

**STUDENTS' ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION OF THE
MEANING OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD UNIT IN THE GREEK
URBAN ENVIRONMENT**

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Abstract. This paper is part of a wider research study that was conducted in 1998 whose aim was to investigate the meaning of the neighbourhood unit in the Greek urban environment. It involves sixth grade students from elementary schools. The participating 20-year old students were asked to answer the question: "Write what is your definition of a neighbourhood". The given definitions were classified into the following categories: definitions with references to: a) only a structured environment; b) only a social environment; c) both structured and social environments, and d) "I don't know" answers. The general conclusions are: a) the students' environmental concept of neighbourhood is similar despite their coming from different urban environments and differs between the two gender; b) the meaning of neighbourhood is to a great extent rooted in the children's mental image of urban environments, and c) the girls, due to their premature development, are able to formulate their definitions with greater easeness than the boys. The definitions of all participating students are simple, short and incomplete but include and highlight important concepts, which make up the meaning of neighbourhood.

Keywords: environment, perception, neighbourhood unit, urban, education.

AIMS AND BACKGROUND

Intense urbanisation due to rapid population and city expansion has its consequences. There is a lot of discussion about urban "mutation" in a not so desirable direction. The "inhospitable" nature of cities, the crowding of people, buildings and cars, the familiar to all "urban environmental" problems such as poverty, unemployment, lack of urban planning, inadequate accommodation, alterations in the social fiber, failure to communicate and disfunctional social relations are all factors that contribute to a not so pleasant picture. As a result, environmental awareness has a lot of negative factors to attribute to the increasingly expanding model or today's modern city.

This continual "mutation" of the urban environment is of course inextricably woven into the quality of peoples' life. It influences their lives and their relationships; it alters their interests, their rhythms and ways of intercommunicating. On the other hand, urban environments and in particular cities are not

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merely modern-day achievements in architecture and construction. More importantly, they house peoples' relationships. In other words, they are what we call "psycho topes" or "places of the soul". They are not merely poor stage settings, as many believe. They are a point of reference. The city is our life itself. It is the framework in which our lives are lived right from infancy.

It is evident that a structured urban environment is the major ecosystem for the majority of people. It is by nature a composite and complex system and a major factor in our survival. As such, it has become a popular field of research and source of philosophical consideration, both of which seek at a better understanding of its nature, its organisation and its prospects for improvement.

In the present study we have chosen to research one of the components of structured environments, i.e. the "neighbourhood unit" in relation to childhood and adolescence primarily for the following reasons:

- The neighbourhood is (after the home residence) the direct environment of children and plays a determinative role in their development¹⁻³.

- A great number of Environmental Education Programs that are part of the school curriculum in elementary schools deal with issues regarding the neighbourhood unit, e.g. pollution, circulation problems, social problems, history, tradition, and monuments, etc.

- The neighbourhood is the primary cell in the urban fiber of any small or large city. It is also the prime unit in the communal and social organisation of a city and the first environment a child comes into contact with. In the Greek Urban Environment there has not been any extensive or systematic research on the neighbourhood unit and its relationship to children. Any existent research material mainly consists of scientific articles on the neighbourhood unit, which contain significant, but nonetheless experimental and personal analyses and very few research results⁴⁻⁹. The term "neighbourhood unit" is of course mentioned in the bibliography of the Urban Planning-Architecture but is mostly comprised of university publications, which are concerned mainly with environmental, urban planning, architectural, population, financial and other features¹⁰.

At this point, it is necessary to site a number of various definitions of what a neighbourhood is as they have been put forth by both experts and non-experts. To start with, there are a number of different kinds of neighbourhoods, which have to do with the degree of unity amongst the members who reside in a particular neighbourhood and of course the neighbourhood's urban structure. There are definitions that refer only to the social environment of the neighbourhood (sociological terms) and to the residents' interrelations and their ability to communicate¹¹⁻¹⁴. There are also definitions, which deal with the neighbourhood unit from an urban planning and architectural point of view where certain typical activities of the residents are described^{15,16}. There are, however, definitions which include both sociological and Planning/Architectural aspects. We believe these

to be the more accurate and refer to the so-called *traditional neighbourhood*. One such definition is the following: "a neighbourhood may be defined as an organised environmental unit in which daily human contact takes place. A neighbourhood is the prime unit of community organisation of a city. In this unit, the members and the social groups are connected with each other through certain basic economic, social, political and historical relationships that are practiced either on a regular basis, or sporadically and or as an organised system. Neighbourhoods at any given historical phase represent a specific urban plan and architectural style".

EXPERIMENTAL

Identity of research. This paper is part of a wider research, which was conducted in the beginning of 1998 in both elementary and secondary schools of the following districts of Greece: Kalamaria, Eleftherio-Kordelio, Edessa and Litohero.

The aim of this extensive research is to investigate and compare fifth and sixth grade students' definitions, concepts, viewpoints, stances and behavior towards structured environments. The participating students all come from differently structured environments.

The research into the meaning of neighbourhood in Greek urban settings was conducted with the participation of sixth grade students residing in the previous municipal districts. All four municipalities represent a good sample of Greek urban settings from the point of view of environment, population and urban planning. They also provide a clear picture of the neighbourhood unit in Greek urban centers.

Participants. The research was conducted on sixth grade students of the four above-mentioned districts. Sixth grade students were chosen because we were interested in investigating the opinions of children about to finish their primary education. Samples were taken within the school environment for the following reasons:

- Access to and cooperation with these schools were easily acquired as both the Ministry of Education and the School of Education readily extended an official permit.

- Compulsory education is enforced in these schools and so as a rule the participating children were in attendance except for a few exceptions where students did not attend mainly due to social factors.

A representative sample of 170 (11.63%) out of a total of 1461 sixth grade students participated in the research during the academic year 1997-1998. All 1461 were sixth graders attending elementary schools in the above-mentioned municipal districts.

The applied method was the Proportional Stratified Random Sample method

and with a maximum permitted error equivalent to 5% ($mpee=0,05$) and proportional distribution was done by class, school and district^{17,18}.

Research tools. To begin with, students were given an extensive questionnaire with a long series of questions of both the closed and open type which had to do with the basic characteristics of buildings and special areas in an urban environment such as: dimensions, colour, lay-out of space, aesthetic result, city planning, definitions, social relations, etc.

The question which is the object of this research study is one of the open type questions of the questionnaire and was worded as follows: "Write down your own definition for "What is a neighbourhood?" (in 4-5 lines at the most).

Procedure for data accumulation. Data was accumulated *in situ* at the schools in the presence of the researcher and two assistants. Cooperation with the schools' principals was excellent. The collection of the completed questionnaires was completed in about 4 months in the beginning of 1998.

Following the reading and close study of the answers that were gathered, the following definitions were classified: a) according to municipal district; b) according to gender; c) regardless of gender; d) regardless of municipal district.

Corresponding diagrams were constructed in order to aid in the analysis and comparison of the answers for the attaining of results.

Phrases and keywords were selected from the students' answers and were researched so as reveal the semantic content students attach to the term "neighbourhood." The environmental perception that students have of a neighbourhood can be witnessed in their definitions by analysing the words and phrases they use. Taken for granted that "what the student writes is what he feels and means"¹⁹ words that appeared with greater frequency were recorded as well as characteristic and impressive words and phrases that reveal the meaning, the role and the mental image that students have regarding the structure and the content of a neighbourhood in the modern Greek urban environment. The definitions were very simply expressed and formulated which allowed for their easy analysis and testing for reliability.

Expressions were categorised on the basis of the following criteria:

1st – on the rate of frequency they appeared;

2nd – on the basis of the mutual meaning they include and reveal ;

3rd – on the consideration that the area of research was unified and was made up of all for municipal districts which seen as a whole provide a good example of the Greek urban environment.

The analysis of the definitions was done in the classic mode of analysis that is used when we are dealing with open type questions that require open type

answers²⁰⁻²². The analysis was done on three levels:

- a. independent meaningful expressions contained in the definitions were selected;
- b. similar expressions were unified into larger units;
- c. the units of the second level of analysis were brought under two major theoretical thematic headings.

This procedure revealed that certain meanings (five) had a distinct significance in the use and the creation of the definitions that were studied. We name these "PRIMARY". Other categories were also found which contain and highlight other interesting but not so frequently mentioned concepts (three) and these we name "SECONDARY".

RESULTS

Definitions of sixth grade students from the elementary schools of Kalamaria. It is characteristic that the definitions given by sixth grade girls from the Kalamaria schools refer more frequently (34% + 31.8% = 65.8%) and with greater intensity to the social environment as a priority than those given by the boys (21.5% + 21.6% = 43.1%).

Definitions of sixth grade students from the elementary schools of Eleftherio-Kordelio

- It is characteristic that the definitions given by sixth grade students from the Eleftherio-Kordelio schools refer more frequently and with greater intensity

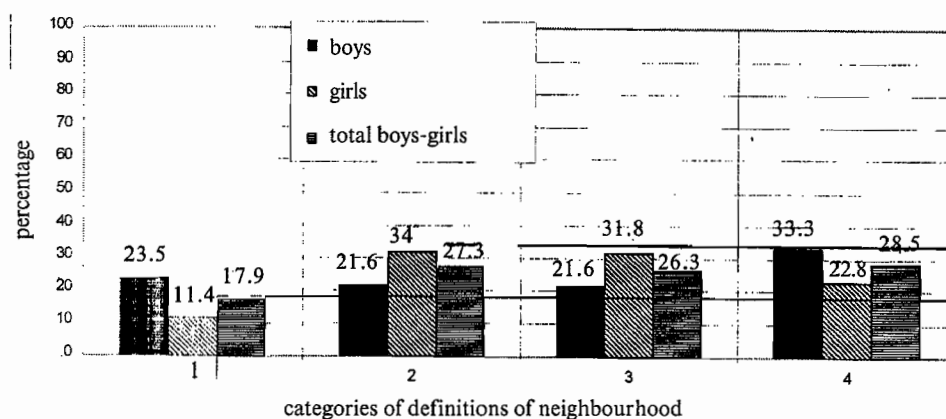


Fig. 1. Sixth grade students from elementary schools of Kalamaria

Category 1: definitions of neighbourhood, which refer only to its structured environment; Category 2: definitions of neighbourhood, which refer only to its social environment; Category 3: definitions of neighbourhood, which refer to both its structured and social environment; Category 4: the answer "I don't know what a neighbourhood is"

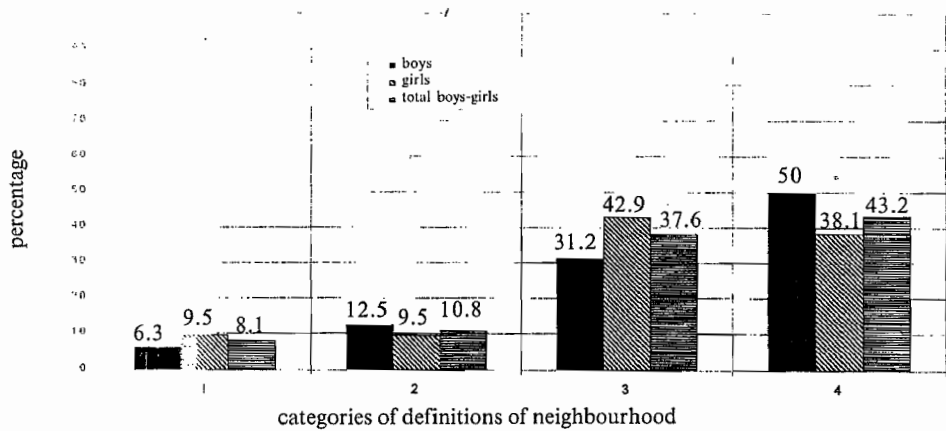


Fig. 2. Sixth grade students from elementary schools of Eleftherio-Kordelio. The categories are the same as in Fig. 1

to both the structured and the social environment (girls (42.9%) and boys (31.2%). Definitions that refer to only the social environment follow (12.5% and 9.5%) and finally definitions which refer only to the structured environment come next (6.3% and 9.5%).

- Generally speaking, the definitions given by the girls focus with greater intensity and frequency (42.9% + 9.5% = 52.4%) to the social environment than the ones given by the boys (12.5% + 31.2% = 43.7%).

Definitions of sixth grade students from the elementary schools of Edessa. It is characteristic that the sixth grade girls' definitions from the schools of Edessa focus primarily with greater intensity and frequency to both the structured and social environment (26.7%). Definitions which refer only to the social environ-

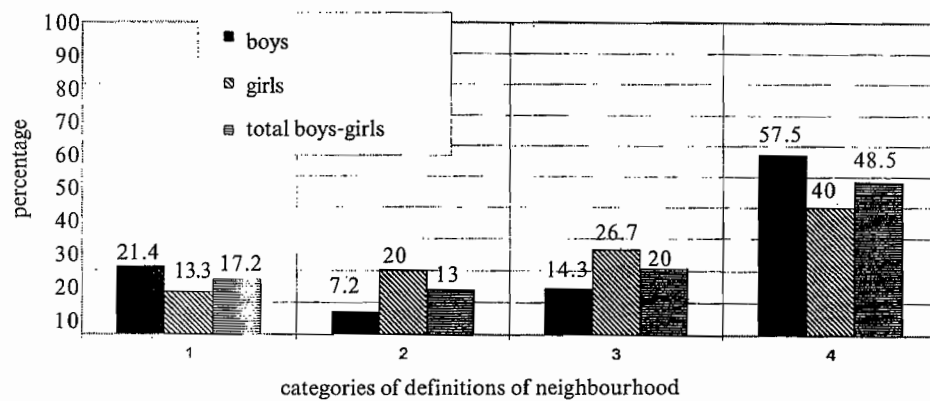


Fig. 3. Sixth grade students from elementary schools of Edessa. The categories are the same as in Fig. 1

ment follow (20%) and finally definitions which refer only to the structured environment follow (13.3%). As for the boys, definitions which refer to the structured environment have priority (21.4%) and definitions which refer to both social and structured environments come next (14.3%) and last in line come definitions which refer to the social environment (7.2%). Compared to the structured environment (13.3%+26.7%=40%), the social factor comes first with the girls (20%+26.7%=46.7%) while for the boys the structured environment (21.4% + 14.3% = 35.7%) has priority over the social environment (7.2%+14.3%=21.5%). Compared to the Kalamaria schools and the Eleftherio-Kordelio schools, the social factor here clearly has a lesser priority.

Definitions of sixth grade students from the elementary schools of Litohoro. In the girls' definitions attending the schools of Litohoro, the social factor in a neighbourhood appears with greater intensity (40%+40%=80%) than does the urban planning factor (0%+40%=40%) whereas in the boys' definitions the urban planning factor (25%+25%=50%) prevails over the social factor (0% + 25% = 25%).

There are, also, two common ascertainties for all (four) districts:

1. From the "I don't know what a neighbourhood is" answers it would at first seem that sixth grade students are not aware of the meaning of neighbourhood. A closer investigation into the other remaining open type questions of the questionnaire leads us to the following conclusion: while sixth graders quite easily answer the questions pertaining to the neighbourhood (questions which do not ask for a definition) they have difficulty in formulating a definition of the term "neighbourhood". They seem to understand what a neighbourhood is but are not yet in a position to formulate (or they avoid doing so) a definition

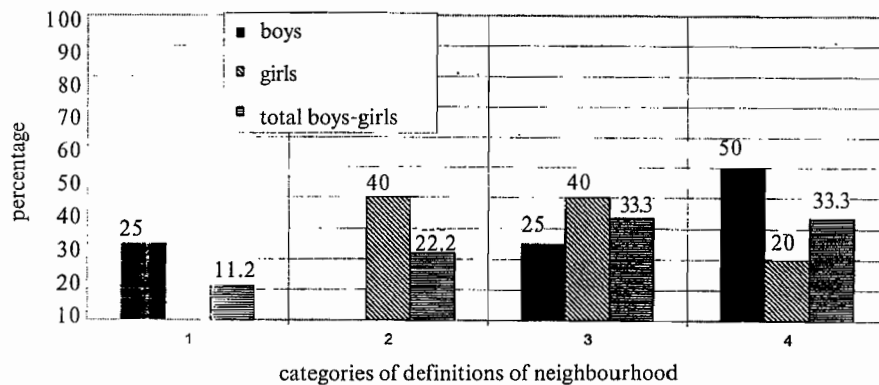


Fig. 4. Sixth grade students from elementary schools of Litohoro. The categories are the same as in Fig. 1

because they do not possess the required mental development nor do they have, at the age of twelve, the ability to express and formulate. Furthermore, the boys (33.3%-50%-57.1%-50%) have greater difficulty in formulating a definition than the girls do (22.8%-38.1%-40%-20%), correspondingly.

2. The students' definitions are simple, short, sometimes awkward, incomplete and descriptive insofar as expression and formulating are concerned. This observation reinforces the previous conclusion, i.e. that 12-year old students do not yet possess a degree of development that would allow for the formulation of a simple definition.

A comparison of the definitions of neighbourhood from all districts and regardless of gender. On studying the previous diagram, we observe that the most interesting conclusion which can be drawn from the comparison of six grade students' definitions (regardless of gender) is the following: the percentages of all three categories of definitions in almost all districts follow the same course. That is to say:

- The definition referring to both a structured and social environment appears with the greatest frequency (from 20.7 to 37.9%).
- The definition that appears second most frequently is the definition referring only to the social environment (from 10.8 to 27.3%).
- The definition that refers only to the structured environment appears with the least frequency (from 8.1 to 17.2%).
- The answer "I don't know what a neighbourhood is" appears with the greatest frequency of all (from 28.5 to 48.3%). This indicates that a high percent-

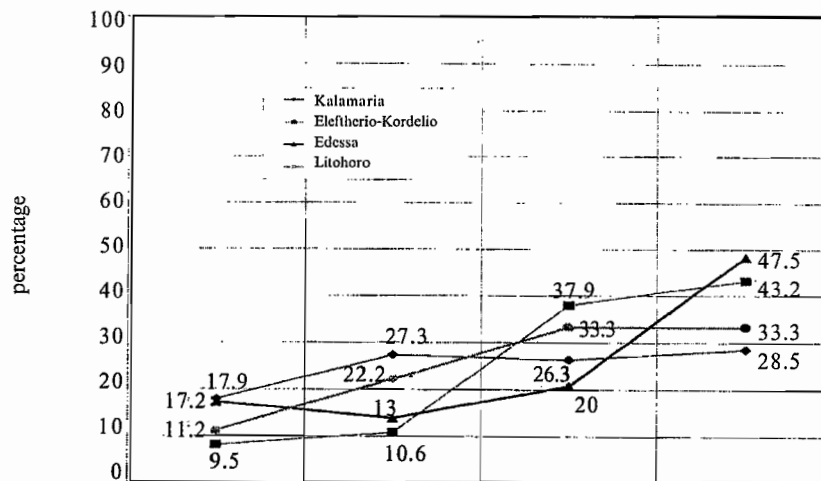


Fig. 5. A comparison of the definitions of neighbourhood from all cited districts

age of sixth grade students is not capable of giving a definition. This, as previously explained for each district separately, is due to the fact that although they comprehend what a neighbourhood is they are not able to give a definition because at the age of twelve they have not yet reached a stage of mental and cognitive development that would allow them to express and formulate a definition and so they simply avoid doing so.

• Seen in sum total, the two definitions which appear more frequently (i.e. definitions 2 and 3) both contain references to the social environment. Thus, it is obvious that the meaning of neighbourhood in the minds of the students tends to have more of a social dimension and less of an architectural-urban planning one.

DETECTIVE MEANINGS THAT CONSTITUTE STUDENTS' ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD

Primary meanings. One of the most frequently answered category of expressions is that which contains urban planning references (i.e. to places and buildings in a neighbourhood). The concept that emerges is one of structured space. It is clear that students conceive of a neighbourhood as their own surrounding structured space (e.g. *neighbourhood is an area: ...bordered by streets...has buildings...with block of flats...around my house...*).

Another category, with special importance, is that which contains references to the social relationships and the communication, which develops amongst the residents of a neighbourhood. In other words, children conceive of a neighbourhood as being a place where multiple social interaction and intercommunication take place. The primary concept here is one of communication (e.g. *neighbourhood is an area: ...where my friends live...,...of making company...,...where people help each other...,...with close relationships between people...,...with mutual help...,...where people say each other "good morning"...*).

The next category includes references which show that children perceive a neighbourhood as a their own place of residence or of a social group's place of residence. The neighbourhood, therefore, contains the meaning of residence (e.g. *neighbourhood is an area: ...where people live...,...your own place...,...where you spend most of your time...,...of people residence...,...where you reside...,...where people built their houses...,...with one family houses...*).

Another primary category is that which contains lexical references that have to do with the functions of a neighbourhood as well as with the services that it provides for its residents. The children seem to perceive the neighbourhood unit as being a place of functions and offered services which naturally concern the residents but most of all concern the children themselves (e.g. *neighbourhood is an area: ...with shops...,...small industries...,...provides entertainment...,...provides*

enjoyment...,...provides education...,...with church...,...with play grounds...,...places with facilities...,...where you find whatever you need...).

Another very important primary category is that which includes lexical references, which have to do with the neighbourhood as an emotional space. The children perceive the neighbourhood as being a space of meanings and of emotional connections either amongst the residents themselves or amongst the residents and the neighbourhood environs. The psychological factor in the constructing of a mental image in the minds of 12-year olds is here evident (e.g. *neighbourhood is: a pleasant area...,...a nice area...,...an area with memories...,...an area with friendly neighbours...,...an area where you feel happy...,...an area where you feel joy...,...an area bounded with it...,...an area where you sentimentally bounded with it...,...an area where I don't feel any fear...).*

Secondary meanings. Together with the primary meanings, there are certain other meanings, which we name Secondary because although they come up less frequently they present some special interest.

One of these secondary meanings is that which presents the neighbourhood as a space for children. That is, children think of a neighbourhood as being their own space. It is the space that they feel rightfully belongs to them and they perceive of it as being mostly a space for games and learning (e.g. *neighbourhood is:...an area where the children can communicate...,...an area where the kids play...,...an area with schools...,...an area where you learn in it...).*

Another secondary meaning that comes up is the time aspect of a neighbourhood which shows that children feel that the neighbourhood is a space where they grow up and live in most of the time (e.g. *neighbourhood is:...the area I know better...,...the area I know as my palm of the hand...,...an area which it is your own...).*

Another secondary meaning, which also comes up, is that of familiarity with the environs of the neighbourhood. This shows that children feel their neighbourhood as the place they know best (e.g. *neighbourhood is:...the area where somebody spends many hours...,...where you spend most of your time...,...the place I have grown up...).*

DISCUSSION. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

- Twelve-year-old students (regardless of gender) who live in differently structured environments in the Greek urban setting perceive the neighbourhood unit in a similar way. A very high percentage perceives the neighbourhood as being a combination of both architectural-urban planning features and social features. Another percentage (relatively smaller) views the neighbourhood as only social environments while still another percentage (even smaller) see it only as a structured environment. What is impressive is the fact that the answer "I don't know

what a neighbourhood is" gathers the highest percentage in all districts. The only difference that arises is in the fluctuation of percentages from district to district which is probably due to local conditions, which should be investigated.

- In densely populated environments in the Greek urban setting, 12-year olds do have a concept of what neighbourhood is and to a satisfactory degree. Their concept contains both spatial and social factors.

- The definitions provided by 12-year olds in all districts under research are simple, short, and incomplete as far as expression and formulating are concerned. The fact that a rather significant percentage (about one out of three) fails to formulate a definition is due to the fact that at the age of 12 they have not yet satisfactorily developed the ability to formulate even simple definitions even though they seem to feel and understand the meaning and the role of the neighbourhood.

- Our analysis of the features that students attribute to a neighbourhood shows that certain of these features are stronger (Primary meanings) and others are weaker but nevertheless of interest (Secondary meanings). Conclusively, the meanings which make up to a degree 12-year old students' perception of the neighbourhood unit are the following:

Primary meanings

1. The meaning of structured space.
2. The meaning of the neighbourhood as a place of communication.
3. The meaning of functions and offered services in a neighbourhood (which directly concern the children themselves).
4. The psychological and emotional aspects.
5. The meaning of neighbourhood as a place of residence.

Secondary meanings

1. The meaning of neighbourhood as a special place for children (mainly for learning and playing).
2. The temporal aspect of a neighbourhood.
3. The aspect of familiarity with the neighbourhood environs.

- The meanings, which make up the mental image of students for neighbourhood are important and play a definitive role in their development. Consequently, in planning an urban environment with neighbourhood elements, the previous concepts are reinforced (as well as others which may be found in other researches) and are desirable.

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