A peer-reviewed, double-blind, open-access Journal

Research Journal of Human and Social Aspects

Web link: https://rjhsa.com/index.php/rjhsa

P-ISSN: 3006-9696, **E-ISSN:** 3006-970X

Volume 3, Issue 3, 2025

Using the Developmental Niche to Explore Parental Ethnotheories of Symbolic Representation

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Article information

Article History:

Received: 2025-04-11

Received in revised form: 2025-05-21

Accepted: 2025-06-28

Published Online: 2025-08-15

Keywords:

Parental ethnotheories; Developmental niche; Early literacy; Family environment; Custom of care

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of the developmental niche, a framework from psychology and anthropology, to understand how culture, vis-à-vis the home and family environments, shapes children's literacy development. This study examines the extant empirical literature to demonstrate how each aspect of the developmental niche, including settings of care, customs of care, and psychology of the caretaker, can be adapted and applied to provide into children's literacy development. Finally, this paper discusses how this framework can support ideas for future research focused on families, culture, and literacy, as well as how teachers might inform their practice of interacting with families by utilizing the developmental niche.

Introduction

Family relationships and cultural environments significantly shape young children's development and learning (NAEYC, 2002). Families influence children's interactions with writing, which contributes to children's values, beliefs, and perceptions of writing (Bradford & Wyse, 2012; Shook, Marrion, and Ollila, 1989). Dyson (2001) explains that "learning an expressive system like written language, is not divorced from one's identity and history, but of necessity, embedded within it" (p. 139). Children's experimentation and interactions with literacy are diverse based on varied family experiences.

The Journal is published quarterly (March, June, September & December) by the Centre for Children Literacy and Lifelong Learning (CCLLL), Pakistan. **Web link:** https://cclll.org

Children have a wide range of literacy experiences that children have prior to beginning formal schooling. The interactions that young children have within their environment result from the ecological and cultural aspects of their families and larger communities within which they are growing, developing, and learning (Harkness et al., 2010). Children learn about written language through interactions with their social and cultural worlds (Bradford & Wyse, 2012; Baghban, 1984; Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Heath, 1983; Ring, 2006). A young child's home literacy environment impacts his or her oral language, phonological awareness, word development (Burgess, 2002; Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Dickinsons & Tabors, 1991) as well as vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and spelling (van Steensel, 2006). Lankshear and Lawler (1993) explain how the cultural environment influences families and communities regarding literacy. The cultural contexts of children's daily lives, reflecting families' values, beliefs, perspectives, and practices, influence which "interests are promoted or undermined as a consequence of how life is lived (p. 43)."

Given the important role of family and cultural contexts on children's development, this paper details the necessity of considering how these ecologies shape early literacy development. In recognition of that, this paper presents the developmental niche, a theoretical frame developed by a social psychologist and anthropologist to consider how culture shapes children's development and concludes by providing recommendations for future research and practitioners based on the developmental niche as a way of understanding how cultural contexts shape children's literacy development.

Role of Culture in Children's Literacy Development

To accurately understand children's cognitive development, educators must consider individual experiences, culture, traditions, beliefs, and values and how these factors across multiple contexts, guide children's development. Specifically, Vasquez notes, "The construction of society is a dynamic system of relationships and structures," (2006, p. 445). Children's experiences within the home heavily influence their orientation towards learning (Teale, 1983), as the learning environment within the home is often social in nature (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2010) and families' perceptions and beliefs impact their children through direct and indirect interactions. Vasquez (2006) explains that individuals' knowledge is based on the social and cultural environments in which they are raised. In turn, it is important for researchers to examine the "cultural contexts informing children's learning" (Meier, 2000, p. 18) and how these ecologies impact and shape children's development.

There are a multitude of definitions of culture utilized across numerous disciplines or as D'Andrade notes, "One of the oldest terminological wrangles in anthropology is over the term *culture*" (1984, p. 114). However, this paper incorporates ideas from anthropology and psychology to conceptualize culture as a process whereby families pass cultural ideas and beliefs to their children (Geertz, 1973, as cited by Levine, 1984). Drawing on the work of Weisner (1997), we can consider that a way to understand and access individual and family cultures is through the examination of everyday activities that reflect shared cultural models or beliefs of a community.

Among young children, the home and community cultural environments help mold children's conception of societal norms prior to entering school. These home and community interactions take up the majority of early childhood experiences, as they are the contexts from which young children draw when making connections to broader sociocultural environments. Research examining reading and writing within the home provides a refined conceptualization of young children's literacy development. Children gain knowledge about written language through observations and interactions with others in their immediate environments (McGee & Purcell-Gates, 1997; Teale, 1986). Reading and writing are learned and taught differently from one socio-cultural context to another (Clay, 1993; Heath, 1983), supporting the need for continued inquiry

into how families' cultural contexts shape children's literacy.

As children's first teachers, families' perceptions of literacy influence their children's developing understanding. The spoken and unspoken expectations of children's social and cultural environment influence young children's understandings of literacy. Before starting school, children develop perceptions consistent with those of their families. Heath (1983) explained that even toddlers must "conform to the norms established for their social boundaries" (p. 343), highlighting the important influence of the home environment. Families' contributions to children's understandings are reflected in the different constructs children bring to the formal classroom (Clay, 1993). With a better understanding of families' sociocultural perspectives regarding literacy, educators can strive to cultivate strong home-school connections to further support children's development and learning. Consequently, this paper explores the application of the developmental niche framework to understand how varied cultural contexts shape children's early literacy development.

Using the Developmental Niche to Explore the Role of Culture in Literacy Development

The developmental niche (see Figure 1), first identified by Super and Harkness (1986), is a convergence of perspectives from social anthropology and psychology. The following interactive subsystems form the developmental niche: (1) the physical and social settings of a child's life; (2) customs and practices of care that influence competencies that children acquire; and (3) the psychology of the caretakers, particularly parental ethnotheories or parents' culturally-informed beliefs that shape their choices. Specifically, the developmental niche has been employed as a means to understand "processes of development and acquisition of culture" (Super & Harkness, 1986, p. 552). The developmental niche, focusing on various aspects of children's environment, is uniquely suited to provide insight into how culture shapes children's early literacy experiences and development.

In particular, the developmental niche has been used to understand childrearing across cultures. This theory is explored further to consider how it informs our understanding specific to one domain of children's development: literacy (Cossa, 2016). Empirical studies of children's literacy development are explored to illustrate how each aspect of the developmental niche can inform our understanding of the role of culture in children's early reading and writing development. These empirical studies are used within the frame of the developmental niche to provide recommendations for future research as well as policy and practice related to children's literacy development.

Physical and social settings. Children's physical and social settings provide insight into children's development through their everyday surroundings (Super & Harkness, 1986), particularly focusing on the location, people, and activities in which children are engaged. The physical and social settings are important, as they provide opportunities for children to learn about being "competent members of their communities" (Super & Harkness, 2002). An example of the importance of physical and social settings is reflected in a recent study utilizing the developmental niche in a cross-cultural study of Asian Indian and Euro-American families (Raghavan, Harkness, & Super, 2010). Asian Indian daughters spent a large amount of time in the home helping their mothers with household chores and entertaining guests, underscoring the emphasis on collectivism within these families. In contrast, Euro-American daughters spent more time with their family outside of the home in organized events and frequently participated in activities that developed their individual interests, highlighting the emphasis on developing independence over collectivism, but reflected in the social and physical contexts of their daily lives (Raghavan et al., 2010).

In relation to children's literacy development, we can think about these settings being where and with whom children are interacting as they develop reading, writing, and other literacy skills. Focusing on literacy through this aspect of the

developmental niche affords researchers an opportunity to learn about the positioning of literacy within the context of physical and social settings of children and families' daily lives. Young children bring families' and community's perspectives regarding oral and written language into the classroom environment (Schickedanz, 1990). Children's transference of their communities' beliefs into formalized schooling highlights the importance and influential nature regarding early physical and social settings in children's language development.

There has been increasing interest in home literacy environments (HLEs) and their contributions to young children's emergent literacy skills. Frequently, there has been a deficit approach to HLE studies, blaming the home and cultural environment for children's failures in the classroom (Bartolome & Balderrama, 2001; Taylor, 1983; Volk & Long, 2005). Specifically, research focuses on the failure of families and families because their cultural understandings do not align with the accepted societal norm in classrooms. Research highlights the conflict between the home and school environment in how they shape children's literacy development. In particular, Schickedanz (1990) took a focused approach when examining the influential role of home and school environments in her longitudinal study of her son, Adam's, writing development from age two to seven. When Adam wrote at home, his products were often social in nature. He observed his mother write at home for her job and other everyday routines that served a real-world focus. When he observed his mother writing, he often requested materials and sat near her as he wrote, modeling his own writing based on these observations and his proximity to his mother. He created grocery, Christmas, and birthday lists and copied words that he saw in his everyday environment; signs, books, toys, and labels. Adam was given autonomy to develop drawing and writing at his own pace during times of his own choosing.

Adam brought his experiences with drawing and writing at home and anticipated similar experiences in the classroom; however, he quickly became frustrated and discouraged as the school's expectations differed from his home environment. Instead of drawing and writing at times of his own choosing about topics he elected to focus on, he was expected to write during structured times on specific ideas or topics. Also, the school environment did not provide the same level of support that Adam was given at home and focused on accuracy instead of content and meaning. Adam's concerns were recognized and addressed at home, possibly furthering his frustration when he was not provided the same support at school. He became disheartened about writing as his understanding differed from the expectations in the classroom community. This study underscored the important role social and cultural environments plays on young children's understanding of literacy. Moreover, it illustrates how school and home are sometimes at odds with one another in this domain of development.

Customs and practices of care. Customs and practices of care focus on the natural or 'right' way to structure children's lives within a community. These implicit norms of care require no justification, as they are understood to be the accepted norm and are easily identifiable by members of a given community. Examining research regarding families' literacy customs helps conceptualize the application of the developmental niche regarding literacy within the home and larger community. In particular, when considering customs of care related to literacy, the researcher examined *how* families and communities interact with children in relation to reading, writing, and other literacy activities.

The differences occuring in children's literacy environments are dependent on the types of opportunities and experiences provided for them. Opportunities and experiences that families provide for their children vary based on their understanding of cultures and care; therefore, the way in which they provide or guide children's instruction varies Heath's (1983) seminal study demonstrates differences in home and school environments. School environments focused on formal written language, contrasting greatly with more practical practices in the two communities,

which had a more real-world approach to written language.

When examining two families, Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu, and Mosier (1993) looked at how families interacted with their children during instances of writing in the home environment. Families in urban, middle-class communities had their children separated from adult activities, such as work. During writing instances, these families were more likely to become deeply involved with their children's learning. When children focused on a specific learning event, they would interact with their children by communicating verbally, praising them, participating, and actively engaging in play activities. Families provided direct, explicit opportunities for writing. In comparison, families in rural communities, whose children were closely involved in most day-to-day activities, were not typically engaged in their children's learning. There was an indirect association in their children's learning. Nonverbal forms of communication were seen more often and children were expected to be observers, not participants in everyday activities (Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu, & Mosier, 1993).

Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Fernandex-Fein, & Scher, D. (1994) examined ways that parents interacted with pre-kindergarten children and literacy. The study examined four different neighborhoods: (a) low income African American families, (b) low income European American families, (c) a mix of both low income African American families, and (d) a middle income African American and European American families. For one week, parents kept detailed diaries of their children's daily activities. Researchers asked additional questions and requested further elaboration about events recorded in the diaries. Data analysis revealed that all groups of parents provided various opportunities for children to engage in literacy activities. These activities include (a) orientation towards print, (b) phonological awareness, (c) and word knowledge.

Comparison of literacy activities across groups revealed more difference between low and middle-income families than European American and African American families. Low-income families provided a structured environment where children focused on concrete literacy skills. In contrast, middle-income families provided more opportunities for their children to independently explore by providing easy access to literacy materials. They encouraged children to develop meaning based on their own understandings.

Burns, Love, Buell, and Casbergue (2012) and Casbergue, Burns, Love, and Buell (2013) focused on parents of children enrolled in a preschool program for academically at risk students. They found that parents emphasized conventions, audience, and conceptual meaning of writing during a joint letter-writing task. This emphasis may indicate that parents have a wide array of understandings of young children's writing with some understandings being more formal and traditional while others including drawing as important in communicating a message in early writing. Burns and Casbergue (1992) reported findings similar to these but with parents whose children attended a university nursery school.

Buell, Burns, Casbergue, and Love (2011) also reported on parents' foci during a parent-child joint letter-writing activity. This study specifically examined dual language learners, in contrast to Burns et al. (2012) and Casbergue et al. (2013). Results highlighted parents' focus on adult-like writing and teaching styles, reinforcing the results of Burns et al., (2012) and Casbergue et al., (2013). These studies indicate parents understand writing in more conventional terms, such as letter formation and directionality especially given that many of the letters were written in home language and for family members. Parents' limited emphasis on unconventional forms of writing (e.g. drawing, scribbling) further substantiates the conclusion that parents understand writing in more conventional terms given this context.

Teale (1992) also focused on low-income families when employing naturalistic inquiry to examine families and the roles that members of the family played in young children's literacy development.

Twelve boys and 12 girls ranging from two years, six months to three years, six months participated in the study. Teale observed and documented occurrences of literacy within the home. Results revealed literacy was integrated in social activities with family members. Teale (1992) categorized activities in which literacy instances occurred, including communication, entertainment, most frequently participants' daily living routine. Daily living routines involving literacy events, occurring as part of everyday rites and rituals, comprised 25.5% of all literacy instances and overall, 80% of activities observed did not have a literacy-specific focus. Children from this community experienced "literacy as primarily a social process during their preschool years" (Teale, 1992, p. 193). The high frequency of everyday rites and rituals during observations demonstrate the social nature of home literacy.

Parental ethnotheories. Parental ethnotheories, or psychology of the caretaker, are ideas or concepts regarding childrearing that are often hard for families to put into words because it is so ingrained in their everyday lives. Parental ethnotheories are difficult to uncover as they are the, "implicit, taken-for-granted ideas about the 'natural' or 'right' ways to think or act" (Harkness, et al., 2010). Harkness, et al. (2010) designate parental ethnotheories as the source from which the other two subsystems of the developmental niche, physical and social settings and customs and culture of care, originate. Physical and social settings and customs and culture of care are the cultural vehicles for directly exploring data through the parental ethnotheories subsystem.

When considering this in relation to children's literacy development we can think of this as *why* families interact with children in certain ways as children develop reading, writing, and other literacy skills. Examining how families understand reading and writing within the context of the home environment provides further understanding of sociocultural contexts influencing and informing children's literacy. Researching these sociocultural experiences provides context to draw from when studying literacy in the classroom. While certain aspects of literacy may be emphasized or valued in the home, the same values may not be equally valued in schools (Brashears, 2008; Heath, 1983). Heath (1983) examined how families and communities influence children's language development. The study drew from two communities: a white working class community (Roadville) and a black working class community (Trackton). The two communities' understandings and practices of language differed both from one another as well as from the school environment. Families from Roadville viewed written language as a limitation of expression in comparison to their oral traditions. Trackton families valued written language as a means to manipulate and negotiate the written word and encouraged written language as opportunities for both playful and serious expression. The two communities understood the importance of literacy in relation to their jobs and everyday routines in their environment.

When interviewing 30 parents in rural Appalachia, Brashear's (2008) study revealed disconnect between school and home environments. The study revealed that parent participants did not see a connection with writing in the classroom and writing in the 'real world'. Participants indicated that they believed writing was important for their children, but like Meier (2000), parents connected writing with conventions, such as mechanical structure.

Brashears (2008) and Meier (2000) examined families' perceptions of their children's writing. These studies revealed families valued the education of their children's writing; however, their perceptions of what was important differed from what was being valued in schools. Families placed more value on conventional writing practices in comparison to meaning making and content of writing. While families in these two studies did value writing, the values differed in comparison to school community; underscoring the need for further research into families' understandings of reading and writing.

Focusing on low-income minority families and writing, Meier's (2000) study revealed families'

conceptualizations regarding writing did not always align with the accepted norms of the classroom community. Parent participants placed value and merit on conventional, traditional forms of writing, such as name writing, handwriting, copying and tracing words. Participants also emphasized phonics and alphabet oriented writing tasks their children created.

This line of inquiry provides further insight into ways families interact with their child in everyday environments and the cultural customs. With a better understanding of these sociocultural influences, educators can strive to cultivate strong home-school connections to further support children's development and learning.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Children's social and cultural experiences highlight the important contribution of home environment on young children's literacy development. Consequently, it is important to consider how utilization of the developmental niche informs literacy research and practice, particularly in terms of understanding the role of culture in children' early literacy development.

Methods for future research. The developmental niche lends itself to ethnographic data collection techniques. Specific ethnographic techniques include (a) collecting data in a natural setting; (b) spending face-to-face time with participants; (c) accurately reflecting participants' perceptions and perspectives; (d) utilizing inductive, interactive, and recursive strategies for both data collection and analysis; (e) employing multiple methods of data collection; and (f) using culture as the lens to interpret results (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999b). Exploring physical and social settings, customs and cultures of care, and ethnotheories regarding young children's literacy, through an ethnographic lens supports data collection in the form of focus group discussions, field observations, and in-depth interviews. Employing ethnographic data collection techniques allows researchers to examine everyday life and social interactions of literacy (Schram, 2003) and provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding about cultural environments regarding young children's literacy experiences.

In particular, focus group discussions, interviews, and observations provide multiple data collection methods to help understand what Van Manen (1990) refers to as, "lived experiences" of participants (p. 9). These methods of data collection align with the developmental niche by focusing on the cultural and social understandings of the physical and social settings where parent-child literacy interactions occur. Specifically, focus group discussions provide opportunities for further understanding of families' familiarity and experiences with young children's literacy within a particular community (Morgan, 1988). The interactions of participants in a focus group provide rich, in-depth information and provide opportunities to compare and contrast cultural understandings within a targeted community or social group (Cary & Asbury, 2012). Focus group discussions support the developmental niche theory, (Harkness & Super, 1996) as the discussion provides insight about every day, taken for granted routines and interactions regarding young children and literacy.

In-depth interviews can provide additional insight, specifically regarding the customs and cultures of care. Families are able to identify and express the norms and accepted practices about young children's literacy within the home and community setting. One-on-one interviews may elicit more details from participants about their individual understandings of the customs and cultures within their own family and the surrounding community than focus group discussions. The focus group discussions allow researchers to gather more detail from individuals during interviews because they are the only person participating in the interview at that time.

Field observations provide opportunities to examine the physical and social settings where literacy occurs. Observations allow for insight into where literacy occurs, where materials are stored, and how families directly and indirectly interact with young children regarding literacy. Focusing

on the social interactions of families help identify values and perspectives regarding literacy in the cultural environment of the home. Observations may also provide insight into parental ethnotheories, which are identified as implicit norms which participants are not always able to identify and articulate, as they are so naturally engrained in their cultural environment.

Recommendations for practice

Families' understandings of literacy do not always align with teachers' understandings (Schickedanz, 1990). Brashears (2008) and Meier (2000) concluded that parents valued their children's literacy, specifically writing, education; however, their perceptions of what was important differed from what was being valued in schools. Often, the discontinuities between home and school cultures result in underachievement in public schools (Datcher-Laury, 1988). Working class, minority, and other culturally diverse students have a disproportionate amount of underachievement in contrast to their middle class peers, contributing to a deficit perspective that culturally diverse families are not providing children with the necessary tools to succeed in school (Taylor, 1983). Studies examining literacy from a developmental niche framework can provide concrete ways for teachers and family practitioners to gather insight into how families understand literacy in relation to their children. This knowledge may provide us with opportunities to further understand the social and cultural environment, customs, and psychology of families regarding their children's literacy development and how they are complementary or different from the accepted norms of the school environment. Further understanding about the cultural environments of families' homes and communities in relation to literacy and young children may provide opportunities to improve home-school connections.

Through the developmental niche framework, teachers and researchers alike can gather a deeper understanding of literacy within students' cultural environments. For example, home visits will provide understanding of the physical and social settings of literacy development. Open conversation and pointed questions regarding families' daily routines—questions that are concrete and easy for families to answer—will provide insight into customs of care and parental ethnotheories regarding children's literacy development. However, accessing this knowledge requires teachers to build partnerships with families outside of school—in families' comfort zones—their homes and communities. Gaining greater understanding of children and families' social and cultural environments vis-a-vis the developmental niche, will help bridge the divide that sometimes exists between home and school environments.

Conclusion

The sociocultural factors that most heavily influence young readers and writers are those found within their home environment. The interaction among families and children during cognitive literacy tasks is an essential part of children's learning and socialization within their cultural community and larger society (Vygotsky, 1978). Families' perceptions and beliefs impact their children through the direct or indirect interactions with their children. Parental involvement in early childhood literacy is crucial for children's cognitive and social growth. Parental ethnotheories have a "powerful influence on the . . .development of children and children" (Super and Harkness, 1996, p. 2). Knowing the ways that families perceive reading and writing within a sociocultural context will help researchers better understand the literacy norms of children. With an enhanced understanding of literacy experiences that children bring to school, we can identify children's strengths and weaknesses, and improve home school communication. Refining the developmental niche to focus on literacy encourages a broader interpretation of families' understandings of young children's reading and writing, and helps identify the social and cultural contexts of literacy to which young children are exposed. Deeper understanding of children's cultural environment helps us figure out specifically where to intervene and how to do so in a culturally appropriate way.

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Appendix

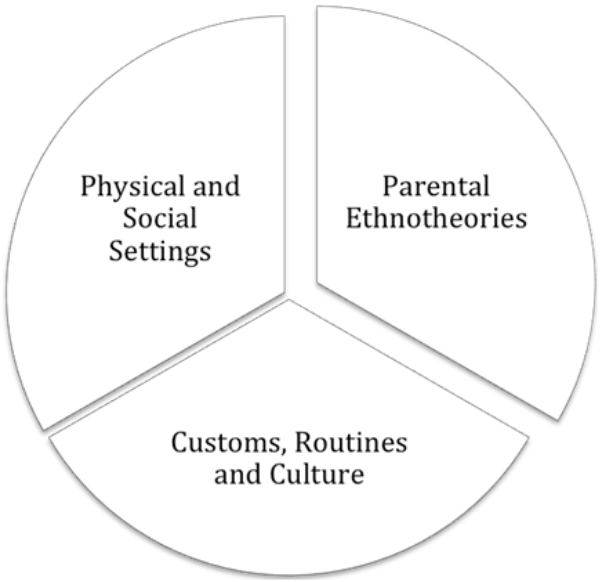

Figure 1. *Connection of physical and social setting, parental ethnotheories, and customs, routines, and culture*

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research.

Funding Statement

No funding is received for this project.