

# The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Kindergarten

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The 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten is one that balances features that support the child's individual development with social values and an awareness of one's surroundings. It adapts to the social, economic and technological changes of our era, and is an alternative to the traditional model of education we have grown accustomed to.

"You say the children are tiring.

I agree.

You also say that it is because you have to lower yourself to their level, to stoop, to bend, to crouch, to make yourself small.

I do not agree.

That's not what is most tiring but rather the fact that you have to raise yourself to the level of their feelings.

You have to stretch yourself, become taller, get up on the tips of your toes, so as not to hurt their feelings."

**Janusz Korczak, "Pedagogic Writings", 1905**

As part of the reform of the “second kindergarten aide”, in which the Institute for Democratic Education partnered, the Early Childhood Education branch is leading a process to adapt kindergarten children in Israel to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As such, in many kindergartens across Israel you can see the beginning of this change.

## **What is a Kindergarten Adapted to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?**

It is a kindergarten that balances features that support the child's individual development with social values and an awareness of one's surroundings. In addition, it nurtures the skills currently required and advances democratic culture.

In this article I will attempt to characterize Early Childhood education as it is required today; education that is more adapted to the social, economic and technological changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will attempt to present the various aspects of the 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten and its uniqueness and difference from the traditional kindergarten model with which we are all familiar (the concept “traditional education” in this article does not relate to religious education but to the “regular” stream of education that is not adapted to the 21<sup>st</sup> century).

## **Characteristics of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Kindergartens**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten, emphasis is placed on the individual development of the child, on his/her independence and uniqueness and integration into the group of children and society in general.

The kindergarten in this spirit promotes democratic principles, such as choice and equality, through understanding the differences between the children in the kindergarten. In addition, in the kindergarten they help the children find their strong points and nurture them. The kindergarten encourages cooperation between the children without competition and nurtures their team work around goals and joint tasks.

Dialogue (Katzenelson 2005) serves as the main communication tool in the kindergarten, and gives expression to the children's emotional world. Importance is attributed to creating in the children a sense of belonging and involvement in determining the activities and the work.

Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten also takes place in the children's areas of interest. It is relevant for them, encourages thinking and creativity and develops the imagination. This learning takes place mostly through intrinsic motivation, experience and enjoyment. The kindergarten activities are directed toward multiple intelligences and matching the characteristics, attributes and

strengths of each child in the group. The kindergarten encourages critical thinking and the ability to cope with changes in the environment. Emphasis is placed on the values of sustainability and responsibility for the environment, as well as values of community and multi-culturalism.

Education in this spirit is well suited to the needs of a changing society, and to the 21<sup>st</sup> century job market. It is education which encourages the children to be independent, take responsibility, cooperate, have deep self-awareness of their strengths. They are encouraged to develop sensitivity toward their peers in the group, as well as concern for the 'other' and for the environment. In addition, this type of kindergarten encourages curiosity and love of learning and arouses creative and critical thinking. These characteristics should help the child cope with a changing world, and work to create a better society, accept the other among its friends and care for the community and the environment in which we live.

## **Education Adapted to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Traditional education is a product of the Industrial Revolution, which was adapted to the changes which began in earlier centuries. 21<sup>st</sup> century education is founded upon progressive education, environmental education and critical pedagogy.

Progressive education, which developed in the early 20th century (Dewey 1969, Korczak 1963 and others), and the liberal/open education that followed (Neal 1977, Greenberg 2002 and others) and constituted part of the revolutionary years of the 1960s and the “flower children”, placed self-actualization at the heart of educational endeavor. In Israel there were also thinkers and educators who supported progressive and open education. Among those who stood out were: Moshe Caspi (1978), Tzvi Lamm (1983), Tzvi Lavi (1978), and Yaakov Hecht (2009). In Early Childhood education, a variety of progressive outlooks developed, starting with Maria Montessori (1964), Lauris Malaguchi in Reggio Emilia in Italy (Zuran, 2001) and Gideon Levine (1986, 1996) in Israel, who developed the 'flowing kindergarten' approach (Dayan 2001).

21<sup>st</sup> century education combines individualistic values that form the foundation of progressive and open education, with collective values of society and the environment, and is expressed mainly in the approaches of environmental education and critical pedagogical (Freire 1981). Although there are those who would say that a combination of individual values and those of society are contradictory in their educational rationale (Lamm 1973, Egan 2009), I think it is possible to combine them, and that this is even completely compatible with the processes taking place in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. On the one hand, we are witnessing very powerful processes of individualization (iPhone, iPad, workshops to 'find' and fulfill yourself), and on the other hand, we see social processes which promote values of equality and justice (e.g. social protests worldwide) and significant environmental processes (awareness, activism, and environmental responsibility are on the rise). The combination

of these values already at kindergarten age creates a different educational framework: it facilitates an atmosphere that encourages personal development and self-fulfillment alongside social relations that are strong and inclusive.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten offers an alternative to the traditional education model and emphasizes different characteristics. The organization of the surroundings of the kindergarten, the climate, the work, the creations and the games in the kindergarten reflect the educational approaches that comprise its foundation.

## **Accessibility and Flow in the Space**

Most of the activity corners of the kindergarten; the games and craft materials are placed at the children's height and as such are accessible to the kindergarteners throughout the day. In many instances the kindergarten yard is also open and accessible, parallel to the other corners of the kindergarten. In this way there is a free flow, for most of the hours of the day, between the different areas of the kindergarten and the yard. In many instances the kindergarten may look like a mess; however, the "mess" stems from developed socio-dramatic games the children are playing and from their creativity and the cooperation between them. This "mess" could be called an "organized mess" – different from a mess that stems from vandalism, lack of caring and disrespect. A visitor who enters the kindergarten might not be able to tell the difference, but the children's freedom of choice of activities in the kindergarten creates a different play experience that might be considered as a lack of orderliness, and at times show a quicker wear and tear of the games and craft materials. In the more structured part of the day, groups of children linger in designated spaces and work independently or are guided by the staff in projects and tasks that they the children initiate and develop in the kindergarten. The kindergarten staff conceptualizes and reflects to the children the various processes and roles in order to attain successful team work and cooperation.

## **Environment**

In contrast to the physical mess, the atmosphere of the kindergarten is characterized by the surprisingly calm state of the children, with minimal aggressiveness and violence, and with open social playing. This unique environment stems mainly from the possibilities for self-fulfillment the children have, through choosing the areas of interest and developing their strong points. This kindergarten environment is also due to the long periods of time devoted to testing and developing social skills and cooperative socio-dramatic play and to implementing the children's initiatives and ideas.

In the traditional kindergarten, only a small portion of the games and crafts materials are accessible to the children. The corners of the kindergarten are open to the children only at designated times, most of the time not simultaneously. The children are not always given the choice what to play with or what to create. Emphasis is placed on the kindergarten being neat all day, and the children are prohibited from moving games and materials from one area to the other and are required to tidy up the games right after they finish playing with them. As a result, in many instances the children are not permitted to return to a game they started, move from game to game or integrate between the different 'worlds' of the kindergarten.

## **Integrative Games**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten encourages flow and integration between worlds of content and play. For example, a group of children can begin to play a game where they are building an entire imaginary world from blocks and plastic animals, and then go to the costume corner where they turn into figures from the world they created, and then to the kitchen corner to prepare shakes and then return to end their game in the building blocks corner.

This type of play is not possible in the traditional kindergarten, because the minute the children want to move from one corner to the next, they will be expected to collect the blocks and the animals, and any games of imagination and creativity that could have developed will be cut off. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that boundaries and order also exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten and they are an inseparable part of the daily routine. For example, with the assistance of the staff the children tidy up the kindergarten twice a day, but not each time they finish playing with something.

## **Display of Children's Varied Outputs in the Kindergarten Space**

The walls of the 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten convey variance rather than uniformity – different creations from different materials that express the children's areas of interest, in addition to their creativity and the variations among them. The different and relevant work in the kindergarten also expresses the uniqueness of the specific kindergarten's social and cultural characteristics, the uniqueness of the educational staff and the diversity of the children. Considerable visible expression is given to the various stages of the work process and not just to the output.

In contrast, the walls of the traditional kindergarten are mostly expressions of the topics the kindergarten teacher chose (or was required) to teach. In many instances the children's' creations are almost identical, and they do not express their personal interests or creativity. In such a kindergarten, for example, all the children create a picture of a citrus tree using the same materials, and with the

identical instruction of the teacher (at times even according to a model she prepared). At the end of the process, all the citrus trees will look like uniform row of trees in an orchard.

## **A Flowing and Flexible Schedule**

In the traditional kindergarten there is a clear preset schedule, and activities are structured and planned. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten there is a clear framework for the schedule (similar to the traditional kindergarten) or set anchors throughout the day that provide the children with a feeling of security. Within the structured framework one can choose, and there is freedom and flow between the various activities. The multiple choices enable the children to express themselves and develop their strong points. They can move between the activities as they choose, according to the different personal pace of each child. In addition, a change from time to time in the schedule nurtures the ability to cope with a changing environment, a skill that is necessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The schedule in the traditional kindergarten can create an environment characterized by rigidity and feelings of frustration. However, sometimes it is necessary to have rigid boundaries in order to prevent incidences of expressions of anger and frustration with aggression and violence. When the children are given little choice in kindergarten, much of the day is dedicated to activities that do not interest them and at times even frustrate them, so you need discipline and a rigid framework in order for the frustration not to be channeled into incidences of aggression, injury to others and vandalism.

## **Cognitive and Multi-Dimensional Learning**

In the traditional kindergarten cognitive learning plays a central role: the teacher is the source of knowledge – she organizes meetings and activities on topics such holidays, seasons, health (me and my body), nature etc. These topics are dictated in most cases by the Ministry of Education, and are limited mostly to holidays and seasons of the year, and thus require a rigid schedule. Learning focuses on memorization (holiday songs, characteristics of the seasons, recognition of the various body parts) and to questions the teacher asks, which have only one correct answer.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten, learning takes place at all levels of multi-dimensional dialogue: emotional, cognitive, physical, social and even philosophical. The activities and the learning encourage use of the children's various types of intelligence (Armstrong 1996). Learning is active, experiential and relevant to the children and is taught through games, hands-on activities and enjoyment. A central part of the topics learned in the kindergarten are a product of the children's curiosity and the learning is constructivist and based on developing existing knowledge. The children are partners in the creation of the new knowledge and the teacher is not the only source of information. Questions are asked by both the teachers and the children, and are primarily productive

and open-ended, ones that do not have one known answer and as a result are open to research, experimentation and study.

For an additional illustration of the difference between the traditional kindergarten and the 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten, let's take, for example, a kindergarten where a large group of the children developed an interest in outer space and the world beyond Earth. Their socio-dramatic games dealt mostly with this topic. The teacher noticed this, and although she was concerned that she was not an expert on outer space and perhaps the children interested in this topic knew more about it than she did, she began to bring teaching materials and activities on the subject. The teacher, along with the children, studied and developed the topic of outer space through crafts (creating a personal and unique star for each child), books, films, plays and additional activities (the children expressed themselves according to their strengths and fields of interest). They dealt with the philosophical questions of faith (Where is God? What does he look like? Are there aliens? If so, why don't they come here?), questions which touch upon our responsibility for the environment and global warming (what would happen if we didn't have the sun?), and emotional questions such as fear of aliens and the dark, and how to cope with them. The annual trip was held at an astronomical observatory and a planetarium. At the end of the study, a Purim party was held in conjunction with the parents on the topic of outer space that included crafting masks (astronauts, aliens), a journey in a spaceship built by the children, a play performed by the parents, and a three-dimensional game about the solar system.

## **Community Activity**

The active participation of the community of parents (not just as an audience but also as active partners with the children) is also usually a prominent feature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten. The community of parents is seen as a central influencing factor on the kindergarten environment and is a partner in the creation of the educational path upon which the kindergarten progresses. In addition to the rich community life of the kindergarten (joint trips, joint Sabbath Eve activities, learning about the community of parents, enlisting them for joint work, joint parties, etc.) there is an emphasis placed on multi-culturalism in the human society, and especially on the various cultures of the kindergarten families. For example, if there is a Christian family in the kindergarten, there will be some room for the Christian holidays and customs. Another example is a Sigd holiday party in a kindergarten where there are a number of children from the Ethiopian community: some of the dolls in this kindergarten will have darker skin, and there will be fabrics in the doll corner to dress the dolls. In one kindergarten yard, an Ethiopian hut was built with the help of parents. The 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten will have a strong connection with the surrounding community. There will be joint learning in the main square in conjunction with people from the community.

## Sustainability

Environmental education is a central aspect of the humanistic approach of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Wenger, 2008).

Education for sustainability is also part of the kindergarten atmosphere and the central values that are part of the foundation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational approach: involvement in recycling, creation with recycled materials (RE-USE), education for protecting nature, preparing compost, creating a community garden, using natural materials, etc. Communal and environmental responsibility are topics discussed throughout the day, and they play a central role in the learning at the 21st century kindergarten.

For example, in advance of Lag Ba'omer, there was a discussion in the kindergarten about lighting the bonfire and its contribution to the personal and communal experience, at the same time as a discussion about the significance of the environmental damage that might occur. It was decided along with the children to have one small bonfire for both of the classes in the kindergarten. Each family was responsive to bringing multi-use dishes, the children and the parents cleaned up the area in which the bonfire was lit and; of course, made sure to bring only materials which are not poisonous or harmful to the ozone layer. Emphasis was placed on putting out the fire and how to leave an area where a bonfire has been lit, for the people who will come after them.





## Summary

Kindergarten education adapted for our era is education that knows how to find a balanced integration between individualist and collective values. It is education that has room for personal development of the individual and recognizes the importance of social and environmental processes. In addition, it integrates between freedom and openness to structure, constructivism and clear boundaries. The different characteristics of 21<sup>st</sup> century kindergarten education influence individuals so that they will express themselves through consideration and concern for society and for the environment.

Leading a change in the kindergarten education system (through an understanding that it will be continued at the older ages as well) will bring a significant change in the individual's sense of efficacy well-being , as well as the sense of security and advancement of the entire community.

The Ministry of Education plays a central role in leading this change, in active partnership with the local municipalities, the teachers' colleges and the teachers and kindergarten teachers' associations. With the help of belief in this idea and the enlistment of the educational staff of kindergartens, this important change can take place.

<b>Kindergarten Characteristics</b>	<b>Their Expression In the Traditional Kindergarten</b>	<b>Their Expression in the Kindergarten that is Adapted to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century</b>
<b>Organization of the space</b>	Divided in a clear manner between different functions (arts & crafts, playing, reading a story ...), children can't go from one part of the kindergarten to another or take objects from one part of the kindergarten to the other without the teacher's approval, children must tidy up the corner where they were before going to another space	Flow between the different spaces in the kindergarten... a child can decide in which space to be and how long to be there, integrative socio-dramatic games can take place that integrate between the different spaces in the kindergarten. A space that nurtures team work and cooperation.
<b>Schedule</b>	Set by the kindergarten teachers for all the children, a separate time is designated for each activity.	There's room for the personal pace of each child - a child can decide when to go from one space to another and from one activity to the next. From time to time the teacher varies the structure of the day in order to encourage flexibility in the children.
<b>Who decides</b>	The kindergarten teacher decides on behalf of all the children, allowing for almost no choice	The kindergarten teacher is attentive to the children and chooses activities and topics based upon areas of interest and strengths of the children, the children are given choices within the spaces and activities that the kindergarten offers, the children initiate activities and even topics for discussion and study
<b>Children's outputs</b>	Mostly as a result of the content the kindergarten teacher selected to teach. The children's outputs are very similar in the materials and their manner of creation. They are designed according to a "correct" model that the kindergarten teacher brought.	The outputs are different in topics, materials and techniques; they express the uniqueness of the children and their individuality, as is also expressed by the specific kindergarten. There is great and visible emphasis on the work process and not only on the final product.

<b>Kindergarten Characteristics</b>	<b>Their Expression In the Traditional Kindergarten</b>	<b>Their Expression in the Kindergarten that is Adapted to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century</b>
<b>Content</b>	According to the Ministry of Education or the kindergarten teacher – dictated in advance	Stems from the areas of interest and the strengths of the children and the kindergarten staff
<b>Type of learning</b>	Mostly cognitive and mostly based on memorization. Use of closed questions that have one correct answer.	Combination of learning in the physical, emotional, social, cognitive and philosophical planes.  Emphasis on constructive study that is based on questions which are productive and open.
<b>Community activity</b>	Mostly as a passive community – limited involvement of the parents in events that are initiated by the kindergarten teacher.	Emphasis on cooperation of the community of parents in kindergarten life.  There is even a connection and learning at the municipal level in cooperation with people from the communities in the vicinity of the kindergarten.
<b>Sustainability</b>	No special involvement with sustainability	Emphasis on education for sustainability and its expression in various areas of the life of the kindergarten.

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