

## **Parental Memories of School and Children's Early Learning: A Comparison of Higher-income and Lower-income Mothers**

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### **Abstract**

Parental histories and characteristics have a large impact on a child's learning environment both at home and with their connections to school. Recent research focuses on current practices and characteristics of parents, but often ignores the role of parents' educational histories and memories of school. The purpose of this study was to explore how mothers remember their school experiences and to examine similarities and differences on memories of school between higher-income and lower-income mothers, and how those memories guide their learning-related behaviors with their children. This qualitative study consisted of 16 interviews regarding recollections of schooling, utilizing a five-step process to develop themes and codes throughout the data. Findings show that both higher-income and lower-income mothers recalled vivid memories of school, and for almost all of the participants, they currently contribute to how they view schools and their relationships with their children's learning.

### **Introduction**

Over the past decade, research regarding the role in which families play in their children's educational development has garnered attention. There is limited research on parents' own memories of school; however, the way parents remember their own school experiences may influence the way in which they think about their children's schooling and the learning-related behaviors they engage in with their children (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004). While prior research has placed emphasis on the role that families play in their children's educational development and readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2003, 2007), there is limited research on parents' own memories of their schooling.

In this regard, the current study aims to provide a new understanding on how mothers' educational histories and experiences in school contribute to their current circumstances and attitudes toward schools, especially when considering the education of their own children. Understanding how parents conceptualize their own school experiences may enrich our understanding of parental cognitions about schooling. This understanding is critical for practitioners, given that parents are the primary managers of their children's environment and are responsible for children's learning outside of school (Mapp, 2003). The current study explores how mothers remember their school experiences while examining similarities and differences on memories of school between high-income and low-income mothers. The guiding questions were: (1) What do mothers remember about their experiences across their primary and secondary school years?, (2) How do recollections of schooling influence how mothers think about preparing their children for school?, and (3) How do the memories of high-income and low-income mothers differ from one another, if at all? Identifying commonalities and differences for mothers with higher and lower levels of education and income along with varying racial backgrounds can help us to understand how parental involvement among diverse groups may be qualitatively different in its form, function, and impact.

## Literature Review

School entry is a normative transition that influences a child's developmental process and is supported through academic socialization (Taylor et al., 2004). Socialization by parents frames the development of children's prosocial and antisocial behaviors, and is therefore particularly important to the process of preparing children for school (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Academic socialization, as a formal construct, has received only limited attention in the literature. However, what has surfaced in research is how some parenting behaviors promote positive school experiences for children and other types of parenting hinder children's academic success (Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Goodnow 1992). One study found that even students' perceived support from parents and parental expectations of school behavior had a positive influence on their academic test scores (Bowen, Hopsen, Rose, & Glennie, 2012). Academic socialization, including parental expectations for and involvement in children's education, has been found to be an important predictor of school achievement (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Apostoleris, 1997; Jimerson, Egeland & Teo, 1999; Suizzo, Jackson, Pahlke, McClain, Marrquin, Blondeau & Hong, 2016).

Taylor et al. (2004) provide a comprehensive review of the literature about parents' influences on their young children's academic development. They conclude that much of what is known comes from one of two perspectives: "what parents do" and "who parents are." The first perspective focuses on the behaviors in which parents engage that support or hinder their children's school-related success. The second perspective considers "who parents are," or the attitudinal, cultural, socioeconomic, and other personal characteristics that are thought to influence parents' academic socialization practices. Parents, through their personal experience, social and cultural characteristics and behaviors, provide a foundation for their children's early academic experiences. Their review extends the transition practices literature, by applying a developmental perspective on the process, within an ecological systems framework.

Based on their synthesis of pertinent literature within the family context and their ecological approach, Taylor and colleagues (2004) created a model of academic socialization that has been applied and widely discussed in the early childhood field, to study and understand the parent-driven process of preparing children for school. Moving from left to right, the model suggests that parents' own experiences in school lead to parental cognitions about school. Next, cognitions lead to their school-related behaviors, such as transition activities (e.g., reading to child, practicing numbers), the home environment (e.g., quality of home environment, learning materials), and school involvement aimed at supporting children's early adjustment to school and academic success. Finally, all of these activities occur under the broad umbrella of socioeconomic and cultural influences. While this model is helpful in displaying important parental contributions to the academic socialization process, it relies heavily on White and middle-class activities that are often identified as the "right" way to socialize children for school, setting the stage for more research with a deficit focus (Doucet & Tudge, 2007).

### Race and Class as Part of the Socialization Process

The national movement behind addressing disparities in school readiness stems from numerous studies on the academic achievement of children from different economic groups at the start of school (Booth & Crouter, 2008; Lee & Burkam, 2002). For example, children from low socioeconomic status (SES) households score significantly lower than middle- and upper-class children on math and reading tests at the beginning of kindergarten (Raver, Gershoff, & Aber, 2007). This problem is especially troublesome for children of color from low SES households

(Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). Because poverty and its negative consequences are more pronounced during early childhood than later on (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998), this period is a critical time to be both addressed and supported at national and local levels.

How parents choose to engage in the academic socialization process often looks different across households, based on the family's racial or class differences (Taylor et al., 2004; Morrison-Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo & Pituch, 2010; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993). Based on mainstream rhetoric and societal assumptions, many educators have a tendency to assume that lower-income families are not investing in children's learning and academic achievement (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004; Edin & Lein, 1997). Contrary to mainstream rhetoric, many low-income parents do provide positive learning experiences and respond effectively to the developmental needs of their young children, which often remains unnoticed and underappreciated (e.g., Machida, Taylor & Kim, 2002). Research has shown that home-based parental involvement, also referred to as academic socialization, may be as important as school-based involvement (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002). Recent research has found that African-American parents highly value academic socialization practices, and engage in a variety of home-based activities (Suizzo, Pahlke, Yarnell, Chen & Romero, 2014; Jeynes, 2003; Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002).

Contrary to expectations, Cooper et al. (2010) found that frequency of home-learning activities did not explain the lower achievement levels of children living in low-income homes, based on data provided by over 20,000 parents in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) data set. In general, parents living in low-income homes reported engaging their children in home-learning activities as often as higher-income parents, but this form of involvement did not appear to improve children's early achievement. Examining the home-learning activities separately revealed that activities related to reading and science significantly mediated associations between family poverty and kindergarten achievement. It is suggested that these forms of involvement are more closely in line with the academic demands that children face in the classroom than other home-learning activities.

Cooper et al.'s (2010) study provides valuable insight into family-driven activities that positively influence children's school success. However, the construct of parental involvement was limited to the measures provided in the ECLS-K. Variables were limited to number of children's books, number of children's records and whether the family has a computer used by the child. Enrollment in organized activities was the sum of whether children were involved in eight activities outside of the home (e.g., art, sports, music), and home learning activities was the mean of how often parents engaged their children in activities related to art, building, games or puzzles, chores, nature or science, reading, singing, physical exercise and telling stories at home. While this type of investigation is important in linking certain activities with child outcomes, it limits our understanding of alternative activities that may be taking place in many of these low-income homes. My proposed study will be able to widen our lens on the behaviors and activities that are shaping children's early beginnings, especially nontraditional activities, and increase our understanding of why parents provide certain experiences. It also draws on a small piece of the academic socialization literature suggesting that parental experiences in school may also help explain why parents engage with their children's education in certain ways.

## **Parental Recollections of School**

The kinds of experiences parents recall from school impact the way they view school and

children's academic outcomes (Raty, 2007). Taylor and colleagues (2004) contend that parents' own experiences in school are important considerations in understanding children's academic socialization. They offer that attitudes deriving from personal educational experiences guide the parents' processing of information they acquire about their child's schooling. Thinking about children's academic socialization in terms of intergenerational influences provides a way to consider parents' developmental histories and their current behaviors.

As adults recount their childhood experiences, the events selected for sharing are ones that they have come to see as formative in their lives (Lapadat, 2004). Memories do not constitute objective truth, but a type of personal truth, upon which belief systems and daily actions are built and provide an abundance of insight into the factors that contribute to behavior (Rothenberg, 1994). It is suggested that childhood memories of school are reactivated as parents prepare their own children for similar experiences (Taylor et al., 2004), and that both positive and negative school memories remain with individuals for decades (Turunen, 2012). Parents' recollections are always selective social interpretations; however, these interpretations contribute to the formation of a more general attitude towards education and children's learning (Raty, 2007). Impressions of those school experiences may be more influential than the details of the actual experiences.

Based on the notion that school memories are carried with us for many years, it is important to think about how positive or negative memories of schooling may currently influence parents' relationships with schools. Parents with positive attitudes may pay proactive attention to incidents that speak for the child's progress; whereas, parents with negative attitudes may pay greater attention to potential problems, which they might be prone to exaggerate (Raty, 2007). Parents who characterize their school experiences as warm, positive, and supportive may have an internal working model according to which schools are positive places for their children. In contrast, parents who characterize their school experiences as negative, and thus view schools as hostile, unfair, or rejecting, may have negative working models of school (Taylor et al., 2004). For example, ethnographic research by Reay (2001) revealed that working class women were more likely to recount their own negative experiences in school, and were thus challenged in offering encouragement and enthusiasm to their children when they were struggling in school. Emotional Capital, or "the emotional resources passed on from mother to child through processes of parental involvement" (p. 568) was lower for these families. The mother's own emotional experiences regarding school, or perhaps most importantly, those she has internalized, were transmitted directly or indirectly to the child.

Similarly, Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2015) found that parental involvement can promote positive educational outcomes, and that parental involvement is influenced by parents' own histories of involvement. The study highlighted the disparities of parental involvement between White, higher-income families and African-American, lower-income families. Through qualitative interviews with low-income, African-American mothers of preschoolers, Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez identified various levels of parental engagement in their children's education, such as patterns of intergenerational continuity and discontinuity.

Barnett and Taylor's (2009) study on parental recollections draws upon Taylor et al.'s (2004) model of academic socialization to explore intergenerational influences on children's transition to school. A primary goal of their study was to address the contributions to parental transition processes, including parental recollections of school, and current parent and family factors such as income and self-perceptions. This was the first study to examine this phenomenon, and they hypothesized that parental recollections as well as parent and family factors would contribute independently to the use of transition practices (e.g., reading to the child, saying the alphabet,

talking about meeting a new teacher, rules, etc.) Their study, that involved structured interviews with 76 mothers from a diverse community sample, examined the general positivity or negativity of mothers' recounted recollections of their own school experiences and their influence on preparation activities. Mothers who recalled the school involvement of their parents more positively reported engaging in academic transition activities with their own children, even after controlling for income.

A recent study by Miller (2015) revealed that transitions, social experiences, and special education labels were the most meaningful memories for parents in preparing for children's school entrance. In the study, 24 parents of lower income backgrounds were interviewed about their own memories of school and their current thoughts and behaviors as they prepared their child for school. This study demonstrates how the experiences that parents recall from their first-hand exposure to school settings impact the way they prepare children for school.

While intergenerational influences are notably influential, experiences that contribute to one's self-esteem and self-efficacy should not be ignored. In Mapp's (2003) qualitative work on school connectedness, parents described how their own performance in school had a profound influence on their desire to be involved in their children's education. Many of the parents stated that they did not make the most of their K-12 or higher education experience. Parental self-efficacy, especially in regards to school, may in part be influenced by the parents' own experiences in school, which in turn may shape their current confidence in helping their children succeed academically (Barnett & Taylor, 2009). This perspective may help explain lower levels of parental involvement, especially in school-based activities, among low-income parents (Lareau, 1996) who may feel more intimidated by the school environment and by teachers because of their own experiences, and therefore feel less confident in engaging with schools. Low-income parents who may have attended sub-par schools, or who may have under-achieved at school, could be more likely to remember negative school experiences; which in turn, shape their cognitions related to their own children entering school (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999).

Intergenerational influences (i.e., parent to child) have been highlighted as important influences within parents' own school recollections and in guiding parents' cognitions about education, and may also drive parental involvement. Putallaz, Costanzo, and Smith (1991) proposed a model of intergenerational continuities relevant to school behaviors, involvement, and connectedness. Their model suggests that if one's own parents displayed high levels of school involvement, cognitive and emotional support, and who clearly communicated value for education, those individuals may be more likely to have internalized a positive attitude toward school. These individuals will approach the schooling of their own children in a similarly supportive and involved manner. Likewise, parents whose own parents were less involved in school, less supportive, and who failed to communicate a high value for education may be at greater risk for providing a similar lack of support for their own children as they transition into the school setting.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A supportive model of parent involvement exists in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of human development. Ecological systems theory is a developmental theory that describes the individual in relation to the system as a whole (White & Klein, 2008). According to the ecological theory, learning and school success is a child, family, peer, school, community and political process (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1986) believed that children should be viewed within the complex systems of their changing environments. This perspective considers interactions that occur in the child's

immediate environment, as well as relationships among individuals and institutions within that environment. According to Bronfenbrenner, the child is involved within spheres of systems such as a microsystem (role and relations), mesosystem (two or more microsystems interrelating with the individual), an exosystem (excluding the individual but impacting the individual), and a macrosystem (culture) (White & Klein, 2008). I employed Bronfenbrenner's (1986) bioecological perspective to consider maternal histories (chronosystem), and how those memories influence their attitudes and relationship with their child's school at the mesosystem and microsystem levels. An educational framework that acknowledges the web of multi-layered influences is now viewed as a more accurate explanation of how and why children learn and achieve in school.

Children's learning takes place reciprocally and within a social context; and therefore, many scholars endorse that early learning may be best understood through an ecological perspective (Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004; Machida, Taylor, & Kim, 2002; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahan, 2000). However when researchers apply this theory to investigations, little emphasis is placed on the consideration of time in the chronosystem, and the educational histories that accompany parents. Taylor et al. (2004) proposed a conceptual model of academic socialization and achievement, which supports the central ideas of ecological theory and suggests that children's socialization evolves under the broader context of socioeconomic and cultural contexts. This model extends our understanding of child development by emphasizing how parents' school experiences shape their beliefs about schooling and their academic socialization practices. This refers to not only the passage of chronological time (e.g., days, months, years), but also to historical and social dimensions of time. One aspect of the chronosystem pertains to the cumulative effects of an entire sequence of developmental transition over an extended period of the person's life, and the impact of personal and historical life events on family and individual processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Such a system helps to explain how the life experiences of a parent may influence his or her approach to a child's schooling at the proximal level.

## Methods

### Participants

Data for this student-led project were collected as part of a larger university-funded study of families and school readiness. Participants were recruited in a mid-sized Midwestern city through child care centers and local fliers. The sample consisted of 16 mothers of children aged 4½ to 5½ years old. The sample was economically diverse with some mothers relying fully on state and federal funding and other mothers reporting household incomes over \$150,000 USD. There was also great variation with levels of education. A large portion reported their highest education level to be a college degree (25%), with fewer reporting some college (12.5%), a graduate degree (18.8%), high school completion (18.8%), less than high school (6.3%), vocational training (18.8%). Most mothers identified as White/European American (75%), and fewer identified as African-American (18.8%) or Multiracial (6.3%). Based on criteria for the study, participants who were labeled as "lower-income" received financial assistance from the state, while participants labeled as "higher-income" reported a household income above the state's median income. Sample characteristics are offered in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	Mean (SD)	Range
Mother age (years)			35.72 (6.81)	23–44
Mother education				
Less than high school	1	6.3%		
High School/GED	3	18.8%		
Trade/Vocational School	3	18.8%		
Some College	2	12.5%		
BA/BS	4	25.0%		
Masters	3	18.8%		
Mother race/ethnicity				
Black/African American	3	18.8%		
White/European American	12	75.0%		
Bi-racial/Multi-racial	1	6.3%		
Mother marital status				
Single/Never married	5	31.3%		
Married	10	62.5%		
Living with a Partner	1	6.3%		

### Data Collection

This was a secondary analysis of interview data. The original data collection involved one-on-one interviews with mothers during a home visit. Mothers were asked to describe their academic and social memories from school, such as their academic success, relationships with teachers and peers, motivation, and social involvement. To conclude the interview, mothers were asked to consider how their own school experience may or may not currently influence how they are preparing their child for school. Interviews ranged in length from 14–45 minutes and were audio-recorded. All interviews were fully transcribed and then checked for accuracy by another researcher.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis process began with the creation of individual outlines of the transcripts and sharing the outlines at an analysis meeting with the principal investigator. A thematic coding approach was then used to inductively analyze the outlines for preliminary themes (Boyatzis, 1998). The process involved five prescribed steps to inductively developing a code: (1) reducing the raw information, (2) identifying themes within subsamples, (3) comparing themes across subsamples, (4) creating a code, and (5) determining the reliability of the code. A working codebook was then created that was applied to the full transcripts. NVivo 9 was used to manage the data, as well as code and further interrogate codes through a constant comparison process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In many cases it was difficult to assign one theme to each section of the transcripts, because many of the themes operated in tandem in any given quotation or memory. Therefore, some of the memories were double-coded as they contained elements of different themes within the participant's interview. As coding and meetings proceeded, I identified four main memory-oriented themes that were continuously linked to mothers' current behaviors and practices: (1) intergenerational influences, (2) diversity and school traits, (3) transitions, and (4)

social involvement. I then refined a coding scheme based on these themes and subthemes that clustered within them (Boyatzis, 1998). The quotes remaining in the four themes were then identified and reviewed.

Reliability was achieved by determining consistency between the researchers' coding of transcripts, by comparing their independently coded transcripts and discussing discrepancies until reaching agreement. Bazeley's (2007) approach to lumping data was used for coding purposes. During this process, I met with the principal investigator periodically to discuss any issues or questions with the application of codes. Based on the ongoing process of coding and interrogating data with software assistance, I began to identify the most frequent and meaningful themes to report in the findings.

In order to address researcher bias, it was important to continually address my positionality as a researcher. As a White female from a middle-class, suburban family, I shared many characteristics with the lower-risk mothers. However, I have also lived and taught abroad, which contributes to my appreciation and understanding of individuals from different backgrounds. These personal characteristics and experiences influence how I see the world and interpret data. For that reason, I engaged in critical conversations with others to explore my research lens and critically question assumptions I had about participants and emerging findings (Berg, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

## Findings

Four themes robustly captured varying degrees of similarities and differences between high- and low-income mothers' memories about why and how they are involved in their children's education and the factors that influence their participation. Although research suggests that academic socialization efforts differ by social class, the four themes supported that the two samples had more similarities than differences. However, the degree to which each theme made an impact of maternal behaviors varied widely between the groups. Each theme is described below with quotations as pieces of evidence, and it was common for themes to operate in tandem as demonstrated by a number of quotes. The quotes represent a wide array of the sample size; however there are a few occasions with multiple quotes from a single interview. It should be noted that although the four themes are presented independently from one another, it was common for the memories to overlap multiple themes at the same time. Similarly, while this research focuses mainly on the similarities and differences between mothers of varying SES classes, other factors in the analysis process were taken into consideration such as race, educational history, and marital status in order to better understand the findings.

### Theme One: Intergenerational Influences

Mothers described their own parents' level of involvement as a main source of motivation to be involved with their child's schooling. This included circumstances in which mothers felt the desire to continue practices of their own parents', as well as circumstances in which mothers felt the desire to avoid recalled parental practices.

Both samples reported memories of positive involvement and desire to continue those practices with their own children. For example, a White mother from a low-income background shared the practices she wished to continue with her children, while also elaborating on what she would like to improve upon from her upbringing.



My dad always commented to get my homework done. But my mom, she provided the shelter, food, and love. I think that gave us a lot of independence, and it's an important thing to remember with my kids, although I would like to be a little bit more, you know, hands-on with academics or school volunteering like that.

Both samples also reported memories of negative involvement, such as a lack of involvement, or unawareness. However, mothers who reported limited or no involvement did not negatively express those feelings towards their parents. A White mother from a higher-income background shared a brief memory of her parents' lack of involvement during her education.

My parents were not involved in my schooling at all. I could have done bad and I wouldn't have gotten in trouble for it. You know, I could have done poorly. Um, I don't think it was, it wasn't a big concern [for them].

Likewise, an African-American mother from a low-income background stressed how the circumstances from her childhood and her current position influenced her upbringing. She reflected on the lack of involvement from her own mother and her desire to change that for her own children.

I think it [her parent's involvement] could have been more. I think things are just so different. I think if my mom would have advocated more and had the teachers paid more attention, maybe it would have been, I don't know... My experience is that I am definitely going to be right on top of it and I have already told them the things to watch for and not label him or flag him don't let him slip through, you know.

The memories of mothers from lower and higher income backgrounds described the intergenerational impact of academic socialization practices and family involvement from one generation to the next. Participants shared a variety of ways in which parents can have a profound impact on their children's education, based on the level of involvement they experienced as children. Whether the mothers recalled positive or negative experiences of their parents' involvement, both samples considered how those practices influence the way they prepare their own children for education and use those memories as a source of motivation to be involved in their children's early learning and education. If their parents were involved they wanted to provide the same involvement for their child, and if their parents were not involved they wanted to break that cycle and become involved in their children's schooling.

## **Theme Two: Diversity and School Traits**

Mothers from higher- and lower-income groups identified racial and socioeconomic student diversity as important to children's learning and education. The two groups commented on lack of diversity as a setback and enriched diversity as a benefit. Mothers from both samples recalled the benefits of learning in a diverse school setting, and the limits of learning in a monoracial, monocultural setting. Both samples considered diversity issues in the future of their children's education.

Higher-income mothers tended to report more memories of a lack of racial and/or socioeconomic diversity and how it negatively impacted their experiences in school. A Biracial mother from a higher-income background commented on her own education, and how that has impacted the upbringing of her own children.

My classrooms were quite White so to have a classroom that's a little more real world experience, we've talked about that... where to go that it wouldn't be culture shock when you're

out of high school, like this mixture of cultures and people and experiences and trying to expose them [her children] to that.

Mothers from lower-income backgrounds tended to report more memories of enriched racial and/or socioeconomic diversity. For example, this White mother from a lower-income background shared a memory of a high school experience.

I was like the only White girl on my basketball team, so I was aware of different social situations and sought them out. I went to a really good mixed school, a realistic, mostly Black and White [school]. I don't remember any racial tensions at my school.

Later in the interview, the same mother reflected on the school environment she desires for her children.

And then we moved to [city name] and I'm like, uhhhhh, painfully White! I wasn't comfortable with my kids being in that system.

As a subcategory of diversity, mothers also recalled how well they "fit" into the school type in which they were enrolled. Both groups commented on the various types of school settings in which they attended and how that impacted their academic and social needs. Both samples expressed diverse, public schools as an opportunity for cultural enrichment. One White, higher-income mother recalled the value of attending a local public school and how she hope her children will attain similar benefits and belonging through the enrollment at a local public school.

It was just important for us to try and find a place that would give them a little bit more cultural sensitivity to different groups of people, and how you work with all kinds of people; they're going to be much better at it than I ever will be.

A White, lower-income mother reflected on the negative experience she had at a Catholic school, thus motivating her to send her children to public school.

I think the public schools were way better, I mean, I just really struggled at Catholic school. I mean just behaviorally I had an awful experience. But public schools I thought were great you know.

Overall, the theme of diversity was viewed as something necessary and enriching by both samples. Mothers from higher-income backgrounds typically commented more on finding a diverse community both within the school system as well as the surrounding community so that their children could experience the "real world" at an early age. Mothers who attended a racially and socioeconomically diverse setting often attributed the enriching contribution to their development in a positive way and hoped their children would have the same. However, mothers from lower-income backgrounds did not reference "seeking out" or "choosing" diverse places like the higher-income mothers. The action of making diversity possible for children seemed to be a luxury for the higher-income mothers.

### **Theme Three: Transitions**

Mothers from both samples described adjusting to a new school environment, or transitioning between grade levels as a sensitive or disruptive time. Memories of transitioning periods included academic struggles, social barriers with peers, and difficulty assimilating to a new environment. Both groups reported points of transition as stressful with feelings of insecurity. One White, low-income mother vividly recalls her first days of school as a kindergartener.

I remember kindergarten for me being terrifying. I still remember clinging to my mom. The experience of transitioning was terrifying. So, I don't want his [her son's] experience to be like that.

The same mother also noted the nervousness she felt as her son transitioned from preschool to kindergarten. To better prepare her child for school, they visited the school on multiple occasions.

A White, higher-income mother recalled a memory of transitioning to junior high and how it impacted her social life as an adolescent.

In grammar school I had friends, and I, you know, it was a good time. When we switched to 7th grade it took me a while to get friends.

This mother emphasized her desire to support her daughter's social readiness for schools. She worried about friend groups and bullying, which were guiding her thoughts and actions for the transition to kindergarten.

Both groups reported a desire for educational continuity for their own children. Many mothers reported wanting to keep school life "stable" for children. An earlier quoted White, higher-income mother expressed her relief about the longevity of her son's current educational program.

I picked the daycare that he's at now because it's really structured like a Montessori. And that's been really good for him as far as learning. Also, that it's kindergarten to eighth grade, that's going to be huge for him not to have to switch.

Overall, both groups shared sensitive memories of both positive and negative experiences regarding the transitional processes in their education. The mothers' stressed their insecurities and concerns regarding transitions into kindergarten as well as across their K-12 schooling, while also embracing the opportunity for change and development.

#### **Theme Four: Social Involvement**

Mothers identified personal connections within the school environment and social involvement (i.e. extracurricular activities, school traits, goodness of fit) as meaningful and an important aspects in considering their children's education. Extracurricular involvement provided positive experiences for mothers; however, they were not accessible for all mothers – especially mothers from lower-income backgrounds.

Higher-income mothers reported more memories of positive social involvement such as active participation in extracurricular activities. For example, one mother expressed her reasoning for participating in various activities when she was in school.

I wanted to be in the know about everything, I probably joined everything because I didn't want to not know what was going on at that place.

She later continued to state her concern about her children's social activity, and how their experiences may differ from her own.

My children are much more shy than I am, and so it's wanting to make sure that they have a few close connections. It's really important, and I actually remember feeling that way up until probably until junior high when I became a social butterfly. So, I want to make sure that they have someone they're strongly connected with.

Conversely, lower-income mothers reported more negative memories related to the social side of school, or having experienced social barriers to their involvement. Upon reflection, the mothers expressed the desire to create a better social environment for their own children.

One African-American, lower-income mother candidly shared her lack of social involvement with her peers throughout junior high and high school.

I would say I was more of a loner. I wouldn't be with people too much. Had other things in my life. Drugs, drugging, smoking, you know. The typical stuff teenagers do.

This same mother later expressed her regret and the desire to have been more involved in the school community. She blamed her social decisions as the reason she struggled in school and making connections. She currently worries about her own children and making sure they avoid negative social choices that could interfere with school success.

Both groups indicated that opportunities for extracurricular involvement and social belonging at school were important to their overall experiences. Social involvement helped to frame how the mothers remembered their school experiences while also allowing them to take the time to consider their current attitudes towards their children's placement. Mothers also recalled that negative social choices or other social barriers kept them from thriving in school, which is something they worry about for their children.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Findings from my study offer insight into how parents' school experiences can influence decision-making regarding children's preparedness for and enrollment in education. This study shows how eliciting stories from parents can be helpful in understanding the diverse backgrounds of children. Almost all mothers stated that their own school experiences helped to shape the way they are preparing their own children for school. Both samples shared how their memories of being "parented" made an impact on their approach to being involved, thus suggesting an intergenerational dynamic to school relationships. The mothers also stated school traits, transitioning periods, social involvement, and diversity within the school as major influences in considering their children's educational needs. This corresponds well with Miller's (2015) recent research and her findings, with similar themes emerging.

The findings from my study identified more similarities than differences between high-income and low-income mothers across the four major themes; however, the degree to which each theme made an impact on the two samples was one of the major differences between the samples. Both samples attached a significant deal of emotion to their stories, indicating the idea that the significance of life events rests on affective reactions to those events and that emotions play an important role in influencing parenting (Dix, 1991). My findings suggest that mothers, regardless of SES status, are concerned about their children's readiness and academic success and are calling upon their own memories to shape the way they prepare their children for school. My findings also reflect the study by Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2015), who found that parents' desire to be engaged in academic socialization, regardless of race and background, is an important aspect in preparing children for school. In this regard, researchers and practitioners should be careful of the assumptions that are made of low income, marginalized populations as the findings point to mothers were concerned about their children's readiness and academic success, regardless of SES. Both samples consciously aim to replicate the positive experiences or avoid the unfavorable circumstances in which they endured. These findings support Machida and colleagues' (2002) and Fantuzzo & McWayne's (2002) studies that even in low SES households, academic socialization is a major factor in a child's preparedness for education. Specifically, the theme of diversity seemed to overlap across all major themes, demonstrating its' importance in the memories and experiences of the mothers and their desires to enrich current practices with their children. Mothers from both

samples advocated for diversity as something positive and meaningful for their children's education and in helping them for their future.

These stories are an excellent way for schools and families to create a meaningful bond with one another. While family outreach is traditionally thought of as a unilateral process (Bernhard, Chud, Lefebre, & Lange, 1996; Christensen, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999), it is important that both sides invest equal effort. Practitioners can consider these personal histories in order to better understand the home environment of children, and how the stories alter between families of high and low SES status. Parents can give teachers access to the complex social, emotional, and educational issues that often surround students' early childhood education.

### **Limitations**

This study should be reviewed with the acknowledgement of limitations. Categorizing the participants into "high-income" and "low-income" groups assumed that current income levels was relevant to potential divisions in the types of memories mother report. However, there was not a clear division in the types of memories mothers report based on current income levels. Additionally, while there was some racial and economic variation in our sample, the majority of families in the study identified as White with income levels at or above the state average. The sample also demonstrates only the mothers' SES status and background at the time of the study rather than the SES status of the mothers when they were children. As described, this study focused solely on maternal histories. Future research should consider other family members' school experiences and their influence on children's preparedness for school.

### **Conclusion**

Building rapport with families is important to helping educators and parents become aware of motivations for their thoughts and actions. Taking the time to listen to parents should start early and should continue throughout the entirety of a child's education. Additionally, it is important to train educators on the family perspective rather than just the school perspective, and to make schools aware of structural inequities in our traditional approaches, which may contribute to inequities in children's education. Through this perspective, we can create a more beneficial support system to families and children.

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