“Whatever I Can Imagine, We Did It”: Home-Based Parental Involvement Among Low-Income African-American Mothers With Preschoolers Enrolled in Head Start

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ABSTRACT
Researchers are increasingly focusing on the home-based parental involvement experiences of low-income, African American families with young children. These studies document the positive ways that parental involvement can promote the school readiness of preschoolers who are at risk of not being ready for kindergarten. In light of the paucity of research on this demographic group and developmental period, this study examines the parental involvement beliefs and practices of low-income, African American mothers with preschoolers transitioning to kindergarten. Specifically, we conducted qualitative interviews with 20 low-income, African American mothers of preschoolers enrolled in Head Start. This research was informed by the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (HD-S) model of parental involvement and resilience theory, which allowed us to explore mothers’ beliefs about who should be responsible for preschool children’s transition to kindergarten and how these beliefs were implemented in mothers’ home-based activities. Our findings are consistent with tenets of both the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model and resilience theory. However, our findings expand these frameworks by detailing the unique experiences of low-income, African American mothers. The research findings offer recommendations for promoting parental involvement in early child care settings and the elementary schools into which children will be transitioning.

Researchers have long recognized the importance of school-based parental involvement behaviors and activities that positively support child-youth development, learning, adjustment, and achievement (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Broadly defined as direct contact with the school through parent-teacher meetings, participation in school events, serving on school governance boards, and visiting and volunteering in the classroom, an ample body of research has documented that school-based parental involvement can have a positive impact on child and youth educational outcomes, from the early elementary years through elementary school and high school (Ansari, Purtell, & Gershoff, 2016; Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Increasingly, researchers are also recognizing the importance of home-based parental involvement activities, particularly for low-income, African American families with young children (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Wasik & Hindman, 2010; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). Home-based parental involvement activities can take various forms, including asking about the school day, conveying educational expectations and support, engaging in learning activities, and helping with homework (Barbarin et al., 2008; Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000; Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Early home-based parental involvement can be a protective factor for preschoolers from low-income, African American families who, relative to White middle-class families, are disproportionately at risk for not being ready for kindergarten (Ginsburg-Block, Manz, & McWayne, 2010). A lack of school
readiness skills has been associated with early- and long-term educational challenges, and parental involvement activities can enhance children’s educational success (Baker & Iruka, 2013; Barbarin et al., 2008; Wasik & Hindman, 2010). Indeed, research finds that low-income, African American families of young children are more likely to be involved in home-based parental involvement activities than school-based activities (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007).

A small body of research using preschool samples, including Head Start, provides insights on home-based parental involvement activities among low-income and ethnic-group families. These studies document the types of home-based activities that families engage in. Data from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) with ethnically diverse families found that parents’ home-based activities with their children included playing games and teaching about letters. Families engaged in about 17 home learning activities per week (Hindman, Miller, Froyen, & Skibbe, 2012). In an interview study of low-income, African American and Latino children, researchers reported that most families assisted their children with reading and math activities (Sonnenschein, Metzger, & Thompson, 2016).

Some studies have focused on low-income, African American samples. Home-based parental involvement activities among resident and non-resident African American Head Start fathers entailed the provision of learning materials and initiation of learning activities with their children (Downer & Mendez, 2005). Children in Head Start families were routinely exposed to language- and literacy-enriching activities, such as parental modeling of reading and encouragement of children’s scribbling and drawing (precursors to writing) (Wasik & Hindman, 2010). In this almost exclusively African American sample (98%), researchers also found that families were engaged in verbal interactions with their children about preschool.

Other researchers have examined the impact of home-based activities on educational outcomes. In a preschool sample of largely White (98.2%) low-income families, researchers found a positive relationship between book reading and availability of print materials in the home and children’s literacy skills (e.g., vocabulary, reading ability) at kindergarten age (Weigel et al., 2006). Among African American parents, providing learning opportunities, asking about school, providing space for learning activities, and reading to children were positively associated with later preschool competencies (i.e., motivation, attention, persistence) and receptive vocabulary (Fantuzzo et al., 2004). “Higher levels” of home-based involvement were associated with lower levels of problem behaviors. Focusing on school readiness, researchers reported that when parents fostered children’s positive interactive home-based peer play activities, children received higher ratings of collaborative play by preschool teachers, and higher assessments on managing frustration and willingness and openness to help (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002).

Some studies have documented preschoolers’ early transition into kindergarten. In a study with predominantly White families, researchers identified home-based activities, including talking about kindergarten, working on academic skills, reading books, working on numbers and colors, taking children to a kindergarten classroom, and changing sleep routines (Kang, Horn, & Palmer, 2017). These activities were assocated with children’s smooth adjustment to kindergarten. Focusing on former Head Start children during the fall and spring of their kindergarten year, the predominantly White sample examined home-based family involvement routines and child literacy outcomes (Dove, Neuharth-Pritchett, Wright, & Wallinga, 2015). Children from families with more consistent home routines and whose parents talked to them about school scored higher on literacy assessments. Moreover, researchers revealed a positive relationship between enriching parent-child interactions (reading, conversing with children) and various literacy, language, and problem-solving skills associated with later academic success (Downer & Pianta, 2006).

Some studies have focused specifically on home-based activities in Latino families. Research with low-income Mexican mothers participating in an early childhood intervention program found that mothers assisted their children with homework, read to their children, and took their children to the library to promote their educational development (Schaller, Rocha, & Barshinger, 2007). Latina immigrant mothers of children in public preschools supported their children’s development directly
through book reading as well as moral and emotional support (Apoyo) (Ramos, 2014). First generation, low-income Mexican American mothers with preschoolers enrolled in public preschools read to their children and used flashcards. Moreover, mothers perceived of home-based parental involvement as keeping their children safe, parental role modeling, and self-improvement (e.g., learning English) (McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013). In their home-based practices, Latina Head Start mothers distinguished between academic (i.e., content or skill-based instruction) and social practices (i.e., behavior, social relations) (Durand, 2011). Social practices were positively related to children’s classroom engagement and literacy skills at the end of kindergarten, reflecting the cultural emphasis on relationships among Latinos.

Key strengths characterize research on the home-based parental involvement activities of low-income and ethnic-group families with preschoolers. Studies detail the nature of parents’ home-based activities, including promoting academic and social skills, engaging in conversations, providing support and encouragement, and using positive home routines. Research has also identified the positive impact of home-based activities for preschoolers’ school readiness. Some studies suggest that home-based practices are subcultural in nature. Limitations also characterize existing research. Few studies focus exclusively on home-based parental involvement among low-income, African American families. Relative to school-based studies of school-age children, researchers know relatively less about the home-based parental involvement practices of low-income, African American families with preschoolers, who more frequently promote their children’s educational development within this setting (Ansari et al., 2016; Hindman et al., 2012; Huang & Mason, 2008; Kang et al., 2017). Even fewer studies have explored low-income, African American parents’ motivations for involvement in their young children’s education (Huang & Mason, 2008). Moreover, studies of low-income, African American families do not fully consider how home-based practices may reflect subcultural practices.

**Current study**

Research on the home-based practices of low-income, African American families is a significant area of inquiry. Families play a critical role in promoting their children’s educational development. Home-based parental involvement can be a key resource for facilitating low-income, African American preschoolers’ kindergarten transition. This transition is a critical developmental period for children, influencing children’s academic trajectories (Malsch, Green, & Kothari, 2011; Miller, 2015). Parental involvement activities can ensure that children are ready for kindergarten and will be successful across their educational careers (Baker & Iruka, 2013; Barbarin et al., 2008; Wasik & Hindman, 2010).

Importantly, research on home-based parental involvement can challenge stereotypes. When the home-based parental involvement activities of low-income, African American families are not well documented, in the absence of regular school-based participation, some researchers infer that such parents are uninvolved in their children’s education and reflect family deficits (Huang & Mason, 2008). Moreover, as Cooper (2009) notes, schools may come to believe that for low-income, African American parents, lower school site presence is a reflection of lower-quality parenting relative to White middle-class parents.

Our study addresses the paucity of research on home-based parental involvement among low-income, African American families of preschoolers. The goal of our study is to add to existing research on this understudied population and developmental period. Like existing research, we seek to contribute to a better understanding of the nature of the home-based activities in which families engage. We also seek to expand on existing research by examining parents’ beliefs about parental involvement and the motivations behind their home-based parental involvement activities.

To explore home-based parental involvement, we conducted qualitative interviews with 20 low-income, African American mothers of preschoolers enrolled in one Head Start program. Our particular focus on Head Start populations reflects the increasing number of low-income, African American children who attend such programs (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009) and
provides an opportunity to consider how such programs can support parental involvement. We examined mothers’ beliefs about parental involvement and related home-based practices. Our research addressed the following questions:

What do mothers believe is their role in preparing children for the kindergarten transition?

How do mothers implement their beliefs about their role in promoting children’s school readiness in home-based activities?

This research was informed by two theoretical frameworks, the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (HD-S) model of parental involvement (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005a; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005) and resilience theory (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Futrell, 1998). These frameworks help explain why and how low-income, African American mothers, whose economic and ethnic minority statuses place them at risk for infrequent involvement in their children’s education, become involved in their children’s transition to kindergarten. These frameworks also add theoretical insights to our understanding of parental involvement among this understudied sample.

**Theoretical frameworks**

The HD-S model of parental involvement and resilience theory are consistent with our qualitative methodological approach, which highlights the strengths of individuals and families who face adversity, including challenges associated with low-income and minority group statuses (Goode, 2002; Harry, Klinger, & Hart, 2005).

**Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement**

The work of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler and their colleagues provides a theoretically and empirically grounded framework to help explain why families of school-age children become involved in their children’s early education (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005b; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005a; Walker et al., 2005). We consider its applicability for preschool-age children in home settings. Four factors influence parents’ decisions for involvement.

*Parental role construction* focuses on the beliefs that parents hold about who should be involved in preparing children for school. The researchers proposed three patterns: in the school-focused role construction pattern, parents believe the school is primarily responsible for the student’s school learning and outcomes; in the partnership-focused pattern, parents believe that they and the school share primary responsibility; and in the parent-focused role construction pattern, parents believe that they are primarily responsible for the student’s learning and school outcomes (Walker et al., 2005).

*Parents’ sense of self-efficacy*, or belief that they could influence their children’s school success, informs whether they engage in activities to facilitate their children’s educational development (Walker et al., 2005). Parents with a positive sense of parenting self-efficacy are more likely to perceive that what they do will have an impact on their children’s education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Walker et al., 2005). *Parents’ perceptions of life context characteristics* include parental time, energy, skills, and knowledge. Parents’ perceptions of their available time and energy are often influenced by work demands, whereas parents’ perceptions of the skills and knowledge they possess can affect the specific domain of parental involvement in which they engage (Green et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2005). *Parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from the school and their children* can impact parents’ decisions for involvement. Positive invitations from the school can take the form of providing a welcoming environment, as well as direct requests for engagement (Green et al., 2007). Parents’ perceptions of children’s implicit invitations can derive from parents’
observations of their children’s difficulties in school, as well as their children’s explicit requests for involvement (Green et al., 2007).

Resilience theory

We explore resilient parenting practices in the form of parental involvement. Children in low-income, African American families are at risk for not being ready for kindergarten. However, we examine how mothers’ home-based parental involvement practices serve as protective factors that positively support children’s transition to kindergarten.

Resilience has been conceptualized as a dynamic multidimensional construct that explains how individuals and families cope with challenging circumstances, including those related to poverty (Becvar, 2013; Murray, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001; Myers & Taylor, 1998). Theorists have variously defined resilience as the ability to survive in the face of obstacles and challenges; positive coping and competence despite adversity; and the ability to recover, withstand, or rebound from traumatic events (McCubbin et al., 1998; Walsh, 1996). Whether conceptualized at the individual, family, or environmental level, the process of resilience entails the negotiation of risk and protective factors. Risk factors can emanate from multiple sources and represent challenges to functioning, increasing the likelihood of harm or a negative outcome (Becvar, 2013; Coie et al., 1993). Protective factors mitigate risk, support positive functioning and adjustment, reduce or decrease the effects or likelihood of a negative outcome, and enhance the likelihood of a positive outcome (Becvar, 2013; Black & Lobo, 2008). Protective factors can take multiple forms, including individual skills and abilities, interpersonal resources, and institutional resources (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Murray et al., 2001). Family-level protective factors include family processes and resources that support the well-being of its members (Murray et al., 2001; Myers & Taylor, 1998). Moreover, family-level resilience frameworks acknowledge that protective family processes can reflect subcultural patterns (Hollingsworth, 2013; Logan, 1996; McCubbin et al., 1998; Walsh, 1996).

Research design

Methodological approach

Our qualitative study was guided by a phenomenological approach that focuses on the daily lived experiences of a small number of individuals (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Creswell, Shoppe, Plano Clark, & Green, 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This methodological approach considers the meanings or interpretations that individuals give to those experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Phenomenological frameworks are often used with marginalized populations (i.e., low income, minorities) whose experiences are not fully understood (Creswell et al., 2006; Krumner-Nuvo, 2005). Phenomenology views marginalized groups as competent social actors, challenging interpretations that focus only on risk factors and deficits (Harry et al., 2005). Using a phenomenological framework, we examined the first-hand experiences of low-income, African American mothers with preschoolers transitioning to kindergarten, and the meanings they gave to those experiences.

Background and training of researchers

The PI is a family sociologist and has conducted qualitative research on low-income, African American families in Chicago neighborhoods for over three decades (Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003; Jarrett, Jefferson, & Kelly, 2010; Jarrett, Sensoy Bahar, & Taylor, 2011). The second author is a human development and family studies scholar with a focus on low-income, African American and Latino families of preschoolers. She was trained in the PI’s ethnographic methods course. The interviewer is a community psychologist and has collaborated with the PI for nearly a decade.
**Sampling strategy**

Sampling in phenomenological research entails the identification of often small numbers of individuals who have a shared experience of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2007; Tongco, 2007). We used homogeneous purposive sampling, which requires the selection of a small number of cases (individuals, settings) that share specific characteristics and that address the research questions under study (Patton, 1990; Tongco, 2007). The selection of cases should be information rich, or cases “from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the study” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Sometimes known as “judgment sampling,” purposive sampling depends on the knowledge and expertise of the researcher to identify a sample with the relevant characteristics, and who are likely to provide information germane to the study (Bernard, 2011; Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

**Setting**

Our research activities were reviewed and approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board. We purposively sampled from the Mariette Myers Head Start¹ (MMHS) because such programs target children (and families) who have demographic characteristics (i.e., low income, minority status) associated with not being prepared for kindergarten. MMHS was located in Lincoln Heights, an impoverished, almost exclusively African American Chicago neighborhood characterized by multiple social and economic challenges. As a federally funded early childhood education program designed to enhance the school readiness of socially and economically disadvantaged children and families, MMHS was a resource for local families and children (Office of Head Start, 2018).

**Sample**

Our sample comprised 20 mothers. We selected mothers because they are the primary caregivers of young children (Barbarin et al., 2008). We followed the guidelines of homogeneous purposive sampling and selected participants who could shed light on our study topic (Patton, 1990). This entailed the use of demographic criteria associated with challenging kindergarten transitions. We invited mothers to participate who met the following criteria: 1) self-identified as African American, 2) met Head Start’s income guidelines for low-income families, and 3) had a child attending MMHS who was transitioning to kindergarten. We viewed mothers as experts who were knowledgeable about their children’s transition experience. Mothers ranged in age from 24–52 years old (average 31.5). Fifteen mothers were never married/single and five were married. Household size varied from three to seven family members, with an average family size of 4.7. More than half (13) of the mothers were employed, four were unemployed, and three were students. The majority (11) had some college, and five mothers had an associate’s degree. Two mothers had a high school diploma or equivalency degree. One mother had a bachelor’s degree and one mother had a master’s degree. The nearby presence of a two-year college likely explains the mothers’ relatively high education levels. Thirteen mothers had experienced the kindergarten transition before. Seven mothers were experiencing the kindergarten transition for the first time.

**Recruitment**

Mothers were recruited at MMHS. To invite participation of the 51 mothers of enrolled children, the interviewer attended parent gatherings, meetings, and workshops. She also “hung out” at the site during morning and afternoon drop-off and pick-up times. Twenty-two mothers were recruited through these efforts. Two of the mothers who initially accepted invitations to participate did not complete the interviews: one mother left the preschool, and the other experienced health problems. Nine participants declined participation, citing conflicting work and school schedules, living outside of the neighborhood, and not being the guardian of the transitioning child. Thus, our sample comprised mothers who were on site and in contact with the researcher. These participants were unemployed or had flexible school and work schedules. Some were particularly active at the
preschool. We likely missed mothers of children who attended preschool infrequently, did not chaperon their children to MMHS, had conflicting work and/or school schedules, were experiencing personal and family challenges, or were disinterested in the study.

Data collection

We conducted in-depth interviews with 20 participants between June 2012 and December 2012. As the primary data collection strategy used in phenomenological qualitative research, in-depth interviews seek rich descriptive accounts in the participants’ own words (Creswell, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Interviews elicit participants’ accounts of their lived experiences, as well as the meanings attributed to those experiences (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Creswell et al., 2006). Phenomenologically informed interviews privilege the life knowledge of groups that are often unheard (Creswell et al., 2007; Krumer-Nevo, 2005).

Interview protocol

We used an open-ended, semi-structured interview protocol that highlighted participants’ subjective perspectives (Patton, 1990). Participants were free to talk about the kindergarten transition based on their personal experiences. Questions were developed by the PI based on the sensitizing literatures guiding the study. Focusing on mothers’ beliefs, we asked the following questions:

What does school readiness mean to you?
How would you describe a child who is ready for school?
How would you describe a child who is not ready for school?
In your opinion, what are the reasons that some children are ready for school?
In your opinion, what are the reasons that some children are not ready for school?

For this article, we used questions that asked mothers about the reasons why children were ready (not ready) for kindergarten, which provided information on parental involvement beliefs. To understand mothers’ school readiness parental involvement practices, we asked: "What are some of the things that you are doing to help your child get ready for kindergarten?"

Interviewing process

The interviewer scheduled interviews at mothers’ convenience, either at MMHS or at their homes. All interviews were digitally recorded. The interviewer shared with participants that there were no right or wrong answers: She was interested in their parental involvement experiences during their child’s transition to kindergarten and on that they were experts. She was there to learn from them. The interviewer’s culturally based knowledge was useful during the interview process. She used language that reflected participants’ lifestyles. For example, like participants, she used the term fiancé for long-term, non-marital partners. She was careful to distinguish between biological and social mothers. At the end of the interview, the interviewer presented participants with $20.00 gift cards to local stores.

Data analysis

The goals of phenomenological analysis of interview data are description and interpretation (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015). We drew on participants’ accounts to provide a depiction of their parental involvement experiences. We also used these accounts to offer explanations of these experiences (Creswell, 2007; Creswell et al., 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and served as the data for analyses. Our analyses entailed the concurrent processes of reading transcripts, coding transcripts, developing data displays, and writing memos.
Coding the transcripts

In preparation for coding, the PI and co-author developed a priori or start codes. These codes derived from substantive and theoretical literatures and were reflected in the interview protocol (Charmaz, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As sensitizing tools, start codes were broad topical codes. For example, for the question “What are some of the things that you are doing to help your child get ready for kindergarten?,” we developed a classificatory practice code (Pract). Similarly, we developed codes on mothers’ perceptions of children’s readiness (Ready+) or lack of readiness (Ready-). The literature on types of parental involvement patterns (PIP) helped us develop additional start codes for the parent-focused parental involvement pattern (PIP-Parent) and for the partnership-focused pattern (PIP-Partner).

During the process of coding the transcripts, the PI and co-author developed new or emergent codes (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). For example, although we began with the start codes for “ready children and not ready children,” we did not specify ahead of time the reasons why mothers believed children were ready or not ready for kindergarten. This information emerged while reading the transcripts. The reasons (Reason) included family characteristics (FamChar), such as parental negligence and parental knowledge. We summarized these reasons into two overarching codes, factors promoting parental involvement (FacProm) and factors hindering parental involvement (FacHinder).

The PI and co-author used the well-established process of coding by consensus. This collaborative process entails multiple researchers coding the same data individually and seeking agreement on coding choices in subsequent discussions (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Olesen, Droes, Hatton, Chico, & Schatzman, 1994). The PI and co-author coded the transcripts independently, and then convened to discuss their coding decisions. When disagreements occurred, each had to clarify their decisions until they achieved consensus. This typically entailed another review of the transcripts and guiding literatures.

Developing data displays

Analyses entailed the use of data displays, or visual representations of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This strategy allowed the analysts to view condensed subsets of the coded data simultaneously and to discern patterns (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; see also Jarrett, Sensoy Bahar, & Odoms-Young, 2014). For example, we placed mothers’ coded responses about parental involvement patterns, parent-focused and partnership-focused, into two matrices. This allowed us to consider each pattern separately and to discern key characteristics of each. We then grouped each pattern into data displays based on demographic variables (e.g., age, marital status, etc.). Once the data were organized into data displays, each analyst independently reviewed the data and then both convened to discuss interpretive decisions. For example, discussions addressed why mothers were placed in a particular parental involvement category, as well as the nature of home-school collaborations. Again, when disagreements occurred, the analysts reconciled their differences by reexamining the data as well as sensitizing literatures.

Writing memos

As a third overlapping step in our analyses, we utilized memos (Charmaz, 2003). These written commentaries helped us to develop emerging ideas, identify patterns in the data, and expand our interpretive understanding of the data (Charmaz, 2003; Saldaña, 2015). We used memos to reflect on our initial readings of the transcripts, noting what we were discovering in the data. Coding activities and decisions were examined in memos. This entailed how codes were developed, their definitions, and how we applied them. These commentaries also accompanied our construction of data displays. For example, by writing about what we were finding in the data displays, we were able to flesh out the nature and types of home-based practices in which mothers engaged.
Managing data quality

We enhanced data quality in various ways. Our research design was guided by a phenomenological approach, and our sampling, data collection, and analytical choices were consistent with the tenets of this approach. Our interview protocol was based on sensitizing literatures and ensured that we were posing relevant topics that reflected participants’ experiences. The semi-structured nature of the interview protocol elicited comparable responses for systematic analysis. Yet, the open-ended nature of the questions was sensitive to unique parental involvement experiences (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013).

We utilized recruitment strategies associated with hard-to-reach minority populations. We recruited participants by partnering with a trusted community-based organization, utilized face-to-face invitations to participate, and provided incentives promptly after completing the interviews (George, Duran, & Norris, 2014; Roosa, Knight, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012). Additionally, the interviewer was matched with participants on race and gender, was culturally competent, and was trained to conduct high-quality interviews. To enhance rapport, she spent time at the preschool site prior to conducting the interviews.

Several factors enhanced the quality of the analyses. The interviews were transcribed verbatim in their entirety by a team member. A second team member checked them for accuracy. The PI and co-author had the disciplinary and methodological training to carry out analyses. They used collaborative coding by consensus that served as a reliability check (Hill et al., 2005; Olesen et al., 1994). Coding by two analysts decreased the likelihood of bias associated with single coders (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). These coding activities were further enhanced by the use of data displays, which entailed the systematic analysis of interview data (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). We included mothers’ accounts (quotes) to demonstrate that our interpretations were supported by the data (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Creswell, 2007). We relied on colleagues to review our analyses and emerging interpretations. These peer debriefings provided critical feedback and encouraged us to reexamine how our insights were grounded in the data and closely reflected mothers’ perspectives and daily experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Findings

Mothers’ involvement and school readiness: “It has to do with the parents and the school”

When we asked mothers why some children were prepared for kindergarten and other children were not, we learned about the role that parents believed they played in their children’s education. We identified two belief patterns, parent (family)-focused and partnership-focused, that informed how mothers perceived their role in promoting children’s school readiness. The parent-focused pattern entailed the idea that parents were primarily responsible for children’s school readiness. The partnership-focused pattern reflected the belief that parents and schools were jointly responsible for children’s school readiness.

Parent-focused involvement: “It has more to do with the parent, not so much with the school”

Four mothers exemplified the parent-focused parental involvement pattern. When asked why some children were prepared for kindergarten, Monique asserted: “Me personally, I think it falls on the parenting.” LaSenda elaborated on this idea:

The parents are the person or the people, the mother and father, who get the child ready. They really determine if the child is ready or not, because as long as you work with your child and have everything they need to go to school and work with them, then they should be ready. So long as the parent … put in the work, then the child should be ready.

In her direct comparison to the school, Destiny also assigned a major role to the parents:
I think it has more so to do with the parent, not so much as the school. They can go to classes, but it takes more than just them going to a Head Start program.... It also takes the parent to actually have to sit down and work with them, or sit down and talk to them.

Kim believed that schools could not be trusted and parents had to assume the primary responsibility for their children’s school readiness:

As parents, education starts at home .... You have to teach your kids. You can’t always assume the school is going to give the kids everything that they need.... I have seen too many kids fall through the cracks, coming into kindergarten and they don’t know a lot.

**Partnership-focused involvement: “It has to do with the parents and the school”**

The remaining 16 mothers ascribed shared responsibility between families and schools in promoting children’s school readiness. Both parents and teachers had a part to play. For example, Diamond told us: “If you don’t get no help at home, the teacher can’t do it all.”

Courtney believed that schools were not designed to prepare children without parental assistance:

A lot of parents think that they’re supposed to learn all this stuff when they come to kindergarten. But some things you’re supposed to come to kindergarten already knowing.... It gives you a jumpstart because if they had to learn everything they needed to in kindergarten, it’s not enough time in the day, not enough days in the year. As parents we have to be able to help prepare them along with ... pre-K programs.

Ariel believed the home set the tone for collaborations and challenged parents who believed that the school should take sole responsibility for children’s learning:

A lot of people say, “The teacher’s not teachin’ them this.” What are you teaching them at home? It starts at home. And then the teacher follows up with helpin’ them .... A lot of parents don’t see it that way. They think that when they go to school that’s all they supposed to do: Go to kindergarten school, learn.... No, parents are supposed to assist them.

Kalina described home and school synergistically, noting the efforts of each:

One of the main reasons [that children are ready for school] is that learnin’ starts at home. A lot of parents bring they kids to school and think that they should learn everything they need to know for school in pre-K and that’s really not the case.... If I’m not doin’ it at home and reinforcin’ also what’s happening at school, it’s not gonna be the same. I think a kid’ll be more successful if they have that learning at home and at school, versus just goin’ to school thinkin’ that it’s the teacher’s job to teach your child.

Anika tipped the collaboration in favor of parents, but highlights the idea of mutual responsibility:

I think parents have a lot to do with that. You have to help your child. They can’t do everything on their own.... Then as far as teachers, as well, them doing their jobs, making sure that when they’re with them, that the kids are doing what they’re supposed to.

As she contrasted children who were ready for school and those who were not, Aaliyah cited the respective and linked responsibilities of families and schools:

Some reason [why children are not ready] could be ’cause the parents didn’t push them. The teacher didn’t really go over the things that they would need. [For ready children,] it would be the opposite. Maybe their parents were there and pushed them. And their teacher knew what they’ll be learning in the next grade and made sure that they were ready.

Maliqua’s account explicitly identified the relational nature of home-school collaborations, which was key to successfully working together on children’s behalf:

It has to do with the parents and the school. I believe [this] because if the parent is not helping at home to get the child ready for school, then they are not going to know what to expect when they get to school. And if the teacher doesn’t reiterate with the parent, and the parent [and] teacher don’t have that relationship to see what they need to be doing at school and at home, like meeting together, then they are not going to be ready.
Factors affecting mothers’ involvement: “Just not havin’ the advantages of other kids”

While discussing parental responsibilities, mothers often volunteered their views about the factors that could facilitate or hinder their engagement with children. Such factors included parental knowledge, family structure, and parent resource-seeking efforts.

Amira was knowledgeable about the kindergarten transition, having experienced it with her older children. This enhanced Amira’s ability to promote her preschoolers’ transition:

I would say knowledge, parent knowledge. If you have had children before, maybe they have knowledge of what it is they are expected [to know]…. I feel as though if you have the knowledge you would try to do better…. I wouldn’t allow my child go to go to school knowing that it was something that I could have done to prepare them. So it would be an easier transition once they hit the door.

Crystal suggested that some parents abdicated their responsibility for children’s readiness:

You [parent] got to give them what they need to get ready…. It depends on the parent and the environment the child in, as far as preparing [them for school]…. It could be that the parents just don’t know or don’t want to do [anything].

The number of parents in the home was believed to impact parental involvement. LaShawn offered a sympathetic view of single parents unable to help their children at home:

Just not having the advantages of other kids…. My kids, they have their mom and dad. So if I was a single mother I wouldn’t have time to sit. I will be drained. Sometimes when I am tired and my husband come and he will work with them or he will take care of the household and I will have time to work with them. If I didn’t have that extra person to give me a break, then I would never have no time or energy to go over alphabets and give them that type of one-on-one, hands-on, whatever they need to start kindergarten.

Monique described unengaged single parents, implying that they were negligent:

Some parents, might be a single parent, that’s just not really preparing their child for the next steps…. They’re not really … that into their child. What they should be doing and should not be doing. That’s the only thing that I can kinda think of for a child to not be ready: They’re not getting training … at home. Because it starts at home first.

More generally, mothers’ beliefs about the key role that parents played in children’s school readiness encouraged mothers like Nia to blame parents when children were unready:

It could be the parents or whoever they’re living with. They see if they’re involved in encouraging [children] to learn new things, like writing their name, or coloring, because sometimes I see people that are not involved and their children aren’t ready…. Some people have children just to have them and they don’t want to teach them anything…. The child, he may learn some things, but he may not be school ready.

Several participants said that involved parents sought out resources like Head Start for their children and uninvolved ones did not. When asked why some children were ready for school, Brandy said: “Daycare, Early Head Start.” Conversely, Brandy said children who were not ready for school “had been more so kept at home, watchin’ TV, playin’ video games, [and] listenin’ to parents or older people talk.” Brandy assigned blame to families and their home activities.

In a chastising tone, Teyana asserted that it was parents’ responsibility to make early preschool learning opportunities available to their preschoolers:

Some children are ready because of [preschool] programs like this [one]. Parents put their kids in early childhood learning centers and then some parents don’t. They just wait until it’s time for them to go to kindergarten. Then they take them straight to kindergarten. I think that’s why a lot of kids at Raven’s age don’t be ready for school. It be hard for them because they so used to being at home or wherever they at, instead of at school.

Tenisha believed that it was parents’ responsibility to enroll their children in preschool, and to be fully engaged at the center. Not all parents were:

It could have somethin’ to do with the parents, them not bein’ 100% involved or really not caring. Some people may use this [preschool] facility as just a drop off type of thing. And then they just come pick them up, and not really concerned with what they did today, what they learned.
Giving her “honest opinion,” Dawn characterized parents, in this case her relatives, as “lazy” when they did not use preschool programs to promote their children’ school readiness:

All my children started school when they turn three…. When they turned three they were potty trained, it was time for them to get out and get involved and learn. Some parents don’t feel like that…. I have a few cousins…. They’re lazy. They want to sleep all day and feel like when they child turn five they’ll try to put them in kindergarten. When I think that your child should have a little bit more learning and little schooling before kindergarten. So once they get to kindergarten it won’t be nothing really too new to them.

**Home-based engagement: “We help at home”**

How did mothers implement their beliefs about their role in promoting children’s school readiness? As mothers talked about parental responsibilities, they used phrases like “work with them [children],” “put in the work,” and “help at home,” to convey their efficacy in promoting children’s school readiness. When we asked, “What are some of the things you are doing to help your child get ready for kindergarten?,” all of the mothers described home-based activities. We found no differences in home-based activities between mothers who exemplified parent-focused and partnership-focused beliefs. Mothers’ home-based activities focused on academic and socio-emotional skills they believed were critical for kindergarten.

Mothers detailed the academic skills they focused on. Aaliyah spent time “reading to Darryl and helpin’ him write.” Teyana, who was trying “to read to [Raven] more,” also inducted her teen daughter: “My oldest daughter reads to Raven and try to help her write her names.” LaSenda was helping Marcus with math and reading: “I have a board where I write on the board. And so I’m teaching him differences, like opposites in math. He does a lot of math. I’m reading [to him].” Ariel’s home routines with Asia and Tierra entailed number identification:

I have flashcards at home .... And I put them down and I ask them “what’s 10?” I usually put out one to 10 so they get an understanding. And I start pointing them out. If they not too sure about it, I start counting with them …. We do the workbooks; we read; we do the flashcards; and we do the poster-boards.... They should be scholars!

Kalia reported that in preparation for kindergarten, she was “reviewing” what Ike was learning in preschool. The family’s daily routine included academic work: “My day is usually long. So when we come home, there’s homework and there’s dinner, getting ready for the next day.... We do readin’ every day.” Mothers were creative instructors. Consider how Kim helped Demetrius learn to count:

Everything that you can image or think about, we were counting.... We count shoes, beans, straws.... And I was like, “Hey, how many do you think that is?” And he was like, “I don’t know,” and I was like, “Just count it then”.... Whatever I can imagine, we did it!

Mothers detailed some of the resource materials they used during their in-home activities. Tenisha received a “kindergarten packet” from Myers Preschool. She used the packet to help Marquis focus “basically on letter and number recognition, shapes, and things like that.” Brandy employed “learning websites on the computer” to promote DeAndre’s academic development. Nia used books, crossword puzzles, and construction paper. The Teachers’ Store was a source of learning materials for Nia: “They got a puzzle book for kids, the crossword puzzle for kids for kindergarten. So I thought that was interesting; so I had got it.” Ariel garnered materials from multiple stores: “I have flashcards at home that I bought from the Teachers’ Store…. I went to Dollar Bill [store]. They have the workbooks and Asia and Tierra want to do about three to four pages a night.” Ashlie shared: “[I use] reading books, coloring books, the little math books that you buy at Walgreens to help Precious understand, to count, and different stuff like that.”

Although LaShawn bought a V-Reader for Jada, and utilized various books and flash cards, she also included children’s learning programs to enrich the preschooler’s learning experiences:
[Learning programs] will keep Jada’s attention more than me just sitting there with the flash cards. She is not going to care. But if I put a cartoon on TV, she’ll sit and look. I just try to go with something that will work for her rather than make her frustrated … [or] make her sit down and do stuff that she really don’t wanna do. I try to make it fun.

Destiny also used children’s programs and developed a science project for Marquis:

We were watching Sesame Street one day and it was to use a coffee filter and you put rocks on there and you see how many rocks the coffee filter could hold before it sinks down…. We always put all the toys in the tub to find which ones float and which ones sink and why. And then I would ask Marquis why that one didn’t float and he would say, “cause it’s too heavy.”

Kim told us that she had “this new Hooked on Phonics video,” and described its merits: “I love that program and it doesn’t cost that much…. It has seven to eight lessons and it goes over different sight words and corresponding books and flashcards you can read with them.”

Several mothers boasted of “home libraries” devoted to their children’s reading activities. Amira reported that she read to Imani and Ahmad daily from their home library. Courtney said Niara had a large library of books curated by her grandmother and the two read together each night. She further told us: “I’m gonna try to get Niara into the library program with the Chicago Public Library.” Monique said:

Jamal has an array of books that we just go through and look at. He has a book that tells him all the parts of your body, the different types of clothes that we wear. What else is in the book? I want to say it has the colors, the shapes.

In their home-based academic activities, some mothers were particularly attentive to areas where they believed their children struggled. For example, Diamond said Shaneesha had trouble identifying letters: “She gets some confused that kinda look alike to her.” To increase Shaneesha’s letter recognition abilities, Diamond sometimes “scrambled” the letters up and asked the preschooler to identify them. Destiny told us that Marquis was “still writing very, very sloppy. I think it’s just boys in general. But we had to work with that.” Amira also said that she was putting in extra effort with Imani’s handwriting: “We are doing worksheets trying to get the hand form together…. Imani is kind of wild with her handwriting…. I am really working with Imani, tracing letters and holding a pencil right.”

Mothers’ home-based activities, including conversations, focused on children’s socio-emotional skills. Dawn talked to Darius about being prepared for the full day school schedule:

I told Darius he’s going to need all the rest he can get because … he won’t be taking naps anymore…. So when school starts I won’t have any problems…. At night, first eating, having his bath and no TV…. Everything have to be shut off.

Ashlie’s conversations focused on potential classroom challenges and remedies:

I talk to Precious. I tell her that she has to go to school. I tell her that she’s expected to do the right thing, not the wrong thing. She need to make all the right choices. She need to stop and think before she acts negatively. If it’s a problem, she needs to address it; tell the teacher; wait ‘til she come home and tell me. And then I’ll address it the next day.

In other instances, mothers practiced behaviors they believed would help their preschoolers’ adjustment. Crystal was helping Tyrone to manage misbehaviors that might arise:

As far as the behavior, with him that’s his biggest issue. We do this time out…. I will take certain things away from him, certain privileges. If he’s like doin’ his stubborn thing, I let him know, “That’s not somethin’ that’s acceptable.” … I tell them, “Express yourself, but you have to do it in a respectful manner.”

Like Crystal, LaSenda was helping Marcus to practice positive classroom behaviors:

We also practice where he sit down in one area so I can get him in one spot. He sits down and listens now. It’s just that in the classroom I’m hoping that when he gets with other friends, he doesn’t want to run and play, or play too much with friends.
Discussion

The study used qualitative interviews to examine the parental involvement beliefs and home-based practices of a sample of low-income, African American mothers of preschoolers transitioning to kindergarten. We sought to expand substantively and theoretically on this understudied topic. The research identified home-based parental involvement practices of low-income, African American mothers of preschoolers that supported children’s school readiness. Like existing studies, our mothers were actively engaged in a range of home-based early literacy activities that enhanced children’s academic and social skills (Sonnenschein et al., 2016; Weigel et al., 2006). Mothers used teaching resources, including videos, computers, television programs, boards, flashcards, and books (McWayne et al., 2013). Some mothers drew assistance from family members; still others made changes to children’s bedtime routines (Kang et al., 2017) and used community resources, such as libraries (Schaller et al., 2007). Additionally, mothers provided encouragement and engaged in conversations with children about anticipated challenges in kindergarten (Dove et al., 2015; Fantuzzo et al., 2004;Wasik & Hindman, 2010). Our findings align with existing research, suggesting the transferability of our data (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Our research adds to theoretical discussions of the HD-S parental involvement framework, which is focused on school-based settings and school-age children. Our home-based findings with preschoolers are consistent with the model. We found two belief patterns, the parent-focused and partnership-focused patterns (Walker et al., 2005). Given its mandate on parental involvement, we believe that Head Start played a key role in promoting mothers’ beliefs that parents should take a significant role in their children’s education (Marcon, 1999). Our findings nuance the HD-S model by highlighting the unique experiences of low-income, African American families. Unlike the partnership-focused group, the parent-focused group was comprised solely of mothers of boys. We hypothesize that this group had more concerns about their sons’ educational success and believe that maternal protection and oversight of the school are warranted. This view is consistent with research documenting that African American boys face more difficulties in school, including being disproportionally reprimanded for misconduct (Gilliam, 2005).

Consistent with the HD-S model, mothers expressed a belief in their ability to successfully impact their children’s transition to kindergarten. They provided examples of intentionally designed home-based activities that they believed promoted children’s school readiness. Mothers also believed they were knowledgeable about the academic and socio-emotional skills expected in kindergarten, and this information guided their home activities. It is likely that maternal knowledge of school readiness abilities and their skillfulness in promoting these abilities were, in part, informed by the Head Start program. Mothers likely learned of their children’s school readiness abilities through classroom observations and through interactions with teachers. Head Start parental involvement activities likely enhanced mothers’ competence in inculcating child school readiness abilities, as well. We believe mothers’ relatively high educational levels also promoted parenting competence. Our data also suggest that mothers’ decisions to engage in home-based activities were influenced by invitations from their children. Mothers’ observations of their children’s classroom struggles informed many of their remediation efforts, while children’s burgeoning skills mastery energized mothers’ ongoing home-based learning activities. More generally, our data elaborate on the HD-S model of school invitations, detailing how they operate in preschool settings.

Mothers’ accounts of future home-school collaborations addressed school invitations. Some mothers believed that schools were unsupportive of their children’s educational success. We believe that mothers’ distrust of schools and teachers are heightened in urban neighborhoods with underperforming schools where many children fail. Research finds that, unlike White middle-class families, low-income, African American parents of young children express more concerns about their children’s kindergarten transition (Barbarin et al., 2008), and expect their children to experience more challenges that parents will need to address (Suizzo, Pahlke, Yarnell, Chen, & Romero, 2014). Adding specificity
to the HD-S model, these findings suggest how inner-city schools hinder children’s school success and parental involvement.

Consistent with tenets of resilience theory, our data suggest that mothers’ home-based practices served as protective factors, promoting children’s readiness for kindergarten despite having demographic characteristics that placed them at risk for low levels of parental involvement. As an example of their competence, resilient mothers exhibited resource-seeking skills: Mothers identified and enrolled their children in Head Start to promote their children’s school readiness abilities. Indeed, research documents that the positive effects of Head Start are particularly significant for low-income children and children of color who demonstrate high performance levels in all academic and social areas in kindergarten (Raikes et al., 2006; see also Wong, Cook, Barnett, & Jung, 2008). Moreover, our findings suggest that mothers’ resource-seeking skills benefited them, as well. Characterized by teacher support and focus on parental empowerment, Head Start likely enhanced mothers’ parenting skills and encouraged mothers to believe that all children can be successful (Galper, Wigfield, & Seefeldt, 1997; Marcon, 1999).

Our findings nuance resilience theory by highlighting the subcultural aspects of parental involvement beliefs and practices (Hollingsworth, 2013; Logan, 1996; Walsh, 1996). Resilient mothering has been documented as a key survival strategy among African Americans whose family patterns are often stigmatized (Dickerson, 1995; Nichols, Gringle, & Pulliam, 2015). Cultural images depict women as the backbone of families who find a central identity as self-sacrificing and self-reliant mothers, despite limited support from the larger society (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015). Empirical investigations of low-income, African American mothers have described how “resilient” mothers buffer their children from neighborhood dangers and facilitate children’s learning and achievement (Authors citations; Rosier, 2000).

Reflecting what we are calling an “ideology of responsibility,” mothers assigned an inordinately high level of responsibility to parents, especially mothers, for ensuring children’s educational outcomes. We believe that the subcultural stress on motherhood partly explains the “ideology of responsibility” among our sample. This belief positively fueled mothers’ home-based activities, but led to blaming parents when children were unprepared for kindergarten. Our data suggest another subcultural particularity. We hypothesize that some mothers used the ideology of responsibility to morally distinguish themselves as responsible parents in communities where low-income families are often stigmatized (Hays, 2003).

**Applied implications**

Our findings have implications for Head Start. Mothers’ discussion of role construction documents that parents are willing and able partners who can play a key role along with teachers in helping low-income, African American preschoolers successfully transition to kindergarten. Mothers were actively preparing their children for kindergarten through home-based practices, and Head Start can enrich these efforts. Head Start can continue to support family activities by scaffolding new activities onto existing ones and extending classroom instructional lessons into the home (Mendez, 2010; Wasik & Hindman, 2010). The program’s support of home-based activities can ensure that parents’ activities focus on the skills expected in kindergarten (Mendez, 2010). Given the close relationships that Head Start teachers often have with families, they can support mothers of children experiencing challenges prior to kindergarten.

Our research provides recommendations to the elementary schools children will be entering. Head Start mothers are primed for positive home-school collaborations. Mothers believe it is important to be involved in their children’s education, including collaborating with teachers. Mothers will be guiding the kindergarten transition with a sense of parental self-efficacy and confidence in their abilities to help their children. Schools will need to recognize maternal strengths and support parents’ desires to be involved in their children’s education. Schools can encourage home-based activities, such as parental assistance with homework, to enhance classroom learning
These acts signal to parents that teachers value their involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). In-service teacher training that focuses on particular parental-involvement needs, concerns, and resources of low-income, African American families can also promote parental involvement (Green et al., 2007). Teachers will need to be attentive to barriers to school-based parental involvement that, when addressed, can supplement home-based activities (Mendez, 2010).

**Limitations**

Several limitations characterized our research. Focusing on a small number of families, our study provided descriptive detail on parental involvement experiences with an understudied population. Thus, the findings from our intentionally small sample are not generalizable. Our sample is also a unique one: Families who use Head Start are likely to be the more resilient families in low-income communities and our mothers may not typify all families in this setting. Additionally, active parental involvement among this sample likely reflects Head Start’s mandate on parental involvement and empowerment.

**Future research**

Large random samples using quantitative data can be used to explore the home-based issues raised in this study. More detailed qualitative case study research should be done to flesh out distinct parental involvement patterns among low-income, African American mothers living in inner-city communities. In particular, researchers should consider subcultural patterns that may influence mothers’ beliefs about parental involvement. It will be important for future studies to examine the experiences of participants that we likely missed in our recruitment efforts. Future longitudinal qualitative studies are needed that examine how parental beliefs, practices, efficacy, knowledge, and skills change over time. Future studies will also need to consider how the school environments that low-income, African American children attend promote or hinder parental perceptions that lead to parental involvement. Finally, more information is needed on how Head Start promotes parental involvement.

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**Note**

1. Names of the community, preschool site, and families are all pseudonyms.

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