The SAGE Encyclopedia of OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING

Kylie Peppler
Editor

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Home Environments

The cultural, social, technological, economic, and physical conditions of the setting in which a person lives constitute a home environment. These environments shape the cognitive development and educational attainment of an individual and are central in a person's learning ecosystem. This entry provides an overview of the factors that make up home environments, gives information about the theories that conceptualize home environments, summarizes research findings, and describes home environment interventions.

Overview

Home environments are composed of multiple dimensions that influence people's life chances and learning. The dimensions include socioeconomic factors such as parents' income, social class, and level of education; cultural aspects of the family such as the language spoken at home, literacy practices (e.g., parental reading to children, singing songs, playing games), ethnicity, and parenting styles; technological elements such as access to old and new media; and physical features such as the availability of dedicated spaces for communal and personal activities. The study of these dimensions has provided ample evidence of how home environments vary in quality and offer different kinds of access to opportunities.

In technology-driven modern societies, the home environment has become one of the main contexts for engagement with community and popular culture. It is a primary context for people's sociability, interest-driven learning, and new media practices. Furthermore, it is a point of connection between in-school and out-of-school learning.

Theory

The setting of the home, understood as an environment embedded in broader and interconnected contexts and as a place where individuals learn and acquire knowledge, has been theorized by social scientists. At the basis of such theorizations are the ecological and sociocultural theories developed in the 20th century.

Ecological Theory

According to the ecological systems theory, human development is the result of the influences of a person's surroundings or the environment that an individual inhabits. Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, this theory describes a dynamic model of four systems or environment layers that interact with one another in complex ways, shaping the development of a child. The systems go from the intimate settings of family and home to the broad contexts of society and culture. The level of *microsystems* is the smallest context in which the child lives and moves, and includes people such as family members, peers, and teachers, as well as settings such as home, child care, and school. The *mesosystems* layer consists of the relationships between the microsystems, such as the interactions between parents and teachers. The next level is the one of *exosystems* and includes the broader community. Extended family members, communication media, neighbors, parental workplaces, and family friends, for instance, affect children's development and socialization from the *exosystems* level. The next layer, called *macrosystems*, contains the ideologies, values, laws, and customs of the larger culture and society.

In the ecological systems theory, the home environment is interconnected to wider contexts and is in dynamic relationships with microsystems such as the school, teachers, and peers. It is one of the most important contexts of human development, particularly at early ages, because in the home environment the individual can have more direct personal experiences. Acknowledging the complexity of the multiple environment layers and their interconnections, the ecological theory recognizes the diversity of home environments.

Sociocultural Theory

Lev Vygotsky developed the sociocultural theory of cognition to explain how society, culture, and history influenced the way in which humans

develop and learn. According to this theory, learning occurs through meaningful social activities as humans interact with the tools, values, and semiotic signs of a particular culture. Often called social constructivism for its emphasis on the social construction of knowledge, this theory explains that the human process of cognition takes place within particular contexts such as the home and the school.

The home environment, according to sociocultural theory, is a context where children participate in a range of social activities as they interact with parents and family members and access cultural tools that mediate the acquisition of knowledge. The characteristics of the home environment shape human developmental and learning processes and have a direct impact on people's learning both in educational and noneducational settings.

Research

A large body of research has been conducted on the home environment to understand its complexity and diversity, its relationships with other contexts, and its impact on learning and achievement outcomes. Based on research findings, scholars have classified home environments according to the quality and quantity of their resources (e.g., economic, social, technology, cultural, and physical) and activities (sociocultural). From rich to poor, from positive to negative, from privileged to disadvantaged, researchers have found a wide spectrum of home environments that reveal the social inequalities present in modern and late-modern societies.

Social Inequalities

It is precisely the study of social inequalities that has consistently revealed evidence of the relationship between socioeconomic conditions and learning outcomes. In the groundbreaking study *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966), James Coleman and his team found that a number of socioeconomic factors of the home environment such as levels of education, income, occupational status, and family configuration had an effect on students' academic achievement in the United States. According to their findings, the student's family background is a predictor of academic success, and poor and low-income students are the ones with lower educational achievement.

Building on Coleman's findings, several studies have analyzed how family socioeconomic status and configuration provide advantages or disadvantages to diverse learners. In *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), Annette Lareau found empirical evidence of how social class in the United States determined different kinds of parenting practices at home and how these practices shaped children's cognitive development, social skills, and access to opportunity. According to Lareau, middle-class parents assume greater responsibility in structuring childhood activities and stimulating children's development. In contrast, working-class parents are less involved in monitoring and structuring childhood activities. The two kinds of parenting styles contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities from the home environment as middle-class homes create a more positive and advantageous environment for learning and accessing opportunities.

Literacy Practices

Several research studies on early-age literacy practices have provided evidence of how resources and activities at the home environment support children's cognitive development. Educational researchers in the United States and the United Kingdom have found that joint activities developed by parents and children, such as play, verbal interactions, writing, reading, and singing, support children's acquisition of literacy skills. Likewise, research findings across numerous studies reveal that access to books and other print media at home allow children to develop their reading competency, vocabulary comprehension, and expressive language. Variations in the quality of resources and activities in the home environments, including enrichment activities such as family visits to museums and libraries, affect children's school literacy preparation.

Researchers agree that positive home environments stimulate children's learning by providing access to educational interactions, activities, and materials. Although socioeconomic variables influence the quality of the home environments in relation to literacy practices, some researchers, such as Robert Ortiz, have found evidence that low-income and minority parents value literacy

practices and make efforts to provide activities and resources at their homes despite their economic constraints.

New Media Technologies

Several communication and media scholars have investigated the technological and physical conditions of the home environment. They have researched the quality and quantity of media technologies, the placement of devices in public and private spaces at the household, the individual and communal media practices, and how media usage organizes the temporal rhythms of family life. As with other dimensions of the home environment, researchers have found empirical evidence that parental practices and socioeconomic backgrounds shape the domestic media environment. Sonia Livingstone, for instance, found in her mixed methods study of young people and new media in the United Kingdom that parents build the media environment according to their values, aspirations, and morals. Likewise, Heather Horst's ethnographic study of U.S. families provided evidence of how parents actively configure different media environments as they buy media devices, engage in joint media activities with their children, and monitor (or not) media usage at home.

In late-modern societies, home environments are equipped with information and communication technologies such as computers, video game consoles, television screens, cameras, smartphones, and Internet connectivity. Although the affordances of these digital tools and networks create a range of opportunities for learning (e.g., retrieving information on the World Wide Web, participating in online communities, and producing a variety of media texts), the mere access to technology is not enough for stimulating learning at home. Several researchers have pointed out that to take full advantage of new media technologies, and effectively use them for learning and participating in culture and society, individuals need to develop new literacies and skills and access to social support.

Similar to the research findings of scholars studying early-age literacy practices in the home environment, recent studies on children's development of new literacies and technological fluencies offer empirical evidence of the importance of parents' practices and backgrounds. As parents provide technology resources, offer social support, and participate in joint activities with their children, they support learning and the acquisition of new literacies at home. Brigid Barron and her collaborators, for instance, identified seven roles that parents can play in the home environment for supporting learning: (1) teachers, (2) collaborators on hands-on projects, (3) providers of nontechnical support, (4) brokers of learning opportunities, (5) providers of learning resources, (6) employers of children to assist with technical projects, and (7) learners. Each of these roles supports children's development of technological fluencies and is instrumental for learning new literacies.

Interventions

Recognizing the central position of the home environment in human development has helped teachers, policy makers, and researchers address the challenges of social inequalities. Given the key role that parents play in shaping the home environment, designing materials for intergenerational and family-based learning has been the focus of several private and public educational interventions in the United States and the United Kingdom. The acknowledgment of the home environment as a complex setting with multiple conditions and relationships has helped spread awareness about the need to support parents and create educational interventions that include all family members.

Andres Lombana-Bermudez

See also Digital Divide; Ecological Systems Theory; Family Learning; Intergenerational Learning; Linking In-School and Out-of-School Learning; Parent–Child Interaction; Sociocultural Theory

Further Readings

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