How African American Parents Understand Their and Teachers' Roles in Children's Schooling and What this Means for Preparing Preservice Teachers

Fabienne Doucet

New York University, New York, New York, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 April 2008

To cite this Article: Doucet, Fabienne (2008) 'How African American Parents Understand Their and Teachers' Roles in Children's Schooling and What this Means for Preparing Preservice Teachers', Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 29:2, 108 — 139

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/10901020802059441

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10901020802059441

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
How African American Parents Understand Their and Teachers’ Roles in Children’s Schooling and What this Means for Preparing Preservice Teachers

FABIENNE DOUCET
New York University, New York, New York, USA

Preservice teachers are socialized by their own raced, classed, and gendered experiences to expect “caring parents” to behave and contribute in certain ways to their children’s schooling. Preservice teachers who come from widely divergent backgrounds from the communities in which they serve can sometimes be skeptical of parents who are not involved in children’s schooling in ways that are familiar from their own upbringing. Moreover, much of the existing scholarship on parent involvement and the transition to school takes a top-down approach that discounts the important knowledge parents bring to the table. This is a study of African American parents of young children who were preparing to transition to kindergarten or first grade that proposes an alternate conversation about what we can learn from parents when we examine their ways of framing and enacting “involvement” in their children’s school lives. African American parents and caregivers (N=25) participated in qualitative interviews. Thematic analyses of the interviews revealed that participants constructed preparation for the transition to school broadly, as preparation for the “real world.” I will discuss the implications of the study for teaching, teacher education, and future research, so that preservice teachers and teacher educators can begin to build a greater imagination for parent involvement.

Most teachers at Garden School . . . had little notions of why working parents might not be able to make midday appointments with their children’s teachers. They suspected disinterest, apathy, and even antagonism and were baffled and troubled by the failure of these parents to “care” about their children. (Valdés, 1998, p. 5)

Recently, while giving a guest lecture in a class for undergraduate preservice early childhood educators, a very sincere young woman (we’ll call her Shayla) talked about a...
young newly arrived immigrant boy in her classroom. He was having some difficulty adjusting to school and Shayla wished that his parents “just cared a little more” about his education. According to Shayla, either the mother or father dropped off the child at school each morning, but they never appeared at the school for other occasions due to their work schedules. The boy was picked up after school each day by his grandfather. None of these adults said much to the teachers about the boy (though this would have been a challenge, Shayla admitted, given that the family spoke a dialect of Chinese not spoken by any staff at the school). The boy was in distress and Shayla was deeply concerned. He spent the majority of each day crying, away from the other children and the teachers. The head teacher in the class refused to allow Shayla and the other teachers to comfort, hold, or soothe the boy who, according to the head teacher, had to learn to be independent and that his tears would not successfully buy him attention. Shayla did not know many details about the boy’s life, his migration history, or his family circumstance, but she did know one interesting detail: for the first 2 weeks of the boy’s residence in the United States, he spent every day hidden by his mother in the factory where she worked.

We could surmise a number of scenarios that might have led to this—fear that enrolling the child in school might lead to questions about legal status in the U.S.; concern about the child’s preparedness for a school setting; worry that the child would be sad or feel abandoned at school—none of which connote apathy on the part of the parents. Yet for Shayla, the parents’ and grandfather’s lack of interaction with teachers and lack of “involvement” at the school was a clear indication that they did not care—at least not about the child’s schooling.

As the quotation taken from Valdés (1998) attests, Shayla is not alone in equating parent involvement (PI) at school with caring. Indeed, much of the popular rhetoric surrounding parent involvement has been couched in the language of “caring” about one’s children, particularly when the objects of scrutiny are parents of color (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006) and working-class or poor parents (Beresford & Hardie, 1996; Brantlinger, 1985; O’Connor, 2001). According to the popular script, parents who come to school, meet with teachers, read to children at home, etc., care about their children, about their learning and their success in school. Therefore parents who do not engage in these activities must not care (Abdul-Adil & Farmer). There is a grave naïveté and chauvinism implied by the assumption that lack of presence at schools signifies apathy. Preservice teachers are socialized by their own raced, classed, and gendered experiences to expect “caring parents” to behave and contribute in certain ways (Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003). Failed expectations result in sentiments towards families as apathetic and children as neglected. Preservice teachers who come from widely divergent backgrounds from the communities in which they serve can sometimes be skeptical of parents who are not involved in children’s schooling in ways that are familiar from their own upbringing.

As a number of scholars in teacher education have pointed out, preparation for building mutually respectful relationships with a wide range of families is sorely lacking from our teacher education programs (Broussard, 2000; Chavkin & Williams, 1988; de Acosta, 1996; Foster & Loven, 1992; Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003; McBride, 1991; Morris & Taylor, 1998; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997; Tichenor, 1997, 1998). In this article, I will use a study I conducted with African American parents of young children who were preparing to transition to kindergarten or first grade to frame a conversation about what we can learn from parents when we examine how they themselves frame and enact “involvement” in their children’s school lives. I will discuss the implications of my study for teaching, teacher education, and future research, so that preservice teachers and teacher educators can begin to build a greater imagination for PI.
The study from which this article draws its data was guided by an interpretive approach that borrows from the traditions of phenomenology and ethnography (Hultgren, 1989), in order to explore how African American parents and caregivers prepared children for the transition to school. From the themes that emerged out of that study, I have selected ones specifically related to parents’ perceptions of their roles and the roles of teachers to make a case for broadening existing definitions of PI to be more reflective of families’ actual ideas about and enactments of PI. I found that while teachers may have a curriculum and formal plan for teaching children valuable skills, parents do not necessarily formulate their activities with their children in such concrete ways. Rather, the parents I interviewed communicated a sense that their approach to preparing children for school focuses on the child as a whole person and does not see preparation for school as the end goal—rather, this is preparation for life. Using semistructured interview data, I will demonstrate that African American parents take an active and purposeful role in preparing their children for school and for the world. I also will show that the parents of the children in our classrooms have much wisdom to impart, although this wisdom often is not sought by teachers and other professionals (Colbert, 1991; Doucet, 2002; Doucet & Tudge, 2007).

A Critical Review of the Parent Involvement Literature

In a booklet entitled *Your Child Entering School* published by the North Carolina Guilford County Schools (1995), parents are given an overview of how they are expected to prepare their children for the transition to school. The booklet is organized into sections entitled “Protect your child’s health,” “Teach your child to be safe,” “Show your child that learning is fun,” and “Encourage your child to develop helpful habits.” In each section, these mandates are explained in more detail, with specific recommendations for how they can be carried out. Interspersed throughout the booklet also are messages about the developmental significance of the transition to school, emotions the transition may elicit for both parents and children, and, most prominently, directives to parents for how they can be active participants in their children’s schools. What is missing from the booklet is an equally detailed outline of what roles teachers and other school personnel play in helping children through the transition to school. The booklet thus symbolizes what I propose is a top-down approach to engaging parents in the home–school connection.

Like the booklet, much of the literature on the family–school connection in early childhood emphasizes the importance of parents preparing their children for school by familiarizing themselves with the school system. For the most part, this research has framed the ideal relationship between parents and teachers as a partnership, one in which parents and teachers work together to provide children with quality educational opportunities and experiences (Berger, 1995; Comer, 1993; Gelfer, 1991; Honig, 1979; Leeper, Witherspoon, & Day, 1984; Read, Gardner, & Mahler, 1993; Swick, 1992). In this model, the ideal is that homes and schools have congruent learning goals, content, and processes, which best equip children with the skills they will need in school. Specifically, parents are expected to learn the “rules of engagement” with the school and work within parameters of acceptable involvement that have been set by the school itself (Graue, 1993a, 1993b; Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001; Mapp, 2003). Brown (1990) has referred to the “ideology of parentocracy” to describe the new emphasis on the rights of parents to be centrally involved in every facet of their children’s education. However this ideology of “rights” to be involved quickly has become more about an obligation on the part of parents to participate, and more than that, to participate in very specific ways (Fine, 1993). Parents
African American Parents and Preservice Teachers


Among the many reasons this approach is problematic, one of the most salient is that it assumes an ideal cultural model that, if not followed, indicates a deficit, particularly when the discourse is about families and children of color and working-class or poor families (Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Crozier, 1999; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, 2001; García, 1996; Lareau, 1989; O'Connor, 2001; Scott-Jones, 1994). While the discourse of cultural deprivation has waned in academic circles, the notion that parents who are not members of the White, American, middle-class mainstream in some way lack the proper educational values lingers like a “ghost” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) in the popular imagination.

The prevalent “at-risk” label used to describe Black children is incongruent with the strong African American legacy of placing a great deal of importance on education (Billingsley, 1992; McAdoo, 1997; Scott-Jones, 1994). In fact, the investment of African American parents in their children’s educational success has been discussed and documented by numerous scholars (cf. Huttman, 1991; Rosier & Corsaro, 1993; Scott-Jones, 1987). In response to research suggesting that Black parents are not as involved in the school system as their White counterparts, other scholars have pointed out that schools often are wedded to an educational philosophy that is culturally mismatched with African American approaches to education (Phenicie, Martinez, & Grant, 1986). Willis (1992) argued that African American children actually have unique learning styles, which are neither acknowledged nor encouraged by curricula constructed around European American values and expectations. According to Wilson and Banks (1994), “The emphasis of traditional education has been on molding and shaping these [African American] children so they fit into an educational process designed for children of another race or class” (p. 1). Echoing these authors, Hargis (1997) proposed that the “problem” of low achievement is not with children themselves, but with the inflexibility of curricula that do not allow for variations in learning styles and abilities. Furthermore, as pointed out by Nasir (2004), research criticizing Black parents’ lack of involvement is built on the unfair “assumption that parents should know that they have to fight the system to get a good education for their students” (p. 113; see also Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In a high-stakes, outcome-focused educational climate in which already limited resources are constantly threatened, it is not surprising that the rhetoric of “parent involvement” has become a mechanism for making parents the scapegoats of government failure to support education (de Carvalho, 2001; Fine, 1993).1

My intention is not to deny that parents and families have an important role to play vis-à-vis children’s educational experiences. Decades of research have documented the importance of parents’ involvement in their children’s education from the early years throughout all grade levels (Epstein, 1987a, 1987b; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002; White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992). PI has been linked to child outcomes ranging from higher academic achievement to more positive attitudes and behavior (Henderson & Berla, 1994). So strongly does our society endorse PI that in New York City, participants in an experimental government rewards program receive cash payment for attending parent–teacher conferences (Cardwell, 2007). Research also has suggested that parents’ involvement during their children’s early school years is correlated with positive outcomes during the later school years (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). These

1Demonstrated most recently by the lack of funding to implement the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (Mathis, 2003; Thomas & Bainbridge, 2002).
claims have come under critique more recently, however, with researchers pointing to methodological and ideological flaws in the study of PI (de Carvalho, 2001; Mattingly et al.; White et al.). These researchers also point to problems with the way the very concept of PI currently is constructed and framed, and two consequences of the current framework are outlined below.

Complex Lives

First, a unilateral approach does not recognize the ways in which race, ethnicity, and class (and other characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, and marital status, to name but a few) influence the nature of involvement in which parents are willing and/or able to engage (Bernhard, Lefebre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1998; Crozier, 1996, 1999; Graue et al., 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; O’Connor, 2001; Phenice et al., 1986). With respect to Black families, the home–school interface has particular features related to the legacy of racism (Lareau & Horvat), such as the myth mentioned above that African Americans do not value education. As Phenice et al. put it, “Typically, minority children have been placed in contra-culture learning experiences that exuded with such messages as ‘your parents’ ways of behaving are not good, and if you want to achieve success you must become like the dominant group’” (p. 122). These messages have been communicated to parents about themselves as well, and it is this perception of being undervalued, rather than a disinterest in their children’s education, that may be the real culprit for lower levels of involvement among parents of color compared to their White counterparts (Bernhard et al.; Crozier, 1999; Phenice et al.).

With respect to social class, similar concerns about the current framework arise. Like children of color, working-class and poor children can experience cultural dissonance in mainstream classrooms (Boutte & DeFlorimonte, 1998; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 1987, 2000). Parents’ work schedules and the degree of flexibility that is built into their jobs are important factors in shaping the extent to which they are able to be involved with their children’s education, both at home and at school (Diamond, 2000; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Lareau, 1987). For example, parents who work the night shift need daytime hours for precious sleep, though they might sincerely desire to chaperone school field trips or visit during lunchtime.

The intricate relationships among race, ethnicity, and social class status are important to consider here as well. Numerous studies have documented differences in children’s experiences that help us understand, not only how class is implicated in children’s development, but also how the intersection of class with race and ethnicity contributes to the process (Doucet & Tudge, 2007; Graue, 1999; Graue et al., 2001; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 2005; Tudge, in press; Tudge & Doucet, 2004; Tudge et al., 2006).

Some examples in the literature illustrate these intersections. In their study of kindergarteners and first graders and their families, Graue and her colleagues (2001) found that middle class African American parents who spoke up on behalf of their children were seen as problematic and as “too quick to play the race card” (p. 483). Thus, rather than being invited to volunteer in the classroom alongside the teacher like other families, these “problematic” parents were sent to the computer lab to supervise children’s activities there. Lareau and Horvat (1999) reported similar findings and tell an interesting story about an African American working-class couple who encountered a great deal of resistance on the part of their third-grade child’s teacher because the parents raised a concern that their child was being denied opportunities because of her race. Rather than being
perceived as involved parents who wanted the best for their child, they were instead perceived as angry and inappropriate in their approach. White working-class parents at this school felt alienated as well, but focused on their individual relationships with the teachers. Some of these parents felt that teachers were not communicating directly with them about their children’s needs. However, these issues were not seen as a pervasive characteristic of the school, whereas the Black parents perceived the school itself as racist.

In contrast to the White and Black working-class families, the White and Black middle-class families in the school where Lareau and Horvat conducted their research knew “the rules” for interacting with the school. This interaction involved a complex “dance” of communicating to teachers that they were doing a great job, while simultaneously taking a very vigilant stance to ensure that their children were getting all they could from the school and teachers. Whereas working-class parents tended to speak up when they were unhappy with what was going on, middle-class parents understood that they should take on the role of cooperative, supportive partners rather than telling teachers what they were doing wrong (Crozier, 1999; Epstein, 1986; Galinsky, 1988; Van Galen, 1987). As Graue et al. (2001) reported in their study, “it was important for parents to cultivate a persona of concerned helpmate so that they could have access to important institutional information. Minimizing a perceived threat increased their power” (p. 489).

**Listening to Parents’ Voices**

Second, the literature on PI tends to reflect a top-down approach, whereby scholars and experienced professionals are the primary sources of information for what home–school relations should look like (Russell, 1991). Parents themselves, who, along with their children, are located at the center of conversations regarding home–school relations, are not consulted as experts with regard to making these relationships work (Doucet & Tudge, 2007). Therefore a second problem with the traditional approach to PI is that parents are not given a voice in how they can contribute to the school. “The school defines roles for parents in the context of institutional needs and priorities. This work largely ignores what families bring to school; it has not examined adequately the needs of parents as they come in contact with the school, or the resources they have to facilitate interaction with educational professionals” (Graue, 1993b, p. 467).

Because the rules of PI are shaped by the needs and priorities of the schools, parents whose life circumstances and work schedules do not permit them to volunteer during school hours or chaperone field trips, bake cookies for school events, or attend parent–teacher conferences according to the school’s calendar are excluded from participation in their children’s schooling experiences. Lawson (2003) described this approach to PI as “schoolcentric . . . how can parents help the school and its teachers?” (p. 91), whereas parents in the community where Lawson conducted his study perceived PI much more broadly. Parents in Lawson’s study wanted to be involved in their children’s lives, to protect them from features of their community they saw as dangerous and negative. Being involved in school was certainly an important part of this involvement in the life of the whole child, but it was not the only issue, and, understandably, it was not as salient as protecting children from violence and drugs.²

²As my colleague David Kirkland pointed out, such stories risk essentializing the image of working-class and poor Black families dodging bullets and hurdling dead bodies while trying to carry out everyday activities. It is important to acknowledge that there are likely other, less vitriolic, issues in the lives of these families (such as working for an inflexible boss!) that can make their participation in their children’s education different than that of middle-class parents.
Paradoxically, parents are expected to be a visible presence at school (or their commitment to their children’s education is questioned), yet they are not invited to fully participate in the process of critically examining existing structures and practices in education because they are limited to serving in the supportive roles outlined by teachers and administrators (Crozier, 1999; Fine, 1993). Even when parents are invited to participate in dialogue about policies or structural issues, often they feel these invitations are “just for show,” (O’Connor, 2001, p. 183) because once a decision has been made at the organizational level, there is little they can do to change it (Fine). Graue et al. (2001) point out that much of the research on home–school relationships can be described as descriptive or prescriptive, with an underlying assumption that there are ideals with respect to PI (e.g., parents and teachers should be partners, with parents playing a supporting role), and with respect to which activities are most productive for enhancing academic achievement. However as discussed above, this literature does not question the very parameters within which home–school relationships are constructed, and thus can overlook the roles of race, class, gender, language, sexuality, ability, and other identity characteristics.

When parents are consulted about their ideas regarding school involvement and their roles in their children’s education, they contribute important insights with implications for how these relationships can become truly meaningful. The following quotation, borrowed from one of the participants in Lawson’s (2003) study of parent and teacher perceptions of PI, eloquently and powerfully makes the point:

> Schools need to be there. And to listen. And, I know that sometimes there may be too much information to swallow, but parents here have got stories to tell, and experiences to share. And, they may not be pleasant stories. But they need to be heard, and schools need to listen. They need to listen to us. No matter what we say.

As the review of literature suggests, perspectives from parents’ own experiences complicate existing models of PI, which can be described broadly as “School-to-Home Transition” (Swap, 1993)—rather than bidirectional—models. Moreover, most of the work that has been done to bring parents’ voices into conversations about involvement has been conducted at the elementary and secondary school levels (e.g., Crozier, 1999; Fine, 1993; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawson, 2003; Mapp, 2003; O’Connor, 2001). By putting African American parents and caregivers of preschool children at the center of the conversation, the current study joins the growing conversation in the early childhood education literature that takes a critical and “bottom-up” look at PI (Ellsworth & Ames, 1996; Gonzalez-Mena, 2001, 2007; Graue, 1993b, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003; Graue & Hawkins, 2005; Graue et al., 2001; Keyser, 2006; Valdès, 1996, 1998; Wilgus, 2005).

**Research Context**

This study was conducted under the umbrella of the Cultural Ecology of Young Children (CEYC) Project, which examines parental values, beliefs, and practices for raising children who are culturally competent members of their societies (Tudge & Putnam, 1997). As part of the project, longitudinal studies of preschool children’s everyday activities were conducted in the United States with a White sample and an African American sample.³

³The CEYC project also has been carried out in Russia, Estonia, Finland, Korea, Kenya, and Brazil. For a complete overview of the project, please see Tudge’s (2008).
Each group included families categorized as “middle class” and families categorized as “working class.” Social class was measured by education and occupation, with “working-class” families designated as those in which parents finished their education either immediately or soon after high school and who worked in the nonprofessional sphere and “middle-class” families as those in which parents had completed higher education and who had professional occupations.

Because we still know little about how African American parents themselves conceptualize, plan for, and experience this milestone in their children’s lives, I adopted an interpretive, phenomenological perspective for the current study, using semistructured, ethnographic interviews as a tool to capture parent’s experiences as they understood them. Everyday life is at the center of phenomenological and interpretive science, because the understanding of daily activities leads toward an understanding of lived experiences (Hultgren, 1989; van Manen, 1984). Hultgren described interpretive science as “a systematic search for deep understanding of the ways in which persons subjectively experience (perceive, interpret, plan, act, feel, value, evaluate) the social world” (p. 41). For Denzin (1997), interpretive science and ethnography are synonymous in that they produce accounts of how people live their lives. Thus, using ethnographic interviews allowed me to focus on these everyday experiences and interpretations of them. This further helped me understand the world from the perspectives of my research participants, rather than mapping their experiences onto existing models that may or may not have captured the complex nuances of their lives.

**Methods**

For the CEYC project, data typically were collected at three points in time. Structured, naturalistic observations were conducted wherever children spent their time (home, day care, the grocery store, etc.) when the children were approximately 3 years old, and their parents completed questionnaires and structured interviews regarding their values and beliefs about child-rearing (Time 1). When the children entered elementary school, parents once again were asked to complete questionnaires about their child-rearing values and beliefs, and the children’s elementary teachers also completed questionnaires about their values and beliefs (Times 2 and 3). Tudge, Odero, Hogan, and Etz (2003) provide a more detailed description of the three waves of data collection, as well as complete methodological details of the CEYC project. The study presented here was an intermediate study conducted between Times 1 and 2 with the U.S. African American sample, focusing on the values, beliefs, and practices of African American parents and caregivers with regard to preparing their children for the transition to kindergarten or first grade. As noted above, in this article I examine a particular slice of the data from the intermediate study, namely data that spoke directly to how parents constructed their roles and the roles of teachers in the transition process.

**Participants**

Participants for the current study were recruited from the 19 African American families who had participated in the observational study (Time 1). I got to know many of these families quite well during that phase of data collection, since I conducted observations

---

4Income was not included in the measure of social class in recognition of the fact that occupational prestige is not always reflected by income, particularly across race (Feagin & Sikes, 1994).
with 11 of the families. Another member of the research team conducted observations with the remaining 8 families. Of the 19 families whose children were observed at Time 1, 13 families were both eligible and willing to participate in the intermediate study. I asked mothers to name the other adult they felt participated the most in helping them raise their children in order to acknowledge the many variations in family forms, whereby a grandmother or an older cousin could take a parent role. This also accounted for situations in which a father may have been present, whether in or out of the child’s household, but not as involved in the child-rearing process as another adult. Since one single mother felt no other adult helped her raise her children, I interviewed a total of 25 adults—13 mothers, 7 fathers, 4 grandmothers, and 1 great-grandmother. Nineteen of the 25 participants were native North Carolinians—5 were from Greensboro, the city where the study was conducted. The other 6 were from the Northeast United States, 5 from New York and one from Pennsylvania. Seven of these families were middle class, and 6 were working class. The gender distribution of children for this study was 6 girls, and 7 boys; and four of these children had siblings. Tables 1 and 2 present snapshots of each family. Details regarding children’s grade levels are reported for the time-span during which the interviews were conducted.

**Interviews**

Mothers and caregivers were interviewed separately using semistructured, ethnographic interviews. Each participant was interviewed once and given the opportunity to read his or her transcripts during a follow-up meeting. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were generated in light of an interpretive approach to the interview process (Denzin, 1997; Hultgren, 1989; van Manen, 1984). Rather than using the interview protocol as a structured instrument, I used the questions as a guide for the “conversations” between the participants and me so that if information came naturally from the exchanges, some questions could be omitted (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Interview questions were piloted with Black mothers of preschoolers in order to verify their appropriateness. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by paid, professional transcribers. After each interview was transcribed, I read it and condensed it into a narrative so that, unless they were needed to clarify the sentence following it, questions were omitted, and the interview was presented like a story. This also provided the opportunity to find missing pieces of information to be gathered at the follow-up meeting. This second meeting was designed as a “fact-checking” follow-up during which each participant read his or her own narrative and was given the opportunity to make changes if deemed necessary. This is an important practice in interpretive research, in that it invites “objects” of research become even more active research participants (Maxwell, 1996). Furthermore, once I had generated themes from the transcripts (Rubin & Rubin; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; van Manen), I also shared those findings with the research participants by mailing them a summary of the findings, and I invited them to respond to what I had written in the accompanying cover letter and through a subsequent phone call (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Mies, 1983). Interviews generally lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and follow-up meetings tended to last 45 to 60

---

5 Two of the children who participated at Time 1 were already in Grade 1 at the time of my study, making them ineligible to participate.

6 In the middle-class group, mothers’ mean educational attainment was a bachelor’s degree (ranging from “some college” to “some graduate school”). Fathers’ median educational attainment was also a bachelor’s degree (ranging from “high school” to “some graduate school”). In the working-class group, both fathers’ and mothers’ median educational attainment was “high school.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Other Caregiver</th>
<th>Relationship to Focal Child</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Focal Child</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th># of Siblings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gibson</td>
<td>Juanita</td>
<td>Office manager at industrial engineering company</td>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Paternal grandmother</td>
<td>Retired elementary school counselor</td>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay</td>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Owner of financial consulting firm</td>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randall &amp;</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>State employee; purchases land for highway construction</td>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>seventh-grade social studies teacher</td>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson Morgan</td>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Administrative assistant at the family church (was a stay-at-home mom at Time 1)</td>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Data engineer for wireless data company</td>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Andrews</td>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>Stay-at-home mom who home schools</td>
<td>Dwight</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Credit analyst, landlord, and owner of investment group</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percy</td>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Owner of computer graphics design and printing company</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Corporate salesman</td>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Freelance bookkeeping and accounting (between jobs)</td>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Maternal great-grandmother</td>
<td>Retired cook</td>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*I chose to include this family because their approach to home schooling included a great deal of time spent outside the home with other adults (i.e., not the parents) taking on the role of instructors once the child moved from kindergarten to first grade. The parents were explicit in explaining the difference they perceived between kindergarten, during which their children were instructed mostly at home, and first grade, when they felt it was important for the children to receive some outside instruction with other homeschooled children, but in a more formal setting than someone’s home.
### Table 2
Snapshot of Working-Class Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Other Caregiver</th>
<th>Relationship to Focal Child</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Focal Child</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th># of Siblings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walker</td>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>Bank teller</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A Factory line worker</td>
<td>Kira</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chantal</td>
<td>Customer service at bank; unspecified part-time evening job</td>
<td>Josie</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trina</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School guidance office staff; school bus driver</td>
<td>Noel Sr.</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Truck driver</td>
<td>Noel Jr.</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carver</td>
<td>Helene</td>
<td>Textile factory worker</td>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother</td>
<td>Factory machine repair technician; part-time clerk at home improvement store; Babysitter; retired housekeeper</td>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Unemployed at first interview; pharmacy technician by second interview</td>
<td>Spencer</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Textile factory worker</td>
<td>Clarice</td>
<td>Maternal grandmother</td>
<td>Retired nurse’s aide</td>
<td>Raymond</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory</td>
<td>Jeanne</td>
<td>Colors fiber for cables at a fiber optics company</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
minutes. Interviews and follow-up meetings were conducted wherever the participant felt comfortable. In most cases, this was in people’s homes, though one interview was conducted at a school because the father I was interviewing lived far away.

Results and Discussion

Like most parents of preschool children preparing to make the transition to “big school,” the participants in this study were both thrilled about the change and nervous about how it might impact their children. Participants spoke about the importance of their children’s readiness—for academics, for social interactions, and for being self-sufficient. They shared stories about how smart their children were, about the children’s excitement around all things school-related, about the importance of children feeling good about themselves, and about wanting their children to be good people. I generated 12 themes based on these results, all of which are listed in Table 3. In reflecting upon their own roles in facilitating the transition to school, parents expressed clear themes framed around what they felt were their roles, and subsequently those of teachers, in preparing their children for the transition to school. The following sections provide an in-depth discussion of the specific themes related to parents’ and teachers’ roles. Parents’ social class is indicated by the abbreviations “MC” and “WC,” signifying middle class and working class, respectively.

Parents Should be Involved in Their Children’s Education

According to these participants, one of the most important aspects of preparing children for the transition to school was being involved in their academic development. Working at home on academic skills was one way in which these parents and caregivers engaged in this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Meaning of Going to School</td>
<td>Going to school is about growing up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Going to school is about learning to take care of yourself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Going to school is about being prepared for its academic demands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Way Children Ought to Be</td>
<td>I want a child who is bright.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I want a child who is a good person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I want a child who feels good about himself or herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Way Parents and Caregivers Ought to Be</td>
<td>Parents should be involved in their children’s education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents connect their children to the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents must teach their children about culture and race.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Way the World Ought to Be</td>
<td>It takes a village to raise a child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We are responsible for these children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We want to live in safe, close-knit communities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
process. Since most of these children were enrolled either in formal preschool programs (public or private) or already in kindergarten, helping children with homework was a regular part of everyday activities. Even among the younger preschoolers, some part of the day was occupied with school-related activities, such as reading. For example, when I observed Brianna as a preschooler (Time 1 of the CEYC study), one of the things that struck me was the amount of time she spent with books. She would cart around a large bag full of books she and her mother had just gotten from the library (a weekly event), and either coax one of the adults at home to read to her, or sit by herself and create her own stories based on the pictures she saw. When I interviewed her mother Andrea\(^7\) (MC) the following year, after Brianna had transitioned to kindergarten, Andrea said, “We do all kinds of [activities]: reading, of course—you already know—“Reading is Fundamental!” . . . reading is, I know, a steadfast hold in the day-to-day activities . . . Yeah, she loves [to read].” Other parents echoed these sentiments:

---

**Chantal (WC mother):** On a regular basis we do activities like activity books that does her numbers and her alphabet, and she has a little laptop computer that we work on and she plays stuff on there. We go to the library and look at books and work on the Internet.

**Paul (MC father):** Lately [I spend the most time with him working on] the lower case of the alphabet. He recognizes the capitals with no problem but some of the lower case he gets mixed up, so lately that’s what I’ve been concentrating on.

In families with an older sibling who was already in school (elementary or middle school), participants invariably mentioned working with the older siblings on homework, or helping them to study for tests, and other such activities to which their younger children were exposed (Mapp, 2003). Indeed older siblings often engaged the younger ones in academically related activities. For example, Maria (WC mother), noted, [Tia]’s always trying to write, trying to read, but she’s doing pretty good, you know. And she learns a lot from her sister. Certain words that she remembers, [it’s] because her sister reads to her a lot.

Parents and caregivers also felt an important part of parenting was being involved in their children’s schools. Parents volunteered in classrooms, served as chaperones for school trips, and found other creative ways to take an active role. Charles (MC father) said,

---

I was minding my business one morning until somebody walked up to me and said, “Are you Mr. Clay?” I’m like, “Yeah.” She’s the brand new principal. She said, “I understand you’re gonna be the next PTA President.” . . . I said, “Well, I have to talk to the family and ask them because I’m very busy.” And I asked the girls, and they were like, “Yeah, Daddy, you ought to do it that way you can get another certificate for being the only parent that shows up at everything.

It is important to note that the Clays were more active in their children’s school than were other parents who participated in this study. Charles’s daughters’ comment

---

\(^7\)All participant names are pseudonyms.
about his being “the only parent that shows up at everything” was not far-fetched. As Charles recalled during the interview, however, his own parents were not as “involved” (as were he and his wife) because of their work schedules, and for other parents in this study, work schedules also stood in the way of involvement. It is fascinating to observe that the children in the Clay family seemed to operate from a narrow definition of PI that mirrors the mainstream construction. Thus recasting PI in ways that acknowledge other ways to be involved is important so that children, parents, and their families (in addition to schools and school people) can begin to reframe what is acknowledged as participation.

Patricia (WC mother) felt she was able to spend sufficient time with Darnell on academic activities at home, but she was frustrated that her work schedule did not permit her to spend more time visiting Darnell’s classroom and his teacher. She was very pleased with Darnell’s teacher and even said she wanted to send her a thank-you card. However, she recognized the importance of spending time at her child’s school:

I don’t get to spend a whole lot of time at the school. I think I’ve only been there like twice, and I’d like to go to the school and spend more time to see what they actually do.

This issue was not problematic for the Clays: Sandra was a teacher and thus was readily available to attend her children’s after-school activities, and Charles owned his own business and set his own work hours. Beyond the desire to be there for his children in a way his own parents were not, though, Charles’ involvement also was related to his belief that the school was not performing at an acceptable level. He reported,

We’re working with her now on spelling, and we found out that it’s not really her fault. It’s the teacher’s fault . . . . the teacher that she has now, in our opinion, is not doing what she’s supposed to in preparing for the first grade. We know what [they’re supposed to know] because my wife teaches . . . .

Other parents who were dissatisfied with the school system turned to various alternatives to address this issue, from using a different mailing address so the child could attend a school they found preferable to the neighborhood school, to considering private school, to home schooling.

Spencer and Maria’s children (WC family) attended school in the town where their grandmother lived, not in their city of residence, because of the weaknesses they perceived in the city’s public schools. Spencer discussed how working with his daughter could help curb some of these concerns:

I’d like to work with her on her reading skills over the summer and everything. I would like to have her ahead of the class—that way she’ll have a better opportunity. I think a lot of times a lot of the teachers [when] they see that you’re putting forth the effort to advance your child, then they’ll work a little bit harder. They’ll know you [and] not to just push your child through because you’re paying attention to them.

Further evidence that being involved in their children’s education was important to these participants emerged in the transcripts of parents who could not spend as much time on such activities as they thought they should.
Dwight (MC father): [I would like to spend] more time, doing science projects. You know doing some experimentation of some things. I would like to do more of that, definitely. Yeah, I would love to do more of that. Less of, I guess playing all the time . . . We play too much . . . so I think setting goals and doing more science projects would be beneficial for him.

The above passages paint a picture of these caregivers as actively engaged in and involved with their children’s schooling, both in ways that were visible to teachers and school personnel, such as serving on the PTA, and in ways that were not visible, such as working at home (Mapp, 2003). Contrary to perceptions that African American parents are not involved (Nasir, 2004; Phenice et al., 1986), these findings suggest that parents were quite involved and aware of the importance of their involvement. Like the middle-class parents in Lareau and Horvat’s (1999) study, both working-class and middle-class parents in the current study demonstrated an understanding of the importance of advocating on behalf of their children in various ways, especially if they were unhappy with the way things were going at school. Based on these passages alone, we might surmise that parents’ perceptions of their roles in preparing children for school fit rather neatly into traditional models of PI. As the following themes suggest, however, far more complex dynamics were at play as parents directed and forged their young children’s educational paths. Namely, this preparation included preparation for the “real world.”

Parents Connect Their Children to the World

Another theme that emerged from the transcripts was a sense that parents and caregivers saw themselves as having an influence on how their children experienced the world, either by shielding them from its negative aspects, or by exposing them to its positive aspects. Parents also spoke about broadening their children’s perspectives by involving them in myriad activities, such as story time at the library, art programs, sports, etc. Interestingly, many parents and caregivers did not conceptualize their activities with their children in terms of specific goals, though they clearly held underlying beliefs that engaging in various activities would be beneficial to the child. For example, Donald (MC father), answering a question about whether he had specific goals in mind for the activities he does with his kindergartener, Justin, stated,

I never thought about a goal for the things we do. I just want him to have a broad perspective on life. The more you know, the better you’re prepared for life.

I: That’s kind of a goal.

Donald: Yeah, I guess that is. To be exposed to a lot of different things, so when he gets ready to make a choice on a career or what he’s gonna do with his life, then he won’t have blinders on—I could do “A,” “B,” “C,” or I could do “L.”

And Andrea (MC mother), talking about where children should learn the things they need to know to be ready for school explained,

I think it all starts at home a lot of things . . . I mean going to school I think enhances what you’re trying to teach. They just have more of a lesson plan than parents do.
Some parents and caregivers did state their goals explicitly, however:

*Dana (MC mother)*: And Jacob [the oldest son], he loves science, loves science. I know he’s gonna be in the science field. So I end up having him to help deliver David [younger sibling]. And it was so, so cute. And he was so . . . it was like he was a natural . . . . He was all into it, asking questions. And the nurse that was there, she kept answering the questions. “This is for such and such and such. Now I’m about to use this.” And I mean very educational for him. It really was.

*Clarice (WC grandmother)*: I want to take him on a train ride. He likes to look at the train. We’ll be going along sometimes, “Look ganny! Look ganny, there goes the train.” So I want to take him on a train ride. See, when I was growing up, I wasn’t exposed to stuff like that.

Looking across the interviews, it seemed to be the case that middle-class parents and caregivers were more likely to talk about exposing children to school-related activities, such as going to the library or to museums. By contrast, working-class parents and caregivers focused more on entertaining activities like taking trips to other states to visit relatives, or going to the zoo. It could have been that middle-class participants chose more traditional academic activities because they had been to college and equate learning with writing, doing homework, and other such conventionally school-related practices (Heath, 1983).

**It Takes a Village to Raise a Child**

Whether stated explicitly or not, parents and caregivers seemed most interested in expanding their children’s minds by introducing them to new experiences. It was clear that participants felt this responsibility was theirs first and foremost, but it also was evident that they expected others to be involved. Indeed, there was a sense of collectivism with respect to child-rearing expressed across the interviews. Participants mentioned older siblings, other relatives, nonrelated adults (such as fellow church members), and neighbors. Donna (WC grandmother) stated that Darnell should learn the things he needed to be ready for the transition to school “at home.” But the people she felt should be involved in this process included a larger cast than the image suggested by “at home.” She named “his mom and his grandma [referring to the paternal grandmother], and his other [relatives] . . . we all help him, and teach, and love him.” Her daughter, Patricia (WC mother) echoed these thoughts,

> I think he should learn [those things] at home first. And certain things you pick up from other students. Who your friends are, teachers, they might have some influence in your life but I think at home. It basically comes from home.

Parents and caregivers were clear that they did not expect the schools to take care of their children, nor the teachers to parent their children. Rather, they saw teachers as important allies in helping to raise their children.

*Donald (MC father)*: I mean, to me school should reinforce what you teach, as far as outside of academics. I mean academics, we reinforce what they teach,
if it’s correct. So if I’m trying to . . . I’m like look, “You can’t go left.” The school should reinforce, “You can’t go left.” That’s how I do it.

Many participants recognized that teachers have the potential to play an important role in the lives of children who do not have the benefit of highly involved parents at home. Juanita (MC mother) made the following statement:

The [children] that aren’t getting from mom and dad at home, teachers can play such a big part at school if they are more positive because you have so many children coming from different backgrounds and what is going on at their house is crazy. Teachers can play a role. But I think that responsibility belongs to Mom and Dad.

Similarly, one mother who was a teacher spoke extensively about the efforts she makes in her own classroom to ensure that all students not only received a good education, but also felt cared for. However, Jeanne’s (WC mother) statement illustrates the boundaries some parents have set around what they expect from schools and teachers as allies in child-rearing:

As far as tying his shoes, I don’t care who teaches him how to do that . . . .[But] I don’t want the school teaching him his religion or his religious background or beliefs. I don’t want that to come from school. . . . He had a little prayer that he said before he ate, and now they’ve taken God out of his prayer. I don’t like that . . . .

This construction of teachers as “members of the village” suggests parents simultaneously expected teachers to contribute to their children’s lives in meaningful ways and to respect that certain areas of child-rearing were the purview of parents and caregivers. Taken together with the first theme, Parents Should be Involved in Their Children’s Education, the idea of the village expressed in these interviews paints a picture of parents’ involvement with schools that is reciprocal, interdependent, and active. In spite of this expectation of a partnership between parents and teachers, it is also clear that these parents saw teachers as secondary, even with respect to children’s education, as illustrated by Linda’s (MC grandmother) comment:

[I think Naomi should learn what she needs to know for school] at home. I don’t think she needs to wait for the teacher to instill that in her. That needs to be instilled in her before she ever steps into school.

The idea that education “begins at home” emerged across all of the interviews, and parents clearly perceived themselves as their children’s first teachers (Scott-Jones, 1987). This was not only regarding sensitive topics such as religion or sexuality, but also in terms of literacy, numeracy, and other basic academic subjects.

Parents Must Teach Their Children about Culture and Race

Finally, for these participants, preparing children for the transition to school (and for life) involved teaching their children about culture and race. In the literature, this process is referred to as racial socialization (Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman, 2004; Harrison,
African American Parents and Preservice Teachers

1985; Peters, 1985; Spencer, 1983; Thornton, 1997; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). Boykin and Toms (1985) presented a useful model for organizing the various ways in which Black parents teach their children about culture, race, and racism. First, parents who adopt a mainstream perspective focus on teaching children skills that will help them to adapt to the majority culture, emphasizing the importance of personal characteristics such as being a hard worker. Rather than concentrating on racial issues, these parents tend to encourage their children towards seeing themselves as equal to all people. On the other hand, parents who adopt a minority experience perspective are more likely to communicate to children that they will experience differential treatment because of their race; this perspective also involves teaching children strategies for confronting racism. Finally, the Black cultural perspective is about instilling racial pride in children by teaching them about their ancestry and upholding values linked to traditional West African cultural beliefs.

These three patterns emerged in the current study. Reflecting a mainstream perspective, some parents and caregivers wanted their children to focus on the similarities among the races, emphasizing the importance of interaction. Interviewees talked about wanting their children to be “multicultural,” to use Donna’s (MC mother) terminology, namely being able to communicate and socialize with people of all ethnic backgrounds. When I asked Helene (WC mother) why she felt it was important for her children to be exposed to people of other races, she expressed the following perspective, which she said came, in part, from her experience working in the public school system.

I see more Hispanic people in our school. And when they come in, and I don’t understand what they’re saying, and they don’t understand what I’m saying. They might bring one person in who can speak a little English, just a little, enough to say, “Umm . . . this child go . . . go to this school.” And then you gotta figure out the rest. I mean, that to me is the worst thing a person can go through where you’re trying to convey something and you can’t . . . . So, I think all kids should be exposed to other races, other languages.

Many parents and caregivers talked about their own sense of multiculturalism in that they socialized with people from different ethnic backgrounds, thus setting an example for their children. Donna (MC mother) said,

We’re raising our kids to be multicultural and be able to love and get along with all kinds of people because they can relate to anybody. They really can, any color. They can relate to anybody because that’s the way we taught them.

Another level at which this theme was expressed was that there was no difference between Black and White children, that they were equal and the same.

*Tiffany (WC mother):* I don’t think there is any difference at all [between what African American and White children need to know]. It shouldn’t matter as far as their race or ethnic background. All children should be created equal, just like all people should be created equal

*Patricia (WC mother):* We don’t teach him that there’s Black people, there’s White people, we just say there’s people. So if he goes out and plays and we go to the kids’ museum or wherever, he makes friends with whoever. It doesn’t bother him.
But while some parents and caregivers wanted their children to know that Blacks and Whites were equal to one another, they also acknowledged cultural differences between the ethnic groups. For instance, when I asked Chantal (WC mother) if there were any differences between what Black and White children needed to know before going to school, she responded,

I tend to notice that, to me, there’s actually more discipline in African American kids than there are White kids. Because I think they’re disciplined differently at home. I have found more of the White people discipline by Time Out and talking, and more African-Americans, they probably spank more just to get their point across.

Interestingly, the mainstream perspective was expressed more often among the working-class families than the middle-class families. With a sample of this size, it is difficult to explore all of the possible reasons for this trend, but other scholars have noted that social class is a powerful unifier when it comes to everyday experiences (Ortner, 1998; Rubin, 1994). Specifically, the working-class African Americans in this sample were employed in occupations where their coworkers included working-class Whites, whereas many of the middle-class participants were “the dot,” as one father put it, in their place of employment. Thus, it is possible that the working-class participants in this sample, given their day-to-day experiences at work, perceived Whites as facing many of the same class-based circumstances of everyday life, as noted by Spencer, a working-class father who worked in a factory alongside Whites, whereas the middle-class participants felt truly different and isolated from their White counterparts, as exemplified by Andrea, a middle-class mother who talked specifically about her daughter needing to be prepared for discrimination at work like Andrea had experienced.

This was further evidenced in the finding that middle-class parents tended to express a minority experience perspective, in this case, the view that Black children needed to be prepared to work harder or to face struggle because of their skin color. Again, middle-class parents also talked about wanting multicultural children, but there was an overall sense that socialization to race and racism took different forms among the two groups. That is, working-class parents focused more on similarities between the things the two groups needed to know, whereas middle-class parents focused on preparing their children for challenges they might face because of racism. Furthermore, whilegrandmothers contributed to teaching their grandchildren about culture and race, all grandmothers in this study focused on wanting their grandchildren to be multicultural and on there being no differences between Black and White children. This could be related to the age of these grandmothers and their experiences with race relations as they were growing up.

Paul (MC father) shared his approach to teaching Benjamin about race and also his perception of his role as a mediator between Benjamin and the world:

One thing that is for sure, at least it’s been my experience, (hopefully it will change) he’s going to have to work twice as hard . . . I wouldn’t particularly tell him, “Hey you have to do this many things to be accepted to this level,” I would put it or teach it in a way that he would want to know all these things and want to be the best that he can be so that he can automatically [be] at whatever level . . . .
Spencer (WC father) combined both believing that life would be more difficult for his children with wanting them to use good judgment, rather than race, to evaluate others:

Basically I would just tell them, “Don’t get your mind that you can’t trust people because of their color. Learn to trust everybody and give everybody the opportunity, but also be aware that you may face some things that may hinder you from getting to the same area that a person gets to and it may be based on color. So don’t let that stop you . . . just be aware of it.”

Other parents recognized that life would be harder for their children but they also wanted them to transcend race-motivated discrimination. As Donald (MC father) put it:

Even though there are some changes, the world, it’s still dominated by the White male. One, you know that you are Black, and there is nothing wrong with being Black and be proud of what you are, and can’t nothing hold you back but you. Whatever you want to do, you can do it. If you make steps and you’re prepared to do it, then can’t nothing stop you, racism, prejudice, sexism, whatever, it ain’t gonna work. You know because your path has been paved for you with blood and tears, your grandma, great grandmother, all them people who showed there’s nothing that you can’t do.

Another facet of teaching children about culture and race for these parents and caregivers was sharing information about their ancestry as African Americans, exemplifying the Black cultural experience perspective. Charles (MC father) said this:

One of the things we did as a family was we sat down and we watched “Roots” together . . . And we had discussion afterwards. And the reason I felt that that was important was because I want them to understand the importance of education. What people had to go through so that they could even have a school or a quality school to learn, so that it wouldn’t be taken for granted . . . I think it’s important especially for African-Americans to know their history so that they can appreciate and not take for granted.

In Peters’s (1985) study of racial socialization among middle-class and working-class parents of toddlers, several themes parallel to the ones in the current study also emerged: “Teaching children to survive,” “The importance of self-respect and pride,” “Understanding that fair play may not be reciprocal,” “A good education: a top priority,” and “But most of all—love.” What stands out from the findings of the current study when compared with others is the consistency of ideas expressed by Black parents, who recognize that race and racism will be issues in their children’s lives as it is and has been in their own lives, although they may choose to emphasize different issues when teaching their children about culture and race. This is a powerful message about racialized cultural experience, one that speaks volumes to the importance of filtering our understanding about parenting, teaching, schooling, and, indeed life, through the lens of culture (Doucet & Tudge, 2007).

**Conclusions and Implications**

In this article, I explored how African American parents and caregivers construct their roles and the roles of teachers in preparing children for the transition to school. Thematic
analysis of qualitative interviews yielded four themes related to how these roles were constructed: (a) Parents should be Involved in Their Children's Education; (b) Parents Connect Their Children to the World; (c) It Takes a Village to Raise a Child; and (d) Parents Must Teach their Children about Culture and Race. In many ways, these themes are connected to one another in that parents and caregivers did not seem to compartmentalize their parenting roles into functions related to the preparation for school and functions related to other matters. The developmental transition to formal schooling was symbolic of becoming more connected to “the world” as well. This was reflected in the way participants talked not only about academic matters, but also about exposing their children to the world and about socializing them about race and culture, among other realities. All of the emergent themes were expressed by both middle-class and working-class participants, and, although it is difficult to speak conclusively about class differences with such a small sample, the findings seem to suggest class variation in two areas: First, in the theme Parents Connect Their Children to the World, middle-class participants referred more often to providing their children with experiences typically associated with academics (e.g., going to the library), whereas working-class participants talked about exposing children to the world more generally (e.g., taking trips, visiting the train station). While it certainly is the case that children learn valuable information and skills that can support their academic learning in a multitude of settings, it is interesting to notice that middle-class families seemed to adopt a more traditional academic paradigm. The second social class difference emerged in the expression of the theme Parents Must Teach their Children about Culture and Race. In this case, working-class parents were more likely to express a mainstream perspective, encouraging their children to develop skills that will help them adapt to the majority culture (Boykin & Toms, 1985). Middle-class parents and caregivers, on the other hand, were more likely to display a minority experience perspective orientation, focusing more on preparing their children to face and deal with racism.

Implications for Teaching and Teacher Education

The points raised and findings reported in this article have important implications for early childhood educators and teacher education programs, whose goals should include bridging cultural and philosophical distances between home and school in order to facilitate for young children a smooth transition to formal schooling. The evidence presented here supports the argument that top-down models of PI curtail our understanding of the many complexities surrounding parents’ engagement with their children’s schooling. First, teachers must recognize, acknowledge, and validate the various ways in which families participate in children’s schooling. This means being aware of the unnoticed work parents, caregivers, siblings, and other family members perform, work that promotes and enhances children’s learning. For example, as I pointed out in the first theme, in families where there were older, school-aged siblings, parents often talked about the older sibling reading to the younger ones, or playing games that involved counting, practicing the alphabet, and so forth. Similarly, Crozier and Davies (2006), in their work with Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents, found that extended family members were extensively involved in children’s schooling and academic activities. We need more models of PI that are open and fluid, that allow for multiple sets of values and beliefs to be respected and affirmed (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001, 2006, 2007; Keyser, 2006; Wilgus, 2005). “Urban legends” (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006, p. 4) that parents of color and working-class or poor parents “just don’t care” about their children’s schooling must be debunked. Helping a preservice teacher like Shayla, with whose story I opened this article, to reframe the actions of a
mother who was not much of a presence at the school, but who was willing to risk her job in the interest of keeping her son with her as demonstrative of deep caring, is a crucial role of teacher educators, who are in an excellent position to engage their students in thinking critically about their assumptions surrounding PI.

Teacher education programs can expose students to multiple models of PI using, for example, case studies that can be analyzed and discussed in class (Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2006). Preservice teachers need more exposure to parents’ actual stories, like those of WC mother Patricia, who expressed so much frustration about her work schedule getting in the way of her making it to the school, but who still wrote notes of appreciation to the teacher. The themes that emerged from the current study showed both traditional ways in which participants framed involvement, such as serving on the PTA and visiting the school, as well as ways that may have been less visible to teachers, like working at home with family members, or faking a home address so the child could attend a better school. It is important for preservice teachers to be exposed to the entire range of possibilities when it comes to PI. In my own class on family, school, and community partnerships, students analyzed different case studies each week, and I invited parents from various backgrounds as guest speakers to share their experiences with the class. Another approach to this could be to have students reflect autobiographically on the involvement of significant adults in their educational careers, to consider whether and how these forms of involvement are consistent with traditional models of involvement, and to discuss how students feel these experiences may have influenced their educational trajectories. Hedges and Gibbs (2005) presented yet another interesting possibility—that of having students spend considerable time observing families in their homes and engaging in their day-to-day activities, like shopping, in order to give the students a realistic picture of families’ lives. A less intense approach to fostering engagement between preservice teachers and parents would be to have the students interview parents about their lives and about their vision of family-school relationships (Morris & Taylor, 1998). Similarly, student teachers can benefit from observing, participating in, and reflecting on activities in the communities surrounding field placement schools. This can provide these students with a more comprehensive understanding of the roles various adults play in the lives of children, from mentors and tutors to coaches and religious leaders, as well as provide them with new models and skills for engaging with families (de Acosta, 1996).

Second, teachers should embrace the important place parents give them in their children’s lives and be good citizens of these children’s “villages.” Parents who participated in the current study clearly valued teachers and what they had to offer. Rather than see themselves as outsiders, teachers would benefit from envisioning themselves the way parents see them—as key players in an important endeavor. By seeing themselves in this way, teachers truly can approach parents in a spirit of collaboration and partnership that will benefit the child. It is important to note, however, that parents in this study also had very definite boundaries for the extent of teachers’ participation in their children’s lives. Arguing that teachers are insiders is not license for unrestricted access to families’ private lives. However, current constructions of home and school as completely disjointed and incongruous are not helpful for creating points of connection between the two (Keyser, 2006; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). In her book, *The Essential Conversation*, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot speaks to the issue of boundaries, recognizing that it is important for

---

8I used Buzzell’s (1996) *School and Family Partnerships: Case Studies for Regular Special Educators* (Delmar Publishers), but another resource is the 2005 Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall publication, *Developing Family and Community Involvement Skills through Case Studies and Field Experiences*, by Diss and Buckley.
both teachers and parents to delineate clear boundaries in order to create safe spaces for communicating with each other. She argues, however, that realistic pictures of boundaries—as “dynamic and double-edged, not linear and static” (p. 73)—are crucial, that teachers must know that parent–teacher relationships cannot be free of conflict and vulnerability. Teacher educators should engage preservice teachers in discussions about these delicate negotiations, which includes ensuring that preservice students have an adequate understanding of how parents’ cultural backgrounds (and here I use the word “culture” in the broadest sense to include affinity groupings at multiple levels), as well as their own, necessarily inform the nature of parent–teacher relationships (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001; Wilgus, 2005). As Sumsion (1999) argued, encouraging preservice teachers to write reflectively about their beliefs and practices surrounding PI, and to conduct action research projects investigating their relationships with parents, can provide rich resources for such explorations.

Finally, by giving parents a place at the experts’ table, teachers will see the children who populate their classrooms with new eyes that can reveal the intricate nuances of these children’s lives (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). This is particularly important when teachers and the families they serve come from different backgrounds, whether with respect to race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, ability status, social class, or any other categories of difference that can prompt misunderstanding and mistrust (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001). By learning about the life circumstances of parents occupying different social spaces than the ones in which they operate, teachers can create safe spaces for parents to share their experiences and contribute to various aspects of school life. There is evidence to suggest that parent liaisons (community members employed or contracted by a school for the purpose of reaching out to parents) can be effective resources for bridging gaps between home and school (Brilliant, 2001; Halford, 1996). Furthermore, teacher education programs can model all that can be gained from learning from real-world experiences by forming relationships with community organizations and inviting parents and community members to be guest speakers in classes (Morris & Taylor, 1998).

The top-down approach thus can be transformed into one that operates more from the bottom-up, that instantiates Vygotsky’s (1934/1987; 1935/1978) vision of obuchenie (teaching/learning) as a bidirectional, coconstructed process (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Doucet & Tudge, 2007; Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). I am not referring here to a grassroots approach to increasing PI, per se, but to building a community of respect for how parents and families are and can be “present”—in other words, building a greater imagination for PI. Participants’ discussion of teachers as members of the village is relevant here as well. As parents saw it, teachers were important, indeed vital, members of the village, but there was a clear expectation that life’s first lessons, such as morality and religion, should be learned at home, with schools serving a reinforcing function. Along with de Carvalho (2001), I would argue that schools should be the primary space where academic information is learned, with home serving a reinforcing function. In this way, children who belong to nonmainstream groups would not be punished for not carrying with them the cultural capital of their middle-class, often White, American counterparts (Cooper, in preparation).

There are useful models for how parents can be drawn into the process in ways that are meaningful to them, from reenvisioning the school as a community space where parents can be informed on topics of relevance to their lives—such as how to discipline children or how to access employment resources in the community (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003)—to actually asking parents what they think the home–school relationship should look like. This change in typical practice also implies
supporting parents who organize themselves to address needs they perceive as unmet by
the school (Delgado-Gaitan), and guarding against defensiveness when parents approach
teachers and administrators with problems and concerns regarding how the classroom or
school operates. Indeed, parents’ advocacy practices must be welcomed and encouraged
(Keyser, 2006; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005).

Implications for Future Research (and Practice)

As I pointed out earlier, the literature that takes a critical perspective on current construc-
tions of PI mostly has been conducted at the elementary and secondary school levels.
More studies are needed that consider issues of power and parental voice in the early
childhood literature. The current study’s findings are consistent with what other critical
scholars have found in their own work, but one finding of the current study that has not
received enough attention in the education literature has to do with parents’ thinking
around teaching children about culture and race.

While the literature on racial socialization has pointed to important processes related
to the way African Americans prepare their children to deal with racism (Caughy,
O’Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002; Peters, 1985; Thornton, 1997; Thornton et al.,
1990), fewer studies have examined the relationship between racial socialization and
schooling—i.e., how parents prepare their children to deal with racism at school. In a
study of inner-city African American PI, McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown, and Lynn
(2003) found that parents’ perception of racism at school was significantly related to their
involvement both at school and at home. This finding, in light of the current study, opens
the door for critically important conversations at the levels of research and practice with
respect to race relations at school and invites questions regarding children’s interactions
with and learning about race at school and what parents learn from their children about
race. As McKay et al. argued, “Interventions meant to increase parental involvement at
home and at school need to explore the associations among perceptions of racism, parent
community support, and opportunities for involvement at the school” (p. 111). Teacher
educators will have to be willing to engage in potentially difficult conversations with their
students regarding the role of racism in the schooling context so that these students are
equipped to address issues when they come up at school. Bernhard and her colleagues
(1998) pointed out that some teachers may be unaware of the ways in which institutional
racism operates and undermines parents of color and leads them to feel ignored and to per-
ceive teachers as insensitive.

A similar point can be made about the classism that pervades the educational system
with respect to values, goals, expectations, and practices (Valdés, 1996). As Lareau (1989;
Lareau & Horvat, 1999) has reported, working-class families often perceive a gap
between the home and school spheres and construct what should be the “appropriate” rela-
tionship between home and school, teacher and parent, differently than do middle-class
families. In addition, working-class and poor parents may feel insecure about their
academic abilities and/or may have had negative experiences related to their social status
when they were in school themselves (Lareau, 1989; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). The
power that past experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot) and current life circumstances
(Diamond & Gomez, 2004) have to shape family–school partnerships cannot be underesti-
mated, particularly when it comes to issues of discrimination and prejudice. A predominantly
White, middle-class, female teacher workforce will need to be educated about and prepared to
address these issues (Ambe, 2006; Bloch & Swadener, 1992; Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan,
Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006).
One of the most interesting next questions for future research suggested by the current study regards the nature of PI itself. Currently, conversations about how to motivate/encourage/empower parents to participate dominate in the circles of research and practice. The current study, as well as other investigations of PI that come from a critical standpoint (e.g., the work of Crozier, de Carvalho, Graue, and Lareau, among others), suggest that we might still understand very little about the actual practices of parents and caregivers with respect to involvement in children’s education. Therefore, some informative lines of inquiry might concern the things parents and other family members actually talk about and do with young children that encourage their development, academic and otherwise. The fundamental assumption that parents must be involved, and in particular ways, can thus begin to be deconstructed and transformed to be more reflective of diverse, real-world experiences—and the ways in which parents from all backgrounds demonstrate deep commitment and care for their children can be acknowledged and celebrated.

Two limitations of the current study bear mentioning. First, as with most qualitative studies, the current study’s findings are limited both by the fact that the number of participants was small and that the sample was not randomly selected. This made it difficult to definitively determine variations in findings based on social class, gender, whether children were in kindergarten or first grade, and so forth, and also makes it difficult to claim that the same study conducted with other African American families would have yielded similar findings. It is important to remember, however, that the goal of qualitative research is not generalizability to a larger population but generalizability to theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In particular, the value of qualitative work that takes into account people’s lived experiences is that it elicits human connection with experiences that are part of all of our lives, although perhaps to varying degrees, and thus connections can be made to larger ideas and concepts. Findings from studies like this one can be used to build larger scale projects that use representative samples and allow for examining how particular variables may influence experience.

Second, and relatedly, the voices of families living in poverty are missing here. In designing the project, Jonathan Tudge made an explicit decision to focus on middle-class and working-class families because so much comparative work on families of color has contrasted very poor families of color with White, middle-class families, resulting in a skewed perspective of non-White families’ experiences. So while a legitimate, and accurate, complaint about the literature is that “most of the subjects [are] White and middle class” (Graham, 1992, p. 629), an equally valid criticism is that being an ethnic minority has been equated with being poor, and this has been reflected in the enormous amount of research on poor families of color with comparatively little attention given to “average” families—i.e., those who are working class and middle class. Given my emphasis in this article on the importance of voice and of understanding the complexities of families’ lives and experiences, however, the study would have been strengthened by including families in poverty.

References


Wilgus, G. (2005). “If you carry him around all the time at home, he expects one of us to carry him around all day here and there are only TWO of us!” Parents’, teachers’, and administrators’ beliefs about the parent’s role in the infant/toddler center. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 26*, 259–273.


---

**Appendix A**

**Sample of Interview Questions**

**Background information**

1. Tell me a bit about your childhood and how you grew up. [In what city/state did you grow up? How long ago did you move to Greensboro if you are not from here? How is Greensboro similar to or different from the place where you grew up?]

2. What were your parents like? [What kinds of jobs did they have? How far did they get in terms of education? What did you learn about work and education from them?]

3. Are you still doing the same job you were doing when I (or Nicole) did the observations? Where are you working now? How do you like it?

4. In what kind of neighborhood did you grow up? [Did everyone talk to each other or was everyone pretty isolated? Was there a strong sense of community there? Did you feel...
safe there? Were there a lot of kids your own age to play with? Were your parents friends with other parents in the neighborhood? Did you go to a neighborhood school?]

**Parent/caregiver beliefs**

1. Are there things you would like [child] to know before [he or she] goes to school? Is there information that [child] should have before going to school? [For example, are there things [he or she] should know about him/herself, family, school, church, other children, etc.]
2. Are there things you would like [child] to be able to do before [he or she] goes to school? [For example, for him/herself, for others, as far as school-related, or daily life-related, with other children, etc.]
3. Are there things you would like [child] to feel before [he or she] goes to school? [For example, about him/herself, about family, about school, about other children, about life, about the world we live in, etc.]

**Beliefs about the child**

1. How do you feel [child] is doing in terms of being ready for school?
2. Have you talked to [child] about what school will be like?
3. Does [child] seem to be excited about going to school? How can you tell?
4. What kinds of things does [child] do that suggest [he or she] might be interested in school?

**Parent/caregiver activities**

1. What kinds of things do you do with [child] on a regular basis? That is, what activities [whether at home or not] do you do with [child]?
2. Do you have any goals about the kinds of activities you would like to do with [child]? That is, are there things you would like to do with [child] or help [child] do? [For example, things that are fun, things that teach lessons about life or religion or school] Do you have any difficulty accomplishing these goals? Are there things that help you meet your goals? What are those helpful things? Are there things that hinder you from achieving your goals? What are those?