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Parent Perceptions of Children's Early Writing Practices

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<p>Affiliations</p> <p>¹ Associate Professor, College of Education, Department of Elementary and Special Education, Georgia Southern University, United States of America</p> <p> https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1408-2686</p>	<p>Abstract</p> <p>Children's early writing development and expression through symbolic representation is heavily influenced by the social and cultural factors but the most influencing factors considered is their parents and families' interactions. In this scenario, this study explored how 12 parents understand their young children's early writing practices, or symbolic representation, such as drawing and writing. Data were collected through focus groups, home interviews, children's work samples, and observations of parent-child activities. The preschool was located on a public university campus in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Constant comparative analysis was used to analyze the data. Results indicate that most parents valued conventional forms of symbolic representation, especially writing and drawing, and emphasized the importance of alphabetic writing for kindergarten readiness. Parents believed that children's ability to write letters and their names is crucial at kindergarten level. The study contributed significantly by recording parents' voices on their children's symbolic representation and suggested a strong home-school connection could further support children's development and learning.</p> <p>Keywords: Writing development, drawing, symbolic representation, parental ethnotheories</p>	
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Introduction

Children learn about written language through interactions within their social and cultural environments. Parents play a crucial role in these environments, influencing how children experience drawing, writing, and symbolic representation. Their values, beliefs, and perspectives shape young children's understanding and interaction with symbolic representation. To fully grasp the sociocultural factors affecting children's literacy development, it is essential to explore the understandings of the influential adults in their lives. Dyson (2001) emphasizes that written language is deeply embedded in one's identity and history. Children's daily lives reflect the values, beliefs, and practices of their families and communities, significantly impacting their development and learning. Torppa et al. (2011) supported the idea that parental literacy, beliefs, and skill level is a strong predictor of children's reading outcomes. The study emphasized on the importance of parent's early interventions for children writing development. Puranik and Li (2022) also endorsed the importance of fostering early writing abilities as a foundational skill that contributes to broader cognitive development, including self-regulatory behaviors.

Early literacy interactions are unique to each child and shaped by diverse family experiences. Given the critical role families play in children's understanding of writing, this study aims to explore the home literacy environment from parents' perspectives. This information can help researchers and practitioners build on children's cultural writing experiences as they begin formal schooling.

Symbolic Representation

Children enter school with a foundation shaped by interactions with their caregivers and the literacy practices valued by their culture. To understand children's literacy development, educators must consider each child's experiences, culture, traditions, beliefs, and values. Initially, this study defined 'symbolic representation' as the various

forms of meaning-making young children use to express themselves, including handwriting, drawing, painting, and text construction. As the study progressed, the definition evolved to reflect parents' focus on scribbles, drawings, paintings, and conventional alphabetic writing.

The Role Played by Teachers Vs Parents

Literacy is a socially mediated process that begins before children enter school. Parents, as their child's first teachers, significantly influence their child's developing understanding of literacy. Emerson and Hall (2018) investigated preschoolers' early writing experiences, emphasizing that teacher interactions play a crucial role in developing writing self-efficacy. Their findings indicate that teachers who encourage scribbling as a meaningful writing activity foster motivation and confidence in young writers. This study supports the notion that early writing experiences shape children's long-term literacy attitudes. However, before starting school, children develop perceptions consistent with those of their parents, highlighting the importance of significant adults in their lives. This study examines how parents understand young children's symbolic representation through reported and observed interactions. These insights provide a deeper understanding of children's home literacy environments and the sociocultural factors that influence their literacy development.

Theoretical Framework

The social and cultural environments in which children live shape their understandings and interactions of the world. To gain further insight into parents' sociocultural understandings, this study employs Super and Harkness' (1986) developmental niche theory. This theory comprises three interactive systems: (1) the physical and social settings of a child's life, (2) customs and practices of care, and (3) the psychology of the caretakers or parental ethnotheories. Through Super and Harkness' (1986) development niche, this study explores parents' and families' beliefs, perceptions, and

understandings of their children's early writing practices.

Research Question

Children's early writing development and expression through symbolic representation is influenced by the social and cultural environments in which they live. Children's earliest experiences are primarily rooted in the home environment through interactions with parents and families. This qualitative study aims to contribute to existing research on parents' understandings of children's drawing and emergent writing by extending the inquiry to include additional forms of children's meaning-making. Data were collected through two focus group discussions with parents at their child's preschool, one-on-one semi-structured home interviews, and a home observation of a parent-child joint activity. The study seeks to answer the following question:

- How do parents' interactions with their children in relation to symbolic representation inform us of their understanding of various forms of young children's symbolic representation?

Significance

Expanding the theoretical and practical understanding of young children's writing by incorporating parents' perspectives will provide valuable insights into the values they place on symbolic representation. This is crucial for teachers to gain a deeper understanding of children's literacy development. Using the developmental niche framework, both teachers and researchers can enhance their comprehension of literacy within students' social and cultural environments. This understanding can help educators build strong home-school connections to better support children's development and learning. Also, Puranik et al. (2011) suggested that children's early writing development is influenced by multiple literacy components, reinforcing the need for structured parental support in early literacy activities.

There is a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between adults' perceptions of symbolic representation and how these perceptions influence young children's experiences with different forms of representation. Current research primarily focuses on traditional forms of writing, such as alphabetic letter formation, name writing, spelling, and drawing. However, as Dyson (1986) notes, understanding the beginnings of literacy requires looking beyond text to include unconventional forms of creation. While some studies focus on parents' understandings and interactions with drawing or within a broader literacy context, little research exists on other forms of symbolic representation. Abstractions, painting, and typing are important to acknowledge because children's spontaneous texts are created through multiple media.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of children's meaning-making, it is essential to adopt a broader view of symbolic representation. Since young children express themselves in various ways beyond writing and drawing, research must explore parents' understandings of symbolic representation through different media forms. This study employs an expansive view of symbolic representation, including less conventional aspects of children's meaning-making. While literacy research often focuses on school practices, this study seeks an emic perspective by learning from parents to understand their views on symbolic representation.

Literature Review

Existing studies on home literacy environments for preschool and kindergarten children (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Burgess, 2011; Deitcher, Aram, and Abramovich, 2024; Korat & Haglili, 2007; Martens, 1996; Schickedanz, 1990). In most instances, these studies focus on a more encompassing view of early literacy development, providing a limited examination of young children's emergent writing. There is a notable gap in research specifically focused on parents' understanding of their young children's symbolic representation. The studies reviewed primarily

address drawing and conventional aspects of writing. A broader, more inclusive view of young children's symbolic representation is needed to gain deeper insights into the home writing environment. To support this study, the researcher conducted an extensive literature search that included various forms of symbolic representation, such as writing, drawing, painting, and typing on the computer.

The literature review contextualizes the current study, summarizes existing research, and identifies gaps and areas for future exploration. The search included books, book chapters, peer-reviewed journals, and dissertations related to parents, families, young children, writing, drawing, graphic representation, literacy, perceptions, beliefs, and understanding of symbolic representation. The search initially focused on preschool-aged children but was expanded to include kindergarten-aged students due to limited studies.

Given the limited research available in this area, the year of publication was not restricted. The initial search covered the past 10 years. When this search yielded limited results, the review was expanded to include studies conducted as far back as 1980. This broader search provided several articles, primarily from the early to mid-1990s.

Sociocultural Influences

When examining young children's writing practices, it is imperative to explore those social and cultural environments. One of those most, if not the most influential, environments for young children is the home environment. With that in mind, this section explores the impact and influence of parents and the home environment. These studies highlight the significant role of parents and primary caregivers in children's sociocultural worlds, emphasizing their integral part in young children's everyday lives (Deitcher, Aram, & Abramovich, 2024; Doram, Skibbe, Hindman, Bindman, Atlas, & Morrison, 2024; Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004; Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009; Ring, 2006, 2009; Teale 1992). Key studies include seminal

works exploring the social and cultural environments of young children in relation to literacy (Baghban, 1984; Heath, 1983; Schickedanz, 1990). Similarly, Bergen et al. (2016) examined how home literacy environments impact children's reading and writing fluency, emphasizing that parental skills significantly influence children's literacy outcomes. Their study involving 101 families found that, apart from the number of books in the home, home literacy variables did not significantly predict children's reading once parental reading fluency was considered. They suggested that shared genetic and environmental factors contribute to reading and writing development, supporting the intergenerational multiple deficit model.

Community Environment

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) studied three different communities and how each influenced children's understanding of written and oral language development. Data was collected from a white working class, a black working class, and a middle-class community. Results of the study revealed that each community had different perceptions and values in relation to written and oral language. The white working-class community understood writing as a way to both communicate and remember information. Adults from the working-class black community viewed writing as a way to record oral language, with more value being placed on oral language.

In contrast, the middle-class community viewed writing as a necessity for success in their jobs and careers, explicitly stating this to their children. These three communities support the importance of communities on children's perceptions and interactions with oral and written language.

Home Environment

Narrowing the focus from entire communities to individual homes and schools, several authors published case studies of their own children's literacy and writing development (Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1996; and Schickedanz,

1990). These studies support the importance and impact of home and school environments on young children's understanding and interactions with oral and written language. Puranik et al. (2018) revealed that parental teaching practices were significantly related to children's letter writing, spelling, and spontaneous writing skills. Additionally, independent writing activities by children were linked to letter writing and spontaneous writing but not spelling. This study highlights the importance of parental involvement in shaping children's early writing abilities.

Kalindi et al. (2017) explored how adult mediation affects early literacy in Zambia, particularly in word writing in Bemba. The study revealed that while caregivers provided varied levels of support, the degree of literate and print mediation significantly predicted children's reading and writing skills. The research highlights the importance of caregiver involvement in literacy, suggesting that direct and precise mediation fosters better literacy outcomes. Two longitudinal case studies (Bissex, 1980; Schickedanz, 1990) collected data on their sons over five years. Schickedanz (1990) emphasized how her son, Adam, created drawings and writings that were social and mimicked what he saw in his home environment. He was given the freedom to choose what he drew and wrote about, which stood in direct contrast to what he was expected to produce at school. This disconnect of what was allowed and encouraged at home in relation to the expectation of specific writing products resulted in confusion and frustration for Adam. The contrast between home and school further supports how early experiences and interactions with writing and drawing impact children across environments.

Bissex's work also reported a disconnect between writing and drawings in the home and school environments. Her son, Paul, developed his understanding of writing by experimenting with various forms of written language and engaging in conversations with his mother at home. These conversations happened organically, and Paul was encouraged to create and praised when he did. There were rarely specific directives, other than

suggesting he get out writing implements and paper to create. As with Schickedanz (1990), this did not parallel to what he experienced at school, which often led to confusion, anger, and an overall resistance to writing and drawing in general. Treiman and Yin (2011) investigated how young Chinese children differentiate between writing and drawing, revealing that even at an early age, children demonstrate distinct writing behaviors. Adults were able to distinguish between children's writing and drawing, indicating that young learners have an early conceptualization of writing as a symbolic system.

Baghban (1984) and Martens (1996) also explored the literacy development of their young children. Their studies provide detailed descriptions of her children's early literacy acquisition. Both studies explore their child's drawing and writing samples, which reflect experiences from their everyday lives within the home environment. These early drawing and writing samples underscore the importance and relevance of children's interactions with significant adults in their lives in terms of how they develop an understanding of symbolic representation.

The parent's involvement, beliefs and reliance on the technological devices for early writing skills development was got attention of the researchers. Tour (2019) examined how migrant parents in Australia facilitate their children's learning in digital spaces. The study found that parents prioritize technology for acquiring traditional literacy and numeracy skills but often neglect digital literacy development. Parents' educational backgrounds and perceptions of the education system influence these decisions. This study underscores the role of parental beliefs in shaping literacy practices. The notion of excessive use of technological devices by parents as mediating role players was discouraged by Soyoof et al. (2023) who reviewed literature on parental mediation in children's digital literacy development, highlighting that active parental involvement in digital learning environments enhances children's literacy, socio-emotional skills, and STEM competencies. However, concerns over excessive

screen time and digital distractions were also noted. The study suggests that balanced parental mediation can optimize digital literacy benefits for early learners. A recent study also validated the notion as Meoded Karabanov and Aram (2024) investigated how digital writing interactions, such as composing shopping lists on smartphones, impact preschoolers' literacy skills. They found that parental involvement in digital writing activities positively influenced children's phonological awareness and letter knowledge, whereas excessive independent digital use negatively correlated with literacy skills. This study highlights the role of digital literacy in early writing development.

The research on children's symbolic representation and early literacy development continues to highlight the influence of the home environment and parental engagement. Results from Ring (2006, 2009) suggest that parental routines can either help to facilitate or hinder literacy-related activities, reinforcing the importance of cultivating an environment that fosters early engagement with symbolic forms of communication. Similarly, Teale (1992) found that writing within low-income households frequently occurs in the context of social interactions, such as writing grocery lists and notes to family members. These results also highlight how literacy development can be incorporated into the everyday experiences of the home environment.

Parents' and families' attitudes and perceptions about early writing practices are also contributing factors to children's self-perceptions as writers. Skibbe et al. (2013) examined the long-term effects of parental writing support on preschoolers' literacy skills. Their study found that graphophonemic and print support predicted children's decoding abilities and phonological awareness, while demand for precision was not significantly linked to literacy outcomes. These findings suggest that interactive writing support plays a crucial role in early literacy development. Bradford and Wyse (2010) found that young children's confidence in writing and even whether

they identified themselves as good writers were closely tied to their parents' beliefs and values surrounding literacy. Levin and Bus (2003) focused specifically on mothers and how they interpret children's early attempts at drawing and writing. When their child's drawings had identifiable characteristics (e.g., a stick person or the sun), mothers were more likely to acknowledge, engage in conversations about, and praise their children's drawings. These findings suggest that drawing may be perceived by parents as a foundational mode of communication that facilitates later literacy development, whereas primitive drawings, or 'scribbles', hold less value.

Collectively, these studies further support the critical role of parents and the home environment in early literacy acquisition. FostKathleeng engagement with early writing, particularly through drawing, provides a foundation for later literacy skills and development. These studies further highlight and emphasize the social nature of writing, as literacy often develops through collaborative engagement rather than as an isolated task Teale (1992).

The literature review concludes by emphasizing the influential role parents play in developing their children's understanding of symbolic representation. It underscores the need for additional research that includes a more inclusive, expansive view of symbolic representation, beyond conventional writing and drawing. The current study aims to gain further insight into parents' understandings of young children's creations through a comprehensive view of symbolic representation.

Methodology

The study adopted a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing participants' interpretations and meanings of symbolic representation within their cultural contexts. This approach acknowledges that reality is socially constructed through interactions and cultural norms. Super and Harkness' developmental niche theory complements this paradigm by focusing on the

influence of social and cultural experiences on families.

Participants

The study was conducted at an independent, play-based early learning center located on the campus of a public university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The preschool served approximately 120 children aged two to five years and employed 10 lead and assistant teachers. The sole requirement for participation was having a four-year-old child enrolled at the early learning center. The researcher had an established relationship with the preschool and spent several weeks interacting with parents during peak drop-off and pickup times to build familiarity and comfort.

There were a total of 12 parent participants (10 females, 2 male) with children enrolled in a play-based preschool. Participants had diverse backgrounds, with most holding at least a bachelor's degree and two families being bilingual. Seven of the 12 participants were connected to the nearby university, but the preschool was not directly connected to it.

Data Collection

Data was collected through focus group discussions, individual semi-structured interviews, and in-home observations. Collecting data through multiple sources provided a more comprehensive picture of parents' understanding. Field observations captured interactions within the home environment, providing a comprehensive understanding of parents' perspectives on symbolic representation.

Focus Groups

Focus group interviews were conducted to understand participants' familiarity and experiences with young children's symbolic representation. The discussions were co-facilitated with a doctoral student and involved the introduction of various work samples created by four-year-olds to facilitate discussions. The focus

groups provided direct evidence of comparable and contrasting opinions and experiences.

In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews took place at participants' homes, allowing parents to express norms and practices within their cultural context. Participants were asked to have a work sample their child produced at home ready for discussion. The interviews were recorded, and pictures of children's work samples were taken for further analysis.

Field Observations

Following interviews, parent-child interactions were observed during a joint activity using a Melissa and Doug® Magnetic Chalk Dry Erase Board. Observations focused on the interaction between parent and child, providing insight into implicit norms and everyday interactions. Field notes were recorded by hand and later expanded into full descriptive field notes.

Analysis

Constant comparative analysis was used to analyze the data, allowing for ongoing refinement of codes and themes. This iterative process helped to ensure a comprehensive understanding of parents' perspectives on symbolic representation. Data were analyzed using constant comparative methods, comparing segments of data to identify similarities and differences. This process involved concurrent data collection and analysis to identify shared and contrasting themes. Initial open coding was conducted on focus group discussions, followed by line-by-line coding of interviews and observations. The researcher and a co-facilitator independently analyzed transcripts and negotiated emerging concepts to achieve inter-rater reliability.

Before data collection, priori codes were noted based on the researcher's experiences with preschool and kindergarten teachers, as well as interactions with family and friends. These codes included: (a) conventional aspects of print, (b) unconventional aspects of symbolic

representation, (c) kindergarten preparation, and (d) the influence of the school environment on parents' understandings.

Eleven tentative codes were developed from focus group discussions, including methods of expression, parents' personal histories, and precision and accuracy of symbolic representation. These codes were refined through subsequent interviews and observations, resulting in 13 codes, such as children's understanding of symbolic representation, parent/child interactions, and social environment. Next, axial coding connected categories to their subcategories and made connections between codes across cases. Five tentative categories emerged: (1) parent and child interactions, (2) child's interest and understanding, (3) parent interest, (4) personal connections, and (5) precision and accuracy.

The final phase of coding aimed to unify categories around a core category. Through iterative analysis, two core categories were identified: (a) making meaning, and (b) structure of children's symbolic representation. Parent-child interactions emerged as the overarching theme, highlighting their central role in understanding symbolic representation.

Triangulation, peer examination, and reflexivity were implemented throughout the research process to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Data were collected from multiple sources, which provided a richer, more comprehensive understanding of parents' perspectives (Glesne, 2011; Maxwell, 2005). Additionally, using multiple data sources helped minimize the risk of bias and ensured that findings were not shaped by a single perspective (Krefting, 1991).

Results/Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore parents' understandings and perceptions of their children's early writing practices. Results identified three major areas: (1) encouraging children to create, (2) parents' support of children's search for meaning, and (3) parents' understanding of important components of early writing development.

The first two codes, "Encouraging Children to Create" and "Supporting Children's Search for Meaning," pertain to parents' self-reports and observations of their interactions and conversations with their children. The third code, "Parents' Understanding of Important Components of Early Writing Development," is more reflective, encompassing parents' comments that extend beyond direct observations and conversations to include broader social context influences (e.g., discussing writing in relation to kindergarten readiness based on experiences with older children). It is important to note that codes and subcodes are not mutually exclusive.

Encouraging Children to Create

Parents in this study both reported out and were observed actively encouraging their children to create. Their interactions, both self-reported and observed, showed that all participants prompted their children in various ways. These prompts ranged from general to explicit and were typically presented as questions. The level of guidance varied across content and types of symbolic representation, categorized into three levels from broadest to narrow: (a) open-ended prompts, (b) prompting type of symbolic representation, and (c) prompting content and type of symbolic representation. In all instances, of specific prompting, parents mentioned drawing or writing.

Open-Ended Prompts

Some parents used broad, open-ended questions to encourage their children ($n = 3$). For example, Robert, a multilingual father, asked his daughter Brooksie, "What are you going to make?" This allowed Brooksie to explore and decide independently. Similarly, Lynette, a monolingual English-speaking mother, asked her daughter Ashlynn what she would like to "work on," leading Ashlynn to draw a picture of her family without further guidance.

While some parents provided open-ended prompts to encourage their children to create, some parents gave more directions. Georgia, a monolingual English-speaking mother, provided

both open-ended encouragement and more structured guidance. During focus group discussions and interviews, Georgia shared that she often suggested specific activities, like drawing, to her daughter Anna. She reported that she would then follow up by asking Olivia what she was planning to draw. During in-home observations, Georgia was observed providing an open-ended prompt and then following up with a specific prompt to help guide her child. Throughout the time Olivia was creating, Georgia was encouraging her daughter and engaging in conversation about the drawing she was making. Olivia ended up creating a self-portrait.

Prompting Type of Symbolic Representation

The majority of parents' observed interactions with their child ($n = 9$) provided a higher level of structure and guidance than those interactions observed during the joint activity with Lynette, Robert, and Georgia. For example, Kathleen, a monolingual English-speaking mother, shared how she prompted her daughter and only child, Holly, to create specific forms of symbolic representation when discussing a work sample that Holly drew of her family. She explained that when interacting with Holly, she would sit down and ask her if she would like to draw, but explained she would not provide further guidance, preferring things to happen "organically." Kathleen's statements demonstrated a higher level of structure during shared interactions because she specified drawing as the form of symbolic representation for her child.

Prompting Content and Type of Symbolic Representation

A small subset of parents ($n = 2$) provided a more structured form of guidance by explicitly encouraging their child to draw or write as well as what to draw or write about. They focused on both the content and how they would create it. For example, Gwen, a monolingual mother, suggested to her son Aaron, to draw Lightning McQueen, a cartoon car. She then encouraged him to write his name; however, he chose to draw a tiger instead. Another mother participating in the study, Amy,

provided similar levels of prompting and guidance. During observations, she focused on letter identification and letter-sound correspondence, guiding her son, Terrence, through a spelling game during their activity. In this instance, she provided more guidance than others and was more actively involved, deciding what the activity was and interacting directly with Terrence.

These interactions illustrate varying levels of parental guidance in their child's meaning-making. When examining forms of symbolic representation, parents' approaches varied but were almost completely circled around drawing and writing. Some parents gave very broad, open-ended prompts, telling their child to "make something," while most gave a more specific prompt asking them to write or draw. A few parents explicitly told their children both the type and the content (e.g., drawing an animal or writing their name). Discussions and interactions focused on drawing and writing were almost evenly split, further supporting how parents' perceptions differ about early writing practices.

Supporting Children's Search for Meaning

Parents actively sought to understand the meaning behind their children's symbolic representations through reported and observed interactions. Most parents ($n = 9$) engaged their children in conversations about their work samples to learn their intended messages. Parents adjusted their dialogue based on the type of symbolic representation to access different types of information. This section examines how parents used dialogue to: (1) understand the child's intended message, (2) gauge the child's knowledge of what they created, and (3) guide and correct the child's conventional print to understand the intended message.

Understanding the Child's Intended Message

Parents ($n = 4$) used dialogue to interpret their children's work samples, especially drawings and abstractions. For example, Sarah asked her son about his creations to understand their meaning,

highlighting the importance of engaging children in meaningful dialogue. Amy emphasized that understanding the story behind a child's creation changes the parent's perception, as illustrated by her discussions with her son, Terrence, about his drawings.

When parents were unable to determine the meaning behind work samples, they focused on identifying what their children created. For instance, Michelle engaged her daughter, Amelia, in dialogue about her drawing to gauge her understanding of flowers. Similarly, Maria asked her son, Johnathan, about the parts of a helicopter he drew, encouraging him to share his knowledge.

Exploring and Guiding Conventional Print

Parents stated during focus group discussions and interviews and were also observed asking their children about what they created, in to better understand the intended message. When engaging in discussions with their children about the meaning behind their children's work, parents provided varying levels of structure when discussing symbolic representation. In instances where their child created abstract or unconventional drawings, conversations were typically more open-ended, and parents relied on their child's explanations to interpret the meaning of their work. For example, Sherri pointed to a large oval on her daughter Kathleen's picture and said, "Oh, now this is neat! What is this you are making?" In this and similar instances, parents were actively seeking to understand their child's perspective and intended message in what they created. When children's samples were primarily comprised of alphabetic letters, parents engaged in back-and-forth discussions that appeared to reinforce and foster their children's print awareness.

In one observation, Michelle, asked her daughter, Amelia, about the letters she wrote and provided feedback on letter formation, pointing out things such as directionality and size of the letters. Kathleen also focused on early literacy concepts when she was observed working with her daughter Holly. Specifically, she focused on letter-sound

correspondence with her daughter, helping her spell words and understand phonetic sounds.

Parents' Understanding of Important Components of Early Writing Practices

The majority of participants (n = 10) placed greater importance on conventional forms of young children's symbolic representation, such as drawing and writing. For instance, an identifiable drawing (e.g., a flower) or a sequence of recognizable alphabetic letters were considered conventional forms. Many participants expressed that their interest in these conventional forms stemmed partly from their ability to ascribe meaning to the work samples.

Focus on Abstract and Conventional Drawing

Parents viewed various work samples, including drawings, alphabetic letters, and abstractions. They often struggled to find meaning in abstractions or 'scribbles' and focused more on representational drawings and alphabetic letters. For example, Gwen viewed scribbles as a "mess" and expressed little interest in them. In contrast, Georgia, a visual artist, appreciated scribbles for their artistic value. During focus group discussions, parents were asked to review various work samples, including drawings, alphabetic letters, and abstract markings. These abstract marks on the paper, often consisting of seemingly random swirls, dots, and back-and-forth strokes, and lacked any identifiable characteristics. Despite expressing curiosity about the intended meaning behind these "scribbles", their discussions primarily centered on drawings with identifiable features or work samples with alphabetic letters.

For instance, when presented with an image of swirls and loops during focus group discussions, parents attempted to interpret its meaning. However, the majority (n = 10) did not recognize such samples as meaningful representations. One participant, Gwen, described this type of work as a "mess," explaining, "This is what my son would bring home if the teacher made him sit at a table and draw, but he didn't really want to, so he just scribbled." Gwen connected scribbles with a lack

of engagement, she placed little value on them. Theresa, for example, specifically identified an image of swirls and loops as something she would discard, stating that it “wouldn’t make the cut for me” because it did not appear to have any meaning.

Other parents echoed similar views after Gwen and Theresa, emphasizing the importance of being able to identify a clear meaning or message in order to preserve or display their children’s work. As the discussion progressed, parents were asked to consider the significance of scribbles. Collectively, they agreed that, compared to drawings or alphabetic writing, scribbles held little importance in their evaluation of their children’s work. They also discussed examples of what they considered “worthy” of displaying or keeping. Specifically, they referenced creations that had attempts at letters, name writing, or drawings that were aesthetically pleasing or personally meaningful to their child or themselves. These statements during focus group discussions further underscore how these parents perceived the value and worth of various forms of early drawing and writing.

Parents’ Focus on Alphabetic Letters

Many parents (n = 7) emphasized alphabetic letters over other forms of symbolic representation. For instance, when asked to select one of her child’s work samples to discuss, Michelle selected a sample that contained both alphabetic letters as well as pictures she colored, but primarily focused on the comprised of alphabetic letters. During the interview, Michelle even stated, “I chose it because it has some of her actual writing on it.” This statement indicates that she perceived Amelia’s alphabetic writing as having more value than the drawing she created.

Similar to Michelle, Theresa chose a sample to discuss because of the alphabetic print her son included in it. She explicitly explained her decisions, stating that her selection was based on the fact that it included alphabetic letters. Theresa briefly pointed out two images that her daughter, Samantha, drew on the work sample (a flower in

the bottom right corner of the page and an airplane), but directed her focus to the alphabetic letters. Once she looked at the letters, Theresa explained that they were not whole words but, “only letters.” Then choosing to focus on the letter formation and left to right directionality.

Michelle’s and Theresa’s focus on alphabetic writing was similar to the responses of over half the parent participants, who also emphasized their children’s conventional alphabetic print.

Parents frequently emphasized the importance of conventional alphabetic writing as a way to help better prepare them for kindergarten. Additionally, those with older children discussed their experiences when their older children began kindergarten, where writing was an important and necessary skill. Parents believe that it was crucial for their children to be able to identify individual letters, write those letters, and also write their name before entering kindergarten. Several parents made reference to the early learning center’s emphasis on these areas as well, potentially indicating that parents perceived this school’s focus as something that should be supported and cultivated at home as well.

Discussion

The results of this study give us some insight into parents’ understandings and perceptions of young children’s early writing practices. Parents in this study indicated that they were more interested in more conventional forms of symbolic representation, particularly drawing and writing. Results indicate that parents were highly interested in these forms because they featured identifiable characteristics, allowing them to ascribe meaning and connect with their child’s creations. When samples included multiple forms of symbolic representation, parents tended to center their discussion on alphabetic letters. The focus group discussions, interviews, and parent-child interactions indicated that parents placed priority on alphabetic writing. They believe the ability to write letters and their name is a crucial skill for kindergarten readiness. They emphasized, sometimes repeatedly, that it was a critical

component to ensure their child's success when they began kindergarten. Consequently, the majority of parents (n = 10) who emphasized alphabetic writing considered it essential for kindergarten success.

With that in mind, it is important to note the limitations of the study. The study's participants were upper-middle-class professionals, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Instead, the concept of transferability is suggested, where the findings could be applied to similar populations.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should examine parents' understandings of symbolic representation across diverse populations and different types of preschools, such as Head Start, Montessori, franchised, and parochial preschools. Extending data collection to include the transition from preschool to kindergarten may provide additional insights. Exploring the connections between preschool teachers' and parents' understandings of symbolic representation is also necessary to

address potential disconnects between home and school literacy environments.

Conclusion

Including parents' voices in research provides additional insights into the values they place on symbolic representation. Connecting with families and acknowledging the important role parents play in young children's understanding of symbolic representation can help cultivate strong home-school connections, further supporting children's development and learning. This study highlights the importance of understanding parents' interactions with their children and symbolic representation. The findings can inform both theoretical and practical approaches to engaging parents in culturally appropriate conversations about young children's writing. Researching children's literacy through the developmental niche framework can help reconceptualize their literacy environment from a cultural perspective, identifying where and how to intervene effectively.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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