**THE EFFECT of PHYSICAL and ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS OF A “CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER” ON A CENTER’S SELECTION**

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**Abstract**

The role of education is a key factor for an individual’s development. After the 1980s the findings of educational research has shown that preschool age is a very important period in one’s development. The single parent family structure and an increase in the number of working mothers have required children to attend schools in “child development centers” (CDC). Preschool education is becoming important in the new millennium because a child’s personality, emotions, cognitive and social abilities develop during the first five years. The purpose of this study is to investigate the reasons for selecting CDCs by parents and children by focusing on physical and environmental factors. The sample was a diverse group of 95 parents and instructors who use CDCs at two different locations in Cameroon. The instrument used in the study was a self-designed standardized questionnaire. The results should enlighten later CDC design studies, and give support for architects who design preschool education centers. The study may be used for educational, governmental and advertising purposes to contribute to changing the negative situation of poorly designed centers.

***Keywords****: child development centers; preschool education; physical environment; environmental quality; child development center selection*

**INTRODUCTION**

Education plays an important role on an individual’s personal development and the future of society. It is an open and dynamic system that interacts with its environment and is only successful if it goes with the changes. Until the 1980s preliminary school education was described as formal and has been a subject considered in a systematic education system. Till today, there has been intensive study on education beginning from elementary to high school as a formal education period. Preschool childhood education is an important phase in the education process. Beginning with the industrialization period, preschool childhood education centers have become important, because there is a rapid increase in the number of working mothers and the problems of a single parent’s child. In the beginning, the “Child Development Centers” (CDCs) had the aim of taking care of children during the parent’s working hours. But now they have begun to be a part of basic education.

In the CDCs of the 1920s, a well body health was targeted. In the 1940s, instructors focused on social and emotional development. In the 1960s, the studies concentrated on cognitive successes. Research after the 1980s showed that the individual’s basic personal characteristics mostly developed between the ages 2 and 5. Many early childhood educators have defined the importance of children’s physical, cognitive and emotional development and the goals of CDCs. The importance of early childhood care and education has been a source of discussion for years. Opinions differ about the advisability of placing a young child in some type of care and educational setting outside of the home. Some parents and educators believe that children benefit socially and intellectually from such experiences, but there are some psychologists, psychiatrists and pediatricians who believe that a young child can be psychologically harmed by being taken care of out of the home during these early years. Of particular concern of many parents and educators is that the young child gets off to a good start

intellectually. So the preschooler gets some basic knowledge and skills that he or she can use in the playground.

Play enhances the usage of the child’s internal motivation, ability to make unique decisions and the usage of verbal and nonverbal communication. During play children develop their internal worlds by creating various fantasies with their imagination. Early childhood education is important for two reasons. First, at an early age a child’s intelligence can be dramatically affected by the experiences in the environment during play and while learning and discovering. Secondly, the growing awareness of the influence of poverty and environmental deprivation on a child’s intellectual development has made these findings an urgent practical application. With these factors added to the need for providing child care services for working mothers, a major responsibility is loaded upon local communities to integrate early education with daycare (Sanoff and Sanoff, 1981). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), our knowledge of the environment is much more than children who live in it. In the last few years, social scientists and parents have become aware of their lack of knowledge about CDCs. The aim of early childhood programs is “to provide a safe, caring environment with opportunities for each child’s ultimate social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth” (Lawton, 1988). Early childhood centers vary in their beliefs about the growth, development, needs and abilities of children, the appropriate roles of staff and parents and the type of physical environment needed. Research about CDCs have discussed the role of the centers on a child’s development and showed the importance of the physical environment in preschool education. The physical environment around children is as important as toys and lesson plans, because children immediately respond to the sources of stimulation around them (Sanoff, 1995). For this reason, architects need to design and create places as much as educators in CDC design (Dudek, 2008). The aim of enrichment of a CDC physical environment is an important subject to be discussed.

THE IMPORTANCE AND THE QUALITY OF PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT FOR THE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF A PRESCHOOL CHILD

During the preschool period, the child’s socio-emotional, cognitive and physical developments are affected by his/her experiences, and interaction with the environment is a basic factor in his/her personality. It is also understood from recent studies that a physical milieu that a child can explore, examine and learn with has a positive effect on both a child’s behavior and his/her learning capacities and talents. As a branch of environment-behavior studies, there is a great deal of research made on child-environment relations, particularly on the role of space in early childhood education (Coates, 1974; Gump, 1975; Prescott, Jones et al., 1967, 1972; Prescott and David, 1976; Moore, 1983, 1986; Weinstein and David, 1987; Cohen, McGinty et al., 1982; Moore, Lane et al., 1994; Moore, Sugiyama et al., 2003; Burger, K. (2010); Abbas and Othman, 2011, Dalli, White et al., 2011;Pairman 2011-2012; Rentzou, 2014).

All children are motivated to interact with the environment (Piaget, 1966). Development of the child is a process whereby the child changes the environment and in turn adapts to changes in the environment. Children learn via interaction with their physical and social environment, the staff, curriculum and space. The active agents in a child’s development are exploring, discovering, testing, and experimenting, imitating, fantasizing and developing. With these agents, he or she not only interacts with the social environment of people, staff, and other children, but also with the physical environment such as architecture, furniture, and materials available. Development occurs when a child observes the consequences of his or her personal actions upon materials and events. The overall quality of this interaction depends on engagement possibilities with the environment (Moore, Lane et al., 1994).

Children begin to understand themselves by their contact with the physical and social world. Unlike the world of adults, the physical world reflects his or her manipulations and it offers a particularly valuable domain for developing a sense of self (Hart, 1987). The CDC’s physical environment quality and the organization of its interior and exterior spaces are important issues to be thought about for the child’s development as a result of his or her spatial experience and learning. The result of research shows that children growing in qualified CDCs have a high level