reality that surrounds us we, too, need education on geography. Geography is often mistakenly confused with what is commonly called broad knowledge (or general culture) and chorography – knowing the countries, capitals, natural topography features and curiosities about different places on the globe. These are the points that TV shows have connoted with Geography!

The spatial organization and planning, the explanation of social phenomena (political or economic) and its spatial expression, are the main aspects that geographical sciences address. As so, the need to pay attention to our surroundings, and the ability to be critical about what we observe should be encouraged from a young age, since it will influence, direct or indirectly, the quality of the spaces where we live and how we use them. Getting children used to observing a landscape and form and express an opinion about it, is one the ways to, in the long term, improve our life quality.

## 2. Key Concepts for Spacial Education

In order to study the "space", we need to see it, look at it, observe it. It is said, (like a Geographical myth in the University of Lisbon) that Professor Orlando Ribeiro often used, in his classes, a wide board with the picture of a human eye placed on top of the black board. According to him, the first tool of a geographer was (and in my opinion still is) looking at reality around us, that is, looking at the landscape. In this paragraph we find two key concepts for our approach to Geography in kindergarten: Observation and Landscape.

"Observation", according to the Great Dictionary of the Portuguese Language, published by the *Sociedade de Língua Portuguesa* (1989), can be defined, within this context, as: "the action of attentively considering, examining, studying and deeply analysing things; having an attentive and observing attitude; having the tendency to investigate things and their effects, the relationship between events, and the

phenomenon of human actions (adapted from volume VIII, page 66). So, by this definition, the Geographer doesn't look: he observes. He questions, tries to explain, looks for causes for the landscapes he has in front of him. He does it systematically and deliberately, in a critical, explanatory and constructive way. Therefore, when we make observation exercises with the children, we are training them to analyse reality in a pondered, critical and analytical way.

Concerning the concept of landscape, so dear to geographers, its definition is not consensual or peacefully accepted. Still to this day, textbooks and dictionaries define it as the "portion of the space that we can cover with a look". In the previously mentioned dictionary, the concept is explained as being: "the extension of territory that one can see from a determined spot, and that stands out for its picturesque/ type of painting or literature whose purpose is to represent or describe the countryside or country-like places (adapted from volume VIII, page 66). Truth be told, this word was first linked to paintings representing the country, the rural, and the natural, in the end of the XV century/beginning of the XVI. It was related to new aesthetic styles that intended to break with the religious medieval dogmas. This origin remains, to this day, in the imagination of many people who associate the term "landscape" with nature, beauty and harmony. The origin of the word itself comes from the German term *landschaft*, that evolved to the English word *landscape*, which had a double meaning: an objective one – a place in the terrestrial surface, and a subjective one (depending on the observer) – the appearance of a place in the terrestrial surface. It also derives from the French word *paysage*, which comes from *pays*, which refers to the sense of space/territory. On a Geography dictionary from 1998 (Batouxas e Viegas, Sílabo) there is no definition for landscape, but instead there are two variants: the humanized and the natural ones. (However, I have to consider the concept of natural landscape ambiguous, because given the stage of technological development of the human race, even the spaces that remain untouched by humankind can be called "humanized landscape", since they are only like that because of men's rational decision of leaving like that.)

In addition to these considerations, the concept of landscape, in Geography, depends on the epistemological stance of thought that is more in agreement with our frame of theoretical thinking. For the supporters of the Critical Realism or, for instance, of the Marxist school, space is a social construction and the landscape reflects the dynamics and the dialectic between capital and labour, in the past and in the present. In more humanist and culturalist schools, the landscape is also a living space which acquires meanings that go beyond the factual and objective of nature and of the physical space as it is. The landscape is made of sensations, symbolisms and experiences. Culture influences the construction of the landscape through the collective action of a group of human beings with a common history and background, and it is

also the product of the diversity of experiences in the construction and transformation of the space. The observer possesses an experience and feelings about the space that he observes and describes, too. The landscape has material and concrete elements as well as immaterial and symbolic ones, and it is influenced by the perception of the person who observes it.

Yi-Fu Tuan, in "Topophilia" (TUAN, 1982, page 160), writes: "Humanistic Geography looks for an understanding of the world through the study of people's relationship with nature, their geographic behavior as well as their feelings and ideas about a space and place".

By all that's been said, we can easily understand that "landscape" has multiple interpretations; in the pre-school and the in the Basic Education Cycle context, we intend to raise awareness in children about their surroundings. In this age, the sensations and experiences are what define the environment and, consequently, the landscape. We want children to observe and be aware of the landscape in a critical, and not just passive, way. In fact, the attitude towards a landscape, with symbolic and immaterial values, is closer to the children's imagination than the concept of landscape as a socially constructed space. What is essential is that children understand the landscape and become aware that it can be improved by human decision, by operating upon it or protecting it from being altered. Getting children to think of the space when faced with a landscape is to introduce geography in preschool.

Besides the landscape, it is also the teacher's job to develop the aesthetic sense towards the surrounding environment. Aesthetics is also a concept often filled with subjectivity, about which a lot has been written (but it goes beyond our scope of analysis). However, the order, the suavity and the position of the elements on a landscape, as well as the aesthetic sense, are aspects that should be worked on with the children. For many kindergarten teachers, working with musical and plastic expression implies doing tasks inspired by the work of unquestionable quality done by renowned authors. Fortunately, it is already common to hear that classical music, from Mozart to Bach, is played in classrooms, educating children from a young age about quality and harmony.

Following this line of thought, and leaving aside a deeper discussion on the concept of aesthetics, let us focus on Harmony. Order in contrast with Chaos. The Greek goddess Harmony (later roman as well) was married to Cadmo; two of the wedding presents were a *peplo* from Athens and a necklace from Hefesto. Due to a curse placed upon these objects, everyone that would wear them would die tragically. This happened to all including the couple's grandchildren. Despite the misfortunes and tragedies, the couple always remained united.

As so, Harmony comes from the Greek and Latin, and this goddess' name is always associated with beauty. Her body had perfect proportions, that is, harmonious ones. Harmony was the opposite of the goddess of discord. Harmony refers to organization, coherence, balance, agreement, pleasantness, compliance, cohesion between different elements in each other's presence. Harmony also refers to the concept, derived from the Greek – Cosmos – order and... harmony, as opposed to Chaos.

Several pilot experiences based on this concept were implemented in some kindergartens. We developed activities of observation of organized/harmonious and disorganized landscapes with the children. The goal was not to have the children explaining the landscapes in front of them, but to have them showing a critical attitude, logically based in simple but unequivocal aspects, regarding the order or disorder of the elements and their connection to a space with certain characteristics that constitute the landscape. This exercise takes us to the last concept we want to address here, and that we will call *Spacial Reasoning*.

We can define *Spacial Reasoning* as the non-indifference towards what surrounds us, implying an analysis and suggestion of possible alterations and/or interventions to be done in the space in order to better enjoy it, and making its use and role more pleasant and meaningful. At an infant level, thinking about what's right or what is negative in a landscape is a form of special reasoning that, if repeated and developed, will certainly contribute, in the future, to a generation of citizens who are more interventional regarding the space and the quality of life in a broader sense.

### **3. Looking at the Landscape with the Children**

Within the context of Pedagogical Practice by the future Kindergarten Teachers and Basic Education ones, we have put into practice the observation of landscapes by the children and the discussion of the positive and negative aspects that each scenery exhibits, or even ways in which they could be improved. This experiment was implemented in two schools in Portalegre, in two classrooms with, respectively, 20 and 22 kids aged in one case 3 to 5 and in the other 4 and 5.

The activities were developed by the students twice, and incorporated in activities that, even though not specifically related with Geography, were related with Knowledge of the World, and enabled the introduction of games with photos. The answers were recorded by the students and analyzed along with the supervisor, so it would be possible to evaluate the effect of the activity within the context of Geography, and hence determine the efficiency and adequacy of the activity.

From simple pre-existing games, but always with clearly marked binary oppositions, so that the children could handle the concepts without hesitation, we

selected photos of different landscapes, with more or less human intervention or even “natural” ones. In the first group, the pictures showed rural areas, such as villages, small towns, cities, shopping centers, city squares... in the second group, the images emphasized landscapes of natural parks, with soft colors, so as to convey tranquility and, yet again, harmony.

We structure our intervention on the line of thought of Kieran Egan (1990/1992/1994) in several works, but mainly in the one, he expresses on “Educational Development”. He stands that the narratives should be structured according to the stage of thought and cognition of the children and the story should be developed through well-marked binary oppositions. Egan defines four stages of children/young though development: mythic (4/5 to 9/10 years old), romantic (8/9 to 14/15 years old), philosophic (14/15 to 19/20 years old) and, at last the ironic. The one we followed is the first related to the kindergarten age and it’s related to the experiment we carry on.

Four essential aspects characterize the mythic stage and the approach that we made to the landscapes is in accord with them. First is the need of intellectual security of children thoughts: if we present the reality in a mythical way, the children can understand the message we want to deliver. The myth itself provides an extensive and comprehensive approach to the reality and carries the explanations the infants need about the way things work; it gives meaning to the phenomena.

The second characteristic of this stage of children’s intellectual development is the lack of space-time diversity and the needless of logic causality in a given special context. They just don’t have the experience of life that allows them to have the time scale of the events and the rhythm of the changes.

In the third place is the absence of a view of the world’s reality as something autonomous and objective. The children understand the world through their own knowledge of the reality. At last, children look at the world and interpret it through marked binary oppositions.

According to the concepts presented, the second phase was the manipulation of the images or the search for examples of less harmonious sets, which integrated elements that were unexpected in that particular context. For instance, a picture of a meadow or a natural park with a polluting factory in the middle or intersected by roads; a picture of a big city at rush hour, where the proportion of vehicles in relation to the road is clearly “asymmetrical”.

The game consisted of showing harmonious and peaceful landscapes, mixed with manipulated and non-harmonious images, which introduced dissonant aspects. The kids were then questioned on their approval or disapproval of what they were observing. When there was criticism, the child would be, individually or in group, encouraged to explain what wasn’t right in the image and justifies his/her answer.

Another activity was to show unpleasant images – garbage on the streets, a graphitized wall, a slum, etc. – with some possible solutions to improve the landscape. A degraded house and images of possible interventions such as: demolition paints and brushes, a construction worker, a group of young people painting graffiti. For social housings with a high density population, we would present images of nice gardens, sports areas, excess traffic, and a factory. The children made their selection, justifying the reason for their preferences.

After these games in the classroom, the next step was to provide the children with real experiences were they could use the same kind of thought process towards actual landscapes. In kindergarten, teachers often organize field trips to different points of interest for the children, as a way to complement their experiences and knowledge. Those moments were enriched with stops and calls of attention towards landscapes that needed (or not) intervention. This way, the child could easily extrapolate the classroom games to practical life, thus giving real meaning to the lessons learned. We tried to raise the habit of observing, analyzing and criticizing the landscape in the children. We believe this attitude will make the child more aware of the geographical environment, empowering her, contributing to her self-esteem and proactive behavior, and giving her a relevant role in the world of adults. Besides, we believe that raising an attentive, interventionist and critical student, used to thinking about things, is going to contribute to making him a better citizen, more participative and less indifferent to the life of his community and country.

The introduction of geographical notions in preschool – however, distant, complex and abstract they may seem – can reveal effective, rewarding and easy to comprehend through the execution of ludic activities. The presentation and use of clearly marked opposites (just like in children’s tales, with the “good” and “bad” guys, the lazy and the hard-working) allows kids to understand and interpret the world from an early age. As presented on the text “On The Other Hand” – Geography in Kindergarten Context (Castro, 2015), Kieran Egan effectively applied this theory of presenting History concepts; in the case we used and adapted it to Geography. Successfully!

The most important is the systematization and repetition of these exercises and their interlacement with other areas of the Curriculum Guidelines. Geography and Landscape are so encompassing that they can be a point of point of start and of collaboration with other sciences, making any approach more enriching for the children.

I would like to finish with a reflection about the study methodology in Geography and the landscape. The notion that the Geographer needs eyes to observe, legs to walk and a chair to sit is attributed to Professor Orlando Ribeiro. Looking and

walking on a landscape and, posteriorly, stopping and reflecting about what was observed. On an interview, Faulkner<sup>i</sup> reportedly mentioned: "A landscape is conquered with the soles of the shoes, not with the wheels of a car." However, the car is what allows us to reach and get to know a larger diversity of landscapes.

The attitude towards an experienced landscape, with symbolic and immaterial values, is closer to the children's imagination than the concept of landscape as a socially constructed space.

It is essential that children understand the landscape and become aware that it can be improved by human decision, either by operating upon it or by protecting it from being changed.

Getting children to think of the space when faced with a landscape they observe, is an effective way of introducing Geography and of helping them understand reality. Project in Progress: Design and apply an observation sheet in pre-school, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Cycles of Basic Education. Understand and evaluate the children's comprehension of the complexity of landscapes (organization, functions, interventions, history, etc...) and the way in which Geography can be simultaneously an autonomous science and an assistant to other areas of knowledge, through the execution of ludic activities.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.citacoes.org](http://www.citacoes.org)

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