

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an orientation to the research study. It presents the problem statement and rationale, an explanation of terminology used, and an outline of the chapters included in the thesis.

1.2 Problem statement and rationale

The literature on early childhood intervention has evolved from ‘first generation’ research which focused primarily on the child’s disability in isolation, towards ‘second generation’ research which aims to look at the child’s functioning within context (Guralnick, 1997). This context is highlighted by the family-centered model which recognises the centrality of the family context as the primary milieu, where children begin to learn and develop the competencies expected of them within their culture (Turnbull, Turbiville & Turnbull, 2000; Nsamenang, 1992). The main assumption of this strengths based approach is that the culture and traditions of families are understood to be the basis for appropriate and sustainable intervention.

Traditional approaches failed to meet this family-centered requirement and have been criticised for not aligning with family goals and priorities. This is due to the use of a deficit model which focuses on what families and communities do not know, instead of identifying what they already know and do (Pence & Schafer, 2006). This approach leads to ‘professionally prescribed’ interventions which are primarily based on the assumptions of professionals, without the necessary understanding of the child within context. As a result, families are provided with isolated, decontextualised programmes or activities which often add to their burden of responsibilities (Bernheimer & Keogh, 1995). This deficit-based approach to intervention has also been critiqued for not allowing time for families to engage in activities, which are important because “families of young children experience events in addition to those provided by early intervention programmes that

can and do influence child development and family functioning” (Trivette, Dunst & Deal, 1997, p. 73).

It is acknowledged that the field of early childhood care and development is receiving increased attention in South Africa through policy development; however, there continues to be a significant gap in the knowledge-base shaping early intervention in this country. This is primarily due to the uncritical implementation of Western-based approaches which may not be relevant to most children in Africa. As a result there is an overwhelming call from African researchers to start increasing the indigenous knowledge-base, instead of maintaining an uncritical adoption of programmes and models of intervention which are often not appropriate to the African context (Pence & Marfo, 2008). This call resonates with the statement that “to intervene effectively on behalf of children is to intervene in context and nothing less is deemed to be sufficient if the goal is to establish meaningful and durable change” (Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000, p. 12).

The study of activity settings has been proposed to achieve an understanding of children within context, (Harry, 2002; Gallimore, Goldenberg & Weisner, 1993). Activity settings make up the everyday experiences and events that involve the child’s interactions with various people and the environment (Trivette, Dunst & Hamby, 2004; Farver, 1999). Activity settings include values, goals and resources required to make an activity happen, people in relationships, the task the activity is to achieve, and a script that defines how the activity is to be carried out within a particular culture. The study of activity settings also allows for a break away from the tradition of judging families to focusing on how families find meaning in their daily lives (Fiese, Tomcho, Douglas, Josephs, Poltrock and Baker, 2002). Activity settings are set within the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model, Weisner’s ecocultural approach, and Super and Harkness’ developmental niche concept, all of which are explored in Chapter 2.

While there is a strong emphasis in the literature on developing a knowledge-base that is applicable to families from diverse cultural contexts, little is known about the beliefs and

practices of families in South Africa. The paucity of research in this area strengthens the need to start improving the indigenous knowledge-base of the activity settings of children in South Africa. This information will facilitate an improved understanding of children within the contexts in which they live.

It is with this background that the aim of this study was developed to focus on the activity settings of typically developing 3-to-5-year-old children living in a low-income context. The study was conducted by interviewing caregivers about activities that children are involved in, the partners involved, the purpose attributed to activities, as well as caregiver perceptions on the importance of activities for learning. A literature search revealed that a study of this nature has not been done in South Africa, and an appropriate research tool was therefore unavailable. The Parent Survey of Home and Family Experiences (Dunst & Bruder, 1999a) was utilised as a basis to develop a questionnaire; however, because this tool was developed for use in the United States of America, it was necessary to include activities that are relevant to the South African context. The preparatory phase of the study therefore focused on developing and validating the questionnaire to include relevant activities. To accommodate differing literacy levels, face-to-face structured interviews were conducted.

1.3. Terminology

The following terms are used frequently in this study:

1.3.1. Activity settings

‘Activity settings’ is the basic unit for understanding how learning or development takes place within context. Activity settings include planned and unplanned, as well as structured and unstructured activities like eating dinner, bath time, listening to stories and getting ready for school.

1.3.2. Family-centered

The term family-centered refers to a particular set of beliefs, principles, values and practices that aim at supporting and strengthening family capacity to enhance and promote child development and learning.

1.3.3. Natural environments

Natural environments are the day-to-day settings, routines and activities that promote learning. Natural environments refer to the place as well as the methodology of service provision, which is the methodology of using natural routines and activities.

1.4 Chapters

The research study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 provides a basic orientation to the study. Chapter 2 details the theoretical framework used to support this study, including Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory, Weisner's ecocultural approach, and Super and Harkness' developmental niche concept. These theoretical approaches provide a foundation for the use of activity settings which is explored in further detail. Relevant research is used to support the use of activity settings as a basis to study the child in context.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology adopted for this study. This includes the aims, research design, preparatory phase and finally, the main study. Participant selection criteria, descriptions of participants and a discussion of equipment, materials and procedures are presented. Data collection and analysis is discussed. Finally, a result on inter-rater reliability ratings is presented. Chapter 4 provides a detailed discussion of the results obtained. Results are organised into eight categories and discussed according to the sub-aims of the study. Chapter 5 focuses on the conclusions drawn from this study, an evaluation of the study, as well as recommendations for further research. The Appendices are attached at the end of the study to assist with interpretation and understanding of the information presented in Chapter 3.

1.5 Summary

This chapter provides a rationale and context for the current study; this is achieved by exploring gaps in current research and approaches. An explanation of relevant terminology is provided. The chapter concludes with an overview of all chapters included in this thesis.

CHAPTER 2

ACTIVITY SETTINGS

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1. Scope of the chapter

This chapter aims at providing a theoretical framework by means of discussing relevant theories that support the use of activity settings. The theoretical concepts discussed include the Bioecological theory, ecocultural theory and the developmental niche concept. Thereafter, the components of activity settings are expanded on, with specific reference to the African context.

2.1.2. Background

The field of early childhood intervention has evolved significantly over the past three decades with many conceptual changes highlighted in the literature. The most significant being the introduction of family-centered practice which recognises the centrality of family in the life of the child (Turnbull, Turbiville & Turnbull, 2000). The term family-centered refers to a particular set of beliefs, principles, values and practices that aim at supporting and strengthening family capacity to enhance and promote child development and learning (Dunst, 2002). Family-centered practice recognises that families are unique, with their own traditions, beliefs and value systems. The family context which has been identified as the context for learning and development (Carpenter, 2000), is embedded within a particular culture; and while families are not defined by culture alone, culture is viewed as having a significant impact on the developmental opportunities of children (Harry, 2002; Barnwell & Monimalika, 1996). To understand family strengths and in order to build capacity, it is imperative that one gains insight into the cultural contexts in which families live (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). This is important, as research has shown that caregivers desire approaches which are easy to incorporate into their daily lives, and assist the child in being part of the family and community (Sheldon & Rush, 2001).

2.2. Contextualising development

Culture is defined as a “socially interactive process of constructions” consisting of two main components: shared activity and shared meaning (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni and Maynard, 2003, p. 462). One way of understanding shared activity and shared meaning is through investigating activity settings, which are the “perceptible instantiation of the ecological and cultural system that surrounds the family and individual” (Gallimore, Goldenberg and Weisner, 1993, p. 539). The study of activity settings therefore allows for human activity to be understood within context, because the impact of culture on belief systems is mediated through the everyday experiences and events that involve the child’s interactions with various people and the environment (Gallimore et al., 1993; Harry, 2000). Furthermore, it is through engagement in activity settings that individuals learn ‘cultural scripts’ or what is expected of them, which activities are considered appropriate or inappropriate, how they are expected to engage in these activities, the ways other people will deal with them, and the ways in which they are expected to deal with others (Tudge, Otero, Piccinini, Doucet, Sperb and Lopes, 2006). Culture therefore structures the settings within which children’s activities take place (Dawes & Donald, 2005). The theoretical concepts underlying activity settings are now explored, in order to develop a perspective on development in context.

2.2.1. Bioecological framework

Bronfenbrenner has motivated for research on children to focus on how children develop within settings that are “representative of their actual world” (Lerner, 2005, p. x). Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological perspective helps to achieve this objective, because it is inclusive of all the systems in which families are enmeshed and it reflects the dynamic nature of actual family relations (Swick & Williams, 2006). The ecological environment is conceptualised as a set of nested systems consisting of the Microsystem, the Mesosystem, the Exosystem and the Macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Sontag, 1996). This discussion focuses only on the Microsystem and Macrosystem in order to understand the proximal and distal influences on the child.

Bronfenbrenner's most proximal level of interaction in his hierarchy of systems, the Microsystem, allows for a closer look at the patterns of "activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by a developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features, and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality and systems of belief" (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 227). The child's family context is the Microsystem in which early learning takes place (Swick & Williams, 2006). The interaction that takes place in the immediate environment is referred to as 'proximal processes'. The proximal processes affecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person, the environment (both proximal and distal), and the processes taking place. Examples of such processes include feeding a baby, reading, caring for others and play. Participation in these interactive processes over time generates the ability, motivation, knowledge and skill to engage in such activities, with others and on one's own (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Children's developmental contexts are therefore viewed as cultural in all senses (Dawes & Donald, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's fourth level of his taxonomy, the Macrosystem, addresses the cultural influence within this system. The "cultural repertoire" of belief systems of significant others in the child's world creates the context that determines and contributes to developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Helman's (1994) definition of culture allows insight into the link between culture at the level of the Macrosystem and how it impacts on everyday life within the Microsystem. Culture is defined as:

"A set of guidelines which individuals inherit as members of a particular society, and which tells them how to view the world, how to experience it emotionally, and how to behave in it in relation to other people, to supernatural forces or Gods, and to the natural environment. It also provides them with a way of transmitting these guidelines to the next generation - by use of symbols, language, art and ritual" (Helman, 1994, p. 2-3).

The Macrosystem therefore influences what, how, when and where relationships are carried out (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). According to Sontag (1997) this affords credibility to the study of belief systems where more detailed descriptions of the child's environment and unique cultural niches can be obtained. The study of belief systems and the activities, through which culture is adopted, will assist in understanding "the way things are ordinarily done in a particular community" (Dawes & Donald, 2005, p. 12). In order to understand how culture is adopted and how people adapt to it, ecocultural theory developed by Weisner is discussed in the following section.

2.2.2. Ecocultural theory

In essence, ecocultural theory is based on the idea of 'locally rational action', where people use connected, schematised and shared knowledge of their everyday cultural world to adapt and respond to complex decisions in their local communities (Weisner, 2002b). Development occurs along pathways determined by culture and society, and actively chosen and engaged in by parents and children, within a particular cultural ecology (Weisner, Matheson, Coots and Bernheimer, 2005). This cultural ecology is conceptualised as "the practices and activities embedded in everyday routines and the shared cultural models and interpretative meanings those activities have in a community" (Weisner et al., 2005, p. 46). Research on cultural values and parental beliefs illustrates that cultural context and socio-economic status does impact on the way parents think about children, their parenting goals and values, as well as the type of experiences and opportunities children will have access to (Rosenthal & Dorit, 2001). Within this context, families actively respond to circumstances in which they live, and construct and organise environments that provide meaning and direction to their lives (Bernheimer & Keogh, 1995).

The ecocultural framework therefore considers human diversity, both psychological and cultural, to be a set of collective and individual adaptations to context (Georgas, Van De Vijver & Berry, 2004). It is within the ecocultural context that every cultural community provides developmental pathways for children, which are made up of the everyday

routines of life that children engage in (Weisner, 2002b). Ecocultural theory zones into these pathways, which consist of activities and practices that are viewed as being the most important influences in the child and family's life (Bernheimer & Weisner, 2007). These activities (e.g. watching TV, visiting, playing), which are dependent to a large extent on cultural and family goals (Bernheimer & Weisner, 2007; Cooper & Denner, 1998), are useful units of cultural analysis because they are meaningful for parents and children (Weisner, 2002b).

The values and beliefs upheld by parents are reflected through their child rearing practices (Rosenthal & Roer-Strier, 2001). This is stressed further by Norton (1990, p. 3) who states that "child rearing practices reflect what parents know about life in their community, what they believe to be useful, and what they recognise as realistic aspirations for their children". Beliefs about children and the experiences afforded to them are therefore inextricably linked to and derived from culture. Every cultural community provides developmental pathways for children within an ecocultural context (Weisner, 2002b); children's well-being is therefore dependent on engaged participation in this context (Weisner et al., 2005; Weisner, 2002a). Two developmental pathways have been emphasised in the literature; one pathway emphasising individuation and independence, and the other membership and interdependence (Greenfield et al., 2003). Oheneba-Sakyi and Takyi (2006) note that although variations exist among African societies as they adapt to different ecosystems and cultural realities, African indigenous cultures have historically believed in the supremacy of the group as opposed to Euro-American culture which focuses on the individual.

The value of looking at parents' goals and beliefs is highlighted in a study conducted by Rao, McHale and Pearson (2003). They found that socialisation goals and child-rearing practices in India and China were linked to the specific beliefs about children and childhood in each culture. Other studies which have also highlighted the link between parenting approaches and culture, include Bornstein and Cote's (2004) study which focused on parenting cognitions of Japanese, South American, and Euro- American mothers; Beckert, Strom and Strom (2004) who looked at parent expectations of young

children in Taiwan; and Javo, Ronning and Heyerdahl's (2004) study of child rearing among the indigenous Sami population in Norway. Evans (1994) provides a comprehensive report of child-rearing practices in Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular in Namibia, Zambia, Malawi, Nigeria and Mali. Finally a more recent study by Geiger and Alant (2005), reports on child-rearing practices in Botswana. These studies, summarised in Table 2.1, indicate that the beliefs or expectations that parents have about the nature of development, reflect cultural values and regulate the opportunities that parents provide for children (Gauvain, 2003).

Table 2.1 Studies highlighting parental goals and beliefs

Study	Aim	Methodology	Results
Rao, McHale & Pearson (2003)	To investigate variations in socialisation goals in relation to child rearing goals.	Parental interviews with 205 mothers of 4-to-5-year-old children in Beijing, China and 118 mothers in Bangalore, India.	While both cultures valued obedience, Chinese mothers believed that children who were encouraged to display their emotions and thoughts were less likely to succeed academically. Indian mothers were more accepting of individual differences and encouraged emotional expression.
Bornstein & Cote (2004)	Parenting cognitions of Japanese and South American immigrant mothers in the USA were compared with mothers from their country of origin. European American mothers were also included in the study.	Participants were 231 middle-class mothers of 20-month-old children. All mothers completed a set of cognition measures, a social desirability scale and a demographic questionnaire.	South American immigrant mothers' parenting cognitions more closely resembled those of mothers in the United States, whereas Japanese immigrant mothers' cognitions tended to be similar to those of Japanese mothers.
Beckert, Strom & Strom (2004)	To investigate the expectations that Taiwanese parents have of their children.	423 parents completed the Parents as Teachers Inventory.	The variables that significantly affected parents' responses were the amount of time spent with the child, household income, parents' education, gender of parent.



Javo, Ronning & Heyerdahl (2004)	To examine current Sami child-rearing practices with Norwegians living in the same geographic region.	An interview schedule consisting of 225 questions was reported on. Participants consisted of 76 Sami mothers, 58 Sami fathers, 86 Norwegian mothers and 58 Norwegian fathers.	Results showed that parental permissiveness was higher in the Sami group; co-sleeping and self-regulation of food and sleep were commonly practised by Sami, but not Norwegian families.
Evans (1994)	To understand the traditional practices and beliefs among the Uukwaluudhi people of northern Namibia.	136 households were selected and interviews with caregivers and observations of children were conducted.	Results which were similar across studies included: -children are highly valued and seen as gifts from God, -children are the responsibility of the community, -parental and community goals are centered around social and human values, -older children play a significant role in caring for younger children, -the elders have a special role in society, -traditional games and songs are passed on from older to younger children, -men are seldom involved in the direct care of children.
Namibia	To understand child-rearing practices of caregivers in 8 of the 9 provinces in Zambia.	740 adults and 232 children were interviewed.	
Zambia	To understand child-rearing practices and beliefs in Malawi.	Structured interviews and observations were conducted in 382 households in 4 areas in Malawi.	
Malawi	Baseline studies were conducted to determine health and nutritional status of children, as well as care arrangements and stimulation.	Structured interviews were conducted in 1507 households and approximately 100 children between 2 and 6 years of age, were observed.	
Nigeria			
Geiger & Alant (2008)	To describe child-rearing practices and children's communicative interactions in a village in Botswana.	A naturalistic long-term observation was conducted; diaries and written observations were kept during a nine-month period.	Observations reported included: - very little verbal interaction between mothers and young children, especially infants, -most of the verbal communication between caregivers and children was instructional with very little verbal response encouraged from the child, -pre-speech skills were learnt in a play context with other children.

All these studies report on results observed or obtained without making judgments regarding the particular cultural group studied. This is aligned with the ecocultural approach which offers “a value neutral framework for describing and interpreting differences and similarities in human behaviour across cultures” (Berry, 2003, p. 56). The ecocultural approach explicitly rejects the idea that some cultures are more advanced than others and therefore appeals for indigenous conceptions of competence to be uncovered. These competencies are seen as development nurtured by the activities of daily life as an adaptation to the ecological context (Berry, 2003).

There is a resounding outcry that the African context has historically been ignored and Euro-American definitions of competence have been uncritically adopted as the norm by which Africans are judged (Nsamenang, 2008a; Nsamenang, 2008b; Pence, Evans & Garcia, 2008; Pence & Schafer, 2006). Furthermore, African culture has often been targeted for replacement instead of enhancement; Nsamenang (2008a) therefore calls for indigenous voices to be heard so that their daily realities can be understood. Nsamenang (2008b) continues by stating that the gap between African children’s conditions and the theories that are applied to them persists because those working in the field of early childhood intervention have failed to draw strength from the wisdom of African traditions. Culture is again highlighted as the underlying force that determines the nature of children’s developmental niches (Nsamenang, 2008b). The ‘developmental niche’ concept developed by Super and Harkness (1999) allows further insight into the immediacy of cultural forces in the environment.

2.2.3. Developmental niche

The developmental niche concept is a “theoretical framework for studying cultural regulation of the micro-environment of the child, and it attempts to describe the environment from the point of view of the child in order to understand processes of development and acquisition of culture” (Super & Harkness, 1986, p. 552). Within this framework, culture is viewed as having an integrated influence on child development as the different cultural variables operate and exist within dynamically structured

relationships (Super & Harkness, 2002). Goals for development are therefore drawn from the child's cultural niche (Weisner et al., 2005). Super and Harkness (1986) explain that the term 'niche' has been borrowed from biological ecology where it is used to refer to an organism's place or function in a biosystem. The components of the niche operate in a coordinated manner and each component interacts differentially with other features of the larger ecology. The organism and the niche are also mutually adapted. The developmental niche concept therefore allows for the examination of the cultural structuring of child development through the everyday physical and social settings in which children live (Cooper & Denner, 1998).

The child is surrounded by three subsystems: settings, customs and psychological characteristics of caretakers, which allow researchers an opportunity to investigate the impact of culture on a child's daily life experiences. The first subsystem, the setting, or physical and social contexts in which the child lives, determines the risks and support for growth and the kinds of interactions that are likely to take place. The physical setting refers to amongst other things, the size and ecology of living space; the social setting refers to household size, family structure, family composition, generations present, and roles of the mother and father. Research conducted by Super and Harkness (1986) in the rural Kipsigis community in Kenya, found that dissimilarity in settings explained the differences in sleep patterns between infants in Kenya and America. Kipsigis babies slept with their mothers and were never left at home during the day, while American babies generally slept in their own beds, often in their own rooms. This difference resulted in Kipsigis' babies waking up often during the night, whereas American babies slept for longer periods throughout the night. This study illustrates how the physical setting affects behaviour.

The next subsystem, the customs or culturally determined rearing, refers to the behaviours that are commonly used by members of the community and thoroughly integrated into the broader culture (Super & Harkness, 1986). This includes educational practices like caretaking, routines, household chores, play, multiple versus dyadic interactions (Cooper & Denner, 1998), as well as more infrequent, complex,

institutionalised mechanisms, such as circumcision rituals (Super & Harkness, 1986). The practice of carrying an infant on the back is customary in many African countries, as well as in the Kipsigis community; as it is believed to soothe the baby and keep it out of trouble.

The last subsystem makes reference to the psychological characteristics of caretakers, which include specific beliefs and emotional orientations of caregivers and types of competencies expected of children (Dasen, 2003; Super & Harkness, 1999). This was demonstrated by differences reported on mothers' beliefs on children's language and socialisation. Kipsigis mothers were reported and observed to talk less to their children in comparison to American mothers. This practice related to their belief that children learnt to talk from each other and not from their mothers.

In addition to these subsystems, three organisational aspects of the niche were identified which contribute to important developmental outcomes. These are: contemporary redundancy, thematic elaboration and chaining (Super & Harkness, 2002).

Contemporary redundancy refers to “mutually reinforcing repetition of similar influences from several parts of the environment during the same period of development” (Super & Harkness, 1999, p. 288). Contemporary redundancy was highlighted in a study conducted on the daily activities of Mayan children (Gaskins, 1999). The activities that children participate in are structured around consistent adult work activities and the family's religious and social activities. Through observation and invited participation by various family members, the children develop competency in basic maintenance activities (eating, sleeping etc), social orientation (making requests or observing household activities), and work. The study concluded that the competencies that children develop are related to expectations of them within their context.

Thematic elaboration is the repetition and promotion over time of core symbols and systems of meaning (Super & Harkness, 2002). The developing child is able to implicitly extract patterns of meaning from the environment (Super & Harkness, 1999). This is

exemplified by Nsamenang's (1992) description of how children in West African societies are socialised with an emphasis on the "locus of authority, seniority and filial service" (p. 148). Throughout childhood these values are emphasised, for example, infants are offered items and playthings and are then 'lured' into returning the gifts. This training is viewed as a preliminary step in teaching the child to share and give generously as this practice continues right up to marriageable age. Various activities in the child's daily life can contribute to thematic elaboration, for example, the oral tradition in African culture encourages story telling by elders with the purpose of teaching children values, morals and traditions (Evans, 1994).

The third way in which culture affects the course and content of development is through chaining. No single element of the environment is sufficient 'in kind' to produce a particular outcome; it is the linking of different parts that creates a new phenomenon (Super & Harkness, 2002). Research conducted by Zeitlin, Ahmed and their colleagues is cited by Super and Harkness (1999) to illustrate the element of chaining. Their research, conducted in a very poor rural area in Bangladesh, identified a chain consisting of the interplay of child-care customs, unsanitary settings and caretaker beliefs concerning meaning and causes of infantile diarrhoea that resulted in high rates of infant malnutrition, morbidity and mortality. The field trial aimed at impacting on one of these links to destroy the chain. Three major features of the environment were altered: the caretakers' understanding of germ theory, the children's exposure to unsanitary settings, and the customary methods of washing. As a result of the intervention, a significant reduction in growth retardation and morbidity was noted in comparison to the control sample.

These aspects of development in context cannot be accounted for by models of the environment that neglect its systematic structure, or by individualistic models of the child. It is "the mediating and coordinating systems of culture that enable the developmental effects" (Super & Harkness, 1999, p. 293). If a child is able to successfully participate in the activity settings as defined and determined by culture, then

this leads to an expansion of his niches and increases his opportunities for participation and learning.

The theories discussed above highlight the need to consider the immediacy of culture in the child's day-to-day experiences, as developmental goals are related to culture which is transmitted through activity settings. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory highlights that for development to occur, the person must engage in activities which should take place on a regular basis over an extended period of time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This is expanded on by the concept of thematic elaboration proposed by Super and Harkness (1999), in which the repetition and promotion of core symbols and systems of meaning over time is recognised for its contribution to developmental outcomes. These systems of meaning are transmitted through activity settings which are the everyday routines of life made up of cultural activities in which children engage (Weisner, 2002b). The activity settings are influenced by a number of variables highlighted in the discussion of subsystems in the developmental niche concept, the developmental pathways in the ecocultural model and the hierarchy of systems proposed in the Bioecological model. The core recommendation of the above discussion is to consider development within context; this is made possible by studying activity settings (Tudge et al., 2006, Weisner, 2002a, Weisner, 2002b).

2.3. Activity settings

As stated earlier, researchers have identified and proposed activity settings as the basic unit for understanding how learning or development takes place within context (Trivette, Dunst & Hamby 2004; Farver, 1999; Gallimore et al., 1993). These settings represent how families can and do structure their time based on tradition, the orientations provided by culture and the socio-economic system within which they live (Goldenberg, Gallimore and Reese, 2001). Activity settings are a part of daily life and include activities like eating dinner, bath time, listening to stories and getting ready for school (Gallimore et al., 1993; Dunst & Hamby, 1999). Activity settings include planned and unplanned, as well as structured and unstructured activities (Dunst & Hamby, 1999). Activity settings is

proposed as the preferred term for “conceptualizing, operationalizing and describing natural learning environments and the learning opportunities afforded in these contexts” (Dunst, Trivette, Humphries, Raab & Roper, 2001, p. 51).

Dunst and colleagues continue to explain that the use of activity settings as natural learning environments is more encompassing than routines, which refer only to one aspect of a child’s daily experiences. Activity-based intervention, which has been widely researched (Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2003), is one such approach which focuses primarily on routines (Macy, 2008). This approach concentrates on teaching children developmentally appropriate skills in their daily routines. On the other hand, the focus on activity settings in natural environments provides a much more holistic and comprehensive framework of the child within context.

Activity settings have been operationalised to include five variables (Farver, 1999; Gallimore et al., 1993), each of which is discussed here. Firstly, ‘personnel present’ refers to the people who are present to engage with the child during activities. This is determined by broader ecocultural factors such as the economic and social organisation of the community. Variations in family experiences may expose the child to different combinations of people with varied roles, experiences and beliefs that influence the child’s developmental path. It is within this context that Carpenter (2000) challenges the stereotyped Western notion of nuclear families applying to all families.

In order to contextualise the current study, it is important to understand the African family context. Nkosi and Daniels (2007, p. 15) describe the African household as “a common unit of social organisation that combines those who reside together and who contribute to income generation, consumption and domestic activities”. The mother is often the primary caregiver in most households but she is assisted by other family members within the extended family system (Prochner & Kabiru, 2008; Evans, 1994). It is also not uncommon for families in Africa to have multiple generations living in the same household, as the elderly often live with their children and in some families assume the role as head of the household (Oheneba-Sakyi & Takyi, 2006). The elders also play a

special role in the transmission of cultural values (Evans, 1994) and family traditions (Oheneba-Sakyi & Takyi, 2006). Family structures are predominantly female (Ziel, 2001), with fathers frequently absent from the homes where their children live (Richter & Morrel, 2008).

The economic organisation of families is also centered around the combined income of the family, with a strong reliance on money received from old-age pensions (Statistics South Africa, 2007). More than 80% of Soweto's (a large urban-township) informal residents have a combined monthly income of less than R1500 in comparison to 54.6% who live in four-roomed homes (Gilbert & Soskolne, 2003). The typical house usually consists of four rooms: a living room, a kitchen and two bedrooms (Bohman et al., 2007). A substantial proportion of families live in backyard shacks (Crankshaw, Gilbert & Morris, 2000). Due to the number of family members sharing a home, it is not uncommon for family members to sleep in the living room and kitchen (Beal, Crankshaw & Parnell, 2002). It is interesting that Liddell (1994), in her study of ecocultural variables that affect children's behaviour in four different cultural communities in South Africa, found that household size had no impact on children's behaviour. However, it is acknowledged that other researchers (Richter, 1989) found that household size does have an impact on children's behaviour. The family structure and economic organisation discussed here provides insight into the first variable of activity settings.

The second variable refers to the tasks or activities being performed and the third variable considers the purpose of these activities or tasks. It is necessary to understand the meaning of activities as perceived by participants and their reasons for doing them. Research has shown that the same task may be carried out for different reasons within different contexts. This is exemplified by LeVine et al.'s (1994) research amongst the Gusii of Kenya. They compared Gusii infant experiences with those of children in Boston, USA. While the Gusii people practised demand feeding and obedience during feeding, the Boston mothers followed a less structured routine in terms of feeding and were more tolerant of challenging behaviour. These practices highlight the fact that the same activity may have different underlying beliefs in particular cultural groups.

The fourth variable refers to the scripts that guide children's participation; these scripts are determined by cultural norms and beliefs of the family, local culture and the wider community (Dawes & Donald, 2005). Research conducted by Rosenthal and Roer-Strier (2001) illustrates how cultural scripts materialise. They compared the child-rearing goals of immigrant mothers from the former Soviet Union and Israeli-born mothers. While both groups of mothers wanted their children to grow into intelligent and independent adults, the Israeli-born mothers placed greater emphasis on social competence, autonomy and leadership. The Soviet-born mothers emphasised achievement, emotional control, efficiency and organisation. This study exemplifies how developmental outcomes relate to the respective ecocultures of the caregivers. It also provides evidence for the fifth variable which relates to the salient values, goals and beliefs that adults have, as they organise the child's environment and experiences, based on what they believe are important developmental outcomes.

Salient goals, beliefs and values in Africa relate to the concept of '*ubuntu*' which is described as the interconnectedness of people and is rooted in the understanding that a person is a person because of other people (Du Plessis, 2001). The ideals of *ubuntu* guide and direct the patterns of life of Africans and are orally transferred from one generation to the next (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005). This is seen as the context in which one achieves personhood because it is through relationships with others that one develops a sense of being (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005; Nussbaum, 2003). Harmony, cooperation, interdependence and respect are life skills that African children learn from an early age (Hanks, 2008). Increasing modernisation, rural-urban migration and economic restructuring (Oheneba-Sakyi & Takyi, 2006) have challenged the resilience of families in maintaining these core values; however, strong family ties have assisted the continuation of these values through intergenerational, extended family systems (Moeno, 2006).

The focus on *ubuntu* highlights the 'interdependence' pathway of development, which emphasises heteronomy and relatedness, in which the self gives priority to group goals, focusing on norms and duties, and maintaining interpersonal relationships based on roles

and obligations (Keller, Borke, Yovsi, Lohaus and Jensen, 2005; Kagitcibasi, 2003). These moral lessons imparted to children are “tacitly woven into the texture of daily life activities” (Nsamenang, 2003, p. 222). To illustrate this point, children in some Sub-Saharan cultures perform chores and take care of younger siblings to learn sharing responsibility, obedience, helpfulness, cooperation and respect (Evans, 1994).

In contrast, the pathway of ‘independence’ is geared towards encouraging autonomy and separateness as personal goals (Keller et al., 2005; Kagitcibasi, 2003). There is, however, a growing consensus amongst developmental psychologists that “the developmental goals of independence and interdependence have been too sharply dichotomised” (Neff, 2003, p. 315). Neff proposes that instead of focusing on the relative emphasis placed on either independence or interdependence in different cultures, it might be more useful for researchers to document the different ways in which these needs are met in different contexts. This implies studying children in their local cultural setting which is made up of the everyday routines of life and its constituent activities and practices that drive development (Weisner, 2002a). The study of activity settings is therefore recommended to provide a complete account of learning and development in context (Rueda, Gallego & Moll, 2000). Harry (2002) adds that by attending to activity settings, researchers can obtain a ‘fine-grained’ description of any family within its cultural context.

Activity settings have been studied extensively by Dunst and colleagues through The Children’s Learning Opportunities Early Childhood Research Institute. Two national surveys that investigated family and community life as sources of children’s learning opportunities in 48 states in America, found that family and community life is made up of 11 different categories of learning activities (Dunst & Bruder, 1999a). These include family routines (e.g. cooking meals), parenting routines (e.g. child’s bath time), child routines (e.g. brushing teeth), literacy activities (e.g. looking at books), play activities, family celebrations, physical play, family rituals, socialisation activities (e.g. visiting friends) and outdoor activities (e.g. gardening).

Through their surveys, Dunst and Hamby (1999) found that family life is rich in terms of the different learning activities that occur as part of everyday life. Children could find themselves in 16 different home locations and 25 community locations, resulting in at least 150 activity settings, which in turn provided more than 200 different learning opportunities for children (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Raab & McLean, 1998). Children can therefore experience different kinds of learning opportunities, depending on where they live, what their parents enjoy doing, and their values and desires for their children and families (Dunst & Bruder, 1999b). Furthermore, one physical location can be the source of many activity settings, and one activity setting can be the source of many learning opportunities (Dunst & Bruder, 1999a). The study of learning opportunities that occur as part of everyday family life is therefore recommended. The advantage is that these activities are already a part of what families do and therefore do not require extensive planning or additional costs (Dunst & Bruder, 1999b).

Eloff and de Wet (2007) adopted an asset-based approach when they conducted an ethnographic study in Mangweni, a village in South Africa which lies near the border of Swaziland. The study aimed at identifying personal and environmental assets that occur as part of everyday life that could be used to enrich preschool learning in this context. Numerous assets were identified in the community. Child assets included the games they played, like rope jumping, ball games, singing games, dancing games, hide and seek and running games. Children were also exposed to many natural resources in their environment that presented with opportunities for learning; these included animals, insects, plants, gardens and big yards. This study identified assets in a poor community that have the potential to act as learning opportunities.

Children's participation in activity settings has a positive influence on their developmental outcomes, as well as on the well-being of parents. This was displayed by research conducted by Trivette, Dunst and Hamby (2004) to examine the relationship between children's participation in family activity settings and child, parent and family outcomes. Their findings showed that increased participation in home routines, creativity, literacy and physical activity settings were related to increases in child behavioural

competence and child developmental progress. In addition, positive parental well-being was reported as a result of children's participation in activity settings.

An earlier study by Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Hamby, Raab, Mclean (2001) reports on both quantitative and qualitative characteristics of child participation in everyday family and community activity settings. The study comprised 18 sessions and consisted of two weeks of pre-intervention interviews which aimed at generating complete lists of everyday activities that could be used as sources of learning opportunities for children. Target activities were considered which were fun and enjoyable for the child. Sixteen weeks of intervention followed with the development of an activity schedule and activity settings which were incorporated into a child behaviour matrix. Parents were encouraged to use contingent responsiveness to reinforce and support children's production of competence in the context of the activity settings. During the intervention phase, they assessed the number and frequency of activity settings, obtained measurements on the development enhancing characteristics of the activity settings, collected information about participants' use of responsive teaching, and obtained child developmental quotients. Their findings indicated that the variety of activity settings was associated with positive consequences in both enhanced learning opportunities and child functioning.

The advantages of this approach was further highlighted by parents of children with disabilities, who reported that they preferred interventions that were easy to conduct, fitted into their daily lives, and focused on children doing things to help them be a part of family and community life (Dunst & Bruder, 1999a). Similarly, Gallimore et al. (1993) found in their study of children with developmental delays, that interventions that led families to make changes in their activity settings and which were too discrepant from what families were already doing were unlikely to be sustained.

This point is further stressed by two studies conducted by Dunst, Bruder, Trivette and Hamby (2006). In their interview with parents (815 in study 1 and 801 in study 2) enrolled in early childhood intervention programmes, they found that parents reported more learning opportunities when participation in activity settings was seen as a form of

early childhood intervention, rather than a setting in which professionals implement services. Their results showed that the more frequently activity settings were used as sources of everyday learning opportunities, the more positive and less negative were the well-being scores. In contrast, the more frequently early intervention services were implemented in everyday activity settings, the less positive and more negative were the well-being scores. These preferences were not upheld by practitioners interviewed in Portugal, where Sousa, Ribeiro and Rodrigues (2007) found that practitioners still tend to think and intervene within a deficit perspective, focusing on difficulties and deficiencies and failing to see the potential within families.

In summary, research on activity settings has shown that children engage in many different activity settings that can be a source of many learning opportunities. Children's participation in activity settings also has positive outcomes for both children and parents.

2.4. Early Childhood Development in South Africa

The past two decades have witnessed increased attention to early childhood development policies and programmes in Africa (Pence & Marfo, 2008). Since 1994, South Africa has steadily seen an increase in policies being developed which call for a responsive, integrated approach towards early childhood intervention. The Integrated National Disability Strategy (1997) and the White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (Department of Education, 2001) both support the need for early childhood development programmes. While these policies recognise the importance of focusing on early child development within context by including families and communities, their scope in identifying the assets that exist within South African communities is limited.

Although there is a growing body of research about young children and their families from other parts of the world, there is a paucity of such information available within Africa about Africa (Pence, Evans and Garcia, 2008). One of few studies investigating development in context in South Africa was conducted by Bray and Brandt (2007). They focused on the everyday interactions between young children and their relatives,

household members and neighbours. The data were accumulated through a series of qualitative studies conducted in Masiphumelele, a very poor community on the outskirts of Cape Town. Children in this community were not only receivers of care, but also took care of others. Children who are five to nine years of age are often involved in domestic tasks which include cooking, cleaning the home, washing their own clothes and making tea for caregivers. Many of them are also involved in caring for a younger sibling. Bray and Brandt (2007) cite an interesting example of a four-year-old boy who assisted his HIV positive mother with daily domestic tasks and also reminded her to take her anti-retroviral treatment. This study raises awareness about the impact that HIV/AIDS has had on the role of children in families; the responsibilities become more apparent for children taking care of a sick parent, or orphaned children who are heading households. The proportion of orphans in Sub-Saharan Africa is higher than anywhere else in the world; the projected number of AIDS orphans in South Africa by 2010 is 3.1 million (Garcia, Viranta & Dunkelberg, 2008). This particular context would have an impact on the activity settings that children are involved in, especially in relation to their ‘caring’ role.

Children in Malawi also spend time caring for their siblings while their parents work in the fields. Their responsibilities include bathing, cooking for and feeding younger siblings, helping with household chores, and sometimes they are sent to sell things to earn money for the family. In some countries this may be perceived as child labour, but in this context parents see it as training their children to be reliable adults (Evans, Matola & Nyeko, 2008).

Nsamenang (2008b) recommends that because culture determines the nature of children’s developmental niches, it is imperative that their daily routines and settings be included in service provision. Increased participation in daily activities, specifically activities of interest, should be one of the major goals of any intervention approach (Roper & Dunst, 2003). This goal is only possible if there is an extensive understanding of activity settings that children participate in, within context. In this light, Nsamenang (1992, p. 214) recommends that “developmental research should begin with the understanding of the ecology in which children live and develop”. Processes and theories developed by

Western social scientists should not be completely ignored; Super and Harkness (2008) recommend that these frameworks could prove to be useful if implemented along with local theories, insights and experience. Researchers in Africa have the social responsibility to begin systematically building up the knowledge required for making informed decisions about children, and understanding their caregiving niches and activity settings in order to provide a framework for sustainable intervention (Nsamenang, 2008a).

2.5. Summary

This chapter presented and discussed the theoretical underpinnings of activity settings. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model, the ecocultural approach developed primarily by Weisner, and Super and Harkness' developmental niche concept, were explored. These theories highlight the link between culture and development and they recommend activity settings as a means of gaining insight into this relationship. Activity settings were defined and expanded on as a basis for identifying opportunities for learning within the family context.