

## Integrating Design and Pedagogy: HDS Renovates its Kindergarten Classroom

By Dina Shtull

Organizing learning spaces to promote optimal learning is an important task of early childhood professionals. Following through on a goal that had been part of the school's strategic plan for a number of years, Hebrew Day School (HDS) set out this past summer to renovate its kindergarten classroom. "Investment in this asset is an important strategic step," says Michael Pedersen who, along with his wife Dina, played a lead role in the project. "Parents are attracted to the Gan (Hebrew for kindergarten) because of its strong academic program," says Dina. "The curriculum is regularly evaluated and changed to meet student needs; the physical environment must be reviewed and adjusted as well," she added. "The atmosphere of our new room is both serene and exciting," says Gan teacher Judy Musket. "It appeals to the children's interest in color and pattern and makes the room very inviting. In addition, the organization of physical space affects program quality; it influences the range of options children have to explore using different learning styles," Musket added.

The renovation of the kindergarten was designed and led by HDS parent Limor Gutnick, a commercial interior designer by profession. Gutnick developed the project plan, and through her professional connections, secured high quality materials and contract work at lower costs. Working closely with the JCC, she was also able to secure savings for the JCC lounge renovation which also took place during the summer. Gutnick offered creative solutions around the use of color and space. "In the field of educational design," says Gutnick, "color can reduce passivity and refresh visual processing. Visual stimulation, according to the research, can foster visual thinking, problem solving, and creativity," she added. Gutnick was aided by a design intern and received input from educators such as Jennifer Rosenberg, Judy Musket, and Ilana Blumberg. "As we discussed the rich curriculum and the many activities that take place in the Gan," said Rosenberg, "we took care to make sure the various areas in the room could function in multiple ways to accommodate the variety. We also considered that each group of children comes with different interests; the design therefore reflects flexibility to personalize the space depending on the need."

"A kindergarten room needs to provide small-group space for two to six children," said Blumberg. "These spaces become places where kids can work together, invent their own projects, and sustain work on these projects with independence and enthusiasm. Children might also use these spaces to work quietly with a teacher in a more intimate setting," Blumberg added.

The kindergarten renovation included changing the floors, wall finishes, electrical wiring, cabinetry, and furniture. Newer energy-efficient lighting fixtures came from the JCC lounges which received new lighting as part of the lounge renovation. The floor layout included spaces for large and small-group gatherings. Room sections were designated for science and math, drama, writing, and guided reading with a teacher. A special corner was designed as the classroom library and quiet corner. Because of the school's commitment to bilingual learning using an immersion approach, the decision was made to integrate Hebrew throughout the classroom rather than having one Hebrew corner. A new teacher's station was built to include space for both adult work and teacher-student collaboration. Shelves and storage units define spaces so that children can move easily from one activity to another without interfering with

ongoing learning of other children. “Having plentiful space for displaying children’s work was a priority,” explained Musket. “We have very large bulletin boards in three main areas of the room, and additional spaces for children to hang their work. Our bins are filled with toys and supplies that are easily accessible to the children,” Musket added. “We designed the storage areas to help children classify, match, and learn to read labels. We also wanted children to be able to locate their own materials and care for their environment by returning the materials to where they belong. We enjoy messy activities (cooking, play dough, sand and water activities, collections of rocks and leaves) and wanted to combine exploration in an overall orderly classroom.”

Former gansters (kindergarteners) were delighted to return after the summer to see their renovated classroom. Their excitement reflects their feelings about their school as their home. At the end of the day, the feeling of the children is most critical! “It’s real cool,” says first grader Jonah Seinfeld-Chopp. “I like the new carpet and the colored paint on the walls,” added first grader Adam Singer. And what did the current kindergartners have to say? “I like everywhere,” said Maiya Atzmon and Raviv Kaskowitz. “Yeah, everything,” confirmed Maddy Grand!