John Brown According to Kate Brown

Introduction

This is an interpretive analysis of a parent interview to recognize and describe the developmental niche of a young man as it relates to technology. The lens for analysis comes from Rogoff’s theory of guided participation and Super and Harkness’s developmental niche. These two theories create a focus on the parental influence in creating culture that forms a developmental niche for the child. The processes of guided participation include structured situations and forms of guided participation where the parent engages the child directly or indirectly in technologically-mediated activities or supports learning through chosen activities or forms of communication. The developmental niche is divided into three subsystems that include: (1) physical and social settings of daily life, (2) culturally regulated customs of child care and rearing, and (3) psychology of the caretakers. This analysis will illustrate through parent quotes and research evidence the boundaries of the niche and snapshots of parent-child participation.

Family Characteristics and Background

The beginning of this family started approximately 35-40 years ago when father Brown was born in Amityville, New York and mother Lowe was born in small town, South Carolina. They two met while in college where Mr. Brown majored in Insurance while Ms. Lowe majored in Graphic Design and Communications. They were college sweethearts and became Mr. and Mrs. Brown after Mr. Brown had completed his MBA at Insurance Institute and Ms. Lowe had completed her undergraduate studies. Their family has resided in two large cities in the Mid-Atlantic area over the course of their thirteen year marriage. After having worked for other companies or institutions, the Browns are now independent, self-employed business owners. Mr. Brown, henceforth to be called Keith, is a salesman. Mrs. Brown, henceforth to be called Kate, is a reverend completing the ordination process and seminary, and she works with Mr. Brown to support his business while still maintaining clients for her public relations business. Mr. and Mrs. Brown have worked out of the home in the past, but they rent a suite in a church office complex. These career decisions allow them the freedom to control their work hours and be very active in the lives of their four lovely children, John, 10, Mary, 9, Joshua, 5, and Jeremiah, 15 months.¹ My focus for this analysis is John, a handsome, brightly serious 5th grader who attends the local elementary school.

The Brown’s live in a large, three-story Victorian house where all bedrooms are located on the second floor and most family activity occurs on the first floor between the den, kitchen, multipurpose, and living rooms. John and Joshua share a room. Mary has her own room, and Jeremiah has a nursery. When guests visit, the attic is furnished for their hospitality.

¹ Names and institutions have been changed for privacy.
Technologically mediated activities through settings and social activities…

“within the confines of a given time and place, the beliefs and values held by parents play a major role in deciding among the many choices they face regarding their children,” (Super and Harkness, p. 308).

John’s activities and his contact with technology are heavily influenced by his parent’s ideas of how and technology should be in his life and the lives of their other children. This is first demonstrated in the type and amount of technological devices present in the home. The home has less technology than the average American home. The average American home has 3 televisions, 3 tape players, 3 radios, and 2 cd players, 2 vcrs, 1 video game player, and 1 computer. In the Brown house, there are three televisions, one in the family room, one in Keith and Kate’s bedroom, and one in the attic for guests. There is a VCR in Keith and Kate’s bedroom and a DVD player in the family room. There is a boombox cd changer in the multipurpose room, and there are various cd and tape players throughout the house. The children have “one of every video game console that exists,” Nintendo, PlayStation and GameCube, but they only play the GameCube. There is only one computer in the house now, but there used to be a laptop and a ‘dinosaur.’ It has internet access and is located in the multipurpose room.

What is interesting to note here is the evolution of technology in the household and the location of technology throughout the household. The majority of the technological devices are in common areas, and the acquisition of the devices prove salient as part of the parental perspective on technology. Everybody watches television together or take turns watching what they prefer. Video games and television are not usually occurring in the same room simultaneously. “Not having the latest technology is not a priority for us.” The DVD player was a gift from gadgeteer Uncle Calvin (Keith’s brother) Brown, “who apparently considered that his niece and nephews were being deprived if the household did not have a DVD player. We would have gotten one eventually.” Uncle Calvin tends to be the source of lots of technological devices because he buys the latest video games or gadgets, and then hands the old one down to the children. This is how all of the video game consoles were acquired, but the games are chosen by parents or at the suggestion of John if he has played with or heard about them from friends and they meet Keith and Kate’s approval. The children may watch television in their parent’s bedroom, but they do not have televisions in their bedrooms. According to Kate, “They will never have tv in their room.” John, Mary, Joshua, and Jeremiah will not fall into the 65% of the 8-18 year olds who have a television in their bedroom. When asked why, she stated that it promoted “social family disharmony” in that “they can go into their room and be isolated for hours and never communicate with each other,” “not learn how to share,” and “we need to know what they are watching.” It is important to note that Kate and Keith use technology in their work, but they do not fit the profile of the people waiting in line to get the newest technology when it first hits the market. Kate’s sources of information about new technologies that might be good for the children are commercials, magazines, and not so much from other people except Uncle Calvin.

---

2 Kids and Media @ the New Millennium Fact Sheet
3 Kaiser Family Foundation Report on Kids and Media @ the New Millennium: A Comprehensive Analysis of Children’s Media.
Daily caretaking routines and caretaker beliefs

This leads to understanding caretaker beliefs and how these beliefs are integrated into the daily activities of the family and for John. An ideal typical day for John would look like this:

John gets up around 6a.m. with his alarm clock, and if he has to be awakened, it could be as late as 7 a.m. He gets dressed and may go downstairs to get a snack for breakfast or entertains himself until the others siblings are ready for school. Dad usually takes him to school, which takes place from 7:45a.m. - 2:45 p.m. There are days when he participates in after-care, but otherwise Mom picks John, Mary, and Joshua up from school and takes them home or to the office. Most often, the children come home and have forty-five minutes to an hour of “chill-time”. “Chill-time” consists of watching a little television or playing some games and having a hot snack like Bagel Bites or fish nuggets. After “chill-time” is over, then homework is done. If there is a lot of homework, it can be broken up and breaks can be taken. John is independent about his homework, so his parents play a helping role when assistance is needed. At 5 p.m., Jeremiah gets picked up from daycare, and this is approximately when dinner gets started. Dad comes home from work, and the entire family has dinner together. They discuss the activities of the day. After dinner, the family does an activity together like playing with toys or board games, or maybe watching an educational show such as America’s Most Amazing Animals. The family activity is not usually involving any type of technology as Keith and Kim want as many participants as possible, so they play Sorry!, Trouble, and Joshua likes Bingo. Guided participation does not use technology as a platform, but it could be a tool. Mom does not like video games, and this is communicated effectively. However, Dad will play video games with the boys while Mom is engaged with Mary.

Valued Developmental Outcomes

The daily activities and regulated customs of childcare and rearing demonstrate the parental priority of being the people that model behavior and engage John and his siblings to make sure that they grow up to be people that can be respected and confident. When I asked Kate what characteristics she would like to see in John and his siblings as they get older, she gives two wishes:

1. Spiritual nature.
2. Enjoyment of living

Kate spoke first and foremost about her children having a spiritual nature. To make sure that I did not explain this incorrectly, I asked her to elaborate about the spiritual nature of which she spoke. “Spiritual nature, and everything that entails. Choosing truth instead of the easy way. Courage, love, faith, forgiveness, and compassion. Those types of things. Emotional development and social development are important, but I feel that spiritual development will propel them in any direction and anchor them so they can face whatever may come.”

She seems to believe that development of the spirit will encompass social development, confidence, discipline, obedience, comfort with oneself, and foster cognitive development as the children learn about what they enjoy and become aggressive about developing their talents.

The second thing that Kate hopes for her children is “enjoyment for living. That they find whatever they enjoy to do and do it. That they love this thing called life. If living in rainforest
studying apes is what they want and they don’t see people for four months, that’s fine. If they want to be a ballerina, or build spaceships. That they go where they find their gift.”

Based on these answers, one could conclude that popularity, materialism, and lack of integrity are not very high on Kate’s list of desired qualities for John. She encourages a little innocence because they are still children, but she wants them to be able to think for themselves so that they do not get taken advantage of by others.

**Role of technology in child development**

Kate’s feelings about technology in the lives of her children are that it can have positive and negative influences on their cognitive and social development. This aligns with the 58% of parents that believe that media can have a positive effect and 61% of parents that believe media can have a negative effect, (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). She really is a proponent for moderation because she believes in balance. The potential influences on John’s cognitive development involve understanding and knowledge of the world. In fact, Kate and Keith would like to have additional computer resources because they ‘want to teach the kids research because the whole world is open to them on the internet. They could spend time finding out about people, places, and things. That would be a lot better than spending all of their time on the Brats website changing outfits and eyebrows. They can have whole worlds open to them in their own house. It is also very good for reinforcement. John likes to play Mindsweeper. I’m fine with that game because it allows him to think and strategize. We’ve had JumpStart and Reader Rabbit from the beginning, and they love that.’ Being the cautious and informed parent, she says, "For every bit of good, there’s bad. Mary hasn’t found chat rooms yet, and I’m happy. If you let them, they will play all day long.”

Kate also sees potential positive and negative social effects for technology. Most importantly, it would allow the children to communicate. “If their grandparents had email, or their cousins, then they could communicate like their parents. It might be more beneficial for John because he doesn’t express himself with words. It would help him in his ability to communicate with others. Typing seems to be better than writing. The other thing is that John is special in that he likes what other kids enjoy such as video games, but he also gets very interested in very specific subjects. It would be good for him to find others interested in the same things. [Then he would not have to feel so isolated.] It could help people feel a sense of community.” The negative impact of having too much technology in the children’s rooms is that it ‘promotes family disharmony. The kids won’t learn to share. They can be separate, and it’s too hard to monitor.”

**Specifically mediated technology activities**

**Video games**
John plays games at home, friends’ houses, or at school. Sometimes he plays alone, and sometimes he plays with friends, his little brother Joshua, or his dad. Keith and John play a game called Stratego. This competition could be initiated by Keith or by John.

**Writing/Reading**
John does reading and writing activities at home, his parents, or at school. This is usually an individual activity.

Art/Photography
John does most of his artwork or graphic design through “direct pencil or other forms of paper medium. Sometimes he builds things. If we’re at the office, he and I will make something using my software, but it’s usually me controlling the mouse and his directing me. If we had the right equipment at home, we would certainly do it because I would love it. He’d probably do programming and web creation if we introduced it to him.

Robotics
“John would love it. If we had it, he would probably do it non-stop. He’s built things that had robotics in it. Like he draws the robot and then he tells us how it would work. He likes Roller Coaster Tycoon, where you build roller coasters and then estimate whether it will make a profit. He also builds worlds in Lego where you make the people walk and talk. Joshua eagerly watches over his shoulder, and then John shows us his creation.” Then they are likely to print it out and put it up on display.

Web Surfing
Johns surfs the web alone 70% of the time, and 30% of the time we do it together. We may look for something or show him something, and then he takes it from there. The kids like Disney, Barbie, and Brats, but John goes to Brainpop.com and does the puzzles.

Other
John loves science, so his parents find him science kits and various activities from hobby stores to challenge and engage him. He has a handheld game, but he doesn’t play that as much as the video games. He carries it around if he thinks he will be bored in the car or when he has to wait for parents or siblings after some activity.

Valuable vs. Harmful: The verdict

“If Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon did not exist, then TV would not be on my list.”

Kate would agree with the 37% of parents who cite television as first and video games as second (19%) as the two forms of media that have the most negative impact on children, according to the Kaiser Foundation’s Parents and Media Report released in summer of 2003. “TV is most harmful because I’m not as vigilant, and they could watch stupid stuff. Animal planet, the food channel, Tech TV, those are channels from which you can learn.” She and Keith have attempted to regulate television, but “we have not had a tv time limit that we could enforce. We tried two shows a week, but it was ineffective because it was hard to maintain. The tv was already on for three hours a day. Some of those Nickelodeon shows are silly and nonstimulating. They can’t watch too much of that.” The children do not listen to music as much as others, but the family enjoys music. John’s sister Mary is recently into music because of dance, but John doesn’t listen to lots of music. They used to let Joshua go to sleep to books on tape, but that disturbed John, so they discontinued that practice. When the parents play jazz, John enjoys it a lot. (Keith and

---

Joshua play “Jimi Hendrix and Duke Ellington” on the piano and toy drums.) Computers are most helpful, and music can inspire creativity.

Conclusion

“The concept of culture focuses attention not only on the overt behavior of parents in training their children but [also] on the cognitive map that influences the content of what is transmitted, the techniques the parents employ, and their behavior as role models.” (Whiting & Whiting, 1960, p. 53-54). [Super & Harkness, 1999, p.283]

In conclusion, John’s developmental niche is created and formed through his parent’s goals for his life. They have created a physical environment that allows John access to technology, but they do not want it to take the place of people in his life. The family places a high priority on community and communication, and social competence is a goal for the children. The parents structure daily activities to allow communication and interaction within the family because prosocial skills are important, and the technology has been located so that social skills can be practiced or developed around it. Kate sees the potential for technology to provide a bridge for John to other uniquely gifted youth so that he might find compatible peers in other places. As the children get older, they will probably allow more communication across the internet as they teach them responsibility. The parents celebrate talents and gifts, and they support these gifts through finding specific activities that engage John in the form of engineering summer camps, karate lessons, and electronic toys. The parents are most interested in the children being spiritually sound individuals, and technology may or may not play an important role in that process. It appears that the parents have delineated technology competence and dependence, and they support competence without dependence as a healthy child-rearing practice. The children are very well-mannered and bright, and they contribute input to their parents about what they enjoy or dislike because they are respected as developing thinking individuals.

References


