

# **Becoming Literate in the City**

*The Baltimore Early Childhood Project*

**ROBERT SERPELL**

*University of Zambia*

**LINDA BAKER**

*University of Maryland, Baltimore County*

**SUSAN SONNENSCHN**

*University of Maryland, Baltimore County*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Robert Serpell, Linda Baker, and Susan Sonnenschein

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2004

Printed in the United States of America

*Typeface* Palatino 10/13.5 pt.    *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Serpell, Robert.

Becoming literate in the city : the Baltimore early childhood project /  
Robert Serpell, Linda Baker, and Susan Sonnenschein.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-77202-8 – ISBN 0-521-77677-5 (pb.)

1. Early childhood education – Maryland – Baltimore – Longitudinal studies.
  2. Minorities – Education – Maryland – Baltimore – Longitudinal studies.
  3. Literacy – Maryland – Baltimore – Longitudinal studies.
  4. Home and school – Maryland – Baltimore – Longitudinal studies.
  5. Education, Urban – Maryland – Baltimore – Longitudinal studies.
- I. Baker, Linda. II. Sonnenschein, Susan. III. Title.

LB1139.27.M25S47 2004  
372.21'0975'6 – dc22

2004045706

ISBN 0 521 77202 8 hardback  
ISBN 0 521 77677 5 paperback

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
1 Early Appropriation of Literacy in Sociocultural Context	1
2 Growing Up in Baltimore: The Early Childhood Project	25
3 The Intimate Culture of Children's Homes	64
4 Processes of Literacy Enculturation in the Home	103
5 The Development of Literacy Competencies and Orientations	134
6 The Agenda and Practices of Schooling	182
7 Relations Between Homes and Schools	218
8 Conclusions and Implications for Policy and Practice	251
<i>References</i>	279
<i>Name Index</i>	299
<i>Subject Index</i>	303

## **Early Appropriation of Literacy in Sociocultural Context**

Becoming literate involves the gradual assumption of ownership of a system of meanings that enables people to communicate through written texts. Human societies have generated a number of such systems over the course of history. These include not only languages and scripts, such as those in which the present text is printed, but also a wide range of structured activities, such as reading for entertainment, studying at a university, publishing a newspaper, sending E-mail, and so on. The social functions of these various activities collectively define the cultural practice of literacy, and the appropriation of the system of meanings informing that practice is a prerequisite for full membership in a literate society.

The importance that industrialized societies place on children becoming literate is reflected in the hours that children are expected to spend in school. Becoming literate is regarded as an essential part of growing up. Nevertheless, many children in literate societies such as the United States struggle to learn to read, and a sizable percentage fail to master all but the most basic skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The demographic profile of the group of children who fail to become literate includes an over-representation of children growing up in low-income families and children of African or Hispanic heritage.

Adults in industrialized societies who do not achieve individual literacy are seriously marginalized in many ways. However, this was not always the case in America, nor is it true of a number of

contemporary communities around the world. Human societies have often organized themselves without the practice of literacy. This fact, sometimes overlooked in the modern, industrialized world, has implications for understanding both the cultural practice of literacy and the social and psychological processes through which individuals are inducted into it. It means, for instance, that a person, whether child or adult, may be intelligent without being literate. It also means that the processes of literacy learning and socialization are not part of humankind's biological heritage, but a product of cultural, social, and historical factors.

The longitudinal study of early literacy socialization that we present in this book took place in the city of Baltimore, Maryland, on the eastern seaboard of the United States. We followed the lives of a cohort of children enrolled in the city's public schools for the 5 years from 1992 to 1997, from the age of 4 when they entered prekindergarten through the end of third grade at the age of 9. When we started our study, the Baltimore City Public School System, like school systems in other large urban areas, was struggling with limited success to provide its students with a good education. For example, 63% of students who should have graduated with the class of 1994 reportedly failed or dropped out prior to graduation (Baltimore City Public Schools System, 1999, section 8.2).

The children in our study came from low- and middle-income families of European American and African American heritage. Much of our focus was on the home environments in which these children were raised. We examined the *intimate culture* of each child's home, defined by a confluence of parental beliefs, recurrent activities, and interactive processes. We explored the relation between that intimate culture and the child's literacy development during the 5 years of our study. Because we did not want to place parents with low levels of individual literacy on the defensive, we deliberately cast a wide net and gave our study a general name, the Early Childhood Project. Our account of the children's literacy development also includes an analysis of the important cultural institution of school, one of whose explicit functions is to cultivate individual literacy.

The concept of literacy has three complementary facets. It is a dimension of personal development, an educational goal of the school curriculum, and a cultural resource of contemporary American

society. We discuss the relations among these three facets, portraying education as a developmental opportunity, schooling as a social institution, and socialization and teaching as cultural practices. In the life of a child growing up in the city of Baltimore, becoming literate involves acquiring cognitive skills, participating in the social activities of both the family and the institution of school, and appropriating a set of cultural resources that are widely used across many settings.

The theoretical framework of the Early Childhood Project was designed to integrate several strands of theory that emerged in the early 1990s from somewhat separate intellectual traditions: (1) a systems view of the context of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989); (2) the eco-cultural niche of child development (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Berheimer, 1989; Super & Harkness, 1986); (3) cultural beliefs regarding the nature of caregiver responsibility and effectiveness (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Miller, 1988; Sigel, 1985); (4) literacy as a cultural practice requiring skills (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984); (5) participatory appropriation as an account of children's cognitive socialization (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Serpell, 1993a, 1993b; Vygotsky, 1978); and (6) emergent literacy (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). We discuss each tradition in the sections that follow. Next, we turn to an analysis of the cultural institution of school and how, over the course of history, it has assumed such a critical function in the promotion of individual literacy. We then propose an integrative synthesis of these various strands of theory in terms of children's developmental journeys at the interface between the cultures of home and school. The chapter ends with an overview of the plan of the book.

#### THE SOCIOCULTURAL ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The early theoretical notion that context served simply as external stimulation has given way to the more complex perspective of a system of social activity, informed by a system of cultural meanings (Serpell, 1993b, 1999). This theoretical shift has methodological implications. Such discussion acknowledges the common humanity of researchers, parents, and teachers and their responsibility to co-construct or negotiate a shared understanding of possibilities for

the enhancement of children's developmental opportunities (Serpell, 1994).

Systems-oriented views of human development highlight the interdependency of human actors and focus on dyads and groups as self-sustaining units over and above what each individual brings to social interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 1983). Development, according to a systems perspective, consists of changes in the way that a child participates in social activities. An important dimension of that change is from a peripheral role to a more central one (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The developmentally more advanced person's participation earns him or her greater legitimacy, and he becomes more fully integrated into the social system that hosts the activity. For example, the less developmentally advanced child might quietly listen to his mother read a story, whereas the more advanced child might interject comments on elements of the story. As the child comes to participate more actively in reading interactions, he increasingly becomes acknowledged as a member of the community of literate practice, one whose opinions about the storybook count, because he has shown an understanding of the medium in ways that are intelligible to other members of the literate culture. In later phases of development, the child will graduate to the status of a full-fledged reader, who can extract meaning from print without assistance and can participate more equally in discussions of the content of the text with other members of the literate community.

Another theme of the systems view is that social behavior is embedded in a set of relationships that are interdependent. For example, included within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory are microsystems, such as the child's family or school class; the mesosystem, representing interactions among different microsystems; and the macrosystem, representing societal norms and cultural values or mores. The behavior of an adult sharing a storybook with a child is informed not only by the immediate context, the structure of the text, and the child's reading skills, but also by her enduring relationship with the child as parent, school teacher, or family friend. That dyadic relationship in turn is informed by a set of enveloping constraints, such as the family of which they are members, the neighborhood in which they reside, and the society of which the

neighborhood is a constituent part. The dyadic relationship between the child and his school teacher is similarly informed by a set of enveloping, nested systems.

Thus, human development is deeply embedded within a system of social activities and cultural meanings. The development of a child between the ages of 4 and 9 involves growing complexity as a person, increasing competence in many different domains, and progressive incorporation into a particular society and its culture. The process of becoming literate involves not only growth of individual competence, but also, by the same token, induction into new forms of participation in society and a new range of understandings of the culture. From this induction flows a growing authority to interpret actions and events within the society's system of cultural meanings.

For instance, as a child becomes more literate, she is not only able to decode the words printed on a greeting card and to sign her name on it, but she also comes to understand what it means to send such a card to a friend to invite him to a birthday party or to console him when he falls sick. This understanding enables the child to express her feelings about the occasion through a purposeful choice among various cards with different inscriptions on display in the store. A parent or teacher who acknowledges this child's emerging competence to use the resources of literacy for authentic communication will respect her choices as legitimate. In this way, literate adults welcome the child into the community of literate practices.

At the outermost, macrosystemic level of American society, the pervasive significance of literacy for the American way of life is represented in many ways. The nation's written constitution, laws, and regulations are a recurrent frame of reference in civic affairs. Governmental and commercial activities alike are administered through bureaucratic organizations that rely heavily on written documentation. Citizens are expected to articulate their relations with those organizations in writing, often by completing forms that require entry of information in specified spaces. In the nation's most prominent religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), religious texts serve to define the principles of moral conduct and are sometimes cited in public gatherings to buttress moral arguments. The power and prestige attached to science and technology are closely tied to the information

systems in which they are documented, with heavy emphasis on the authority of publication in print. Despite the ascendancy of radio and television, the print media retain an enduring preeminence for the dissemination of political and economic news. Thus, whether in commerce, economics, law, politics, religion, science, or technology, that which is written is often definitive in contemporary America. The importance of literacy in the world into which American children of the 1990s will grow was acknowledged in various ways by each of the families we studied in the Baltimore Early Childhood Project.

Formal education is conceptualized at the level of the American macrosystem, as in most other contemporary societies, as a means of transmitting the accumulated wisdom of the culture to the next generation and as a strategic societal mechanism for the preparation of a workforce to participate productively in the national economy. The individual process of becoming literate is generally construed in American culture as the foundation of formal education. Indeed, the terms *educated* and *literate* have become virtually synonymous in contemporary usage as descriptors for an adult person. Thus, becoming literate is imbued with social significance because it represents the beginning of a journey along a pathway toward effective incorporation into the larger social system. The process is also imbued with cultural significance because it provides a major form of access to the system of meanings that informs social activities. Ideally, through participating in the cultural practices of literacy, the developing child gradually appropriates a distinctive system of meanings (D'Andrade, 1984), not only coming to understand how those meanings inform the practices of literacy, but also eventually deploying the system as an interpretive resource to explain to herself and others why one course of action is more appropriate than another.

Embedded within the macrosystem, and responsible for the concrete instantiation of its principles, are various institutions, some of which are specialized for the maintenance, transmission, and cultivation of literacy, such as schools and libraries. Opportunities for the developmental appropriation of literacy also arise in other contexts of life in an American city. The demand for individual literacy is a feature of everyday transactions in stores, clinics, and family homes. Although these contexts are less explicitly specialized than schools for the structural support of literacy development, their implicit

orientation may also be a powerful influence on how children approach the demands of that developmental task.

#### THE ECOCULTURAL NICHE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The concept of the developmental niche focuses on the structure of the context within which a child is raised. Super and Harkness (1986, 1997) advanced the concept as a way of articulating “the interface between child and culture” and identified three components of the niche: (1) “the physical and social settings in which the child lives,” (2) “customs of child care and child rearing” (which we refer to as *cultural practices*), and (3) “the psychology of the caretakers” (which we refer to as *ethnotheories of caregiving*).

Gallimore et al. (1989) described the notion of activity settings as another means of conceptualizing the cultural context of children’s development. A cultural practice such as literacy is made up of recurrent activities, including shared storybook reading, making a shopping list, or searching a newspaper for advertisements of commercial products. Each activity is culturally defined in terms of its participants; the nature, timing, organization, and location of the tasks; and the meaning the tasks have for the participants (see also Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Technological artifacts, such as paper and pencils, books, or computers, also often serve as defining features of a cultural activity.

Figure 1.1 illustrates in schematic form the relations among the cultural practice of literacy, the various activities that instantiate that practice, and the process of guided participation through which a parent facilitates the child’s appropriation of culture. Every cultural practice provides a guiding framework of rules that the novice must assimilate. In the case of the literate activity of shared storybook reading, key constructs include the story and its elements, such as the protagonists, the setting and the plot, the text and pictures in the book, the pages, and the cover. Key rules include how to hold the book so the pictures are the right way up, how to turn the pages one at a time, and how to take turns reading or commenting on the book (Ninio & Bruner, 1978). Literate adults know these constructs and rules and share an implicit theory of how they fit together. As these adults follow the rules, they demonstrate a script for the participating child

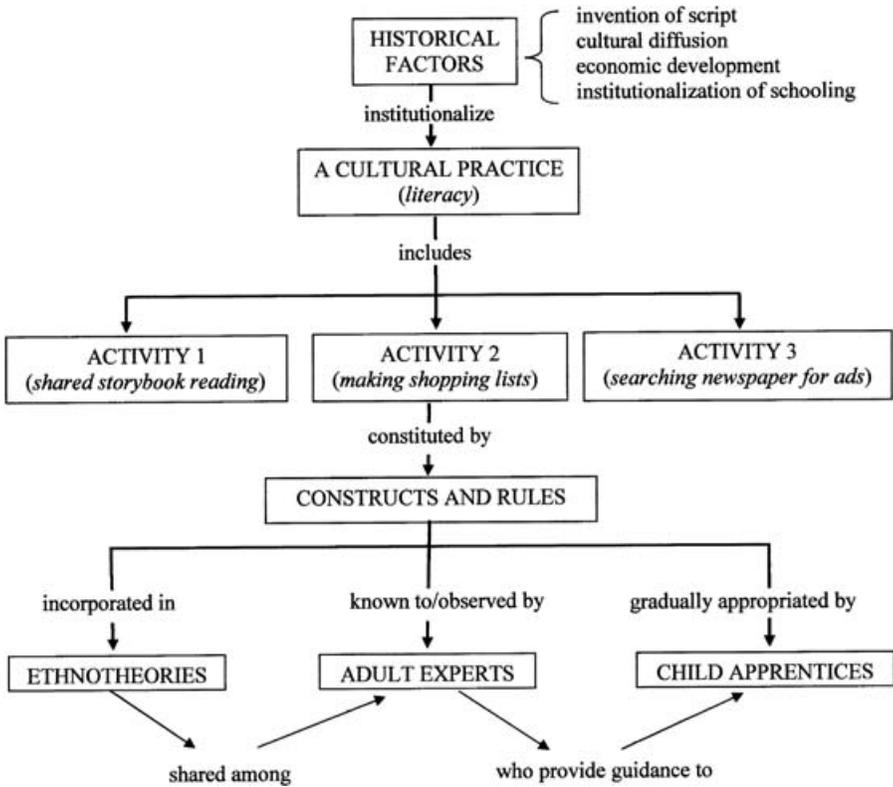


FIGURE 1.1. The appropriation of cultural practices through participation in activities with guidance by experts in light of their ethnotheories.

to follow; as the child participates in the activity, he gradually appropriates the rules, using them as a framework for interpreting the unique contents of different stories in various books.

Once a practice is acknowledged by a community as an identifiable element of its cultural repertoire, it acquires certain properties that facilitate communication. Parents and teachers familiar with shared storybook reading as a “packaged” cultural routine can draw on it as part of their stock of higher-order categories for exchanging views and experiences (e.g., “You should read more often to Johnny,” “Try including some more advanced books in your bedtime story sessions,” “Have you thought of getting his father to read him stories sometimes?”; Serpell, 2001).

### **Children's Everyday Experiences Within the Niche as Facilitators of Literacy Development**

Researchers have long been interested in the effects of the home environment on literacy development. Early research documented relations between social address variables, such as socioeconomic status or parent education level, and children's literacy, but did not explicate the source of such relations. A second wave of research, recognizing the limitations of status variables as indices of the environment, focused more on characteristics of the environment itself, such as availability of print materials in the home and frequency of reading. More recent still is direct observation of the literate activities within the home. Rather than relying on quantifications of material resources or on parental reports of literacy-related behaviors, researchers have begun to document the variety and scope of literacy events within the home through detailed ethnographic descriptions and microanalysis of parent-child interactions during such events. This changing emphasis is leading to a better understanding of the role of the family in literacy development and how this role varies across different sociocultural communities. The shift of attention from status variables, such as parental occupation, to process variables, such as the nature of shared reading activities, also provides a clearer indication of how intervention should be designed to induce change.

When the Early Childhood Project was conceived, researchers had identified a number of print-related home experiences associated with positive literacy outcomes, such as frequent reading with children and exposure to a wide range of print materials (e.g., Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Morrow, 1988; Scott-Jones, 1991; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). A growing number of researchers were also beginning to document that other sorts of opportunities within the niche could be helpful, such as parent-child conversation and oral storytelling (e.g., Heath, 1983; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991). The Early Childhood Project sought to extend our understanding of the literacy-promoting resources available at home, even to those children whose families lacked the financial means to purchase a wide array of cultural artifacts.

Demonstrations that certain home experiences correlate with literacy development are informative, but they leave unanswered

important questions about the nature of the experiences in which children are immersed during the course of their daily lives. Qualitative research methods are better suited to addressing such questions, and indeed several ethnographic studies completed in the 1980s revealed the variety and scope of the literacy activities in homes of families from diverse sociocultural backgrounds (e.g., Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale, 1986). However, none of these studies examined in detail many of the psychological variables that are critical to the appropriation of literacy, including the beliefs and values of responsible adults in the child's environment and the processes of adult-child interaction during experiences affording opportunities for literacy learning. Moreover, they neglected the motivational and affective dimensions of shared reading and learning to read. Our study sought to overcome these limitations with the design of a detailed inventory of home resources and activities and a series of in-depth interviews probing parental ethnotheories, as well as analysis of directly observed representative interactions in the setting of children's homes. We describe our various methodological tools in Chapter 2.

#### CULTURAL BELIEFS REGARDING THE NATURE OF PARENT RESPONSIBILITY AND EFFECTIVENESS

The study of cultural beliefs or ethnotheories has its roots in anthropology, and the literature is rich with hypotheses about how culture informs this aspect of the developmental niche. A limitation of anthropological research, however, is a failure "to make clear exactly what individual natives really believe, since these studies focus primarily on collective representations of various kinds, such as myth and ritual" (D'Andrade, 1990, p. 108; see also Jahoda, 1982). Within psychology, in contrast, research conducted prior to the 1990s on parental beliefs was often guided by little or no theory, giving rise to isolated investigations of unrelated beliefs rather than more programmatic research (Miller, 1988). As a consequence, the origins of the beliefs and the processes controlling the relationship between beliefs and behavior remained poorly understood.

In designing the Early Childhood Project, we were sensitive to such concerns. We drew on the suggestions of Miller (1988), who called for

future research in this area to pay special attention to studying parents' actual beliefs, as opposed to the beliefs that psychologists think they should have, to studying beliefs comparatively, to conducting longitudinal studies of how beliefs develop and change, and to conducting more cultural comparisons but "measuring differences in experience directly rather than inferring differences from group membership" (p. 281). We also drew on Goodnow and Collins (1990), who stressed the need for further research on the processes involved in the change of an individual parent's ideas over time. They noted the value of focusing such research on major developmental transitions, where "the changes in children are highly visible, and the implications of the change are likely to be significant to both parents and children and to the relationship between them" (p. 97). One such transition is marked by the entry of children into formal schooling. In the Early Childhood Project, we documented parents' changing ideas as their children made the transition from prekindergarten to elementary school.

Ascertaining parental beliefs can be difficult because parents may have many different beliefs about their children, and these beliefs may not always be readily available for conscious reflection. For example, Rodrigo and Triana (1995) examined how the various components of a belief system are represented in memory and how they are deployed in making practical judgments and formulating expectations of behavior. The authors were critical of the notion that ethnotheoretical, lay beliefs about child development and socialization are represented in an individual's memory in the form of structurally organized schemas, and concluded that it is the "structure of information presented" that is crucial for the elaboration of inferences about actions.

Among explanatory schemas that may form part of a parent's beliefs, one type of particular interest to us is the notion of a developmental goal for the child, toward which the parent construes his or her socialization practices as oriented. We recognize that there may be considerable variation among parents in how deliberately their practices are focused on molding or nurturing a certain direction of development. Hallden (1991), for instance, reported that two contrasting themes coexisted for many of the contemporary Swedish parents she interviewed: an Aristotelian concept of "the child as

being” whose development is a natural process directed by inner drives and for whom parents should be available as a resource, and an alternative concept of “the child as project” whose development the parent should actively strive to influence by serving as an introducer or mediator. Parents may invoke either of these contrasting models “in order to understand and come to grips with various problems” (p. 339) that arise in the context of caregiving.

Research has also revealed that parents often have seemingly incompatible beliefs, beliefs that are incompatible with practices, and beliefs that are, at best, only weakly related to children’s outcomes. For example, in several studies, parents of children attending American schools were asked about their perceptions of the significance of schooling (Laosa, 1984; Okagaki & Sternberg, 1991; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990). Low-income parents of African or Hispanic heritage tended to endorse academic goals even more highly than middle-income parents. Yet, the pattern of academic achievement of those low-income minority group children is relatively weak. One explanation for why children of parents with high academic goals for their children do not consistently achieve academic success is that “goals are not always accompanied by a knowledge of how to achieve them. Parental hopes and expectations, for example, are often not accompanied by an accurate knowledge of how to make them achievable” (Goodnow, 2002, p. 444).

Another explanation for inconsistencies between parental beliefs and children’s outcomes is that parental endorsement of the goal of academic success in response to a simple direct question may conceal a more complex underlying pattern of beliefs and behavior. For instance, parents may send their children double messages by advocating adherence to the school’s standards in their direct comments on the child’s behavior at school, but criticizing those standards as irrelevant or oppressive when reflecting on their own everyday experiences in the local community or at work (Ogbu, 1990). Parents may have more than one goal for their child and these goals may be weighted differently, with the most highly weighted goals (not necessarily those tapped by the researcher) getting the most attention. In addition, parents of minority cultural groups and/or economically oppressed social groups may tend to exaggerate the degree to which they agree with the philosophy that informs the school system. This

may occur partly out of hopeful optimism that things will turn out better for their children than they did for themselves, partly because these parents do not perceive clearly the areas in which their personal and cultural orientations differ from that of the school teachers and partly because there exists in contemporary American society a strong public cultural theme that schooling is a major route for upward social mobility. All these factors may create a social desirability response bias that is difficult for researchers to get beyond when interviewing parents of lower socioeconomic status.

Another example of incompatible parental beliefs comes from the work of Serpell (1977, 1982), who used semi-structured interviews with caregivers in a rural African community to explore adult perceptions of the most valuable attributes of child behavior. Although many parents in these Zambian Chewa villages endorsed the principle of enrolling their children in school, they apparently had other, more highly valued goals as well. Parents, for instance, generally attached greater importance to social responsibility than to intellectual alacrity. Yet, both parents and teachers in Zambian primary schools recognized that intellectual alacrity was more relevant to academic success than social responsibility. Serpell concluded that the indigenous formulation of intellectual development in relation to moral development and socialization differed in important respects from the formal educational model of cognitive growth that informs the primary school curriculum. This discrepancy generated grave difficulties for students, parents, and teachers in integrating the cultures of home and school (Serpell, 1993a).

In light of the various issues discussed previously, the project that we present in this book was designed to analyze the processes of cognitive socialization in context and to delineate the interactive processes through which the child explores and gradually appropriates the cultural resources of the environment. We documented with a unique combination of methods the implicit models held by parents in four contrastive sociocultural groups. We examined the stability and changes in each parent's models as his/her child progressed through the early years of formal schooling, the extent to which the models were shared with other parents in the same and other sociocultural groups, and the particular ways in which the models were related to observed patterns of interaction. Furthermore, our sampling

strategy provided the opportunity to examine how these processes were instantiated in different sociocultural contexts. As the project evolved, we were also able to explore the relations between various aspects of parental beliefs and later developmental outcomes for their children.

#### LITERACY AS A CULTURAL PRACTICE REQUIRING PARTICULAR COGNITIVE SKILLS

Our view of literacy as a system of meanings embedded in particular cultural practices calls for an account of development at the interface between sociocultural and psychological aspects of cognition. Vygotsky's (1978) theoretical perspective has been widely invoked in the contemporary literature on cognitive development and education for this purpose. Not only did he maintain that social interaction is an important mediator of cognitive development, but he also advanced a particular formulation of that mediating interface. Technological devices, such as writing and mathematics, evolve as products of cultural history and also mediate the cognitive activity of individuals. We have adopted the neo-Vygotskian conception of literacy as a cognitive tool with both a cultural history and a developmental empowering and structuring potential (Cole & Griffin, 1980).

Scribner and Cole's (1981) comparative study of literacy in different scripts within a single society showed how, in addition to its formal properties as a system of representational meaning or mode of encoding information, literacy can be viewed as characteristic of a set of practices. The cultural practices of literacy are constituted by recurrent activities in which a particular technology and particular systems of meaning are directed toward socially recognized goals.

Viewing literacy as a set of cultural practices helps us understand how groups of people can be literate in different ways. Within what Heath (1983) termed the mainstream subculture of literacy, individuals engage on a daily basis in distinctive "types of uses of reading," including instrumental, news-related, recreational, critical/educational, social-interactional, and confirmational activities, as well as distinctive "types of uses of writing," including memory aids, reinforcement or substitutes for oral messages, social-interactional, financial, and expository activities. Members of other American

subcultures also engage in literate activities, but these are characterized by different types of uses of reading and writing with different patterns of cognitive demands and opportunities for cognitive development (Nerlove & Snipper, 1981). The relative importance of different forms of engagement with text (Wells, 1990) in the early phases of a child's socialization may thus vary across different sociocultural contexts (Serpell, 1991).

#### PARTICIPATORY APPROPRIATION AS AN ACCOUNT OF CHILDREN'S LITERACY SOCIALIZATION

The concept of guided participation provides an explanatory account of one type of process through which literacy is fostered at home. As Rogoff (1990) discussed, a child and a more competent adult or sibling sometimes engage in a collaborative process whereby the more competent person provides a supportive structure and facilitates the child's appropriation of new skills. In Rogoff's view, children acquire their competence in the cognitive domain of literacy through a form of apprenticeship, with or without the benefit of explicit instruction.

Adults who deploy the cultural resources of literacy in their daily lives serve as models of competence that the "apprenticed" child strives to emulate. Children's participation in the activities that call for literate skills is phased by adults in accordance with social norms and modulated in the light of estimates by adults of the child's competence. Studies of mother-child interaction in problem-solving tasks suggest that mothers are indeed sensitive to the competencies of their children, offering more assistance if their child appears to need more and offering less if the child needs less (e.g., Baker, Sonnenschein, & Gilat, 1996; Freund, 1990). Studies of storybook reading interactions reveal a similar patterning, with parents providing qualitatively different kinds of scaffolding as their children develop (Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

One aim of the Early Childhood Project was to acquire a better understanding of children's developing literacy skills as they observe and interact with more knowledgeable others both at home and at school. Wells (1986) identified a number of ways in which children's home experiences in the preschool years foster language and later literacy skills. In discussing how children learn language,

he emphasized that the talk in which young children engage is not an end in itself but is goal directed to achieve other purposes, such as communicating their needs and desires. Similarly, we believe that at least some of the child's learning about literacy at home may occur as the child engages in literate activities for purposes other than explicit learning, such as looking at two boxes of cereal and deciding which to choose.

Our emphasis on the child's appropriation of literacy as a mechanism by which children become literate builds on a broad trend in research and practice away from the concept of reading readiness (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). This changing conceptualization is indicated by the coining of the expression *emergent literacy*, reflecting the notion that children begin to appropriate a broad base of literate knowledge even before formal schooling begins. "An emergent literacy perspective ascribes legitimacy to the earliest literacy concepts and behaviors of children and to the varieties of social contexts in which children are becoming literate" (Sulzby & Teale, 1991, p. 728).

#### ASSESSING LITERACY COMPETENCIES IN THE EARLY YEARS

Influenced in part by cross-cultural studies of human development, psychologists have acknowledged the importance of studying behavior within different contexts because the skills a child displays in one situation may differ from those displayed in another (Rogoff, 1998; Serpell, 1976, 1979). For example, although a child might not demonstrate certain skills when observed in the laboratory, he may demonstrate them when observed within the familiar structure of the home. More recent research has accorded increasing attention to early manifestations of how children construe the practices of literacy and their social contexts (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). Studies of these phenomena have established the feasibility of measuring several indices of early literacy, including concepts about print and its uses, phonological awareness, and narrative production. The design of our project included a wide range of observations and assessments of these indices of early literacy appropriation. Moreover, as we explain in Chapter 2, we paid special attention to ecological validity by tailoring these tasks to reflect the prior experience of each individual

child in order to minimize the impact of varying degrees of familiarity as a source of extraneous variance in our assessments of children's competencies.

As the children grew older and became familiar with the shared environment of the school classroom, we also assessed their competencies on tasks that form part of the school curriculum and are widely used by educators and researchers. We now turn our attention to the institution of school, which carries a special authority in the domain of literacy because it is generally regarded as the principal site of literacy learning.

#### THE CHARACTER AND ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY FORMAL EDUCATION

Contemporary American public schools constitute a distinctive cultural institution, differing from other schools, both from earlier models of public schooling in the course of American history and from other contemporary types of school, including public schools in other societies, and various types of private schools in the United States. They share, however, a number of design features with an emerging international model of "institutionalized public basic schooling," which has been strongly influenced by the practices of Western formal schooling in the mid-20th century (Serpell & Hatano, 1997).

The cultural tradition informing those practices includes the following premises: a primary goal of the curriculum is to impart a commitment to objectivity and rationality; the children enrolled are in a formative stage of intellectual and moral development; and focused, explicit instruction holds the key to enabling children to acquire essential academic competencies. In addition to these premises, the paradigm is characterized by hierarchical organization of the curriculum, an emphasis on advance preparation of children for future cognitive challenges, standardized instructional targets, group instruction, regular scheduling of activities, and age-grading of classes. Some of these characteristics have arisen over the course of history, not so much from philosophical or pedagogical ideals, but more from considerations of organizational efficiency and administrative convenience (e.g., the need to manage a large number of children brought together in one place for instruction). These factors,