

Chapter 2

Theories of Parent Involvement

While theoretical approaches to any field provide foundations of analysis and interpretation, parental involvement in ECEC is no exception. Specifically, it is upon theories that the basis for research is built and deepens the aspirations of researchers to broaden and aspire further in social and natural sciences (Epstein, 2001; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). There are mainly three theories that have a great impact on the perspectives taken in most of the research done in ECEC and have laid out frameworks for the researchers and practitioners. Hence, this chapter discusses the theories that most commonly guide parental involvements, namely: 1) Socio-cultural theory by Levy Vygotsky, 2) Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, and 3) Urie Bronfenbrenner's exosystemic theory.

Socio-cultural theory

Developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978), this theory considers human development as a socially mediated process in which children develop beliefs, expectations, views, and cultural values. Accordingly, learning occurs in a socio-cultural context with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other, therefore, it stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978). Socio-cultural theory strongly establishes that community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning" and proceeds development, as such, language plays a major role in children's development and learning (McLeod, 2020). For meaningful learning to occur, children need to interact with other family members in a community setting (Tekin, 2011). In learning and development, this theory very strongly emphasizes social and cultural contexts in the construction of knowledge (McLeod, 2020). As such, there are no specific linear stages for all children to follow during development and growth as the main assumption is that every individual is uniquely influenced and shaped by specific social and cultural factors in their communities (McLeod, 2020; Tekin, 2011).

This theory introduced the concept of Zonal Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD refers to the difference between what a child can do and achieve independently and what s/he can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a more skilled partner. Vygotsky (1978) considers ZPD as a point where a child/learner is given more useful instructions to allow him/her to develop and master skills which they will then use on their own in developing higher mental functions. The ZPD necessitates the development of effective interaction with adults (i.e. parents) and more competent peers (i.e. classmates) to strategize and master required skills. For example, in a classroom context, teachers may opt for more interactive and cooperative learning strategies and exercises that allow less competent children to develop with help from more skillful peers - within the zone of proximal development.

Sociocultural theory locates language as a major means of interactions within the child himself, among children themselves, and between the child and 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1987). Accordingly, there are three forms of language namely (i) social speech – used for external communication and talking to others; (ii) private speech – used for a talk directed to the self for intellectual function; and (iii) private speech or underground speech which normally takes on a self-regulating function or silent inner speech. It is through private speech that children are confronted with difficult tasks/challenges and starts to individually strategize and interact with a more knowledgeable other using language (Vygotsky, 1987).

More to the point, this theory establishes the concept of 'elementary mental function' or children's inborn ability for intellectual development (Vygotsky, 1978). These include perception, memory, and attention which through interactions using language well understood by children, develops into 'higher mental functions'. The social interactions taking place in specific cultural contexts enable children to develop adaptation tools that may be of intellectual use in other contexts (Winsler, et al., 2007). In other words, children develop higher mental functions that are socio-culturally influenced. For example, due to biological reasons, young children's memory is mostly limited with attention paid to ongoing events. To keep and aid their memory, in Western countries, children will be asked to learn how to take notes, while in a context with limited print materials, children will tie knots in a string or just recall the names of relatives or ancestors (Ndijuye, 2017). These dimensions of the sociocultural theory emphasize the importance of interaction with parents in general and the parent involvement in young children's education and development, in particular, as the parents

are in their immediate environment and have a significant impact on forming the things they learn and how they build themselves. The parents guide them in the context, teach them, and influence them in ZPD as a significant knowledge resource, thus their involvement is essential.

Cognitive development theory

This theory was developed by Jean Piaget (1957) and assumes that children's cognitive abilities change as they chronologically grow through defined phases, hence, while a child learns, it also develops and constructs a mental model of the world around them. Children develop through a series of stages because of interactions between environments and inborn capacities (McLeod, 2022). As such, the main assumption of this theory is that as active learners, children have a constant drive to match and balance their internal drive of the world to that of the external construction (McLeod, 2022; Piaget, 1981). In such contexts, other people are important (i.e. parents) components of the learning process to influence children's environments.

Piaget presented two important concepts in his theory, namely assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation can be generally defined as the cognitive process of fitting new information into existing cognitive schemas, perceptions, and understanding. In this case, the child's general beliefs and understanding of the world do not change because of the gained new information. Accommodation can be defined as the cognitive process of revising existing cognitive schemas, perceptions, and understanding so that new information can be incorporated. This occurs when the existing schema (knowledge) does not work and needs to be changed to deal with a new object or situation (Piaget, 1981).

As such, children tend to assimilate the newly acquired knowledge very quickly and/or accommodate incorrect worldviews if they are actively involved within their environments. This detail necessitates the creation of appropriate learning opportunities that allow interactions between children, parents, and physical and cognitive environments (Prior & Gerard, 2007). However, the same theory does not distinguish the extent to which these schemas may influence children's learning and development in different contexts from their previous experiences. For example, while swimming is common in Western societies as a leisure activity, in tropical communities along lakes/oceans/large rivers in developing countries it is associated

with fish and fishing, hence a necessary survival skill for children from these communities. Thus this dimension can be subjected to critique as contextuality matters in children's learning and development.

Another important aspect of this theory is equilibration (Piaget 1957; Wadsworth, 2004). This is a state whereby the mind balances between old and newly acquired knowledge and it takes place when the child acquires and fits in new information in the existing schema through assimilation processes (Piaget, 1957). However, sometimes the new information may not be assimilated, which creates frustration and a need for accommodation of the new knowledge. This is more practical in the learning and development of children in which they interact and acquire new knowledge whenever the opportunity to learn presents itself. Taking the perspective of this theory, parent involvement becomes critical since children's minds develop very fast with fluctuations and always need to learn and unlearn new concepts, ideas, and experiences. Parents can be considered as one of the most significant parts of children's learning process through assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium.

Nevertheless, the same theory seems to miss the critical role of culture and society are essential parts of children's development and learning and has implications on the level of parental involvement. This is because human development is not linearly universal due to socio-cultural, climatic, and biological reasons (Wadsworth, 2004). Even the development of various domains within an individual child is multidimensional and tends to grow at different paces. As such, contextual and cultural reasons do influence readiness and the level of parental involvement in children's learning and development (Puccioni, Froiland & Moeyaert, 2020). Hence, it should be noted that Piaget's cognitive development theory could fall behind in addressing this contextuality as it is authenticity is based on mostly a Western context without going beyond for further investigation in other cultures and contexts.

Ecological systems theory

This theory was introduced by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974, 1995) who established that children's development and learning occur in a nested arrangement of structures/layers each contained in the other. Initially, Bronfenbrenner developed the ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which regarded development because of interactions

between humans and proximal and distal environment. However, in later years Bronfenbrenner modified and revised his theory by arguing that the human development process occurs because of complex reciprocal interactions between ‘biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate, proximal and distal external environment’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Bronfenbrenner called this theory a ‘bioecological model’ to reflect interactions between nature and nurture.

Understanding the multidimensional effects of the proximal processes on development, the foci should be on the person, quality of interactions, contexts, and outcomes. This is because there are variations in these processes, hence affecting people differently (Bronfenbrenner & Evance, 2000). Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995) grouped the ecological systems as micro-systems, meso-systems, exo-systems, and macrosystems. Accordingly, the approach focuses on the developing child and its interactions with environments such as people, objects, and symbols in “proximal processes” across multiple settings and contexts (McLeod, 2022; Prior & Gerard, 2007).

More specifically, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995) established that a microsystem is a set and pattern of roles, activities, and interpersonal experiences by the child in a specific setting with specified features. These include the child’s family, school, teachers, peers, available health services, and the neighborhood. Normally, the noted components tend to interact with and influence each other. For example, the quality of schools in a certain neighborhood reflects the quality of life in that neighborhood and vice versa. The exosystem consists of such elements as extended family members, parents’ workplaces, the school board, and the media. Such elements do indirectly influence children’s development and learning. For instance, in a collective society, the death of an extended family member may have implications on the psychological well-being of parents and even a child.

The mesosystem includes the interrelations among two or more settings in which the child is an active participant. For example, the relationship between and among school, home, and neighborhood comprise the mesosystem. Sound child development and meaningful learning occur there is a solid linkage among various components of these systems. The macrosystem simply refers to the functionalities, reliabilities, and consistencies of the other lower systems that exist at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These include societal attitudes and ideologies such as existing laws, morals, values, customs, and world-views. These elements have indirectly eminent implications in children’s

development and learning such as children's construction of what is socially (un)acceptable.



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However, it is important to note that while the bioecological systems are vital in child development, it does not mean that those who do not have less supportive ecological systems are not developing at all or are less developing. While this may be partially true in some contexts, some children grow into well-rounded adults even though they receive limited support from their ecological systems. This could result from resiliency factors. Nevertheless, delineating from bioecological system theory, we argue that children's development and learning are influenced by mutual interactions between them, teachers, schools, parents, peers, communities and neighborhoods, existing policies, and other systems. Effective coordination of various systems is vital for children's development. Particularly, the child as an agent in this system, needs effective and meaningful involvement by the other parents, who are located in the core system of this theory. Especially during the early years of development as their information processing level is high as they are experiencing the golden era of learning. During this era, they need solid sources of knowledge such as parents as they become and get familiar with their immediate ecosystem. This brings to the fore

the question of the quality of parent involvement in children's development and learning.

