

LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN DAYCARE CENTRES: A HAVEN FOR LEARNING OR MISBEHAVIOUR?

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Abstract

This paper is based on findings from a study conducted to examine learning environments in daycare centres, whether they are a haven for learning or misbehaviour. This study is based on interviews of caregivers and observations of activities during teaching and learning situations. The sample consisted of two hundred and seventy pupils and six caregivers. Respondents were purposively selected from public and privately owned preschools in the urban area of Masvingo district in Zimbabwe. Learning environments have the capacity to enhance children's learning or impede it through misbehavior. The findings point to the fact that some caregivers are not aware that learning environments can be a haven of learning or misbehaviour. The caregivers from the private preschools who are paraprofessionals lack the skills and knowledge to deal with the three to five year olds at their centres. The rooms in some instances were too small for the number of children to move freely. Children hence fidgeted, made noise, hit each other over play items and refused to share items for play. The caregivers from the public preschools, that is those attached to existing primary schools, were manned by qualified personnel who had the knowledge and skills to handle children at preschool level. However, though the environments were conducive for learning, children were not allowed to make free choices in their learning. Children were exposed to formal learning as a result the activities were too academic. The researcher recommended that there is need for staff development workshops in this area with the personnel at the local teachers' colleges and universities. Caregiving is a dynamic skill and caregivers can only keep pace with the pedagogical demands and expectations through workshops at their particular preschool or in conjunction with other centres. The quality assurance section of the Ministry of Education should have time to check on the structure of the learning environment at

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the various daycare centres whether private or public so as to monitor the quality of care and learning given to preschool children. Misbehaviours abound if environments are not structured for optimum learning.

Key words: misbehaviour, learning, environment, learning centres, materials, equipment, public preschool, private preschool

Introduction and Background to the Study

The physical environment is a critical element in the behavior children manifest. Controlling children's behavior takes many forms or rather includes many aspects. Crosser (1992) suggests that the arrangement and management of the early childhood classroom have a direct effect on the kinds of behaviours children manifest as they live and work together. A well structured environment in terms of useful learning centres and other media can eliminate potential behaviour problems, (Martinez, Naudeu and Pereira, 2012). Crosser (1992) goes on to say that regular, predictable routines and settings help children to cope with new experiences and arrest misbehaviour. Therefore, adults need to think carefully about whether the settings, activities, layout and routines meet the needs of the individual child. Bee (1999) is of the view that in terms of learning it is always worth observing how children use their environment. Bee (1999) further suggests that layouts that are very open can create a noisy environment and cause children to misbehave. The researcher was then challenged to carry out this study after realizing that most day-care caregivers were found wanting when it came to structuring a learning environment suitable for the three to five year olds.

Meaningful learning may not be attained if there is a shortage of interesting materials and activities. It is justified to carry out a study of this nature to find out what is in existence with regards to the structure of the environment and how children adapt to learning. Chisaka and Mavunduse (2006) point out those children learn better when they are surrounded by a concrete learning environment. However, Cohen and Manion (2011) note that the physical environment is the framework for learning as it can contribute to either promoting or impeding learning. It is against this background that the researcher intended to find out how the physical environment was structured at four different urban preschools in Masvingo.

Preschool education prior to independence in 1980 was for the privileged few and it was the sole responsibility of private enterprises. From 2005 the Government of Zimbabwe crafted policies which have ushered in preschool education to children in the three to five year old category. These preschools are attached to existing primary schools as mandated by Secretary's Circular 14 of 2004. The present state of affairs is that both the private enterprise and the public preschools exist and run concurrently offering preschool education. It is against this background that the researcher intended to establish how learning environments are structured for these children in the different setups. Allen and Marotz (2007) and Bredekamp and Copple (2009) suggest that preschool children need a stimulating environment in which to channel their abundant knowledge and curiosity. Essa (2011) is also of the view that when an environment is thoughtfully and aesthetically prepared in a way that respects the children's interests and needs, children will use such an environment productively and appropriately.

Group activities can be facilitated by such factors as a well-set environment, scheduled activities, equipment, materials and expectations that are appropriate for the developmental level of children. However, as Curtis and Carter (2003) put it, if expectations are inappropriate, frustration and boredom are likely to result. Children who are expected to behave beyond their capability will become frustrated and frustration results in misbehaviour. On the other hand if the expectations are too simple for children's abilities, the children will easily get bored and this can also lead to misbehaviour. It is important to carry out such a study because today too many young children spend their bulk of their waking hours in early childhood programmes and often in one room for nine to ten hours every weekday. It is therefore very important to maximize the use of the environment because it has a profound effect on children and their behavior.

The early childhood classrooms should promote learning and a sense of belonging. The environment as such should convey positive messages about what the children have to do, (Read 2007). Teachers or caregivers should ensure that the environment is safe, healthy and conducive to children's exploration and hence foster independence. In this way caregivers/teachers support children's exploration and learning of new skills and thus curb misbehavior, (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). The learning environment has a profound effect on children's learning. It has

a direct effect on how children behave toward each other. Positive peer interaction is promoted when children are not crowded, when an ample number and variety of items are available and when socially oriented materials are provided, (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). Classroom arrangement and careful selection of materials also foster cognitive development by providing opportunities for children to classify, find relationships, measure, compare, match, sort and label (Essa, 2011). It is against this background that the researcher intended to find out what kind of learning environments caregivers provided and how they impacted on children's behavior.

Dodge (2004) suggests that for preschool children the environment enhances both the fine and gross-motor development skills through a range of appropriately challenging equipment and materials. Above all the environment helps the children to develop a sense of responsibility when it is clear how and where materials are to be returned after using them. Children are more productively involved in activities when the purpose of classroom spaces is clearly defined and when materials are developmentally appropriate (Shepherd and Eaton, 1997). The environment also enhances children's self-esteem when it is designed with their needs and development in mind. Curtis and Carter (2003) also indicate that when the environment is set up to maximize children's development, prevent problem behavior and promote appropriate behaviors the caregivers' job will be easy to follow. Gerstwicki (2007) points out that one effective way of arranging the indoor environment is through learning centres that organize materials and equipment around common activities.

Learning centers allow children to make choices from a range of available developmentally appropriate activities. An environment that includes learning centers encourages independent and focused play that helps children to feel competent and successful. It is against this background that the researcher investigated the arrangement of the indoor environment at the public and private preschools. Crosser (1992) is of the view that the arrangement and management of the early childhood classroom has a direct effect on the kinds of behaviours children exhibit as they live and work together. It is this structuring of the environment which brings the difference between chaos and an orderly atmosphere or productive learning or misbehavior. An orderly environment as such can eliminate potential behavior problems, (Martinez, Naudeu and Pereira, 2012). A well planned environment thus ensures maximum participation and optimum learning

by the children. It is in the framework of the various views highlighted that this research was deemed necessary as the researcher tried to find out whether caregivers understand child development and the need to create learning environments that meet the needs of growing children. It was also in an effort to find out whether caregivers were aware of the relevance of learning environments in guiding children's behaviours during learning episodes.

Conceptual Framework

This study was informed by philosophers like John Locke and John Dewey who discussed the concept environment and how it facilitates learning. The ecological theorists of play also discussed how the structure of the environment promotes children's learning at early childhood development level.

John Locke 1632-1704

John Locke who lived from 1632 to 1702 had his contribution on the structure of the learning environment and he is called the father of environmentalism (Follari, 2011). Ornstein and Levine (2013) are of the view that Locke believes that children acquire knowledge through objects in the environment. Children therefore according to Locke should be exposed to an enabling environment that makes their learning enjoyable. His view of environmentalism emphasized the belief that it is the environment that determines what a child learns.

John Dewey 1859-1952

Dewey took advantage of the early European educators such as Pestalozzi who emphasized that children learn by doing through interacting with the environment and Froebel who recognized the value of play in children's development and learning as they interacted with the objects in the environment. Follari (2011) opines that according to Dewey important skills such as problem solving, language and mathematics concepts were developed as children were allowed to move freely in and out of the classroom and explore their environment. Ornstein and Levine (2013) suggest that in a classroom based upon Dewey's ideas children are involved in physical activities such as manipulation of things, social interaction and intellectual pursuits as they work in the environment. Dewey believed that the child and the curriculum become connected when established matter is permeable to and shaped by child's interests. As a result Dewey coined the

term interest or learning centres such as Art centre, Dramatic centre, Maths and Science centre and so on where children could be given the chance to solve problems, discover new things and figure out how things work in interest or learning centres. According to Morrison (2012) Dewey suggests that the early childhood classroom environment should be clean and spacious so that children will move around safely and freely as they interact with the objects in the environment.

The Ecological Theory

The ecological theorists as outlined by Sawyer (2010) are concerned with the structure of the environment and conditions that promote children's learning at early childhood level. These theorists discuss how the environment affects children's learning. A rich environment elicits rich learning whilst impoverished environment elicits mediocre learning.

The researchers were encouraged to carry out the study guided by the ideas of the philosophers and ecological theorists. Seefeldt and Barbour (2012) suggest that the environment can be set up to elicit the kind of learning envisaged. The researcher had such questions in mind whether the caregivers set up the environments to elicit the different kinds of learning they wished or whether they were not aware of the power of the environment to produce optimal learning among the pupils.

Research Problem

Learning environments are critical in accessing information in teaching and learning situations. Given the poor learning environments and chronic shortage of facilities in crisis borne Zimbabwe, the researcher was motivated to study how such environments influence the behaviour of young learners.

Major Research Question

How is the environment structured for learning for preschool children at the day-care centres?

Sub Research Questions

1. Are the learning environments a haven for learning?
2. Are the learning environments a haven for misbehaviour?
3. What specific displays are in the learning environments?

4. Are there any learning centres demarcated in these learning environments?

Research Paradigm and Design

A qualitative research paradigm was adopted in this study. The use of the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to gain an insight into how learning environments are structured at the preschools. Since this was a qualitative study the researcher heeded Wolcott's (1987) advice to work with a small population of four preschools, two of which are public and two privately owned. In the qualitative approach of conducting research, the case study design was used. Case studies are used extensively and Wiersma (2000) advances that a case study is a detailed examination of something, a specific event, an institution and so on. Neill (2006) further stipulates that the case study can be an individual person, an event, a group or an institution. Purposive sampling was used targeting participants who are rich informants because of their direct involvement in the didactical processes. Data collection techniques such as observation and interviews were used to gather data for this study.

Observation

Observation was the major method used for collecting data. The observations were carried out over a period of fifteen days. The researcher was on site for the fifteen days on a daily basis during the preschool week. By spending such a fairly long period of time visiting the participants, the risk of participants exhibiting artificial behaviours was greatly reduced, (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). The participants became accustomed to having the researcher at the day-care centres and thus behaved naturally. Gall, Borg and Gall (2003) say that observations are important because the researcher may find out whether the participants' verbal claims are backed by actions on the ground. In this case observation was found to be appropriate since the learning environments were the hunting ground for the researcher.

The researcher had an observation guide to ensure that components for observation remained the same even if the preschools/day-care centres were different. The intention was to be as systematic as possible. The observation guide focused on the aspects below in line with the research problem and questions.

- Structure of the environment

- Availability of learning centres
- Developmental appropriateness of the materials in the learning centres
- Developmental appropriateness of equipment in the learning environments
- Wall displays and decoration

Interview

The semi-structured interview method was also used to collect data. Interviews were both formal and informal. The participants were asked to verbally describe the importance of structuring the environment at preschool level. First hand information from the caregivers was obtained, recorded and transcribed.

Discussion of Findings

In the fifteen days of observation, it was noted that the preschool environments in some instances were not conducive for learning. Preschool A, which was a private entity, the researcher noted that the learning environment was cramped for the ninety children who were accommodated in three small rooms. There were no learning centres; neither did the children make free choices in their learning. The children were also taught in the formal way in most cases. As observed on day one there was a glaring absence of play materials and as a result children misbehaved. The misbehaviours ranged from being fidgety, noisy and fighting over the few play items that were available. The situation was not different on all the other days. The classes were manned by three paraprofessionals. Crosser (1992) is of the view that thoughtfully established routines are the vaccination against classroom chaos. Most of the child's day should be invested in purposeful play. Preventative classroom management can eliminate many potential discipline problems. Bee (1999) also suggests that the physical environment is a powerful tool in controlling children's behavior. Layouts that do not have developmentally appropriate material can create a noisy and chaotic learning environment as was the case at this preschool.

Preschool B was another privately owned day-care centre. The learning environment was a house too small to accommodate sixty three children. There were no learning centres in that learning environment. Learning was formal. It was not through the playway method advocated for at this stage. Learning materials were in cardboard boxes and responses from the interview indicated

that children would break some of the toys if they were given the chance to freely play with the materials. In some instances because the crayons were few during the art activities, the caregiver kept on yelling at the children to keep quiet and to concentrate on the work at hand. The whole class made unbearable noise. The activities in this learning environment were not varied hence children manifested various behaviours like fidgeting, hitting one another and refusing to share play materials. Another finding was that the room was too small for the number of children to move freely. The learning centres were used as storage areas for objects like balls, ropes, musical instruments and other artifacts. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggest that the physical environment is the framework for learning since it can contribute to either promoting or impeding learning. Essa (2011) also indicates that today many young children spend the bulk of their waking hours in an early childhood classroom and often in one room for nine to ten hours. The room therefore has to be a place that can be trusted, safe and friendly. This was not the case with this room.

Preschool C was publicly owned and was attached to an existing primary school as per the instructions from the Ministry of Education through policy circulars 14 of 2004, Director's Circular 12 of 2005 and Director's Circular 48 of 2007. The class was manned by an ECD specialist and a student teacher from the local teachers' college. The learning environment was a big room which was well structured for the age group. Learning centres were available and children were given a chance to interact with the materials. The learning environment as such was a haven for learning. The children were twenty, indicating that the recommended teacher-child ratio of 1:20 was practised. It was clear from the caregiver's definition of learning centres that they are areas where children learn on their own as they engage in independent activities. Learning centres are also viewed as part and parcel of the daily learning since children learn informally. Allen (1993) points out that a classroom that is well structured and designed can eliminate misbehavior for it can suggest to children how the learning has to take place and children can use the environment profitably. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) also indicate that caregivers have to ensure that the environment is safe, healthy and conducive to children's exploration and independence as they facilitate children's learning. Learning centres allow children to make choices from a range of available developmentally appropriate activities.

Preschool D was another public day-care centre which was studied. The learning environment was a big room which had various learning centres demarcated. However, the teacher pupil ratio was high. There were ninety five children under the supervision of two caregivers. The children were taught in most cases in the formal way. Though learning centres were available, children were not given the opportunity to play independently with the materials in the learning centres. The caregivers spent the greater part of the day silencing children. Faber (2000) is of the view that in the informal teaching approach children are taken as active partners in the learning process. Children can also experiment with materials and manipulate them so as gain new meanings and solve problems. Copp (2001) also states that children's misbehaviours may be a result of activities that are either too simple or too challenging to the children. Materials used for learning affect how children behave. The materials provided can challenge or bore pupils. Gerstwicki (2007) actually says that an environment that includes learning centres encourages independent and focused play which in turn helps children to feel competent and successful. At this preschool, children were not given the opportunity to play independently. How the environment is structured definitely affects children's behavior, Misbehaviours in the studied learning environments resulted because there were no learning centres where children could engage in independent free choice activities. Crosser (1992) states that the arrangement and management of the early childhood classroom have a direct effect on the kinds of behavior children exhibit as they live and work together. Bee (1999) also points out that behavior that is deemed unwanted is sometimes linked to a shortage of interesting materials and activities. This was the case with the activities at preschools A, B and D in this study. Copp (2001) also says that confusion, frustration and fatigue may be created by either too simple or too complex activities which may result in misbehavior. Misbehavior in this study was caused by activities which were not developmentally appropriate as they were exposed to formal learning. Bee and Boyd (2004) suggest that in terms of children's behavior it is always worth observing how children use their environment, Allen and Marotz (2007) propound that when an environment is thoughtfully and aesthetically prepared in a way that respects them the children will use such an environment productively and appropriately.

Good supervision is also an essential tool in promoting acceptable behavior among children. Incidents of misbehavior are more likely to occur when children are unsupervised or bored with

activities, (Catron and Allen 1993). Regular predictable routines and settings help children cope with new experiences. A predictable schedule, familiar routines of play, sleeping and eating give structure to children's experiences and curtail misbehaviour. Misbehaviour is a signal to caregivers to identify problems in the curriculum, methods and the daily schedule and rectify what is amiss. Many potential discipline problems can be avoided by anticipating possible problems and planning routines and methods that minimize the occurrence of problems. The caregivers therefore can create an orderly classroom environment in which children can learn and work in harmony. For example if the classroom contains only enough materials for a few children, the result will be boredom and problems in sharing. Chaos will rule in such a classroom. Play materials should be enough in each play area or learning centre so as to promote active play as well as interaction among the children. A well planned environment thus ensures maximum participation and optimum learning by children. Preschool C was able to offer children a learning environment which curtailed misbehavior

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Conclusions and Recommendations

- The teacher pupil ratio in most preschools needs attention as this study established that only one preschool adhered to the 1:20 policy required by the policy on enrolment. Large classes hinder the creation of an apt learning environment.
- The study also concluded that lack of suitable resources in the learning environment lead children to misbehave. It is therefore recommended that preschool teachers should engage district trainers in their district so that sessions on making suitable resources can be mounted and staff development workshops arranged periodically.
- The quality assurance section of the Ministry of Education in Masvingo Province should have time to check on the structure of the learning environment at the various day care centers whether private or public so as to monitor the quality of care and learning given to preschool children. Misbehavior abound if learning environments are not structured for optimum learning.
- Children at this stage learn through the informal way in most instances. Children therefore should be exposed to learning centers where they can learn through play as is the requirement of Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005. Most preschools in this study as was realized do not make use of learning centers in their learning environments.

- On the whole personnel from the Ministry of Education should enforce the regulations on the running of preschools. These focus on the room or size of classrooms, methods used for teaching, the teacher pupil ratio among other things. The preschools in this study are violating some of the requirements.

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